

Generativity and Eldership: Redefining Successful Aging through Indigenous Perspectives

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Presentation Outline

About me – who is Jordan?

Successful aging study

What is generativity?

Generativity & Alaska Native Elders

Summary

Discussion, Q&A

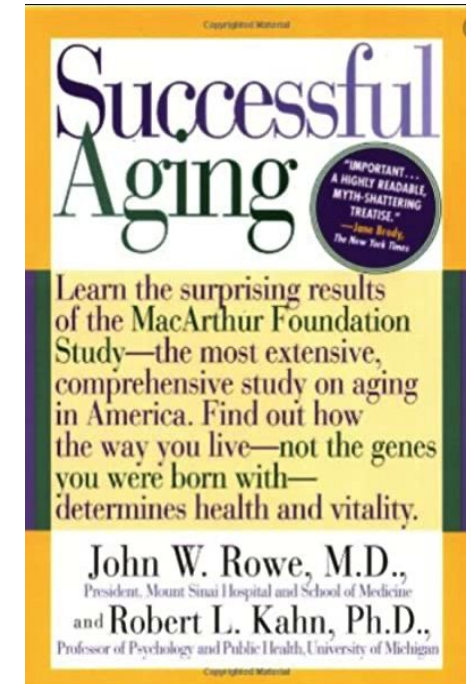
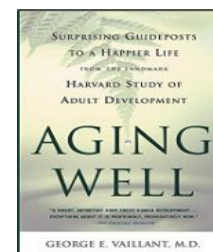
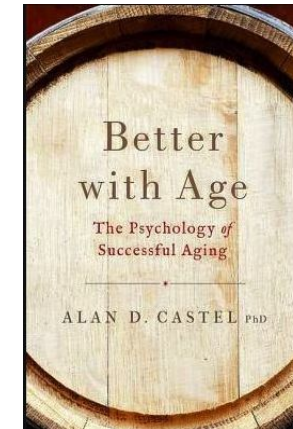
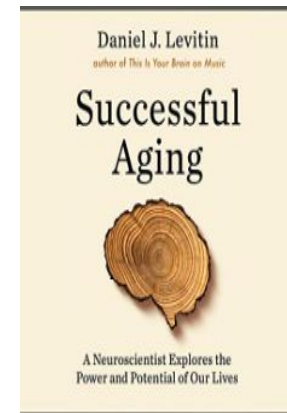
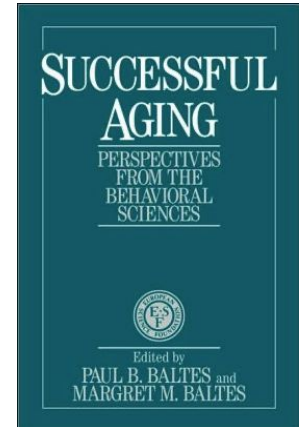
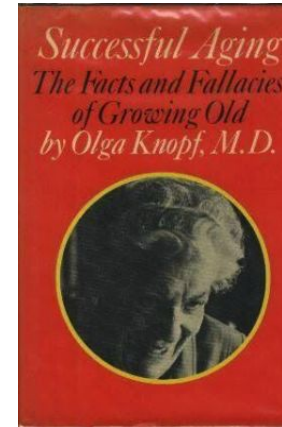
Who is Jordan

- Aleut and Sugpiaq – Naknek, AK and Cannon Beach, OR
- Commercial fishing background
- Oldest of 3 siblings
- Social Worker, Gerontologist, Community Psychologist
- Pivotal role of family and Elders
 - Parents, Cliff & Janis Lewis
 - Grandparents, late Gordon & Anisha McCormick and Lew & Muriel Lewis
 - Great grandparents, late Paul & Anna Chukan
 - Elders across Alaska



Background

- Conceptualizations of successful aging based on Western cultures (Torres, 1999)
- Dominant focus on medical model of aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997)
- Lacking diverse models and conceptualizations of aging (Lewis, 2009)



Western definitions of successful aging

- No disease (physical, mental)
- No disabilities
- Children have completed college
- Paid off mortgage, car loans
- Physically active



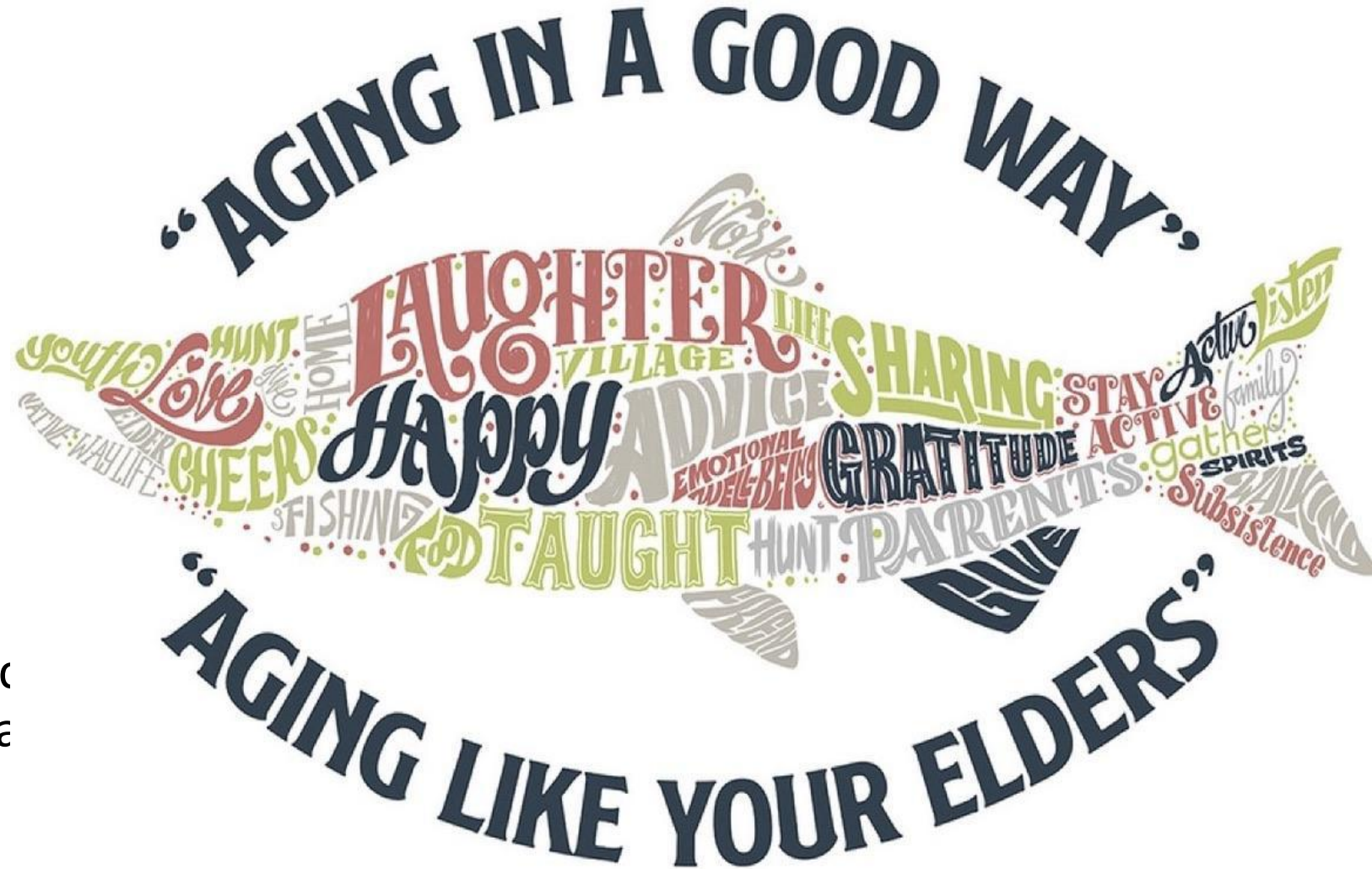
These definitions did not necessarily match the experiences of the Elders in my life

Alaska Native Successful Aging

“What it means to be an
Elder in Alaska”

18-year long study

National Science Foundation, Office
of Polar Programs, Arctic Social
Sciences



Study background

- Conceptualizations of successful aging based on Western cultures (Torres, 1999)
- “Eldership” may be equivalent of Western framed successful aging concept (Lewis, 2011)
- Western models prioritize biomarkers, medicalization of aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997)
- Overlook unique cultural strengths and resiliency of Indigenous peoples, cultures

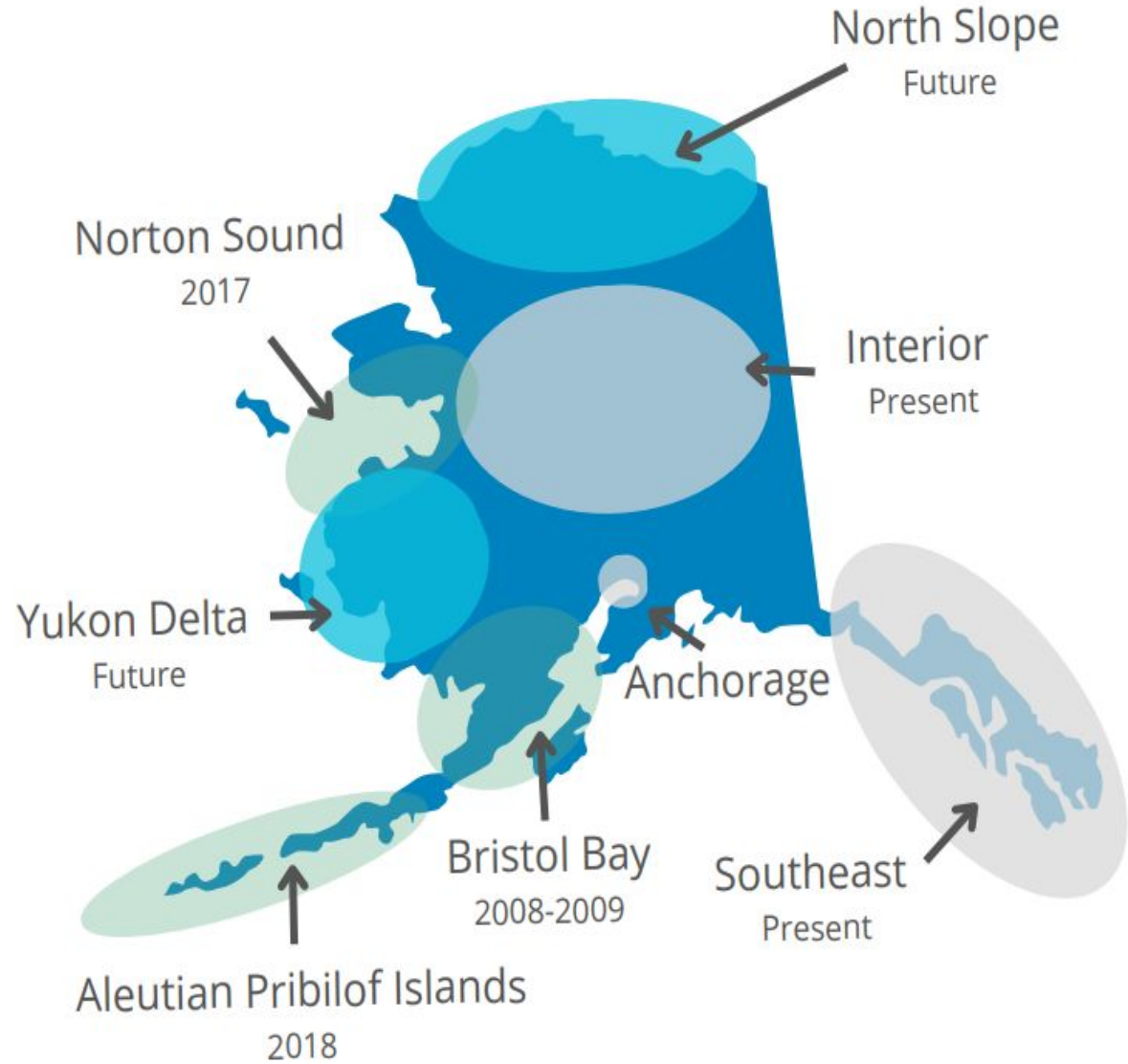


Research objectives

1. Understand what it means to age successfully from Elders' perspectives
2. Develop a successful aging model that may be generalizable to Alaska Native people



Participating regions

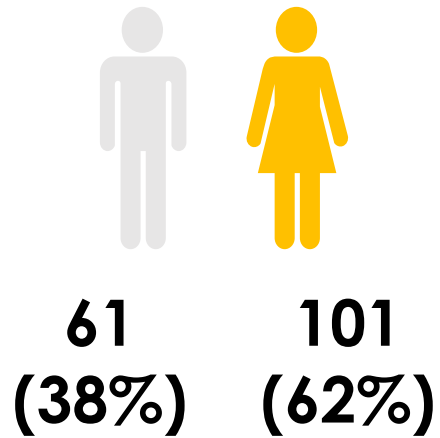
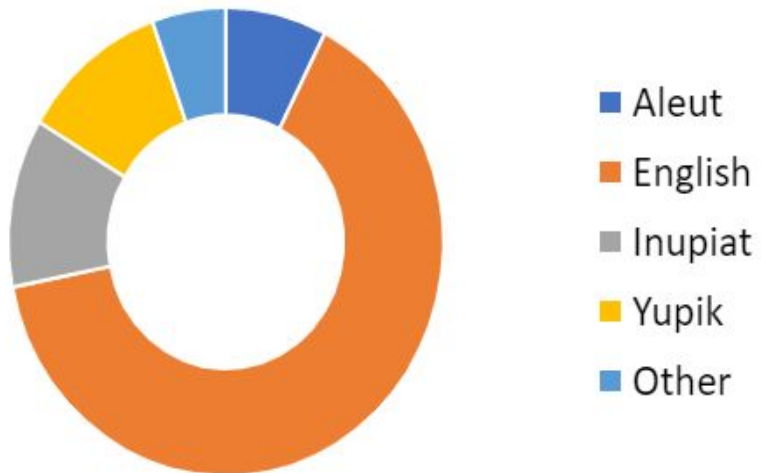


162 qualitative interviews

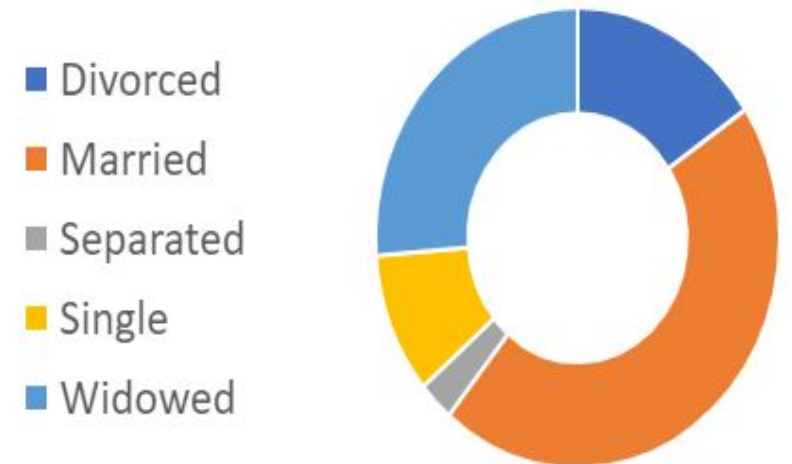
Age range:
46 – 93 years

Household:
1 -13
(Average 2.5)

First Language



Marital Status



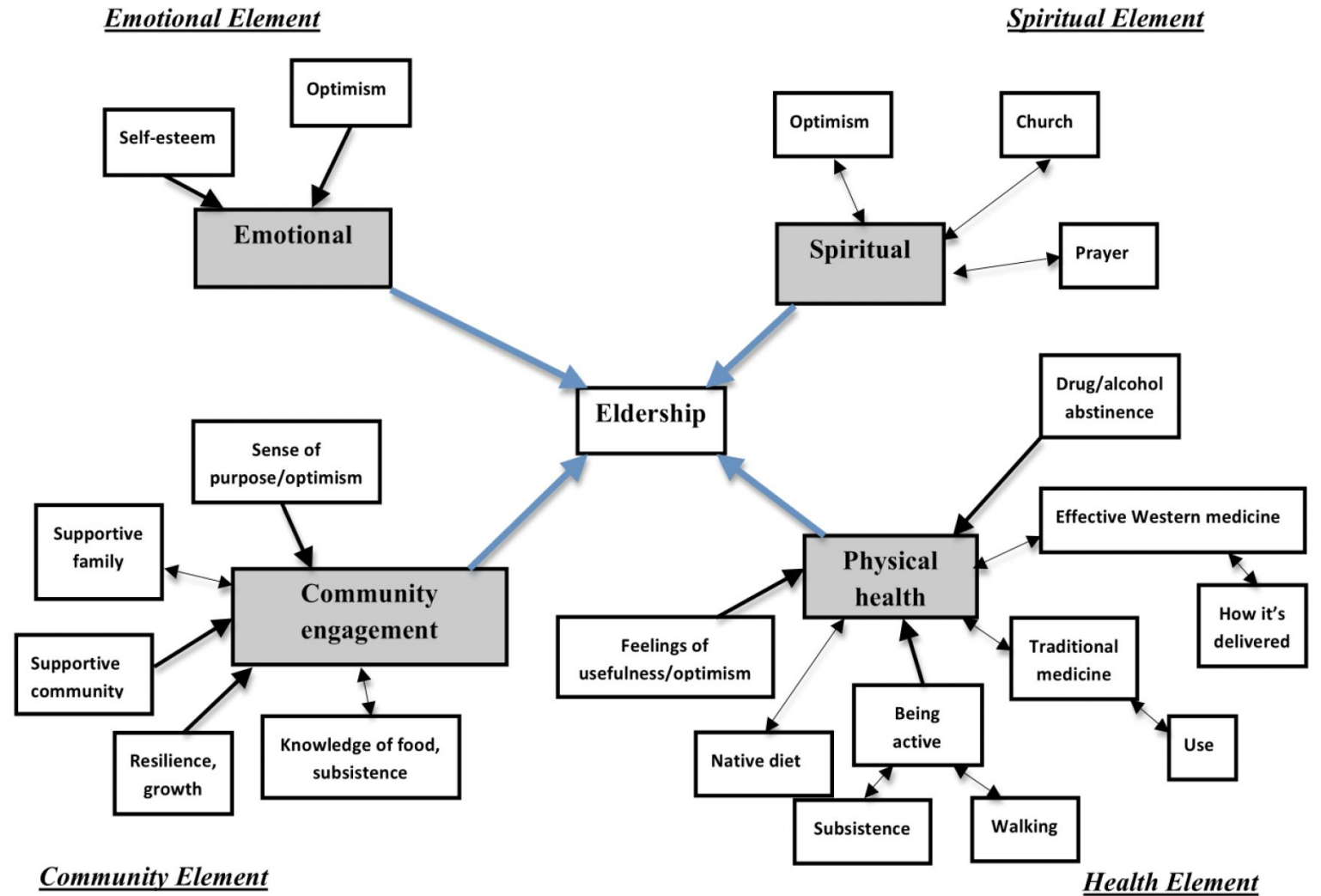
Six Components of Aging in a Good Way

- Spirituality
- Native ways of Life
- Community & Family Engagement
- Emotional health
- Physical health
- Intergenerational sharing
(generativity)

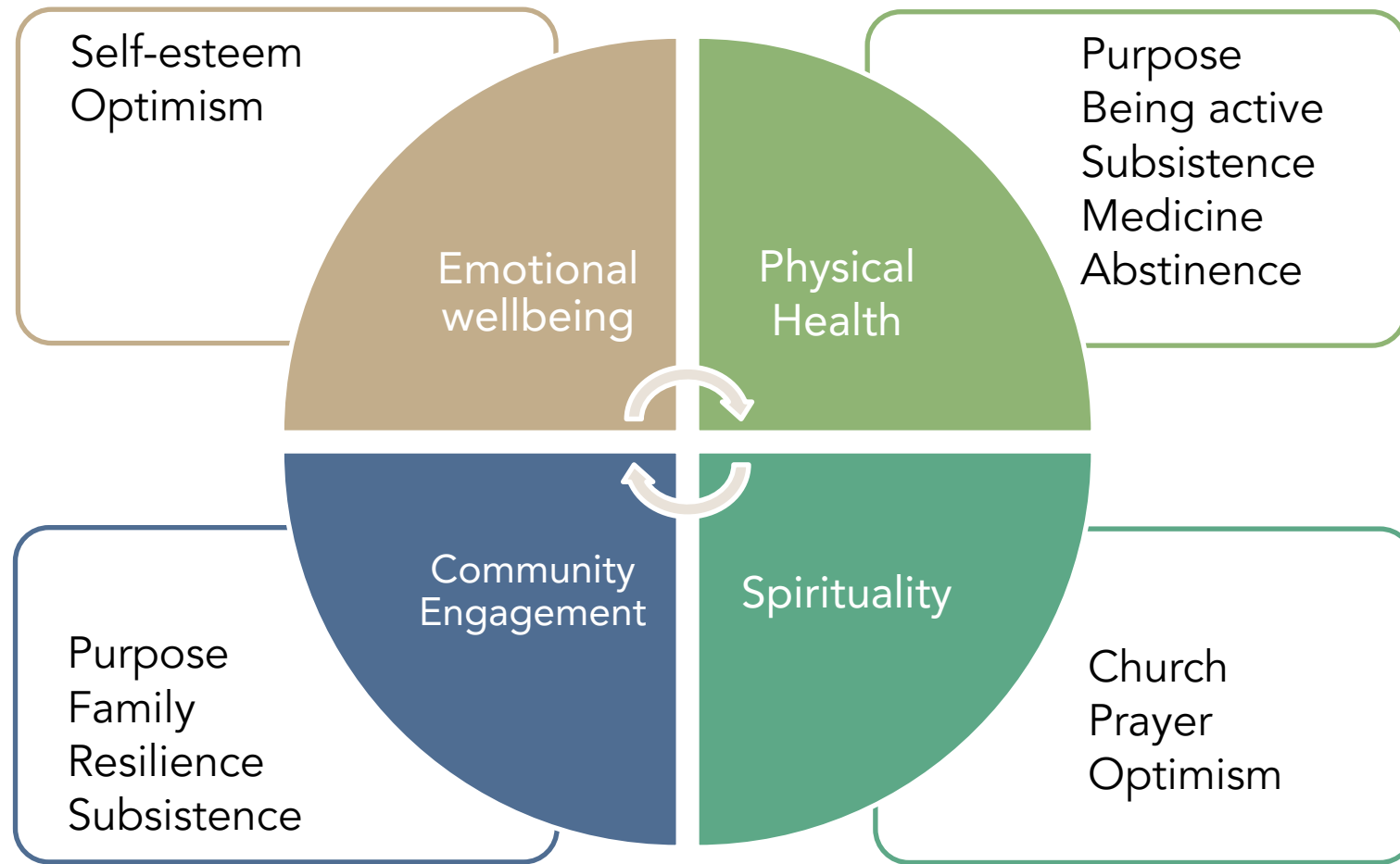


Successful Aging Model (2009)

-Elements of Eldership-



“Eldership” in Bristol Bay Area



Six Components

- Spirituality
- Native ways
- Engagement with community
- Emotional health
- Physical health
- Intergenerational sharing (generativity)

They also shared insight on:

- Benefits and challenges of aging
- Why Elders stay or leave their communities
- Importance of advocacy and passing advocacy on to younger generations





Bristol Bay, 2008-2009

Bristol Bay Elders

- Emotional wellbeing – “People that are friendly and have a cheerful outlook, seem to age better; view aging as another phase and are not bothered. It is just something that happens.”
- Spirituality – “You know that the old people who are religious keep going to church until they can’t make it anymore. The ones I’ve seen were into their 90s, who were still going to church.”
- Community engagement – “We get company. Like, when you are sick, they’ll help you. They don’t leave you to be by yourself.”
- Physical health – “Well, like I said, being active, getting involved in a lot of things, getting along with the grandkids and the other people. That’s about it.”





Norton Sound, NW Alaska

Norton Sound Elders (2010-20 19)

Family – “The more the children see us, what we are doing or what we are teaching them through our actions or work, they’re able to see what we do and the more I do things, that’s aging well.”

Emotional wellbeing – “It’s more like I’m knowing that I am helping them. And if they get older, they’ll say, Oh, I remember that.”

Native way of life – “An Elder spoke to me about the beliefs that we have, the meaning of it. So, each different Elder gave me some knowledge that I used in my lifetime. There are guidelines I share with others on how to be Elders.”

An Alaska Native Elder is someone who ...

Leads community

Youth look up to

Takes care of their grandchildren

Listens to people

Observes and learns

Never quits learning

Takes care of themselves

Shares what life was like 40 years ago

Has young people talk to them

Lives day to day

Does not think about growing old

Listens to who they are and

Treats their mind and body with respect

Believes in themselves

Makes wise decisions

Engages as a leader and mentor

Helps make the community safe and better place to live

Understands what life is

Believes in their children and their children's children

"Your life journey begins when you're a young child. And we just continue one step forward and one day as a child, when you take your first step forward, one day when you wake up, you'll be taking your first step as an Elder."



Elder, Shaktoolik,
March 2018



An Elder from
Shaktoolik provided
guidance to help us
better understand the
roles of Alaska Native
Elders



Aleutian Pribilof Islands (2018-2019)

Aleutian Pribilof Islands Elders

Community engagement

“Growing old healthy, as they said, is that I give you what I was taught when I was brought up. If we hold everything back, we won’t age well, we won’t be healthy.”

Physical health

“As long as you’re moving around, you stay young. Do the things you like, and then you stay young because your mind is active.”





Anchorage (2018-2019)

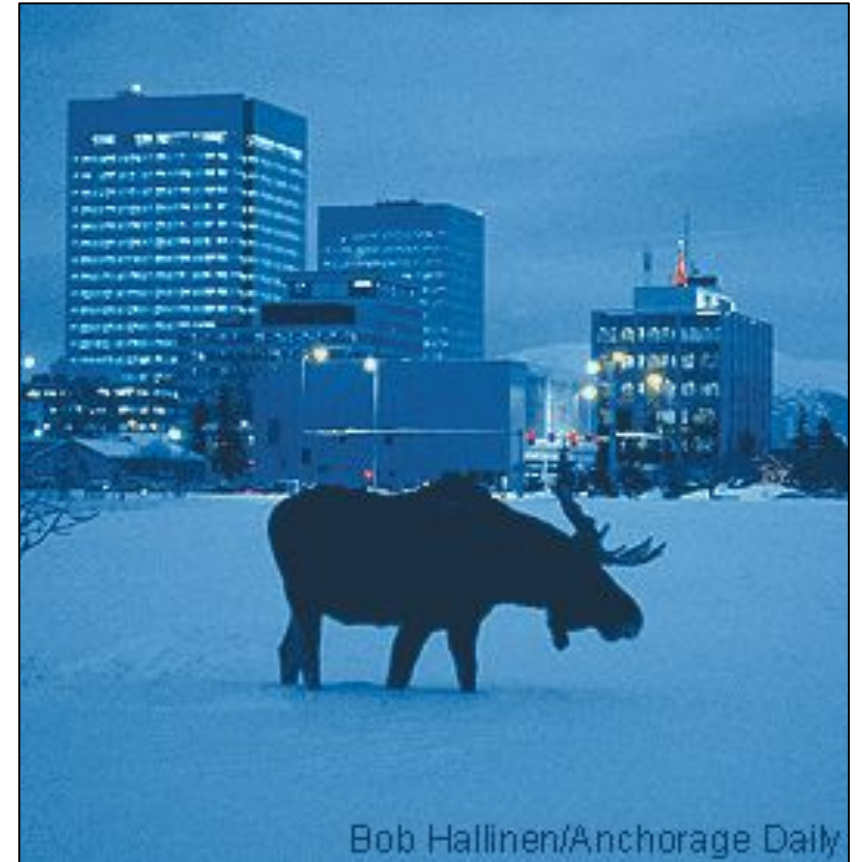
Anchorage Elders

Family

"My grandkids keep me very busy, but I like it. I don't mind doing it with them. I'm happy. At least I get to meet and be with them daily."

Community

"No, it's scattered. Our community here in town is scattered. Here, we're all strangers, except people who are your relatives from the village or sometimes Native people."



Bob Hallinen/Anchorage Daily



Southeast (2023-2025)

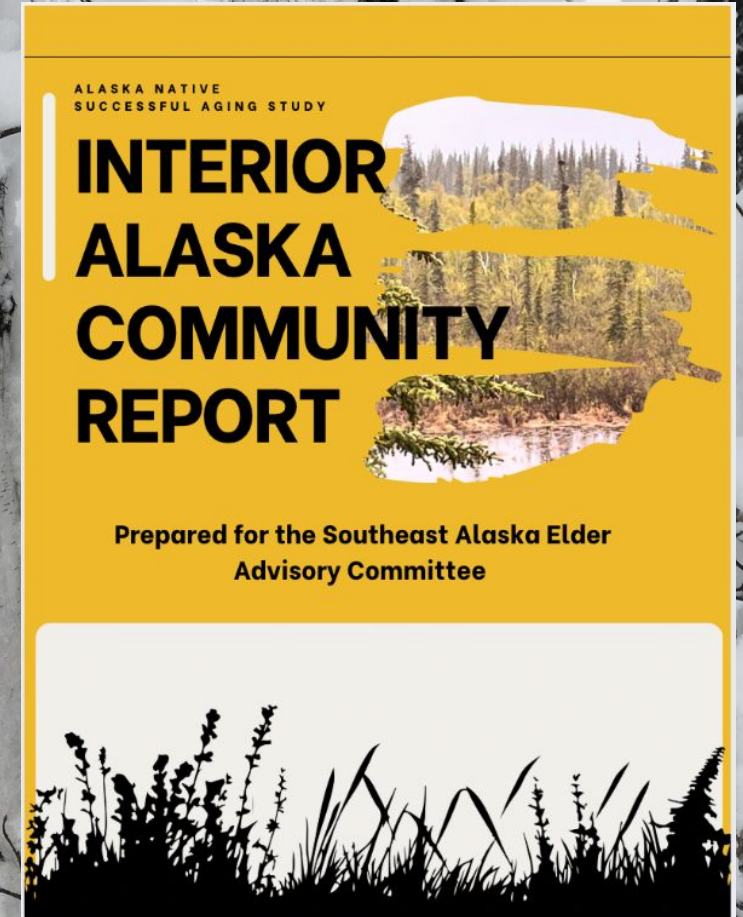




Interior Elders

- Same six components were still relevant for Alaska Native Elders in Interior Alaska
- Additional findings
 - Importance of place in supporting physical health
 - Dynamic community support
 - Intergenerational sharing

“So, as I worked and lived my life in the woods, I'm a hunter, a trapper, and a fisherman so I'm a great advocate. I consider myself as a traditional knowledge specialist because I did all that for so long. So, I am a valuable resource to people that haven't had the chance but need the information.”



What have we learned so far?

- Western definition is very biomedical
- You can still be sick and age well
- There is more to aging well than having physical health or lacking disease
- Generativity is the foundation of aging well



**What does it mean to be
generative?**

Forms of generativity

(Villar, 2003; Kotre, 1995)

- **Technical generativity**
 - Being productive at work
 - Teaching or sharing knowledge, skills, or expertise
- **Cultural or Creative Generativity**
 - Passing down values, norms; creating something of value to benefit others and pass down legacy
- **Biological generativity**
 - Having children

Benefits of generativity

Find a sense of purpose/established identity

Engage in meaningful activities

Greater social engagement

Redemptive narratives – past adversity teach lessons for future and others

Spirituality

Higher levels of optimism

Negative effects of not being generative

Stagnation

Loneliness, isolation

Lower-quality relationships

Decreased life satisfaction

Challenges coping with
mental health

Generativity and health

- Generative behaviors and acts have positive health benefits for older adults
 - Only when received by others
 - Increasing concern for generative mismatch
- Share redemption narratives - difficult life events lead to lesson learned
 - Unfortunate event leads to reflection and behavior change
- Longer lifespans – fewer co-morbidities

Generativity and Alaska Native Elders

- Opportunity to share knowledge was a critical aspect of aging well
- Being generative:
 - Provides Elders with a sense of purpose
 - Fulfill roles in their family and community
 - Contributes to the health and well-being of family and community
- Elders desire to share their knowledge of through classes, community gatherings
 - Teaching by doing, youth observe Elders

Generativity = Native way of life

Generativity

“They pass down things to you, and you’ve got to pass it on down to your kids, everything you learned. It’s important to pass on what you know to people your same age.”

Native Ways of Life

“The thing is my children try to make sure I have an easy time with them out there in the country. That’s one of the benefits of my family.”



Generativity – pathway to Eldership

- Sharing is a living, culturally embedded practice
- Primary pathway to achieving Eldership
- Cyclical transmission of knowledge
 - They learned from their Elders and now pass it down
 - Intergenerational sharing
- Being generative is also central part of healing journey
- Central to this model is **Indigenous Cultural Generativity**

(Lewis, 2026, 2024; Lewis & Allen, 2017)

Indigenous Cultural Generativity

Defined as any act of Elder where they pass down:

- Traditional values
- Subsistence practices
- Language
- Beliefs
- Activities that preserve and pass on the culture of the family and community (Lewis, 2014, 2017, 2023, 2025).



Words of the Elders

“Elders can have a class to show them how to build a harpoon, or how to put together a sled. We need to have more activities where Elders can get out and show their skills.”



Words of our Elders

“The ones [Elders] that like to give advice to others and help direct the right way by talking age good.”

“As they age, they like to share about awareness and knowledge; what obstacles they are facing, what they learn, and keep going.”

Challenges of Generativity

- The knowledge, wisdom, and stories Elders want to share does not always match the interests of the youth.
 - Referred to as generative mismatch
- This generational gap is widening with technology, outmigration of families, changing family structures, and other sociocultural changes.
- Impact of history on frequency and type of sharing

Strengths and challenges of Alaska Natives

Challenges

- Historical trauma
- Abuse, neglect
- Relocation
 - Boarding schools, climate, family, long term care
- Loss of cultural practices, language, and history

Strengths

- Family
- Community
- Language, dance, art
- Culture
- Native foods

Weaving together strengths and challenges

- Being generative means passing down stories and lessons on these strengths and challenges
- Learning how to navigate the good and bad times
- Elders age well because they learn something from all experiences
 - These lessons contribute to their ability to adapt
 - **Passing down this knowledge helps the heal**
 - **Sharing their lessons guides the future generations into a brighter future**

Indigenous Cultural Generative Activities

- Elder/youth interactions
 - Classroom volunteering and cultural demonstrations
- Grandparents spending time with grandchildren
- Grandparents teaching own adult children
 - Sharing recipes and traditional child rearing practices
- Ask Elders to share their stories and experiences



Future research questions

- Which generative behaviors give most benefit to older adults?
- Technical? Cultural? Other?
- Target public health prevention models toward middle age to encourage generative acts to age well.
- Generative mismatch
 - Reduced elder/youth interactions, less generative behaviors, poorer health?
 - Can generative acts with peers have same effect?

Concluding Thoughts

- Generativity is a key feature of “aging in a good way”
- Being generative ensures a healthy future for our youth and Elders
- Passing down our life lessons helps others avoid similar challenges and helps you heal
- You can age well does not mean absence of disease



Concluding Thoughts

- Achieving Eldership involves being generative with all ages
- Passing down your knowledge is not an optional activity, but the essence of a meaningful life
- The benefits of sharing are inseparable from the profound sense of purpose and holistic wellbeing Elders derive from filling this role as a teacher and mentor for future generations
- This research offers a new paradigm for culturally responsive health interventions and public health policies that empower Alaska Native Elders to continue “aging in a good way.”

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An aerial photograph of a lush, green forested coastline. A large body of water, likely a bay or fjord, is visible, with several small, rocky islands and peninsulas extending into the water. The water is a deep blue, and the surrounding land is covered in dense, dark green trees. The overall scene is serene and natural.

Thank you for your time!

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