

Growing Intergenerational Resilience for Indigenous Food Sovereignty through Home Gardening

PAPER BY Rachael Budowle, Melvin L. Arthur, and Christine M. Porter

Brief by Rachael Budowle and Kit Freedman

Photo: Christine Porter

Why this study was needed

Growing Resilience, a community-based participatory research project, provided home food gardens to 96 families living in the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming between 2016 and 2020. Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho people living in the Wind River Reservation experience enormous health disparities, including higher rates of obesity and diabetes and dying up to 30 years earlier on average than White people in Wyoming. Growing Resilience aimed to reduce those disparities and evaluate health impacts of home gardens using a randomized controlled trial design. The project also aimed to support local food sovereignty leadership through Blue Mountain Associates, the Indigenous-led, Wind River Reservation community organization that provided garden installation and maintenance support. Indigenous food sovereignty upholds the right of people to define their own sustainable food systems and community-led revitalization of relationships with the land.

In addition to exploring quantifiable health outcomes, the project's community and academic partners aimed to understand processes and outcomes of wellbeing and resilience—or, the ability of systems and communities to adapt to social-ecological change and disruption—through home gardening experiences. In this paper, the authors explored whether and how participants in Growing Resilience built relationships, knowledge, and practices across generations through gardening.

How it was done

The research team conducted two years of ethnographic fieldwork from 2016 to 2018, including stories told and shared by 53 Growing Resilience participants and partners. The authors relied on two primary sources of stories for analysis: talking circles (i.e., culturally appropriate focus groups) and a novel methodological approach they developed through the research process called *sovereign storytelling*.

After completing a series of talking circles, researchers designed and implemented sovereign storytelling as a way to infuse participant choice and voice into the often colonizing process of research. Sovereign storytelling asked participants as individuals or families whether and how they would like to tell their stories to the researchers and whether they would like to share those stories with the greater community in their own voices. Participants selected methods of storytelling about their garden from a menu, including interviews, group talking circles, informal garden visits, photos with captions, journaling, making art (e.g., poem, sculpture, drawing, beading), a short film, or any other method of their choosing.

What the researchers discovered

Using standard methods for coding and analyzing qualitative datasets, the researchers identified broad mechanisms of resilience, health, and wellbeing associated with home gardening. After removing story excerpts about merely technical or practical aspects of gardening, excerpts related to family and generations made up 66 percent of all coded passages. The prevalence of these themes suggests participants consistently contextualized their gardening experience in terms of family and generational relationships and shared knowledge, practices, and memories.

The themes demonstrate the importance of interconnected relationships supported through a living garden environment across present, past, and future family generations all at once. While teaching, learning, and knowledge appear in all frames, the cross-generational frame, in particular, suggests that the transmission of memories and knowledge within families is an active process. Gardens provide more than health promotion or reclamation of autonomy over food production; gardening can facilitate intergenerational connections. Taken together, the researchers suggest these themes compose what they call *intergenerational resilience*.

Why it's important

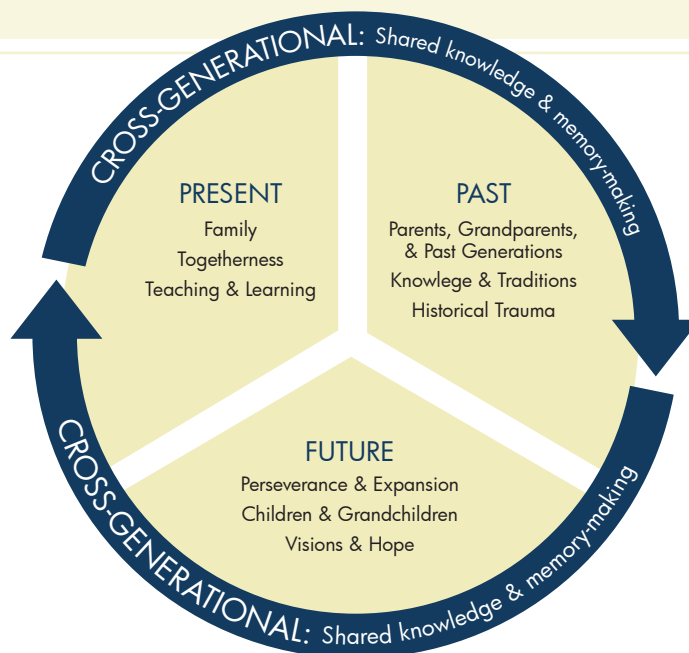
Gardens provided much needed space for families to reinforce their relationships as a resilient counter-practice to the historical trauma and ongoing effects of colonization and genocide they experience, including through the food system. This study provided empirical evidence for various features of intergenerational resilience by uncovering the specific ways participants drew on relationships and knowledge across the present, past, and future and cross-generationally through gardening to inform resilient practices. Additionally, the study introduces intergenerational resilience as a culturally specific dimension of community resilience frameworks.

Sharing family stories of intergenerational relationships, knowledge, memories, and hope may further develop resilience in Indigenous food sovereignty efforts. In contexts with strong family networks, such as the Wind River Reservation, future community-based participatory research approaches to food sovereignty collaborations with community-based partners can help ensure this approach by shaping interventions around the family and across generations. By focusing on these relationships, gardens and other Indigenous food sovereignty practices may grow resilience more intentionally both for the present generation and for generations to come.

SELECT PARTICIPANT QUOTES

“ It’s instilling in our kids, showing them that we’re able to do this ourselves instead of relying on the stores for their produce and waiting. And teaching them, empowering them that really, they’re able to grow their own food.

“ I think that’s the biggest reason I decided to do gardening... It really makes me good memories, and I think that’s what I want to leave my grandbabies with is memories, so they can instill that in their kids and carry it on.



Participants’ stories contained numerous intergenerational themes, which researchers organized into present, past, future, and cross-generational analytical frames, represented here by a culturally appropriate, cyclical paradigm of time as opposed to a Western, linear, chronological representation.

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Read the paper

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