

CONTINUITIES OF SELFHOOD IN THE FACE OF RADICAL
DEVELOPMENTAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Michael J. Chandler¹, Christopher Lalonde², and Bryan Sokol¹

¹*The University of British Columbia*

²*The University of Victoria*

Address for correspondence:

Michael J. Chandler
Department of Psychology
The University of British Columbia
2136 West Mall
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4
E-Mail: chandler@unixg.ubc.ca

To appear in: L. Nucci, G. Saxe, and
E. Turiel (Eds.), *Culture, Thought, and
Development*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence
Erlbaum Associates.

Our *text* for this chapter is the under-examined notion of self-continuity (i.e., the art of counting one's self only once), and our *purpose* will be to bring out both common and distinctive ways in which young persons, representative of markedly different cultures, usually succeed, but occasionally fail, in somehow regarding themselves as one and the same numerically identical individual despite their awareness of often dramatic personal and cultural change. The *point* of our rehearsing these matters will be to use them as a way of drawing your attention to what we judge to be better and worse ways of dealing with the recurrent culture versus trans-culture polemic that cross-cuts the whole of this volume.

The particular villain of this piece is that exclusionary brand of neo-situationalism that has, of late, motivated a renaissance of interest in cross-cultural work within the developmental disciplines by succeeding in shaming much of the field into settling for a warmed over version of the classical duality between "Nature and Nurture" that only "Nurture" could win. We mean to speak against this stark antinomy by championing a kind of "levels analysis" that aims to give equal pride of place to both the universals and particulars of development. We intend to do this, at least in part, through example, by directing your attention to the notion of "self-continuity," and by demonstrating that it, at least, is a concept that is necessarily trans-cultural in its formal design features, and, at the same time, also fully determined by the vagaries of culture.

In taking up the notion of self-continuity we intend to further focus your attention on the grizzly fact of suicide among young people from both Canada's cultural mainstream, and from the badly savaged culture of Canada's aboriginal or "First Nations" peoples. Our point will be to demonstrate that the risk of suicide that is run by such young people is importantly determined by the personally and culturally different ways in which they undertake to satisfy the common obligation to work out some diachronic sense of identity that allows them to survive as continuous or numerically identical individuals, despite the inevitability of personal change. In taking up this agenda, we mean to proceed through a series of three steps.

AGENDA

First, we want to broadly sketch the rough outlines of the culture versus trans-culture polemic that currently divides our field, and to run up a cautionary flag meant to warn you off of the dangers of settling for some fickle choice between these two oppositional alternatives.

Second, we want to go on to quickly particularize what might otherwise risk becoming a flight of abstraction by focusing attention on the target issue of self-continuity, a concept that we mean to mark as one more of those Janus faced matters, that, in one of its countenances, directly reflects the cultural context in which it is situated, and, in the other, reveals itself to be one of those existential matters that, like birth and death or solidarity and loneliness, necessarily recurs in every culture.

Finally, we want to report on an ongoing program of research meant to track the developmental course of the self-continuity “warranting practices” of young persons drawn from both Canada’s cultural mainstream, as well as their aboriginal counterparts, all with an eye toward better understanding the life or death consequences of successes or failures in the maintenance of a sense of personal and cultural persistence.

THE PITCHING OF UNIVERSALITY AND PLURALITY

Let us begin, then, by first critically examining what we plan to hold up as the common but misguided practice of pitting universality against plurality. As is generally recognized, the developmental sciences are currently suffering through yet another in what has shown itself to be an ongoing series of pendulum swings that repetitiously sets human nature against contingent circumstance in some either-or form of bivariate opposition (Chandler, 1997). According to the latest version of this increasingly radicalized nature-nurture polemic, more or less everything of moment is understood to be either the automatic consequence of some small handful of innate (and therefore “universal”) modularized structures, or is otherwise seen to come down only to culture. Not surprisingly, the “neo-nativists” who live on the “wet-lab” side of this either/or paradigmatic divide are quick to remind us of our million or more years of common hominid history, and the stark improbability of all of this yielding nothing that deserves to count as real “human nature.” For their own part, the “neo-situationalists” or “cultural relativists” lined up on the opposite side of this ideological divide adopt much the same scolding tone, but used this time to heap shame upon the heads of all those who dare to intimate that there might still exist something (anything) that is actually common to all cultures. As seen from the post-modern vantage of such *fin-de-millennium* parlor nihilists (Chandler, 1997), the traditional search by developmentalists for “existential themes” likely to recur in every culture, or to define some universal trajectory in human growth, is not only viewed as a fool’s errand, but, worse still, is thought to betray a kind of residual ethnocentrism, some lingering colonialist mind-set, that works to limit human freedom and to trivialize all cultures save one’s own. All such retrograde universalistic assumptions, it is argued, not only perpetuate long since discredited modernist illusions about so-called “human nature,” but leave all those who promote them self-accused of an unreflective prejudice that is so shabby and so shot through with ideological contaminants that they need to be understood as collaborators in some repressive Orwellian plot of the political right. Although perhaps understandably provoked by the all too familiar tendency on the part of some to proclaim the discovery of yet another new developmental universal hidden away like a prize in whatever adventitious sample of young persons comes most easily to hand, such understandable resentment alone is insufficient, in our view, to justify the bleak vision of subjugated selves currently being promoted by the advocates of the new situationalism.

Several things seem wrong with any such high-contrast, oppositional picture of universals and particulars, not the least of which is the fact that it is inimical to, and effectively empties out, most of what has traditionally proven really interesting about the study of human development. More to the present point, however, is the fact that there appear to be any number of good reasons as to why no such mirror-image, either-or account will ultimately work. Beyond the observation that the new cultural determinism looks surprisingly like biological determinism stood upon its head, one might well list out, by way of objection, the facts:

- a) that any such attempt to discount apparent trans-cultural universality by evoking some “universal law of difference” amounts to a performative contradiction (i.e., the suggestion that it is “in our nature” to be infinitely open to the influence of the environment is no less a commentary on human nature than is its opposite number);
- b) that such expressions of thoroughgoing social determinism presuppose that culture directly impresses itself upon presumably passive individuals without the necessity of “interpretation”;
- c) that such claims merely threaten to relocate the epicenter of “essence” away from the individual person, and into the culture;
- d) that no evident “stop rule” exists to prevent big cultures from being progressively “down sized” to the point that we are once again reduced to studying just you versus me (Habermas, 1989); and finally,
- e) that the idea that persons are simply clay in society’s hands is no less ideological, and no less likely to be enlisted as a tool of political oppression, than its opposite.

ESCAPING THE NATURE-NURTURE POLEMIC

If that is enough said about why simply trading old monologic lamps for new hardly qualifies as much in the way of real progress, then the serious task at hand would seem to become that of finding some better way of conceptualizing how it might be that at least some components of development actually reflect both a fully determinant human nature, and, at the same time, have culture written all over their face.

Any argument to the effect that the defining course of development—in this case identity development—is somehow both set by certain universal design characteristics constitutive of the whole of human kind, and is, at the same time, thoroughly determined by the vagaries of culture, can only hope to succeed through some divide and conquer strategy that locates putative universals in one place and contingent consequences somewhere else. Because the available maneuvering room is as tight as it is, such sorting strategies have tended to spread out either horizontally or (in a way that we find more uplifting) vertically.

The most ready-to-hand of these orthogonal alternatives has been to proceed “horizontally,” by simply dragging out our well-oiled analysis of variance techniques, and apportioning to both culture and its opposite their own seemingly fair share of responsibility for this or that aspect of personhood. We could, in so doing, get lucky by finding that the neo-situationalists and the neo-nativists are both entitled to something like fifty percent of the available variance. Although no one would walk away empty handed from such a Solomon-like dividing of the spoils, such a hatchet job would continue to leave us with two competing camps caught up in yet another of those forced-choice, “whatever makes you rich, makes me poor” scenarios. Invoking the language of contemporary object relations theory, Overton (1996) has stigmatized all such horizontal instantiations of the traditional nature-nurture polemic as “split positions,” equivalent in form to the old domestic Donnybrook in which I insist that I drink because you yell, and you argue that you yell because I drink. Because such confrontational politics ensure that every putative gain in understanding in one quarter automatically qualifies as a countervailing loss in the other, there is, we would urge, a renewed obligation on us all to somehow rise above any such zero-sum game.

The more stand-up alternative to all such horizontal nature-nurture dualities is to attempt some more vertical form of “levels” analysis according to which distinctions are drawn, not between one’s various collateral attributes, but rather between: a) those formal, abstract, “computational” (Marr, 1982; Norman, 1982), or “design features” (Dennett, 1987) that specify what function this or that psychological mechanism is meant to serve; b) those more “functional” or “procedural” or “algorithmic” means—as they have been variously called—through which such designs are actualized (Overton, 1991); and, finally, c) those particular physical mechanisms, or bits of psychological “hardware,” by means of which such procedures are concretely implemented. Clocks, for example, if they are to satisfy the purposes for which they are intended, must all share the common “design” feature of somehow lending a measured beat to the passage of time, quite apart from the “procedural” and “hardware” questions of whether they are “digital” or “analogue,” or whether they accomplish their functions with batteries, or tightly wound springs, or the slow measured burning of ropes. In ways, then, that are analogous to Aristotle’s classic claim that a full explanation of any phenomenon requires an account of formal and final, as well as efficient and material causes (Overton, 1991), many contemporary cognitive scientists and theorists of mind (e.g., Dennett, 1987; Marr, 1982; Norman, 1982; Searle, 1984) have, of late, also come to insist that all well rounded explanations must necessarily include not only “hardware” and “procedural” explanations, but also “pattern” or “design” or “competence” explanations that seek to make clear what it is that particular psychological mechanisms are supposed to be able to do.

The special merit of applying such a “levels” analysis to the problem of arbitrating what is context or culturally specific, and what is potentially common or universal, is that one and the same psychological mechanism—the self, for example—can be meaningfully understood to be both culturally specific at one level of explanation, and universal at another. At the “hardware” level, for example, Lillard (1998) informs us that in some, for us exotic, cultures it is imagined that the seat of the self is to be found in the nose, or some other dangling appendage. Similarly, our own data, to which we will shortly turn, makes the case that, at the procedural level, Euro-American cultures tend to promote a “structural” or “essentialist” strategy for computing self-continuity, whereas certain aboriginal communities support a more “narratively based,” functional approach to the problem of personal persistence. None of these strongly situated, culturally based variations need be understood, however, as detracting from the possibility that, at a different and more patterned level of analysis, self-continuity continues to be a necessary trans-cultural design requirement for any workable conception of self- or personhood.

SELF-CONTINUITY ON THE COMPETENCE, PROCEDURAL, AND HARDWARE LEVELS

Armed with something akin to Dennett’s (1987) or Overton’s (1991) or Marr’s (1982) hardware, procedures and competence framework, we now mean to turn full attention to the topic of selfhood in general, and the problem of self-continuity in particular, all in an effort to better understand how representatives of distinct cultural groups might proceed in similar and different ways to warrant the necessary assumption of their own numerical identity. In going about this task we mean to organize our remarks as follows. First, we plan to argue, both on formal grounds, and on appeal to a certain amount of newly minted empirical evidence, that, by focusing on the pattern or design or competence level of explanation, it is possible to describe what amounts to a trans-cultural program aimed at specifying a common problem space within which any person of any stripe must define the meaning of selfhood. Next, we mean to describe a set of preliminary findings that offer us good reasons to believe that mainstream Canadian youth, on the one hand, and First Nations adolescents, on the other, adopt quite different procedural approaches, or employ different algorithmic strategies, in attempting to solve the generic self-continuity problem. Finally, we plan to report out on some recently collected epidemiological data (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) that help to drive home the point that different culturally-sanctioned procedural solution strategies to the problem of self-continuity are differently vulnerable to particular kinds of challenges to identity that historical circumstances can set in one’s paths.

THE FORMAL PROBLEM SPACE OF THE SELF

Taking this list from the top, we mean to begin by reflecting on the general problem space over which any conceivable notion of selfhood is presumably obliged to operate, and to consider the possibility that there may well exist certain constitutive conditions, or system imperatives, that any

workable account of identity needs to satisfy before it could potentially calculate anything that would be recognizable as a fully fledged person. Before going very far down this road, that is, before openly suggesting anything as currently politically incorrect as the possibility that there may be some trans-cultural design characteristics to the self, it is probably best to start by happily conceding the point that, in different times and in different places, persons have and do continue to hold quite radically different ideas about the hardware and procedures that go into making up a self. If this proposition was ever in serious doubt—which seems unlikely—research and observational data accumulating over the last 40 or 50 years has left no real room for continuing uncertainty. It just *is* the case that humankind has already proven itself capable of holding to views about itself that are not only strongly different from our own Euro-American, post-enlightenment thoughts on the matter, but are often so different as to strike the cross-culturally challenged as totally preposterous. Selves located in noses, you say with a snort, how absolutely quaint or charming or ludicrous. Put-off you may be, but what you are not is *surprised*. The idea that available conceptions of selfhood vary cross-culturally has long since become old news (e.g., Shweder & Bourne, 1984). What we are not so sanguine about is the precise *sense* in which the meaning of selfhood requires being understood as subject to the vagaries of culture, and it is in this place of uncertainty that any hope of winning the argument that something about selfhood is common to the whole of humankind must somehow try to gain its explanatory foothold.

Although there are other contenders for the trans-cultural part in the production of selfhood (self unity and personal agency, for example), an obvious first draft choice among these various candidate design features is clearly the notion of self-continuity. The considerable agreement that exists on this point arises out of the seemingly inescapable fact that every society would seem to require, as a condition of its continuing existence as a moral order, some degree of social responsibility on the part of its constituency (Hallowell, 1955), and, consequently, the availability of some mechanism for both counting its members responsible for their own past actions, and for ensuring some degree of commitment to a common future (Harré, 1979). For this reason it is widely thought to follow that *any* shared conception of selfhood capable of supporting *any* cultural form of life whatsoever would, at a minimum, need to allow persons to be identified and re-described at different moments in time (Strawson, 1959). That is, every society must, as a necessary condition of its own maintenance, somehow make whatever conceptual provisions are necessary to permit its members to understand themselves to persist in a way that is sufficiently self-same to allow all of their various temporally distinct ways of being to be counted as paraphrases or alternative expressions of one and the same continuous individual. On this authority any putative self (and, in fact, any candidate culture) that lacked this constitutive quality of presumed persistence—what Taylor (1991) has called the bare reflexive awareness of one's self as a

continuing subject—would fail to be recognizable as an instance of what we ordinarily take selves to be (Cassirer, 1923).

For all of these reasons it has been widely argued: a) that the requirement that persons be seen to persist in time is an immanent providence at work in all human affairs (Shotter, 1984); b) that the fundamental logic of identity necessarily understands the subject as self-identical (Haber, 1994); c) that a sense of personal continuity is not an elective “feature” of the self, but a “constitutive condition” of its coming into being (Habermas, 1991), and so needs to count as one of those things that every one needs in some measure in order to qualify as a person (Cassirer, 1923); d) that personal persistence stands as a necessary condition over which even the term “self” could reasonably be allowed to operate (Shotter, 1984), automatically rendering any claims to selfhood that did not include such a temporal dimension fundamentally nonsensical (Luckman, 1976); e) that any notion of selfhood that was not held to be abiding in this diachronic sense would consequently have no functional value in the operation of any human social order (Hallowell, 1971), and finally; f) that any society that failed to make provisions sufficient to permit the reidentification of persons across time would simply fail to function. On these and related grounds, a long list of otherwise apparently committed cultural relativists (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Hallowell, 1976; Shweder & Bourne, 1984) have come to agree that self-continuity is “universal in the human experience” (Levine & White, 1986, p. 38) and so “ubiquitous to all of humankind” (Harré, 1979, p. 397) (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

Now, of course, none of this is automatically true just because so many contributors to this literature have assumed it to be so. Perhaps we have all, once again, simply become infected with some new strain of lingering colonialist sentiment that causes us to misread simple contingencies and practice effects as evidence for some deep-running trans-cultural computational form. Clearly, something stronger than abstract formalisms or mere hearsay is needed if you are to go away persuaded that something about the design of selves is really exceptionless and so universal after all.

Without being necessarily convinced that this is the sort of disagreement that can be effectively attacked by throwing data at it, we do have one line of empirical evidence that does speak to this question. It comes from an ongoing program of research that has had as its goal the possibility of bringing out the changing ways in which young persons of various stripes undertake to warrant whatever convictions they may have about the basis for their own self-continuity. To do this we have spent time with upwards of 200 “normal” and psychiatrically hospitalized adolescents, first reading with them various “Classic Comic Books” (e.g., Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*), that depict examples of persistent identity in the face of personal change, before then going on to press them for their own reasons for believing that, despite

dramatic transformations, they themselves still deserve to be counted as self-same continuous and numerically identical person. Without going into detail about the age-graded changes that we have observed in the various strategies that more or less mature young persons differently employ in warranting their own and others persistence through time (see, for example: Boyes & Chandler, 1992; Chandler & Ball, 1989), we do want to draw your attention to the unique ways in which an available subgroup of suicidal adolescents have dealt with this assessment task.

But what bearing, you might well ask, does the topic of youth suicide have upon the foundational matter of self-continuity, and on the variable ways that individuals of different developmental stations, or different cultures, undertake to warrant their own sense of personal persistence? The answer, we suggest, lies in the fact that somehow being able to throw up a bridge across the distinctive expressions of selfhood that differently manifest themselves at separate moments within the ontological course needs to be understood as the link that welds together one's past, present, and future into an enduring sense of personal identity worth caring about. That is, self-continuity is that glue that not only holds us responsible for our own past actions, but that also provides the key to understanding why we are entitled to our own just deserts, and why we ordinarily have a legitimate stake in our own as yet unrealized future. Why, you might wonder, is the prospect of our own death at some future moment a matter of special interest? Why do we not picture the death of that person we will later become in the same dispassionate way that we read about some drive-by shooting in some distant city, or in the same detached way that military pilots must think about their high altitude bombing missions? The answer, we suggest, is that, we ordinarily understand ourselves as projecting both forward and backward out of the specious present, such that later down the road of serial reincarnation of ourselves we, like some shop worn ship of Theseus, will still be us—precious us. In short, the reason that we do not happily shuffle off this mortal coil when the going gets tough is because we count the dead person in question to be our own closest continuer, an extension of ourselves into some as yet unrealized future.

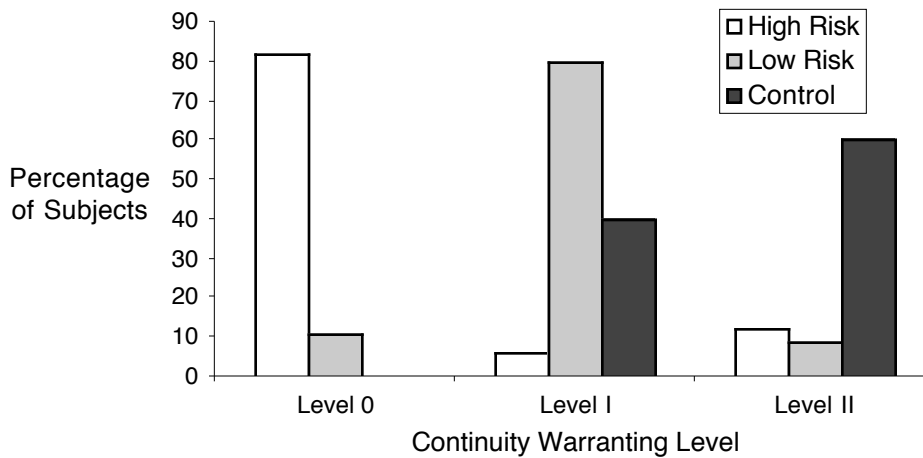
Two available sets of facts add to the good prospects of this attempt to re-read youth suicide as an expression of disruptions to the standard self-continuity warranting practices of more successfully developing persons, one of which is known by practically everyone. The other is contained within a recent series of our own publications (i.e., Ball & Chandler, 1989; Boyes & Chandler, 1992; Chandler, 1994b, 1994b; Chandler & Ball, 1989; Chandler & Lalonde, 1994; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). The common knowledge is that young persons (adolescents and young adults) actually do undertake to kill themselves at a prodigious rate some 10 to 20 times that of still younger and older persons—a fact that, in and of itself, cries out for a developmental explanation (Ball & Chandler, 1989). The second is that, in the course of their own sharply accelerating process of identity development, adolescents do regularly and repeatedly shift the

grounds upon which they attempt to argue or “warrant” the presumptive basis for their own self-continuity. In addition, and more to the present point, in the process of tacking back and forth between these less and more mature ways of warranting their own self-continuity—that is, in trying to clear the hurdles separating a series of increasingly complex and formally adequate ways of thinking about their own personal persistence through time—young persons do repeatedly find themselves with both developmental feet off the ground, and during these precarious transitional moments occasionally trip and fall. In so doing they temporarily end up (victims of their own progressive development) without any workable means of understanding their own continuity in time—their own reason to be invested in the person they are otherwise slated to become. At such awkward, and potentially lethal, transitional moments, suicide is a solution strategy with no appreciable down-side, and an outcome that often seems preferable to the more boring or heart-wrenching of teenage moments.

On the strength of this hat-trick of evidence (i.e., on the strength of the facts that: a) in the absence of any workable means of warranting one’s own self-continuity the concept of selfhood becomes nonsensical, and all reasons for investing in one’s own future become problematic; b) adolescents are regularly in the business of transiting between one and another way of warranting their own self-continuity, and sometimes temporarily lose their way in the process; and c) adolescents attempt to take their lives at a rate that is many times higher than that of other age groups) we undertook to look at the ability of suicidal adolescents to warrant their own self-continuity in time.

Stripped of all of those details better suited to a journal format, this, in short, is what we found (see Ball & Chandler, 1989). First, to a person, ordinary adolescents (labeled “Control” in Figure 1) always had at their disposal some more (Level II) or less (Level I) mature way of warranting their belief that they are continuous in time. Second, in almost every case, psychiatrically hospitalized but non-suicidal adolescents (“Low Risk”), although regularly less “mature” in their approach to the problem of self-continuity than their non-hospitalized age mates, were, nevertheless, still able to find good reasons as to why the persons they had been, were now, and would later become were the self-same numerically identical person. Finally, and in remarkably sharp contrast to those prepared to go on living, some 84% of the seriously suicidal adolescents tested (“High Risk”) came up empty. That is, they were totally unable to find any grounds whatsoever for warranting the necessary belief that they were continuous in time or connected to their own prospective futures (Level 0). None of this is, of course, iron-clad evidence in support of the broad proposition that self-continuity is a universal design feature of self- or personhood, but it is arguably a step in that direction.

Figure 1: Continuity Warranting Level by Suicide Risk Status



CULTURE AS THE SET-POINT FOR THE CHOICE BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE ALGORITHMS FOR CALCULATING SELF-CONTINUITY

If, as we now mean to have shown, there are empirical, as well as formal reasons to support the claim that self-continuity is a necessary constitutive condition of any coherent conception of selfhood, and, consequently, of any collective moral order, then we will have advanced our assertion that numerical identity is a non-elective design feature of all workable accounts of human individuality, and so belongs in the bag of trans-cultural things that turn out to be true for all people in all times. What all of this leaves unsettled is the location of the proper place in which to preserve the otherwise uncontested fact that, at some other “level of analysis,” the meaning of selfhood is also one of those things that are known to *vary* dramatically from one culture to the next.

The answer, we suggest, is that it is at what Dennett (1987) and Overton (1991) refer to as the “functional” or “procedural” level of description that culture works to “select” the broad outlines of the particular operational strategy (i.e., digital, or analog, or what?) that its members actually employ in directly computing their own self-continuity. That is, given the assertion that anyone, however situated, must, on pain of otherwise ceasing to be any sort of understandable person whatsoever, somehow learn to count themselves as continuous in time, it still follows that members of different cultures are nevertheless free to generate their own functional procedures and their own notational system and algorithmic heuristics for calculating how it might be that individuals who are first one way and then another can, nevertheless, end up being counted as one and the same numerically identical person.

If something like this is so, then what remains to be determined is precisely what choices one culture, as opposed to another, has made in arming its members with alternative procedural means for somehow finessing the problem of computing sameness in the face of exceptionless change. At

present, we have at our disposal small bits of information that could help to answer this question as it differentially pertains to young persons drawn from Canada's cultural mainstream, on the one hand, and their aboriginal, or First Nations counterparts, on the other.

In particular, what our ongoing research has suggested is that, when obliged to lay out their own conceptual strategies for winning the argument that they and others are continuous in time, standard issue Canadian youth almost invariably begin, and more often than not end, by rooting their convictions that they are diachronically continuous on the presumptive fact that there must be some *essential* aspect or feature of their identity, situated at some more or less subterranean level of internality, that manages to stand apart from the ravages of time, and works to vouchsafe the problematic matter of their own personal persistence. What tends to change in the course of ontogenetic development, this research suggests, is the level of abstraction at which such structural claims for the existence of some unchanging personal "essence" are pitched. Young 9- or 10-year-olds, for example, simply turn a blind eye toward everything about themselves that is different and instead focus their attention exclusively upon one or more of their surface attributes (their finger prints, their DNA, etc.) that they imagine somehow stands outside of time. Older adolescents, by contrast, tend to create an identity structure with some depth, and invoke a kind of phenotype-genotype distinction that allows them to write off evident change as merely superficial, while still preserving what they take to be an unchanging subterranean core of their identity. Only the oldest, and among them only the best and the brightest, ended up calling into question this common essentialistic strategy, conceding that perhaps, after all, everything about themselves is subject to change. Forced to abandon their former structural or essentialist strategies, these young people (all whom were in their late teens and strongly formal operational by standard measures) sharply shifted the ground upon which they made their case for personal persistence, opting instead for some more functional or narratively based self-continuity warranting practices. By these new lights, they and others were assumed to be self-same across time, not because some more or less deep lying part of them had escaped change, but rather because the person they once were and the person they had subsequently become were functionally related by some narrative connection assumed to exist between admittedly different installments of their identity. That is, they judged themselves to be diachronically continuous either because their past was assumed to be the determinant cause of their present (i.e., "I am the person I am today because of that terrible/special thing that happened to me in the past"), or because, applying a more presentist form of historiography, they reasoned that they could narratively reinterpret their past in light of their evolving present. That is, they effectively joined Dennet (1978, 1989) and Flanagan (1996) in assuming that the self amounts to a "narrative center of gravity" in one's own life.

What is perhaps most remarkable about this later group of more developmentally advanced

young persons—that is, those who came to adopt a more narratively based conception of their own persistent identity—is just how hard they were swimming against the main cultural stream. Without really trying to provide the full grounds for saying so, it is, we think, uncontroversially true that, certainly since the “Enlightenment,” and probably as far back as Plato or the origins of Christianity, our Western culture has been an essentialist culture, committed to what Polkinghorne (1988) describes as a “metaphysics of substance.” As a result, we are all quick to assume that “foundational” matters of great importance are always buried deep beneath obfuscating layers of phenotypic opacity, all of which must be swept aside or tunneled through before ever getting to the real heart of any matter. Small wonder, given all of this, that the young subjects of our research, rooted as they are in our own essentialist Euro-American culture, should begin their search for the “roots” of their own identity by “going deep” in search of some unchanging structure, and that those uncommon forays into some more narratively based constructions of self-continuity that do occur always seem to come late, and always in the wake of insurmountable difficulties in warranting personal persistence on a more structural, essentialistic basis.

Although the amount of data that we currently have in hand is too small to warrant statistical treatment, the kind of evidence that is currently coming in about the self-continuity practices of young aboriginal or First Nations Canadians suggests a very different picture than that afforded by their non-native counterparts. These young persons all belong to a culture that, on report, is committed, not to some foundationalist approach to truth, or an essentialist approach to meaning, but to what Polkinghorne (1988) refers to as a “metaphysics of potentiality and actuality,” and, consequently, are given to a more narratively based way of framing problems. That is, the First Nations of Canada, with their oral history and storytelling tradition, represent a culture whose standard notational schemes and algorithmic strategies should predispose them to attempts to solve the common computational problems of self-continuity through strategies that “go long” rather than “go deep,” by linking earlier and later occurring personal ways of being through some narrative framework that connects past and present in a more “leading to” or “interpretive” fashion.

It is precisely this reliance on a narratively, rather than on an essentialistic based, self-continuity warranting strategy that our data so far suggests. That is, when tested with what are meant to be more culturally appropriate story materials, young First Nations persons almost never attempt to warrant their own or others self-continuity by searching out some potentially hidden essentialist core. Rather they begin, from the outset, by undertaking to frame some story that will narratively link their earlier and later ways of being. It is not, of course, that these young persons all succeed in authoring anything that would ordinarily qualify as a mature form of autobiography. That is, they do not begin by relating self-narratives that take the complex form of *bildungsroman*, or other

transformational stories of character development (Lightfoot, 1997; Rorty, 1976). Rather the early efforts of the youngest of these native respondents are more often like early “picaresque” novels, or “Medieval Romances,” in which the episodes of their own and other people’s lives are simply strung together like beads on a string, *sans* real plot or coherent change of characters. As such, the procedural ways that First Nations youth do go about the business of warranting their own or others’ self-continuity is, according to our data, qualitatively different from the ways of proceeding that are common to their culturally mainstream counterparts. They adopt from the outset a “leading to” form of narrative-like self-accounting that is, in its mature expression, only an end-game achievement in the development of non-native youth. In short, First Nations youth pursue a computational algorithm that plays “analogue” to our own “digital.” It is in no way our point to try to argue that one of these strategies is naturally more adequate than the other. Rather, our claim is only that, at the “functional” or “procedural” level of description, different cultural groups can and do understandably vary in how they undertake to vouchsafe their own self-continuity.

HARD TIMES AND THE DIFFERENTIAL COSTS OF NARRATIVE AND ESSENTIALISTIC SOLUTIONS TO THE SELF-CONTINUITY PROBLEM

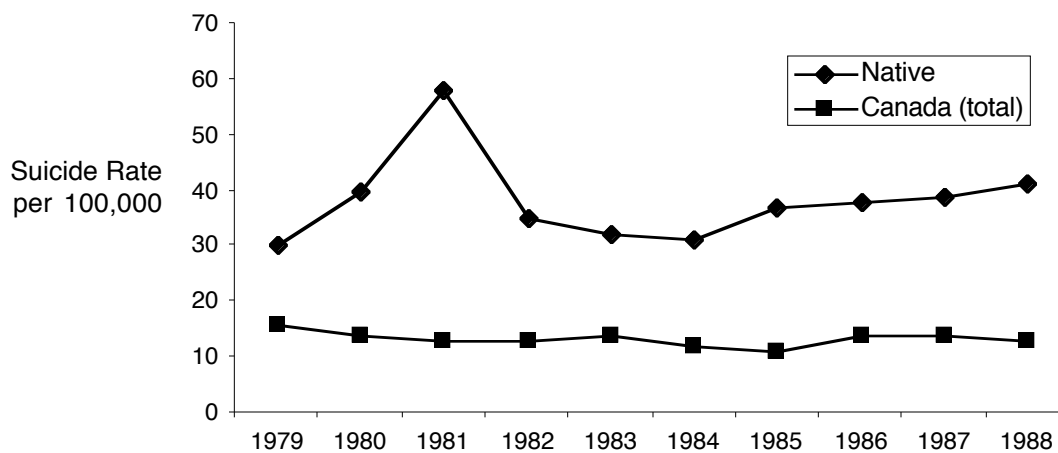
Finally, we want to alert you to the possibility that, while there may not exist some blind scale of justice upon which to weigh the relative merits of this or that culturally specific procedural strategy for solving what, in this case, is the universal obligation to compute some workable self-continuity warranting strategy, there is also no guarantee that such contrastive heuristics will prove uniformly adequate in dealing with the specific kinds of adversities that historical circumstance happens to throw into their path. That is, under the press of this or that practical circumstance, digital sometimes just is better (or worse) than analogue. Something like this is also pointedly the case in view of the different historical circumstances in which Aboriginal and mainstream Canadian youth are currently obliged to negotiate their own convictions about self-continuity.

By most accounts, we are all, to one degree or another, living through a time of dramatic cultural change. However true this might be for rank-and-file Canadian youth, a case can still be made that their culture’s predilection for a more “essentialistic” approach to the common problem of self-continuity, while not without certain alienating costs of its own, currently works in their favor by partially insulating them from at least the surface structure of rapid cultural change. That is, if the culturally sanctioned direction of your search for some means of warranting your own personal sense of sameness across time happens to carry you away from the situationally troubled surface, and toward some quieter, more subterranean pool of abstraction where the core of your self is alleged to be found, then count yourself temporarily lucky for being born into a place where “going deep” may just happen to be contingently better than “going long.”

If, by contrast, you happen to live in a culture, as do contemporary First Nations youth, the fundamental meaning of which is understood to reside in the continuity of its own narrative history, and if your culturally sanctioned ways of thinking about your own self-continuity are similarly prescribed to be narratively based, and, finally, if, after 10,000 years of adaptive success, your culture has, nevertheless, been declared “stone aged” and moribund—that is, if your cultural practices have been criminalized and beaten out of you through generations of residential schools and genocidal approaches to your language and cultural life—then woe be upon you and your chances of declaring your personal existence as having any worthwhile or enduring meaning. This, of course, is precisely what has happened to the culture of every aboriginal group across North America and beyond.

Given this shameful history, and the connections we have already drawn between culture, self-continuity, and suicide, one would naturally expect that the rate of suicide among Canada’s First Nations youth would be dramatically higher than that of their non-native counterparts. In fact, the trouble is worse than one’s worst expectations. The overall rate of suicide among Canada’s First Nations persons is 3 to 5 times higher than the national average (see Figure 2), and, in fact, is the highest of any culturally identifiable group in the world (Kirmayer, 1994). Worse still, the rate of suicide among First Nations youth is another 5 to 10 times higher than this already alarming statistic (Cooper, M., Corrado, R., Karlberg, A. M., & Pelletier Adams, L., 1992). Given these current trends, and before everything is over, one in every 20 of this generation’s First Nations youth will end up dying at their own hand (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

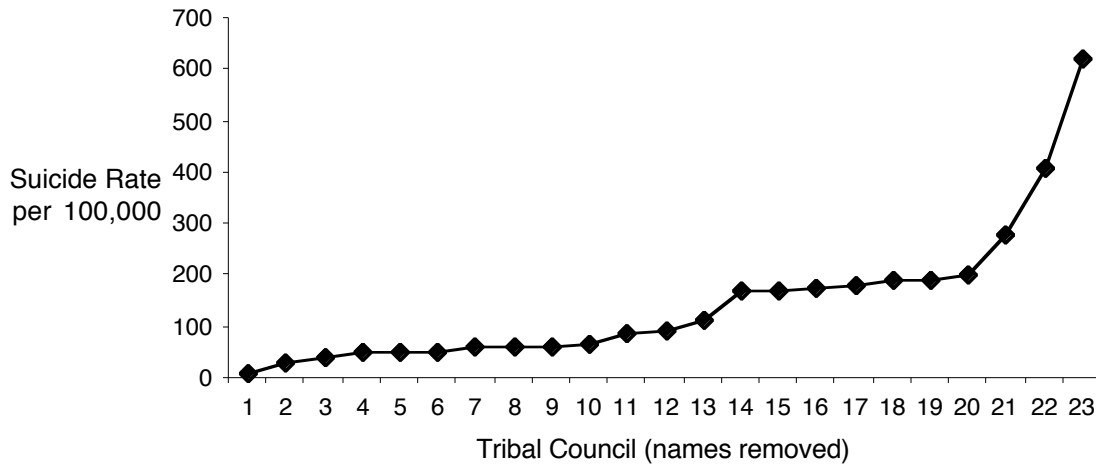
Figure 2: Suicide in Canada (1979-1988)



Looking into this bleak picture, we have recently completed an epidemiological study (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) that tries to get beyond the usual “pan-Indian” level by asking about the potentially differential rates of suicide that characterize specific tribal groups. The results of this inquiry are perhaps surprising. Among the 30 some “Tribal Councils” that organize British

Columbia's 196 aboriginal bands, the rates of suicide turn out to be extremely variable. Over the 5-year window of the study (i.e., 1987-1992), more than half of the province's native bands suffered no youth suicide at all, and, consequently, have overall suicide rates well below the national average. Others have suicide rates that are 500 to 800 times that of the nation as a whole (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Native Suicide Rate by Tribal Affiliation (British Columbia, 1987–1992)



On the strength of the proposition that suicide is a manifestation of failed attempts at sustaining a sense of personal self-continuity, as well as the expectation that, at least among First Nations peoples, the culturally sanctioned procedure for computing personal persistence is narratively based, and so automatically linked to the narrative continuity (or discontinuity) provided by their own cultural heritage, we have attempted to relate the known variability in the suicide rates of various First Nations communities to some index of the degree to which these groups have been left without any sustainable culture whatsoever.

In view of the fact that the “ethnic cleansing” to which each of these aboriginal groups has been subject is, in most respects, more tragically similar than different, and because their traditional cultures have been almost uniformly “swept away,” what we went looking for instead were any kind of markers that might index community-based efforts to rebuild or rehabilitate a culture that was otherwise on the cusp of being lost. Given available resources, we have so far identified six such possible indices of cultural reconstruction, including the facts that some, but not others, of these cultural groups are currently in the midst of litigating for self-government, or aboriginal title over traditional lands, and that some have met with more success than others in introducing native values into, and exercising local control over, their own public health and educational and judicial systems. Figure 4 draws out the strong statistical relation of these half dozen markers of cultural rehabilitation to known rates of suicide, while Figure 5 depicts the cumulative effect of these markers. What these comparisons serve to make clear, we think, is that, in working to inculcate a sense of connectedness to one's own cultural past, communities can succeed in constructing safety

nets that help to catch young people who slip while trying to navigate those standard developmental transitions that recurrently threaten to cost every young person a sense of enduring self-continuity.

Figure 4: Relations between suicide rates and measures of cultural reconstruction

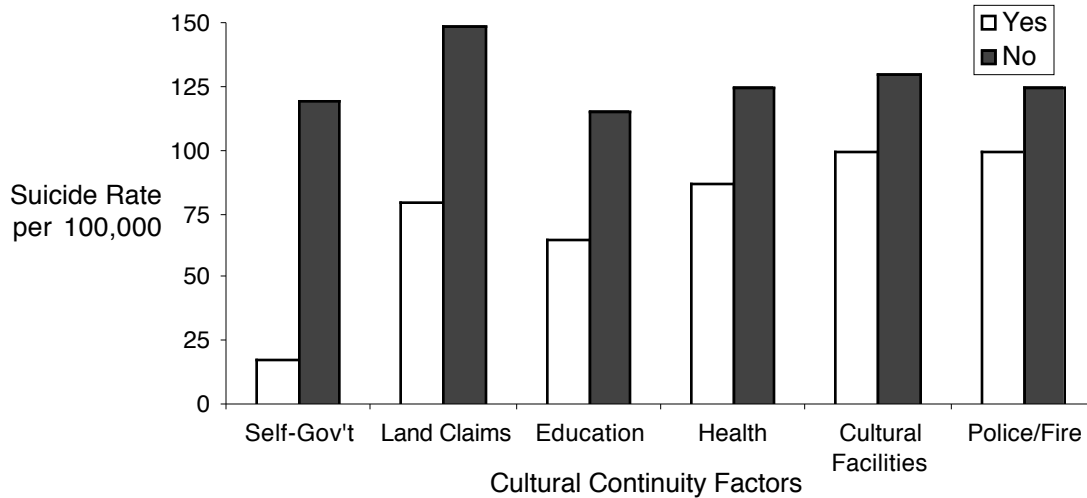
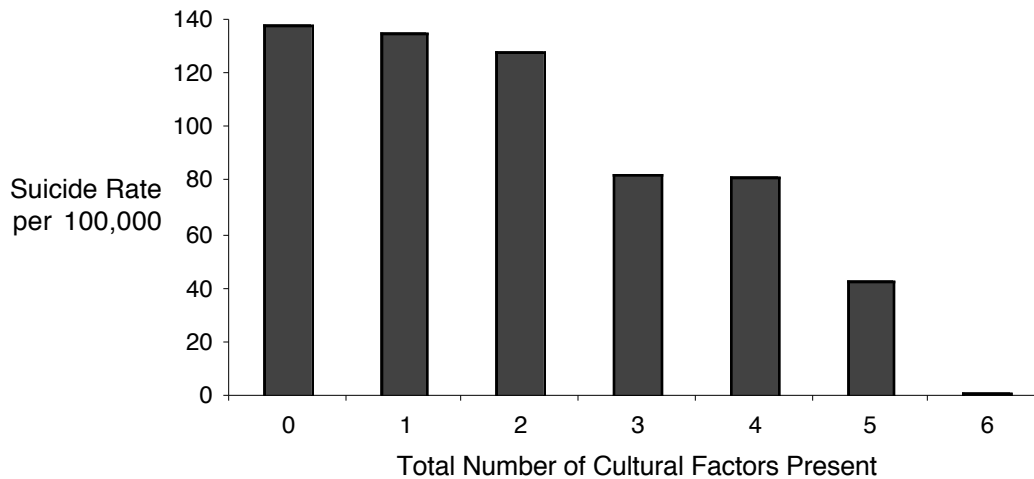


Figure 5: Cumulative effect of measures of cultural reconstruction



CONCLUSION

What we take from all of this is that the subject of selfhood and its development is neither the exclusive province of those in search of some broad trans-cultural competence theory of identity development, nor some wholly owned subsidiary of those neo-situational theorists committed to showing how the concept of the self is the contingent consequence of socially constructed, and so culturally variable, systems of belief. Rather, the task of working out what it could possibly mean to have or be a self needs to be viewed as existing within a problem space that occupies at least three

different levels of description. At the most abstract of these levels—Dennett’s or Overton’s “competence” level, or Marr’s level of “computational” description—there are strong empirical as well as formal reasons for supposing that, however culturally situated, any workable conception of the self, on pain of otherwise failing to satisfy those minimal design requirements necessary for the maintenance of any social or moral order, must be designed in such a way as to address the universal problem of sameness within difference, and so allow individuals to understand themselves as somehow continuous in the face of inevitable personal change. Nothing about such claims in favor of the existence of trans-cultural commonalties needs to be seen, however, as in any way impugning the reputation of different claims and different lines of evidence all pointing to the undeniable fact that different communities make available to their members culturally contingent ways of constructing the self. Without careful attention to the different levels of problem description on which such claims operate, we risk once again trafficking in that same spent culture versus trans-cultural polemic that has cost us our professional reputations so many times before.

REFERENCES

- Ball, L., & Chandler, M. J. (1989). Identity formation in suicidal and nonsuicidal youth: The role of self-continuity. *Development and Psychopathology*, *1*(3), 257-275.
- Boyes, M. C., & Chandler, M. J. (1992). Cognitive development, epistemic doubt and identity formation in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *21*(3), 277-304.
- Cassirer, E. (1923). *Substance and Function*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company.
- Chandler, M. J. (1997). Stumping for progress in a post-modern world. In A. Renninger & E. Amsel (Eds.), *New directions in the study of change and development*. (pp. 1-26) Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Chandler, M. J. (1994). Adolescent suicide and the loss of personal continuity. In D. Cicchetti & S. L. Toth (Eds.), *Rochester symposium on developmental psychopathology: Disorders and dysfunctions of the self*. (pp. 371-390). Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Chandler, M. J. (1994). Self-continuity in suicidal and nonsuicidal adolescents. In G. Noam & S. Borst (Eds.), *Children, youth and suicide: Developmental perspectives* (pp. 55-70). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chandler, M. J., & Ball, L. (1989). Continuity and commitment: A developmental analysis of identity formation process in suicidal and non-suicidal youth. In H. Bosma & S. Jackson (Eds.), *Coping and self-concept in adolescence*. Heidelberg: Springer Verlag.
- Chandler, M. J., & Lalonde, C. E. (1994). Folk theories of mind and self: A cross-cultural study of suicide in native and non-native groups. In A. Marchetti & O. Sempio (Eds.), *The development of theories of mind and the construction of cognitive abilities*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Chandler, M. J., & Lalonde, C. E. (1995). The problem of self-continuity in the context of rapid personal and cultural change. In A. Oosterwegel & R. A. Wicklund (Eds.), *The Self in European and North American Culture: Development and Processes* (pp. 45-63). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Chandler, M. J., & Lalonde, C. E. (1998). Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *35*(2), 193-211.
- Cooper, M., Corrado, R., Karlberg, A. M., & Pelletier Adams, L. (1992). Aboriginal suicide in British Columbia: an overview. *Canada's Mental Health*, *19*, 19-23.
- Dennett, D. (1978). *Brainstorms*. Hassocks: Harvester Press.
- Dennett, D. (1987). *The intentional stance*. Cambridge, MS: MIT Press.
- Flanagan, O. (1996). *Self expressions: mind, morals, and the meaning of life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1975). On the nature of anthropological understanding. *American Scientist*, *63*, 47-53.
- Haber, H. (1994). *Beyond Postmodern Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The new conservatism: Cultural criticism and the historians' debate*. (S. W. Nicholson, Trans. & Ed.) Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original works published 1985 & 1987.)
- Habermas, J. (1991). The paradigm shift in Mead. In M. Aboulafia (Ed.) *Philosophy, social theory, and the thought of George Herbert Mead* (pp. 138-168). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hallowell, A. I. (1955). *Culture and Experience*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Harré, R. (1979). *Social being: A Theory for social psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kirmayer, L. (1994). Suicide among Canadian aboriginal people. *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review*, *31*, 3-57.
- Levine, R. A. & White, M. I. (1986). *Human conditions: The cultural basis of educational development..* New York: Rutledge & Kegan Paul.

- Lightfoot, C. G. (1997). *The culture of adolescent risk-taking*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Lillard, A. (1998). Ethnopsychologies: Cultural variations in Theories of Mind. *Psychological Bulletin*, 123, 3-32.
- Luckman, T. (1976). Personal identity as an evolutionary and historical problem. In M. von Cranach (Ed.), *Human ethology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marr, D. (1982). *Vision: A computational investigation into the human representation and processing of visual information*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Norman, D. A. (1982). *Learning and Memory*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Overton, W. F. (1996). Beyond dichotomy: An embodied active agent for cultural psychology. *Culture and Psychology*, Dec.
- Polkinghorne, C. (1988). *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Rorty, A. O. (1976). *The identity of reason*. Berkeley, U. of California Press.
- Searle, J. (1984). *Minds, brains and science*. Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press.
- Shotter, J. (1984). *Social Accountability and Selfhood*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Shweder, R. A., & Bourne, L. (1984). Does the concept of the person vary cross-culturally? In R. A. Shweder & R. A. Levine (Eds.) *Culture theory: Essays on mind, self, and emotion* (pp.158-199). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (1959). *Individuals*. London: Methuen.
- Taylor, C. (1991). *The malaise of modernity*. Concord, Ontario, Canada: House of Anansi Press.

Figure 1: Continuity Warranting Level by Suicide Risk Status

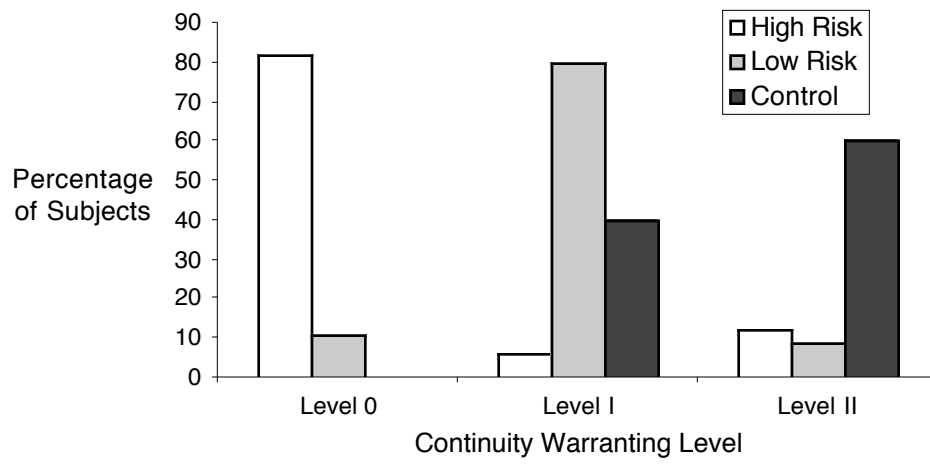


Figure 2: Suicide in Canada (1979-1988)

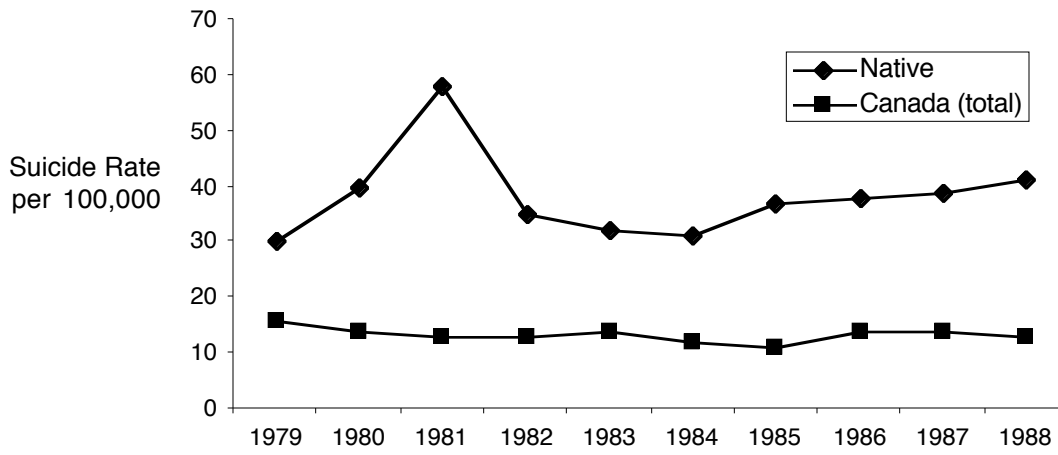


Figure 3: Native Suicide Rate by Tribal Affiliation (British Columbia, 1987–1992)

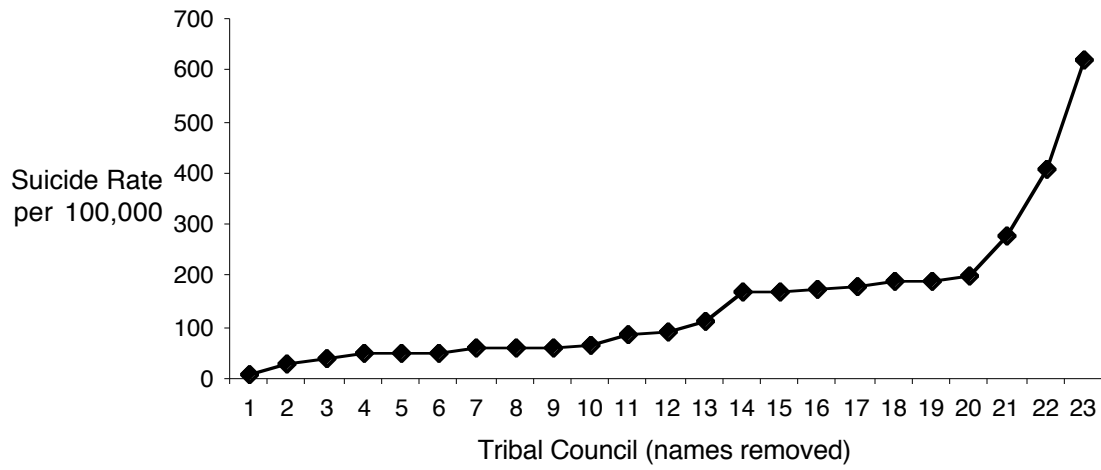


Figure 4: Relations between suicide rates and measures of cultural reconstruction

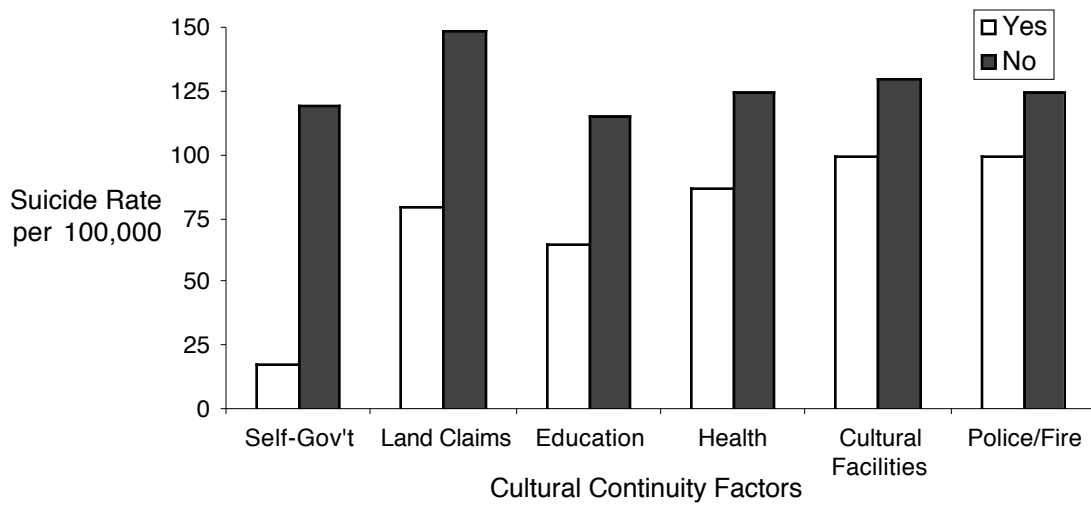


Figure 5: Cumulative effect of measures of cultural reconstruction

