



THE TRANSFORMATIVE INFLUENCE OF STORIES IN THE  
LIVES OF  
NAVAJO WOMEN: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Yá'a'tééh.

My name is  
Michelle Tsosie.

My maternal  
clan is

Tsi'naajinii

(Black Streaked  
Wood), and my  
paternal clan is

Tódich'íi'nii

(Bitter Water). I  
am from Rough  
Rock, Arizona.



## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Navajo women's lives have been influenced by their Navajo culture, traditions, and stories they have learned from their family members and Elders



## Research Question

How do stories told to Navajo women by their family members and Elders influence their lives?



# Conceptual Frameworks

Transformational Learning Theory

Chaos Theory

Major themes of Diné cultural wisdom that include the Blessing Way Ceremony

1. A disorienting dilemma
  2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
  3. A critical assessment of assumptions
  4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
  5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
  6. Planning a course of action
  7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
  8. Provisional trying of new roles
  9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
  10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)
- The wisdom learned was from observation and research of the lived experiences of other women in an educational program.

## Transformational Learning Theory

Mezirow (2000) organized a learning theory transformation from his dissertation research that consisted of 10 phrases that allowed for others to understand and learn.

# Chaos Theory

Dynamically organized patterns are revealed when complex systems and their behaviors are explored. Some non-equilibrium universality principles of Chaos Theory include the principles of sensitive dependence, bifurcation, self-similarity, and fractal organization (Fichter et al., 2010).

Metaphorically, these same principles could be applied to behaviors of an individual, or a group of people.

The Butterfly Effect theory was coined by the American meteorologist Edward N. Lorenz, “to highlight the possibility that small causes may have momentous effects” (Ezeugwu & Omeje, p. 40). Lorenz initially realized that the simple weather systems he was studying and computing were “extremely sensitive to initial conditions, where small changes in the past have huge outcomes in the future” (p. 41).

Ezeugwu and Omeje (2020) highlighted the Butterfly Effect, Chaos Theory, and sensitive dependence in their investigation of Eco literacy and Igbo cosmology in Chinua Achebe's literary tome, *Arrow of God*. They contended that Igbo societies of Africa have contributed to environmental literacy, ecological literacy, and Eco literacy through their culture, language, and stories.

The Igbo recognized patterns within their environment and would immediately coin a protection myth or superstition to protect any endangered species or organisms. If a community member disregarded the superstition or myth and disrupted the organism or the organism's environment, their "gods or deities are involved in punishing any violator" (p. 52). The cultural practices are still in effect in Igboland today according to the authors.

The authors asserted that that the Igbo people and their culture allowed for stories and superstitions to protect, regulate, and guide Earth and the environment in which they lived. The authors asserted that that the Igbo people and their culture allowed for stories and superstitions to protect, regulate, and guide Earth and the environment in which they lived.

# The Blessing Way

- The Blessing Way Ceremony is called *Hózhóójí* in Navajo.
- Farella (1984) explained how the name of the ceremony *Hózhóójí* comes from the concept of *Hózhó*.
- The Navajo phrase *Si'q̄h Naaghéí Bek'eh Hozhóón* (SNBH) is defined by Farella as “an understanding of the whole. In fact, in a very literal sense, *Sa'a naghái bik'e hózhó* is the whole” (p. 17).
- The first syllable hó- as “the whole, everything, everywhere, and every living entity that includes the land, animals, and insects—the Universe including myself”. The stem *-zhó* is *felt in one* as the feeling contentment with the feelings of “beauty, peace, joy, excellence, and order”.
- Kahn-John and Koithan (2015) described Navajo *Hózhó* teachings as: The effort of maintaining relationships is constant, a grounding force that promotes individual, spiritual, and collective health and strength. Generosity and reciprocity are significant in *Hózhó* philosophy. . . . Likewise, reciprocal exchanges of support, food, gifts, love, compassion, and respect are viewed as means of maintaining relationship. Honoring, preserving, sustaining, and nurturing positive and healthy interdependent relationships may be the richest source of internal, external, and existential health protection attained through the practice of Diné *Hózhó*. (p. 28)



## Literature Review

- Glittering World
- Changing Woman
- Hero Twins  
Diyin Dine'é
- Hooghan
- Saad
- Navajo Code Talkers
- Indigenous Research Studies
- Navajo Research Studies



## Research Design

Narrative Inquiry using semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions

Eleven women (ages 41 to 56) from the Navajo Nation were interviewed using an Internet-based recording application. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. A narrative analysis was conducted to ascertain major themes and subthemes.

# Participant Demographic Data

Name	Age	Primary Caregiver	Number of Siblings	Number of Children	Highest Education
Grace	49	Parents	5	4	College
Adeline	45	Parents	1	0	College
Hilde	50	Grandparents	6	4	College
Olivia	42	Parents	--	7	College
Natalie	55	Grandparents	8	2	Trade School
Cara	42	Parents	3	3	College
Norah	56	Parents	6	1	College
Sadie	45	Parents	5	0	College
Tabitha	47	Parents	10	3	College
Joy	41	Parents	8	0	College
Sherrie	51	Parent, Aunt, & Grandmother	0	3	College



# 7 Major Themes

- Reciprocity of Respectful Relationships with Family and Community Members
- Openness to Communication and Learning through Listening and Speaking
- Wisdom of Matriarchs and Patriarchs
- Embodiment of Stories, Teachings, and Ceremonies
- Hózhó: Balance and Harmony in Life
- Recognition of a Unique Background Compared to Mainstream
- Observation of Disconnect and Difference

I remember my brothers. They were supposed to take the horses somewhere . . . one of the horses, I remember, turned and almost bit one of my cousins . . . and here my cousin brother turned around and bopped it or hit it with a closed fist—hit the horse. My *Náli 'Asdzáá* (paternal grandmother), the older one, my grandma—she saw it and as she came over she didn't yell. She just came over, and she started talking to all of us. . . . I remember her telling us like, “You don't hit your horse. You don't hit any type of livestock, especially horses, with a closed fist or in any way. You don't abuse your horses. It bites or it does stuff, it reacts because of what you do to it. [If] it doesn't like something, it's going to react just like us. But if somebody scares us, we're going to react by kicking them.” She told us that first.

# Olivia

## Wisdom of Matriarchs and Patriarchs

Then she began with how horses were created, the creation of the horses, and how it has its own song, *Łii' Biyiin* (The Horse Song) . . . . It's like a protection song for the horses with themselves, within the four directions, the four colors, the sacred mountains. And they're all adorned with the shells and how they would use that as a learning tool for the kids. . . . It made sense because when we came back down here, the horses didn't come back.

We looked for them everywhere, and we couldn't find them, and I remember one day, one night we sat there with her. . . . She said a prayer, and she sang the Horse song, and that morning . . . the horses were walking back, they were following each other. They went straight into the horse corral that was over at her place. . . . That's how I know . . . I believe everything that my grandma said. So it was that's what I really remember, and that's one of the stories I always tell my kids—and that it did happen. They didn't believe me. I said, “It happened.”

Olivia

Wisdom of  
Matriarchs  
and  
Patriarchs

The term “walking in beauty” to me—I can't think of it in any other way, except in Navajo. When I say my morning prayers, I say I want to walk in beauty—beauty in front of me, below me, around me, above me, all around me, and the ending of the prayer, *Hózhó Náhasdlíí'*, *Hózhó Náhasdlíí'*. You say it four times. So, to me, I think it really means—it's something that comes from my grandma. . . . Walking in beauty means to have good thoughts in your mind, to have good thoughts about people, to have good thoughts about things that are going to happen, [and] good thoughts in your plan. And then when you do something to reflect on the good things and try to make those good things stronger instead of focusing on the bad things that have happened, or that could happen. So I know it's really important to me when I hear “Walking in Beauty.” It's really important to me the words that and the actions that I take.

## Cara

Embodiment  
of Stories,  
Teachings,  
and  
Ceremonies

I'm really careful with my children—the way that I talk to them. I know I try real hard not to say anything that they could consider being mean. I'm always trying to be really kind to them. And because I know some things that you say you just—you can't unsay them, and so you have to be really careful with your words. And it's the same with the things that you do. You have to be careful to do things, and it all goes back to your thinking. You want to do things with good intentions, with a good heart, [and] with good thoughts, so I try to be that way. It's not always perfect. I know that, but that's what it means to me when you're walking in beauty. You know your thoughts are good, your words are good, and your actions are good.

## Cara

Embodiment  
of Stories,  
Teachings,  
and  
Ceremonies

I would say the first time I heard about that was during my *Kinaaldá*. And they talk about all the songs—not all the songs, but the morning songs. It's repeated. It's like *Hózhó, Hózhó, Hózhóogo Naasháa dooleet*. It's the one thing I can remember. I'm always going to walk in beauty. There is beauty above me, below me, before me, behind me, around me. When I thought about that during my *Kinaaldá* and being on the mesa, I felt like that was it. I felt like when I was going out taking care of the sheep, walking among the trees in the forest and even down the ditch chasing after the sheep. That's what it was. I was like I was doing something that people before me did. And I could see myself being like in their footsteps, and I felt this—I felt like that was the right thing that I needed to be doing even as young as I was. I was like, "Oh, so this is what I'm supposed to be doing."

# Joy

Hózhó:  
Balance  
and  
Harmony in  
Life

It came up again before I left for the Army. My parents, they had the ceremonies for me to—for protection. And when I came home, there [were] ceremonies again to bring me back home so that I was in balance again. Walking in beauty, to me, is feeling positive and knowing you're not separated from the environment, that you're engaged with them. You're fluid with it—fluid with the air and the land and the plants and the animals and people around you. . . . So when you're able to appreciate where you're at, knowing where you're supposed to be, that you're engaging and respecting your surroundings. That's what it means to walk in beauty.

Joy

Hózhó:  
Balance  
and  
Harmony in  
Life

# Discussion

The participants recounted many stories they had heard from their family members and their Elders. Those stories provided a fundamental knowing and understanding for the women. The stories helped them to rediscover themselves because, in the retelling of stories that have guided them throughout their lives, they also have become aware of how the stories influenced them. From the stories, they learned about themselves, their families' history, their culture, and their ceremonies. They also shared profound thoughts and belief systems that have affected their lives for the better and have radiated throughout their lives in a beautiful way.

The knowledge gained from the stories not only illuminated aspects of Navajo cultural knowledge and wisdom, it showed how Navajo women were connected with the whole and with one another through the stories they told. Additionally, the stories from this study could assist Navajo people of the future in knowing the Navajo people of today and help them to (re)discover themselves.



# Significant Findings

- Kindness, Respect, Love
- K'é
- Saad: Strong Communication
- Wisdom of Matriarchs and Patriarchs
- Changing Woman
- Hozhó: Balance and Harmony in Life
- Changing Women: Mindful, Reflective, and Proactive
- It is a Glittering World

# Recommendations for Practice: Personal or Self

- Become aware of the stories you tell yourself. Positive communication with oneself is beneficial to your well-being.
- Engage in self-talk to reflect on and expand on your own understandings and feelings within and without.
- Be kind to yourself. Treat your body, mind, and spirit with great respect and love.
- Ask for help. There is so much support available to you whether it is your family, friends, or community members.
- Self-reliance is a powerful antidote to fear, helplessness, and complacency.
- Embrace and engage with the world. Be bold.
- Learn and engage more with your cultural heritage and language.

# Recommendations for Practice: Interpersonal

- Be kind and respectful to one another.
- Be open to listening to other people who may have different viewpoints or ideas.
- Recognize styles of communication. How you communicate with your child is different from how you communicate with your colleagues.
- Recognize that your tone of voice matters a lot to a young child. Children respond much more positively to a gentle voice.
- Interact with one another based on K'é and clanship.

# Recommendations for Practice: Community and Society

- Encourage open and lively conversations with children and adolescents in a kind and respectful manner.
- Sharing stories allows people to witness and learn from each other's experience.
- Encourage and allow children to ask questions, and honor them by answering their questions the best way you can. Children are naturally curious and will ask many questions. If a question is asked, I would encourage engagement and conversation.
- Encourage young children and adolescents to be proud of their heritage. Encourage them to participate at community level events. Engagement in community allows them to understand that Navajos have a unique culture.

# Recommendations for Further Study

- Extend the concept of this study to other communities on the Navajo Nation. Navajo females older than 55 years old were not interviewed in this study. They would provide an amazing contrast to this study, as I believe they may have additional traditional knowledge and stories to share.
- Navajo male participants might also offer a different perspective if the same interview questions were to be used. However, the interview questions may require modification for the Navajo male population to reflect their roles, responsibilities, ceremonies, and stories they have learned experienced throughout their lives.
- This research project could provide guidance for other Indigenous communities in the United States and beyond. The research interview questions would require some modifications to address their particular cultural stories, myths, legends, and perspectives.



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