Creating Culturally Safe Spaces for Indigenous Populations – Turquoise Skye Devereaux, MSW
Episode 59
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

In this episode, I talk with Turquoise Skye Devereaux, a member of the Salish and Blackfeet Tribes of Montana, owner of the consulting company Indigenous Skye, LLC, where she does a range of trainings, workshops, and speaking focused on creating culturally safe spaces for Indigenous populations as well as work with Indigenous youth and tribal communities. She also works in higher education in retention of Native students and is a PhD student in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. Turquoise talks about colonial systems and the four stages of colonization, as well as systemic racism and oppression, and specific ways education and social work have caused–and continue to cause–harm to Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups.

We get into how cultural competency is a myth based in a Westernized, colonial mentality, and how it does more harm than good. Turquoise explains differences between Indigenous and Westernized worldviews and ways of living. She shares ways to create culturally safe spaces for Indigenous populations, providing examples from her own life, as well as interviews she has done with Indigenous students in terms of ways they did not feel included in school systems and how professors, administrators, and staff made a difference–and can make a difference–in creating safety, equity, and inclusion. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only political social work programs and an abolitionist focused learning opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve racial, social, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Hey Turquoise, thanks so much for coming on the podcast. Just really excited to have this conversation with you and want to give a shout out to our mutual friend, Jordan Thierry, for making this connection. And just to start off, maybe you could share a little bit about what you currently do.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be here. So I am part of the Salish and Blackfeet Tribes of Montana, so I grew up, born and raised in Montana, in western Montana. I say it's literally one of the most beautiful places in the world. I know I'm a little biased, but if you've ever been there, you would know. And I do a lot of things, but primarily it revolves around serving my community and I run my own consulting business called Indigenous Skye, LLC, where I do consulting on creating culturally safe spaces for Indigenous populations pretty much on every level of social work, micro, meso, macro, and I've been doing that now for about seven years.

But I've also worked in higher education institutions pretty much as my, what I would say, 9-to-5 career jobs, recruiting and retaining Native students in higher education. And yeah, really in the realms of macro level social work. If you can think about it, I've pretty much done it. And then a lot of my direct

practice in social work really revolves around Native students and Indigenous youth programming and working with tribal communities as well.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, just from our conversations before even this recording, you have a lot going on. You're also a PhD student, correct? And you...

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

You publish and you have writings that are out there and ones that are coming as well.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, it's funny because I am in the weeds the first semester of my PhD program and I totally feel it right now and somehow I forget to mention that. But yes, I am currently a PhD student in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. So I currently reside in Phoenix, Arizona and I've been here for about four years. But, yeah and I also am involved in a lot of trying to get... Well, I have been published in... I actually have an article in the Macro Level Social Work Encyclopedia on historical intergenerational trauma with my mentor Laurie Walker. Give a huge shout out to Laurie. They have literally got me to where I am today. I know we'll talk a little bit more about that later, but that's just one of them.

And then I do have a article that's in press right now that I'm really excited about because it's my first, first-author article and it really talks a lot about more of my work. And I know, as you mentioned, it's more of a narrative form and so I really enjoy that because I was able to really tap into a lot of more creative writing, I think you could call it, but it's really more digestible and less all academic, which I love. So I also do those things.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that article, and thank you for sharing it with me, is just a phenomenal piece and once it's out we can link to it. So when this podcast episode gets published, it might not be out yet, but I'll add it once the link... once it's published. And yeah, it just felt like we could be hanging out and you're talking about it. It's such a powerful article and also enjoyable to read, but clearly really heartfelt and really serious when you're sharing your experience and also what it's like to be a Native student in a space that isn't designed for you.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, no, definitely. And I really enjoy that feedback because that was definitely the initiative I was trying to take when writing it. And also because I've worked in systems, like colonized systems, higher education institutions, in my career, it also is a really great article for people who are working in those systems as well and to understand that even if you're not just a student, it's still difficult for people of color to work in colonized systems as well as an employee. And so I think that that highlights a lot of that.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. It's really incredible. I hope everyone checks it out when that is out. So I know we're going to talk mostly about creating culturally safe spaces for Indigenous populations, but before we get more into that, how did you get involved in this work?

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, so as an Indigenous person, which coming from a very collectivist community, which a lot of people, if you understand the different types of world views, it just means that serving my community was really always a priority in what I wanted to do in my career, no matter what it was I wanted to go into, but my junior year of college in my undergrad, I was really questioning whether school was for me, which is kind of crazy to say now as I'm going into... started my PhD program. But yeah, it's kind of nuts to think about. But my mentor, Laurie Walker, was actually a person who for the first time in my undergraduate career really gave me a voice in the classroom and so I really trusted them to, cause they were providing me this platform, to really talk about my community and the struggles that we have and also the beauty of my community.

So then when I let Laurie know, "I might not want to stay in social work because everything I'm learning just isn't working." And Laurie was like, "Don't leave and here's a article about Native women in social work." And so honestly, that support has, like I said, brought me to where I am today. But when I was in... so I stayed and then my senior year, Laurie was a part of my practicum, which is our internship for the last semester of our undergrad in our school, in this social work field, and I got the opportunity to intern at American Indian Student Services at the University of Montana and I did a program evaluation. I had no idea what I was doing, absolutely no idea. All I knew is I wanted to make the campus a better place for Native students and I wanted to do focus groups with Native students to get their perspectives.

And actually the article that we just mentioned, the one that is going to come out, is all about that specific experience of mine and doing that in the way that I did it and having the support of my mentor, Laurie, to really say that, "What you're doing is just as worthy as understanding the academics behind what Westernized society would tell you you're doing. You're serving your community and that's the same thing." And so really those students' stories are still honestly what I would say predicted my trajectory into my passion for trying to create culturally safe spaces in colonized spaces, colonized systems, and really just still gives me the motivation and determination to change these things. And honestly too, it's like the students that I get to work with, especially the Indigenous youth, the fact that I get to work with Indigenous youth, I feel so honored and privileged and they keep me going. They rejuvenate me for sure.

And so really from there I started... that's when I started presenting as well and it started on just at the University of Montana and then locally throughout the community and then statewide and then regional. And then I moved to Arizona and now I've presented nationally a few times. I travel a lot to present in many different states all around the country at conferences and specific organizations hire me to talk about creating culturally safe spaces. So it's kind of just flourished into this completely... I'm so grateful for this completely just overarching career of serving my community and when I stay on this path, I'm always taken care of and that's something big and I know I'm on the right path, so that's huge.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that's huge and super powerful to carry all that along the path with you.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

So a big reason why I wanted to get you on here was of course for people to learn from you, for folks who follow the podcast and new people that might be listening for the first time to learn from you so that they can create change to create... or improve upon, if there's been a start already, culturally safe spaces for Indigenous populations. And of course, as you said, folks can hire you for trainings as well. So I'm just wondering if a place to start could be on naming the historical and currently unsafe environments for Indigenous Peoples and then we can later talk about what makes a culturally safe space.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, definitely. I mean really the act of colonization impacts pretty much every single system that is in our country. And especially when it's Westernized based, that means that it usually doesn't include Indigenous ways of functioning or worldview or healing or even ways of living, and that's why when we're thinking about systemic oppression, systemic racism, it's very apparent with Indigenous communities because in most spaces, especially in education, we're not included in the curriculum. In most cases, it's like we don't even exist, and so that's something that obviously for... Because research shows if you can support an Indigenous student's identity the most, it doesn't matter what skill set you provide them, whether it's like math skills, writing skills, if you support their identity and that's it, they will be more successful in education.

And so going through a Westernized education system where it literally doesn't even acknowledge your existence can be very, very difficult and it's not culturally safe because in most cases it literally denies your existence and your identity. And it doesn't include, even when you think about U.S. history or American history, it doesn't include anything usually that's happened to Indigenous populations in the United States and that in itself is an issue because of, in the many different ways, that we still experience those things. And so education of course is a big one, and I primarily work in the education system and trying to change those spaces. But also throughout history and especially as social workers, we always think, "Oh, we created these amazing things that help so many people," but a lot of those things were used in order to inflict assimilation, cultural genocide and even just continued historical oppression on many communities of color and marginalized communities.

But even for instance, the child welfare system is a perfect example of in... we like to think, and like in my MSW program, my professor gave me a list of all these amazing policies and things that social workers created and the child welfare system's on there and I was like, "I don't really see it like that. I'm not going to lie." And then I asked her, "Did you know about the Indian adoption project that happened where they literally used social workers in the child welfare system to take Native children from their families and place them with White families?" And she had no idea. And we still see the effects of that today in our communities. Or even when we're talking about the boarding school era too, that continues to have a huge impact on us and especially me being the granddaughter and daughter of boarding school survivors, it's such a huge part of even how I make my daily decisions in life.

And so many people think even if they know about it, they're like, "Oh, that was so long ago." But it really wasn't. And also, even if it was that long ago, we still experience our ancestors' trauma due to what's happened to us. And so it's not like we can just escape that. But that just acknowledging that really any system, especially when it has derived from colonization, is going to be an unsafe space for Indigenous populations, and that's just the reality because that's one of the main goals of colonization and it's really just to continue the historical oppression that's happened for hundreds of years. And so being really intentional about that is extremely important.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. So like you said, I mean, anything that colonization touches and there's so many examples, more than we can cover of course in this conversation, and it's a global... It's global. It's a global... colonization's all over.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, it is global because I think in the early 1900s, over 80% of the world was colonized and so that means... and it can only be inflicted upon Indigenous people, so that means that there's Indigenous populations all around the world that have experienced the same act of colonization within the four stages that it happens in. And so there's populations that experience some of the same effects that we do here in the United States as American Indian people.

Shimon Cohen:

Since you just mentioned it, could you briefly touch on the four stages?

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

So whenever I present, and this is the main presentation I usually do when I'm talking about creating culturally safe spaces, I always first go through the four stages of colonization in the United States and how... from an Indigenous perspective, so it's pretty much just going over hundreds of years of history from an Indigenous perspective, but it is broken up into the four stages. And this is backed by research because colonization has happened for so long all around the world. But the four stages are exploration, invasion, occupation and assimilation. And so in the timeline that I provide, I've tried to break it up into the best possible way in what happened and in each stage just so people can really... and it's based on a lot of factual information because the important thing is saying, "Yes, this actually happened. You can read these things. This is what happened to my ancestors." And it really is, you can see how those four stages play out in the history of the United States. And then again, the effects that those things have had are still so apparent within our communities today.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you for sharing that. I think it's really important for people and a lot of people don't know about it, which is part of why this is so problematic too, is that we don't learn... in typical U.S.-based education, we don't learn this history. This isn't something I learned. We learned there's a holiday for Christopher Columbus who's a murderer, engaged in sexual violence, stole–

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

And who didn't even set foot on the United States of America.

Shimon Cohen:

Right. Right. Right. And the White House is, even this year, sending out a release still praising him and connecting it to Italian Americans, which was just totally insane. But I think about also the example you just gave of that social work class and that professor and how many Indigenous students are sitting in a class and getting a lesson that is completely contradictory and oppressive, really, anti-Indigenous and they're sitting in there and you were able to... it sounds like you chose to say something and I think about how many people say something and it doesn't go well or are tired of trying to say something and are just like, "F this, why am I here? Why am I in this class? Why am I doing this?"

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah and that's very common and that honestly is what contributes to a lot of Native students not being able to make it through Westernized education system. And I'm known, obviously if you can't tell, I've been known for a very long time to cause what I call good trouble. I'm the student who definitely speaks up in classes, but not everybody does that, and I get it. I totally understand it because the thing is, and this is when I present for institutions, even in public education, cause I work with a lot of public education institutions as well, I always say Native students are there to get an education, they're not there to be an educator.

So you need to be knowledgeable enough to be teaching these subjects and these topics and integrating them into your classes if that's what you want to do. And not rely on the Native students to educate everybody because that's not our job. And that's what happens a lot. And even in the article, I know that I wrote, one of the main topics of my focus groups, was tokenism, and that happens so often because a lot of times we're the only Native students in a lot of the courses, especially in higher education. So a lot of times you're relied on to educate when that's really not... that puts a whole nother level of responsibility on students, which doesn't even make sense. And in some cases it causes students to just go home and quit education.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Like all eyes are now on you.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

So what are some ways that educators, practitioners, people get wrong in their attempts to actually address this issue and maybe try to do, I don't know if they're trying to necessarily create a culturally safe space, but they're trying to do something, I don't necessarily want to put a label on it, but like land acknowledgements maybe would be a kind of example of that.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, no, definitely. And land acknowledgments is an example because majority of the time it's very performative, saying that, "Okay, we're going to write this, we're going to say this," but what's the actions that follow it? There has to be some sort of actions that follow something like that or else you're just saying it to literally on the surface level saying, "Oh, we support this population." But that's not always the case and usually that's not what happens. And so one of the biggest things, especially when I'm working with mostly non-Natives on creating culturally safe spaces, the biggest thing that I talk about is really understanding that you're going to make mistakes. That is just the honest truth. We're humans, we make mistakes and literally we could be an expert in something and we still make mistakes. I still make mistakes with other Native people. When I work with Indigenous youth, especially if they grow up in a different setting than I grew up in, it happens.

I've made mistakes before and I've had to... and I honestly created a space that was not culturally safe and I had to understand how to address that and really change, or I guess acknowledge, my personal biases and my worldview when it comes to how I was raised as a Native person. But the thing is is that we're going to make mistakes. I think one of the biggest facades or myths that Westernized education teaches us, especially as a social worker, is that as long as we get this degree, we know everything. And it's this hierarchy of knowledge, especially as a social worker, we have this word called competence and

I always say there's no way you can be competent in everybody's culture. Being culturally competent is something that is literally a lifelong journey. And I don't even like saying that because it really is not... it's not obtainable as if you're trying to be competent in someone else's culture because you'll never know what it's like to be that part of that culture or part of that population.

And so that's I think one of the biggest things that I always tell a lot of people and when you're looking at it from an Indigenous perspective, there really is no hierarchy of knowledge because every single person contributes some sort of knowledge or learning style or education to the community. No matter if they have a degree, no matter if they are a child, no matter if they're an adult, everybody has the same opportunity to teach someone something. And that facade, that Westernized education teaches us, it causes a lot... honestly, it does more harm than it does help because pretty much it teaches us, "Oh, once you know these things about this population, then you can go help them or you can serve them and you can do these things." But in most cases, if you're learning just assumptions or stereotypes, especially about Native populations, because in most statistics we're leading in the worst statistics in the country and that's all you're learning in classes, then it's not good to go in the community and that's the only knowledge you know and you're making those assumptions about every client that you're working with.

Because when you make those assumptions, that in itself is the opposite of creating culturally safe spaces because you're placing your own bias on what this person should maybe look like, act like, be like, even where they should live, where they should have been raised, how they should have been raised. Because Westernized society, when we're not included in curriculum, then you don't honestly know a lot of how we even function. So that's one of the biggest, when I say myths or facades that Westernized education tries to teach us is that... especially if we get to the level of being faculty or being a doctor, we're seen as this expert in our area or expert in these things and in all honesty, if you don't continue to be a lifelong learner, then you're not going to continue to know how to serve communities that you don't belong to. And that's really how it is. And so when I talk about creating culturally safe spaces, I mostly talk about practicing cultural humility, which I'll talk a little bit more about when I actually say the definition of creating culturally safe spaces.

Shimon Cohen:

As you were talking, I was thinking about this article by Gordon Pon, who I know you know his work, the Cultural Competency as New Racism: An Ontology of Forgetting, and it's such a good article and so important to just completely shatter that myth and call it what it is because I think that concept was probably trying to be helpful at one point and it's just done so much damage, this idea that we can be competent in other... The whole competence thing, too, is, as you're saying, it's just so... it's a colonizer mentality of like...

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

It is.

Shimon Cohen:

"I'm going to be in control of this, I'm going to be so competent. I'm going to be so in control that I'm competent in this, over this."

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

And I think, too, it is honestly it's control and power because that's what colonization literally thrives off of. But because it also tells you that you have the power to have access to whoever you want to help

because you have this competence. And that's not the case because a lot of times if you're coming from that perspective, you're doing more harm. And I think that's one of the biggest issues with the social work profession, is that people think they can go in because they want to be saviors, but that's not how it works. But yet we still have social work curriculums that still teach that. So that's part of the issue too.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, a hundred percent. I mean I think it seems like a lot of it came from the medical, medicine and whenever I think, "Why does social work want to replicate medicine?" And it always seems to come back to this professional... trying to have this profession that gets taken seriously. And that's all part of this problem that we're talking about.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

It is. And you know, too, being rooted in that Westernized, colonial mindset as a profession too, it really does, like you mentioned, it's not only power and control, but it's that you have to have a solution to every problem. It's a very linear way of thinking. And so when we're working with people, when we're trying to help them solve their problems or provide them resources to better their life, then we always, a lot of times, were taught from this linear perspective so then we think that this is how we solve problems when in all honesty, that's not how life works, there's more things than just us that contribute to our welfare. So, yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

One of the things that I wanted to ask you just in terms of... I mean, you mentioned some of it in terms of Native students struggling to finish Westernized education, leaving, going home from higher ed for example and in that article, you have some stuff in there, too, about acting less Native, and I was hoping you could talk a little bit about that or anything else you want to add in just terms of some of the impacts of culturally unsafe spaces before we shift into safe spaces.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, I mean then in the article there's a lot of specific examples that came from students. I had them, in my focus groups, I had them write down on pieces of paper what their experiences were in these four categories and then they talked about it to build a network and support, but also to talk about similar experiences. And what was crazy is I literally had to type up every single one of those responses into qualitative data program and I had no idea what I was doing, and I would do it very differently if I did it again, but I think some of the quotes that came out, especially from students, which is very common for Native students, is that, especially when we talk about the act of assimilation, the main purpose of... and some people even consider our education system today a modern day version of assimilation because we continue to not be included in the curriculum, which means that we technically have to assimilate into this Westernized society in order to be deemed successful and receive a degree.

But yet we... so we might do things in the educational setting that might, and sometimes in our case, we might believe that might make us more successful. For instance, what is more commonly known as code switching where we talk completely different, we might get involved in things that don't support necessarily who we are, but it's something that the university would recommend or even not speak up in class like that or even not correct the professor if they say something wrong. And because we're constantly in what we would call walking in two worlds, meaning that we're functioning from this worldview and this way of living and we require such collectivist support for who we are and that's how we naturally are, yet we have to navigate this Westernized system that doesn't even acknowledge who

we are, and so we constantly have to navigate those two things. And there are ways, of course, creating culturally safe spaces is definitely a strategy to help students navigate both worlds.

But in most cases we're surrounded by... we're in spaces and are surrounded by people who don't know these things and so we constantly have to either be less Native or we just have to really understand how to function from a Westernized perspective. And sometimes even when I think about me being in the highest level you could be in education, I know that the work that I do, it's the reason why I'm able to do this, it's the reason why I'm able to be in a PhD program, but also I know that in order for students to even be successful, they need that as well and I mean, it's proved through research. And sometimes though, for me, is I support Native students no matter where they're at, because Native people deserve unconditional support for who they are because of the historical impact that we've been through. And really, especially with students, if they got to do what they got to do to make it through the system and get a degree, they deserve that support and that's always the approach I try to take when I work with Native students.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, as you were talking, I was wondering about what this has all been like for you, because like you said you've been through a lot of Western education and you're in it now and I know, like you've said, you're doing it because of the work you can do and the benefit for your community. Do you feel that you've lost some of who you are in the process or do you feel like you've been able to retain and even enhance some of that, who you are? I don't know. I'm having trouble exactly wording it, but maybe you know what I mean?

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

I know what you mean. I feel like it's been a little bit of both because there are sacrifices that as Native people we have to make and a lot of times, like for instance, there's a faculty member here at ASU, which this is just so profound to me because we talk about sacrifices. When I work with students all the time, especially some of my mentors or my best friends who have their doctorates or who are lawyers and all these different things and they talk about the sacrifices all the time like, "I had to be away from my community for so many years in order to now return and do what I want to do," and this faculty member here at ASU, he was away from his community for 20 years and now he's a doctor and he moved back to, now he works here at ASU and he's able to be in his home community and work at ASU.

And that blew my mind because... and obviously personally I know of the sacrifices I've made. I moved to Arizona alone, I don't have family here, I really didn't know anybody here when I moved here and I get to see my family a lot, thankfully, because I travel a lot back to Montana to work in my consulting business and I'm very grateful for that, but leaving my family, it never gets easier, every single time. Even if we have the best time of our life, that actually makes it harder, if we have the best time because it's, and I was just telling someone recently, it honestly never gets easier. And I know that's the sacrifice I'm making in order to have this sort of impact that I know I'm meant to do at this point in my life.

Or even not being super present in my nephews' lives, my brother's children, that's also a sacrifice I have to make. But if anything, I think it's... the opportunity that I've had in really focusing on my true passion and purpose of serving my community has opened doors like nothing else here in Arizona and even all around the nation getting the opportunities I've had. And I know that that in itself has really strengthened my identity and even who I am spiritually as an Indigenous person. And so it is kind of... it's a little bit of both, but I know that because of those benefits that I've had that have strengthened my identity, has definitely set me up for success to be able to tackle this PhD program on this level, and I

know that for a fact. And because I can continue to do my consulting during my... even though it's a lot, but it is what rejuvenates me. So that's a benefit, too.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that's so interesting, Everything you just said, it's just really interesting, and like you were saying, these things don't go in a straight line.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Like you said, life doesn't work like that.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Let's shift into how people can create culturally safe spaces for Indigenous folks. What maybe are some key ways, and obviously acknowledging that it's impossible to cover all of it in this one podcast episode. I mean, you and I talked about this when we talked before, this could be a whole podcast series in and of itself.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, definitely. And it's funny because when I present, I think a couple nights ago I did a guest lecture for a course at the University of Montana virtually, and she's like, "I'm going to give you all three hours." And I'm like, "Oh, I won't talk for all three hours," and I totally talked for all three hours. So the official definition of creating culturally safe spaces, which actually was coined by a Māori nurse in New Zealand, because as everybody should know, New Zealand is like the mecca for Indigenous everything and I hope to live there someday for at least some amount of time, but it was coined by a Māori nurse and what it means is it's an environment where there's no assault, denial or challenge of someone's identity. So it's really truly listening and it's learning from the person of how they identify in order to provide that support.

And so what that means is that it combats that facade that we talked about of, "Oh, you're going into this space and you know all of the things already," and making those assumptions because, like I mentioned before, if you make those assumptions, let's say for an Indigenous student and you make the assumption that every Native person must speak their language, and you go into this space and you say, "Oh, so tell me a word in your language," or something like that and they don't speak their language, you're then challenging their identity and they might think, "Oh, maybe I'm not Native enough for this person." And that could have detrimental emotional reactions in some people. And so the approach that I take whenever I talk about creating culturally safe spaces also like I mentioned before, is going through a timeline of history from an Indigenous perspective and talking about how history continues to impact not only our communities through historical intergenerational trauma, but also our identity. And it leads to our identity being super, super complex.

So really it is not possible to even go in a room and have these assumptions and they always be right. Because even as, like I said, even as a Native person and when I work with Native students, I also have to

take some of these same approaches to learning from students how they identify. And one of the tools that I talk about, that I provide to participants on what could really help them is the cultural iceberg. I don't know if you ever heard of the cultural iceberg, but it pretty much just is a metaphor for how culture is so in-depth and it takes in to account so many different things, which also includes your worldview. And it's some things that you know mightn't do and you don't even know it. And so I always show the diagram, and you can Google it, the cultural iceberg, but I always show the diagram and explain some of the things, what we call deep culture, things that you don't see on the surface.

And I hang that in every office I work in because, even when I'm working with Native students, there's probably some things that I'm not taking into account or there's things that maybe I'm getting triggered by because of my worldview that might be in the deep culture that could hinder my ability to even create that culturally safe space. And so there's a few different factors like I mentioned. One is the historical impact and then two is understanding how that historical impact creates this, what we call this cultural spectrum for Indigenous people, meaning that every single one of us identifies differently, but it doesn't matter how we identify as long as we identify as Indigenous and wherever we lie on that spectrum, we deserve unconditional support for our identity, because a lot of times those things aren't our fault because of the historical impact. For instance, being the daughter of a boarding school survivor, I don't speak my language and my father still struggles to this day speaking his language and so I didn't learn it growing up.

And same with my grandma on my mom's side who raised me. She was in boarding school and she never spoke our language either. And so that's a perfect example of how that history continues to impact us. But if you don't know that, then you might not have what we call that holistic perspective of that we're still influenced by what our ancestors went through. And you're not going to learn that in a Westernized education system. So it's important also to do your own research, have your own knowledge if you're going in these spaces and you at least have foundational knowledge on what this looks like. And that means that student... or any Native person that you're going to work with, they're going to feel that support. And again, you're probably going to make mistakes, but the more humility you have of going into that space and saying, "You know what? I'm here to learn. I just want to know about you. I want to know specific ways that you identify," and that being genuine and having that humility can completely change the way that people work with Indigenous people.

Shimon Cohen:

One of the things you mentioned earlier is Indigenous ways of functioning and living, and I was hoping maybe you could share a little bit more about that and also how that contrasts, I guess, with the Westernized way?

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, so that's actually something that I touch on, too, when I present because it's important to have some level of self-awareness and as we know... and then this is the one ask I usually ask people when they're in my training, is to practice critical thinking skills of self-awareness, self-reflection and critically challenging what they're learning. And so I do talk a lot about what we call Indigenous worldview or more of a collectivist way of functioning versus a Westernized worldview, which focuses more on individualism. And so when you think of a collectivist worldview or collectivist way of functioning, it definitely is more focused on... well, kind of exactly what it says, a collective and so a lot of times when you're making individual decisions in your life, the betterment or the health of your family or community is going to be a priority during that individual decision making process.

So what that means is, for instance, when I work with Native students, or I'm a perfect example, I've dedicated my entire career and life pretty much to serving my community, so when I was in my undergrad and I was deciding what degree to get or what profession to go in the betterment of my community was always a priority when making that decision. And so a lot of times it contrasts with Westernized society because we were colonized by more of an individualistic worldview. And Westernized systems tend to function more from that worldview. And so again, when we're having to navigate both of these ways of functioning, and it doesn't mean that one way is, one way is wrong, it acknowledges the fact that each and every one of us functions differently. And even as an Indigenous person, there are some Westernized individualistic ways that I've adapted because obviously I've made it through education to this point. There's some things that I've had to take into account in my way of functioning where it's really on a scale.

But the more that you know about where on that scale you function from, the more you're going to be able to understand how you impact others around you and also have the realization that people come from different realities than you do and people naturally function differently than you do. So maybe they're making different decisions in their life that maybe you might not think are okay, but it might be okay to them because they function from a different worldview. And I think that's one of the biggest things, too, when I work with Native students because persistence within American Indian students is really, really high and that means that even if they do step away from education, there's a really high chance that they're going to come back and they're going to finish. But that also means that usually they're not in the four year degree plan and it might take longer or they might come back and your average Native student is actually a non-traditional single mother, that's usually your average Native student.

And so whenever I work with Native students, I think part of this whole process is really taking into account that they're the experts in their own life and if they need to go home, if they need to take care of their family, if they missed so many classes because they had to go home for funerals or if they had to go home to practice ceremony, I will be the one to say, "That is okay and when you come back, you can come back to me because I'll be here and I support you a hundred percent no matter what." Cause you know that even them trying to fit in this world of what Westernized society tells us of success, they already have people, they're probably telling themselves that they're not supposed to do that, but the thing is is that their world view is worthy of recognition and it's worthy of support. So that's another approach that I always try to teach because that in itself, too, is creating a culturally safe space for them to know that their worldview and the way that they naturally function and their value sets are supported.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. As we're saying that, and I can't remember if this is a conversation we were having or if it's in the article, but attendance policies and bereavement policies are often really problematic, right?

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, extremely. When I worked with Native students, I had students where professors asked them to literally turn in obituaries with their assignments, or if they weren't listed in the obituary as kin, then they didn't get excused for their absence, or even for ceremony or spiritual practices, which that in itself is what is going to keep a Native student and make them more successful, it's going to keep them in education is if they have the opportunity to do those things. And the research that I did and that the articles, and I think it was in the article, but the articles about that actually resulted in creating a policy at the University of Montana for cultural leave for students so that professors couldn't use it against

them and it couldn't impact their grade to some extent if they chose to go home or miss class because of a cultural reason. And so there's opportunity for change and there's also definitely some solutions to systems really taking these things into account and implementing them in these, what we would consider unsafe spaces.

Shimon Cohen:

I think that's a really clear policy change that people can do and if their organization or whatever institution they're in isn't doing it, they could hopefully implement it on their own until it gets done on larger scale. I mean, the whole attendance thing in higher ed and well really K12 and higher ed is...

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

What's excused, what's not excused, is just so problematic.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

It really is.

Shimon Cohen:

On so many levels. Who has access to healthcare to get a doctor's note and why should they share it? Why do they have to share it with anybody, any personal business, really? What other practices have you found to be really helpful in creating culturally safe spaces for Indigenous folks?

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

I think another one is to really truly understand how these challenges or assaults on people's identity really does... can trigger intense emotional reactions in people, and sometimes if you do make mistakes and you do those things, it's really important to understand that a person's emotional reaction could literally be to not come back to you for services, but hopefully if you get the opportunity to make things better, that it's very likely that they'll still have a reaction. And I think that's really important to take into account too, because it's all about that, what I keep saying, that holistic perspective. So many things impact a person's ability, whether we're working with clients or even students and things like that, their ability to really navigate life, really in general. But also I do a lot of resiliency skill development with Indigenous youth and tribal communities. And so that's another component of tangible strategies that you can use.

And I really enjoy this because research shows, through epigenetics, research shows that American Indian populations, because we experienced long periods of trauma, it now has impacted our biology and so we're born thinking that we've already experienced direct trauma when we haven't. But you can see that literally proves intergenerational trauma, meaning that we're not only experiencing our own lived experiences, we're experiencing hundreds of years of grief and even cultural genocide. And sometimes you see that, especially when you're working with clients and especially when you're working with the youth because every single person's different. The way that I handle my intergenerational trauma is completely different from the way my brother handles it, even though we're raised in the same space by the same people. It's very, very different. And it can look different in when you're

thinking about behavioral issues and things like that. But when we talk about epigenetics, it also shows that we have a natural sense of resiliency within our way of functioning.

So not only are we surrounded by people in our community who made it through all of these things that we weren't supposed to make it through and so our communities literally embody resilience, but we as individuals embody resilience. And I tell youth this all the time in tribal communities, I said, "You already have the skill sets inside of you to make it through any adversity that you're ever going to experience in your life, and that was passed down." Yeah, we talk about trauma a lot with our ancestors, but the biggest and most important thing that they passed down was their resilience and their survival. And that is such a huge thing to focus on when you're talking about helping Native people navigate the Westernized world. And even in education or even if just in general just to heal. And so the resiliency skill development is... I found this list of resiliency skills from research from one of my previous supervisors here at ASU and she did her research with families who were in the child welfare system.

But I took that list and I was like, "Hey, I'm going to turn this into some activities that I do with some tribal communities and Indigenous youth." And so pretty much what I do is I have them identify, I bring up the list of resiliency skills and I have them identify, "What's one skill that you feel like you already use, maybe if you're having a hard day at school or hard day at work and when you get home, what's something..." One of them is creativity, "Maybe you write, maybe you draw, maybe you're involved in theater," or one is humor, which we all know Natives are really funny and so we tend to go towards that. And that's seen as a coping mechanism so it makes sense. And then social support is another one and spirituality. And so those are the top four that a lot of Indigenous people... well I would say a lot of Natives use that I work with. But identifying those things and then identifying also how they already use them is going to help them develop those skill sets more as positive coping skills within their life.

And so that in itself is... even with youth, I'll do an activity where I'll have them either write about the skills that they use, or even draw it, illustrate it, or create something, build something that represents them doing this or what they use in order to act out this resiliency skill. And then I talk about, "Is there any skill that you feel like you need to work on?" And of course there's always one and I'm very transparent with anyone I train, I talk about the ones that I know I would really benefit from if I did those things. And so that's another activity, like tangible activity, that I teach a lot of my participants in the trainings I do. And I actually will do these activities with tribal communities and Indigenous youth so that... actually, I mean, I've done them with non-Natives too, but just really tapping into that resilience is another great way and strategy to really focus on that healing component and a positive aspect to identity and healing... or I guess intergenerational healing, I should say.

Shimon Cohen:

I love that. I think that's really... I just think that's awesome. I really love that.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

I just I'm imagining what that looks like and it's probably a really cool experience.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah. And sometimes too, I'll have people create their own cultural iceberg. That's another activity that I do with people, because that also builds their self-awareness, but also for Native people, it really validates the way that they function and their worldview. Cause one of the things in the cultural iceberg

is concept of time, which is in what they call below sea level in the deep culture, and I always tell, cause we run on people color time, we run on what we call NDN (Indian) time and it's a real thing and it's called polychronic time. And so I always validate people that I train if they function from that, because I know I function from that way of valuing time, and that's literally what it means though, is that we just value time differently dependent on what our beliefs and values are in our life and our worldview. And so that's another thing that in itself, it just validates a lot of people's ways of functioning, which can be really helpful in actually learning how to use these skill sets with others.

Shimon Cohen:

So I know about the time thing, but that term polychronic time, I've never heard that before.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, I learned it in my undergrad. Actually, Laurie, my mentor taught it to me and I learned it in my undergrad because when I did my focus groups, of course I had, "Okay, it has to start this," but we have food, people brought their kids, it's like just this whole space where I'm like, "You know what? As long as you're here, long as you're contributing, that's all that matters." And then Laurie was like... And of course things did not go on time, which always happens, tends to happen. But the important thing is that people stayed over the time because they were so invested and that in itself just shows you it doesn't need to happen in a linear fashion. And I think even being open to that, and that's when Laurie was like, "Oh yeah, well that's called polychronic time when you're not functioning from that linear time." What is it called? Structure of time. And so I just thought that was... honestly since they've told me that, literally it's changed my life. Yeah. So I want to share that with people who also function that way so they can feel validated.

Shimon Cohen:

I never knew that term. So as we're talking, I just Googled it, cause I knew about obviously different concepts of time, but polychronic... well, monochronic is one thing at a time, only able to focus on one thing at a time, like you're saying very linear, and polychronic is like there's a lot going on and relationships are valued more than doing something on time, whatever.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah. And I always use an example of if I'm going to... I have to be this meeting on time for work, but then I see my cousin on my away to this meeting. I'm not going to be that meeting on time. I'm going to stay and talk with my cousin because I value, especially coming from more of a collectivist community, I value relationships and kinships way more than time, and that's a perfect example. And that's happened so many times.

Shimon Cohen:

You kind of just touched on this as you were talking about the resiliency skill set, but you bring this up in the article too, you talk about survivance and you also talk about Indigenous existence being revolutionary. And I was hoping you could talk a little bit about both of those concepts.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah. So survivance in itself I think that... because when I talk about this topic, especially because primarily I am teaching people who function more from a Westernized worldview and I understand

sometimes the first... when they see my presentations, the first time they're even like, "Wait, there's different worldviews?"

Shimon Cohen:

Right. Right. Oh my G-d.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah. It's so mind blowing. And honestly though sometimes to Indigenous people, it's the same thing. But they are like, "Wow, you just validated me. I've never felt that." But for sometimes people who function from a more Westernized worldview, they might then be like, "Oh, okay, so then..." But they're still functioning from that, "Oh, okay, well you just mentioned all these problems. Tell me the solution." And I'm like, "Well no, I'm telling you that you have to take all this into account in order to come up with your own solution when you're working with people," it's not just a like...

Shimon Cohen:

They want a prescription.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Exactly. Or they want me to tell them, "Do this."

Shimon Cohen:

And I've felt like that before and it was pointed out to me that that's a colonial mentality.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

And it really... I mean, even thinking about science, Western science, it's the same concept. It's like, "Oh, well this proves this, so this is how it is." And so a lot of times when I'm talking about worldview, it just means also that it's very, very complex. Even though I talk about all of these things that happen to American Indian populations and how it impacts our communities today, it doesn't mean that everybody in our community... and honestly most of us don't know these things because we go through the same public education as everybody else. And it's very intentional that we don't learn about these things. Everybody, especially us, when they say a educated Indian is the government's worst nightmare, but it's honestly, it's true.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Look what they did to the American Indian movement.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Literally. Exactly, right, they dismantled it. And so when we're especially thinking about this idea of survivance, it's a different perspective that some of our ancestors had and they had to function from this idea of survivance in order to literally survive. And so sometimes when you're talking about these experiences, for instance, even sometimes with boarding school survivors, they look back and see their experience as something as super positive or they see it as... or they just see it differently. And in some cases.... and in some cases maybe that was the case, but in a lot of cases they still experience really bad things. It's just that in order to survive that time, they only focused on the good, and that's literally what we would consider survivance. And so that term in itself, that adds to the complexity of even this whole

healing journey or healing process that we're, especially as social workers, we're always going to be a part of someone's healing journey. Well, hopefully that's our goal.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Or people are doing social control.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Right, or...

Shimon Cohen:

That's a whole other problem.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah. So that and survivance in itself just shows that there's such a diverse... there's so many diverse ways of handling and pretty much just dealing with trauma. And another one is when we're even talking about internalized oppression, too. I touch on that sometimes when I'm presenting because I even had professors who teach American Indian history or history from Indigenous perspective, and they say, "Some of my Native students, they don't believe me or they don't want to hear it, or they don't want to get to that place of acknowledging that they're still impacted by this."

And this happened, I did a presentation for San Antonio, Texas... or I can't really remember the institution's name, but Laurie and I did a presentation together on this topic and one of the professors brought that up and I told her, I said, "We're all on a different path in our healing journey and some people experience, probably experience, some level of internalized oppression. And that means that... that's literally the goal of oppression is to make the oppressed believe the things that the oppressor is telling them and sometimes that can result in people not being able to believe the information or even make the connections or not even wanting to." And I said that and that's okay because if we're really supporting people on all this entire spectrum of what it means to heal or even means to identify as Indigenous, then we have to acknowledge that oppression really has impacted us in pretty much in every aspect.

And so internalized depression is also something that, it's not necessarily... well in a way, I guess it's similar to survivance because it's a way of surviving, but it's really just these different ways that people deal with their trauma and what has happened to them and our ancestors. But especially when I work with youth, the whole, I say, "Indigenous existence, is..." I would say, "Your existence is the resistance, you existing in these spaces is literally revolutionary because we were never supposed... we're not meant to be even a part of these spaces. We're not meant to even make it this far and the fact that we're thriving is extraordinary." And that's something to really acknowledge and take into account.

And I think too is it's important to also acknowledge, because me and my friends always talk about this, too, of a lot of times we think that leaving the reservation is success, and this is me and my other friends who have left the rez. We grew up on the rez, but we were like, "Oh, we got to get off the rez, go be successful." But leaving the rez doesn't mean... you don't have to be successful... or you don't... Okay. You don't have to leave the rez to be successful. You can be successful in your community, and that's big. That is huge because even when I think about me, yes I have the ability to leave home and be away from home, but some people don't. I have friends who went to school and became doctors, but as soon as, the day literally after they graduated, they moved back home.

And that's okay because we need people in our community that are preserving our language, our culture and serving even the departments and the institutions on our rez. Cause for me it's like I'm going to support that regardless. So no matter where you're at or how you identify as an Indigenous person, your existence is literally revolutionary and it's going to change every single space that you're in. And I tell Native students that all the time. I say, "You might be the only Native student in that classroom, but know that you being in that classroom, you're changing the environment completely, just your presence." Or even if you do have the courage to speak up, then your words are also changing the environment for other students or even for other Native students maybe in the class that don't have the courage to speak up.

And so I always tell Indigenous youth that all the time because it's important for them to feel empowered and know that their strength from their ancestors is something to be completely proud of. And also, I always say, "Our ancestors stayed strong enough for us to be here, so we're going to stay strong enough for future generations." And that's really how we look at it, we always take into account seven generations before us and seven generations after us because we're going to be ancestors one day and I think that's one of the most honored thing to do is know that I can have an influence and an impact on people who come after me. And that's just important. And it looks many... it looks different in many different ways. It's not just this way that Westernized society tells us. It's literally in any way you possibly could imagine. And that's what we were meant to do and that's what our ancestors wanted us to do. And they prayed for the best thing that they could and it's giving us life and that's why we're here. So yeah, I would say we're pretty revolutionary.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. There's so many things I want to talk with you about and I know we're going to wrap up because we're already going over an hour, but hopefully we'll have you back on here or maybe we'll collaborate on some other stuff. So before we wrap up, I just want to make sure, is there anything you know want to add that we didn't get into? Well I know there's so much more we could get into, but just while we're still on this episode, if there's anything you want to add.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

I think I talked about pretty much everything I want to talk about. And I never do this, but I'm going to say, if you want to learn more, you can hire me.

Shimon Cohen:

Well, I hope you do that more cause people should be paying you and what you're doing is really important. And this is a whole other episode or multiple episodes, but this whole push of decolonizing the curriculum and decolonizing this and decolonizing that and decolonizing social work and what that means and who's doing it and what they're basing it on and all of that, it's like people can hire you and you get some help along the way.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah and I think one of the biggest things that just for me that has proved and keeps me doing the work that I do is that every single opportunity I've ever gotten, cause I've done pretty much no marketing on my work, and so every opportunity I've gotten for the last seven years has only been from word of mouth or someone has seen me present and works for a different organization or has recommended me, and so I think that in itself is so profound, but that means I need to learn how to market myself and this is a great opportunity.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely. Yeah. Turquoise, thank you so much for sharing all of this knowledge and I've learned a lot talking with you and I know folks listening and or reading the transcripts, cause we always have a transcript, are going to learn so much, too. And I just want to really thank you for coming on the podcast and most importantly, thank you for doing the work.

Turquoise Skye Devereaux:

Yeah, thank you so much. It was so great to be here.

Shimon Cohen:

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