

NAVAJO VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES OF COVID-19 AND HEALTH AND WELLBEING
IMPLICATIONS FROM A *DINÉ* STUDENT

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ABSTRACT

NAVAJO VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES OF COVID-19 AND HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS FROM A *DINÉ* STUDENT

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The purpose of my research project was to gain the *Diné* (Navajo) traditional and cultural perspectives of *Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19* (COVID-19) and discuss how those views aided in the combat of coronavirus on the Navajo Nation. I learned more about how views and perspectives on COVID-19 among Navajo people tied into cultural knowledge and practices surrounding health and wellbeing. I applied an autoethnographic approach to writing my thesis, to position my existing knowledge and lived experiences from a Navajo woman's point of view. I also conducted a social media content analysis to collect public knowledge from the height of the coronavirus pandemic from social media posts including all pictures of signage on the Navajo Nation, opinions expressed, perspectives, views, and data posted by social media participants. Additionally, I engaged in ethnographic interviews with ten Navajo residents of Flagstaff, Arizona to gain current and past COVID-19 experiences and views, as well as cultural knowledge about health and wellbeing. My theoretical frameworks included relationality and interconnectedness, the relationships that humans have to the world around them (land, animals, people, cosmos, and ideas) as well as phenomenology, the study of lived experiences. These approaches provided me with a lens to gather and interpret my data in order to understand how worldviews shape how people make sense of different experiences, such as illness. This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship regarding the validity and importance of Indigenous cultural knowledge and in the decolonizing and Indigenizing ways of viewing health and wellbeing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Yá'át'ééh, shí éí Shanell Yenchik yinishyé. 'Adóone'é nishlínígíí 'éí Deeshchii'nii nishlí. Bilagáana 'éí bá shíshchíín. 'Áshihí 'éí dashicheii nááná. Bilagáana 'éí dashináli. Ákót'éego diné asdzáán nishlǫ́. Tódinéeshzhee 'déé' naashá. Kintlánídi shighan. Hello, my name is Shanell Yenchik. I am *Diné* (Navajo). I am of the Red Streak Clan born for German. My maternal grandfather is of the Salt Clan and my paternal grandfather is Czech. In this way, I am a Navajo woman. I am from a small town on the Navajo Nation called Kayenta. I live here in Flagstaff, AZ.

As a *Diné* woman, I have grown up listening and learning about the cultural teachings, lessons, practices, and concepts of the Navajo people. I have learned through oral histories, stories, and ceremony how to identify myself as a *Diné* in this world and what “Walk in beauty” means. To think positive, do positive, and then positivity will come. This belief, way of living, has been the way I have overcome many hardships in my life. As a people, we are all connected through family, clan, and community. When the coronavirus pandemic first began, the Navajo people were fast to utilize culture, teachings of “monsters” or *Naayéé'*, *Hózhó* (harmony and balance), and *K'é* (kinship) to protect and uplift the Navajo people during that difficult time. I heard about and experienced many people throughout the pandemic applying cultural teachings and stories to COVID-19, which in turn inspired my research project.

The purpose of my research project was to gain *Diné* (Navajo) traditional and cultural perspectives of *Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19* (COVID-19) and understand how those views aided in the combat of coronavirus on the Navajo Nation. I learned how views and perspectives of COVID-19 to the Navajo people tie into the implications and importance of cultural knowledge and practices surrounding health and wellbeing. My research question was: What role does Navajo

traditional cultural knowledge play in understanding COVID-19 and promoting wellbeing during the pandemic? My overarching goal was to understand how Navajo traditional cultural knowledge shaped Navajo wellbeing and perceptions of COVID-19 and how people promoted, practiced, and implemented those perspectives to combat the pandemic.

I used an autoethnographic approach as I went about my research journey gathering data, engaging with Navajo residents in Flagstaff to reflect on my own experiences, and understanding how they intertwine with what I am learning and doing. My data comes from social media content analysis and ten ethnographic interviews. I conducted research by gathering and sorting through social media posts that I have either seen or shared on Facebook that Navajo people and the Navajo Nation government made on social media during the height of the pandemic to better understand the thoughts, opinions, and views of the social media posters about COVID-19 at the time. I interviewed ten Navajo residents in Flagstaff, Arizona, the foot of one of our sacred mountains *Dook'o'oosliid* (San Francisco Peaks) about current and past COVID-19 experiences and views, as well as cultural knowledge about health and wellbeing. I chose these methods to explore experiences, knowledge, and opinions from the Navajo people. Their voices and words are what guided my research and provided understanding about my topic. This approach allowed me to share this information from the perspective of a *Diné* graduate student, who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic while being enrolled as a full-time student.

I make sure the language or terms I use are appropriate and respectful throughout my paper. I do not knowingly perpetuate or add to any stereotypes or false narratives. I also avoid words such as “always” that connote something static and unchanging. I discuss Navajo traditional cultural knowledge and I have consulted with my participants on how to do that properly. I include more than just Indigenous voices; I situate and support my research through

Indigenous methodologies and theories that are respectful and appropriate for my research as well (Rosa and Bonilla, 2017). I decided to write my thesis paper in an understandable and accessible way for everyone. This means my research is presented through language that is familiar, straightforward, and comprehensible for the majority of my readers. My thesis is accessible to the public and does not have any restrictions.

This research project is significant because I am contributing more information to a growing body of scholarship regarding the validity and importance of Indigenous cultural knowledge. I am contributing, alongside the work of other scholars, to the decolonizing and Indigenizing ways of viewing health and wellbeing, as well as understanding illness and utilizing culture to create preventative and protective measures. My research provides a perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced from the perspective of a *Diné* woman graduate student.

Chapter 2: Background

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic I heard my people refer to COVID-19 as a modern-day monster, as well as the philosophies of *Hózhó* and *K'é* being tied to ways we can combat this virus. This background is broken into three sections to provide a framework informed by a *Diné* perspective and a cultural anthropological perspective and to shape my research and learning about the Navajo views and perspectives of COVID-19. These sections also connect Navajo health and wellbeing to ideas surrounding COVID-19. Understanding health and wellbeing from a communities' perspective shapes the way and provides understanding for the way illnesses or hardships are explained and overcome. The three sections are *Diné* “Monsters” and Health, *Hózhó* and Wellbeing, and *Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19* (COVID-19) on the Navajo Nation.

***Diné* “Monsters” and Health**

COVID-19 has been referred to as a “modern-day monster” by many people, which applies cultural understanding to this virus and utilizes cultural teachings in how this new monster can be overcome. This section of my background introduces the concept of “monsters” or *Naayéé'* and their origin in Navajo creation stories, then discusses “modern day monsters” and how to combat them, and lastly presents information about COVID-19 as a “modern day monster.” Understanding illness and hardships as *Naayéé'* is important in thinking about how the Navajo people engaged with COVID-19 and how it ties into ideas about health and how to keep themselves well.

Navajo creation stories explain that “monsters” first originated in the beginning of human life in this world. It is explained that “monsters” come into being from evil or through the manifestation of the wrongful acts of humans, such as the destruction and misuse of Mother

Earth (Schwarz 1995; Yazzie-Lewis & Zion 2007). These monsters interfered with the everyday life of the Navajo people, so Navajo deities (Holy People) blessed Changing Woman, the mother of all Navajo people, with warrior twins also called the “Hero Twins” (Schwarz 1995) to help the Navajo People find their way back to the sacred path *Sq'áh Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó* and to help them overcome the monsters. When the warrior twins grew up, they searched for knowledge to learn how to fight these monsters and gathered the weapons or tools they needed to slay them (Schwarz 1995; Yazzie-Lewis & Zion 2007; Bahe 2016). This knowledge consisted of cultural protocols, such as prayers, songs and ceremonial knowledge and items, which are in use to this day. The Navajo warrior twins slayed most of the monsters but decided to leave some that pleaded with them to live, such as poverty, hunger, and death that are still around today as a way to ensure that Navajo People remain vigilant to follow the sacred path (Schwarz 1995; Tachine 2015).

The Navajo people continue to use oral history and traditional cultural stories to cope with and combat hardships that have impacted the people (Schwarz 1995; Schneider & DeHaven 2003). Navajo strength and resilience are shaped by these hardships, which can now be referred to as “modern day monsters,” imbued with cultural meaning holding historical experience (Shone & O’Neal 2020; Tafoya 2014). Today, new monsters come to life through similar circumstances as before—humans doing harm. These modern-day monsters are now explained as different diseases, illnesses, sociocultural inequalities, and hardships. These monsters are controlled and mitigated by using the right “weapons” that include practicing traditional ways of life, turning negativity into positivity, and enacting family relationships (Krisst 2020; Tachine 2015). Some traditional lifeways that people still teach, and practice today are waking up early in the morning and being proactive by going on a morning run, offering prayer, and planting and

tending to their own crops (Krisst 2020; Tachine 2015; Colby College 2020). Other examples of traditional practices are eating blue corn mush and horse meat because of their healing properties, as well as the burning of cedar to ward off any negativity and to cleanse the area (Krisst 2020; Colby College 2020). Sharing cultural knowledge through cultural stories, songs, games, such as during sweat lodges and the Navajo shoe game is another way Navajo people gain strength and “weapons” against these monsters (Tachine 2015). Knowledge, teamwork, and planning, as well as naming a monster is key for a community to overcome, weaken, and even destroy these monsters (Bahe 2016; Yazzie-Lewis & Zion 2007). Certain monsters cannot be fully destroyed and learning to live and protect yourself from them is a part of balance and life or *Hózhó*.

Navajo people also have ways they utilized oral history to explain and cope with the past "mystery illness" (Hantavirus), another example of a modern day ‘monster’ (Schwarz 1995). Viewing diseases and hardships as monsters provide Navajo people with a powerful tool to interpret and determine action for prevention of illnesses or viruses within their own cultural context and understandings (Schwartz 1995). Another modern-day monster is uranium, also known as *Leetso* (yellow dirt). This monster has impacted the Navajo people in many negative ways (extraction of natural resources, pollution of land and water, grazing contamination, cancer, etc.) (Yazzie-Lewis & Zion 2007; Bahe 2016). In *Indigenous Stewards Magazine*, Bahe (2016) provides the story of how a Navajo uranium researcher, Monica Yellowhair, combined Navajo oral teachings and knowledge she learned in school to slay the monster affecting the land and people. These analogies act as a means for “meaning making” by the Navajo people to endure and understand hardships that they experience in their lives.

As described by Bahe (2016), Yellowhair discusses the role people play as “warriors” to fight these monsters, and the importance of understanding and knowing about a monster to help combat it. Tachine (2015) explains some of the monsters Navajo students face while enrolling and navigating their futures after high school as personal and sociocultural barriers. Students overcame these monsters by using sources of strength known as “weapons” that they created based on the monsters they were facing (Tachine 2015). Tafoya (2014) explains how Navajo people apply cultural information to understanding illnesses and protective measures to protect themselves from health issues and other monsters. People become “warriors” by utilizing traditional teachings and history to protect and shield themselves against hardships, illnesses, or monsters that may affect them at any time.

The newest monster to come about is COVID-19. Like with other challenges Navajo people continue to utilize culture to combat COVID-19 (Shone and O’Neal 2020). A Navajo woman, Allie Young, works to help her people fight against the “COVID-19 monster” by implementing Navajo creation stories of the warrior twins fighting monsters to explain the modern-day fight against a new monster (Shone & O’Neal 2020; Tachine 2015; Schwarz 1995). Krisst (2020) gives the perspectives of Navajo Nation members on COVID-19 that encompasses advice to return to traditional lifeways, continue to respect and honor kinship (*K’é*), and remember our responsibility to the Earth. Cultural and historical narratives help to explain why COVID-19 is here and how to fight back by drawing on past experiences and reestablishing balance (Krisst 2020; Schwarz 1995). Explanations from Navajo people of mistreating the Earth and harming nature explain why COVID-19 is here (Krisst 2020; Yazzie-Lewis & Zion 2007). The Navajo people utilize cultural knowledge relating to family/kinship, spirituality, and challenging oneself to confront adversity and any barriers that come their way (Tachine 2015;

Tafoya 2014). These monsters are not a new phenomenon to the Navajo people. My research considers different views and perspectives that came out of the coronavirus pandemic and how they tie back to this idea of monsters, including exploring how Navajo people use traditional cultural knowledge to fight back against this immense hardship.

Hózhó and Wellbeing

Navajo cultural wisdom and knowledge is passed on by elders and other culture keepers through storytelling, activities, cultural practices and speaking the traditional language. Navajo people often draw on traditional cultural knowledge for health and wellbeing to create preventative measures and protective factors for the community (Kahn-John et al. 2021). *Hózhó* and *K'é* are very important and complex aspects of Navajo culture that are implemented and connected to many teachings. Kahn-John and Koithan (2015) explain *Hózhó* by describing it through six distinct characteristics. First, spirituality involves respecting and honoring one's spirit through prayer and other traditional practices. Second is respect for all living things. Third is reciprocity, or the teaching of treating all relationships with respect, then you will also receive kindness, positive energy, and support from these relationships as well. The fourth is discipline, meaning the commitment to self through exercising, helping others and achieving goals. Fifth is thinking, which encompasses thinking positive about everything and planning one's life. The sixth is *K'é* (relationships) which means you are interconnected to everything in the universe, including the plants, the animals, people, and the land.

Hózhó is a complex Navajo philosophy involving ideas of harmony, balance, peace, respect, relationships, and positivity which can be achieved by goal planning, maintaining responsibility to oneself and others, and reflecting on one's connection to the world (Lee 2014; BCA Navajo Healing Project 2020). *Diné* (Navajo) perspectives of wellbeing involve concepts

of *Hózhó*, that health is holistic, dependent on good thinking and surrounding oneself with positive factors, as well as understanding that human survival and wellbeing is directly impacted by more than human relationships (Mattingly & Wakpa 2021; Kahn-John & Koithan 2015). The principle *Sq'áh Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó* (SNBH) consists of an important set of concepts involving restoration of disrupted relationships within both a ceremonial and everyday life context (Lewton & Bydone 2000). Lewton and Bydone (2000) conducted interviews with Navajo people about SNBH and they revealed identity and healing also make up this philosophy. Navajo health and well-being are understood through harmony. This involves connections a person maintains with the physical and spiritual worlds, and with animate and inanimate beings. When this harmony is off balance, it needs to be reestablished by engaging with family relationships, learning, and implementing Navajo culture and history into their lives, and making sure that one understands their relationship to others and to the land, as well as the responsibilities they have to themselves (Lewton & Bydone 2000; Kahn-John & Koithan 2015). Following the teachings of *Hózhó* offer the strength, the medicine, the ability to conquer fears, life challenges, and illnesses (Kahn-John et al. 2021; Navajo Traditional Teachings 2022).

K'é and *Hózhó* are very interconnected to Navajo health and wellbeing. Health in Indigenous communities has been negatively impacted and controlled by the impacts of colonialism, which in turn has provided inadequate healthcare, treatment, and negatively impacted overall wellbeing (Richardson & Crawford 2020; Tuhiwai-Smith 2012). Many Indigenous Peoples have started implementing and contributing their own practices, experiences, and healing practices into healthcare, especially evident during COVID-19. For example, one hospital created an adaptation of a medicine wheel for Indigenous wellbeing during COVID-19, which implemented ideas of community, relationships, as well as a holistic approach to health

involving the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects (Richardson & Crawford 2020; Nelson 2018; Yenchik 2022). Adding in these perspectives of wellbeing in western healthcare changes the focus from the illness or one part of a person to rebalancing the person as a whole and finding understanding in an illness (Yenchik 2022). Additionally, in the Southwest, the Indian Health Service (IHS) partnered with Navajo healers and cultural experts to create a model that implements cultural teachings into health (Nelson 2018). These include ideas of keeping a balanced life of exercising, eating healthy, and the importance of maintaining family relationships (Nelson 2018; Kahn-John & Koithan 2015; Lewton & Bydone 2000). This model focuses on four areas of health and wellbeing: self-identity, self-respect, self-care, and self-protection, all of which surround resiliency. These teachings aid patients with health literacy, self-management, and cultural competency within health care systems (Nelson 2018; Begay 2020).

Begay (2020) explains how many nurses on the Navajo Nation discuss *K'é* and *Hózhó* as fundamental values they integrate into their roles as healthcare professionals. The pandemic restricted people from seeing family members, holding family events, and taking part in ceremonies, which are all important aspects of Navajo *K'é* (kinship) and the SNBH way of life. Healthcare centers provided areas where patients could pray with traditional medicines and even hired medicine people to work with patients to help keep *Hózhó* intact at a time when traditional healing was difficult to practice during the pandemic (Begay 2020). In my earlier research I created and illustrated a children's book that tells the story of a young Navajo girl *Becoming the Doctor my People Need* through understanding and implementing Navajo perspectives on health and wellbeing in western healthcare, such as *Hózhó*, *K'é* and understanding illnesses and disease as monsters (Yenchik 2022; Yenchik n.d.). I decided to continue with some of these concepts

with more depth, the Navajo principles of *Hózhó* and *K'é*, to explore how these teachings played a role in combating COVID-19 and how they tie into the perspectives and views about COVID-19.

Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19 (COVID-19) on the Navajo Nation

In this section, I provide context on the impact of the pandemic on the Navajo Nation and briefly describe the COVID-19 timeline. I then provide a data driven explanation of the COVID-19 infection rates at the height of the pandemic along with mitigation processes and vaccination efforts on the Navajo Nation. I will then discuss the historical implications and the effects of settler colonialism to explain the high impact of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation. I then move back into how *Hózhó* and *K'é* were important factors that contributed to the success of the Navajo Nation mitigation and protective measures against COVID-19.

According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) COVID-19 timeline, the first appearance of COVID-19 started back in mid-December 2019 in China, where a group of patients were falling ill with a pneumonia-like sickness whose condition was not improving with standard treatment (CDC 2022). In early January 2020, the WHO (World Health Organization) announced the outbreak in Wuhan, China stating it was caused by the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (CDC 2022). On January 20, 2020, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the United States (U.S), first in Washington, four days later the second case in Illinois, and on January 26 infections were confirmed in Arizona and California (CDC 2022). WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, and the U.S declared a national emergency on March 13 and two days later many states started to implement shutdowns (CDC 2022). It was March 17, when the Navajo Nation had its first case of COVID-19, a few days later then Navajo President, Johnathan Nez, implemented preventative mandates (CDC 2022). At this time, COVID-19 rates

across the country were rising, and by the end of March 2020 the Navajo Nation already had about 200 positive cases confirmed.

Even though rates of COVID-19 were rising rapidly, the Navajo Nation was quick to respond and set up preventative and protective actions. Hakim et al. (2021) discuss how *Diné* College on the Navajo Nation developed the first response to COVID-19. They implemented protective measures in their classrooms and mandated masks five months before everywhere else. The college also developed a campaign to inform the community about COVID-19 prevention and symptoms. Navajo Nation president Johnathan Nez also asked *Dine* College to help create prevention and coping measures. Navajo medical scientists at the college began research to understand the Navajo Nations' vulnerability to the virus, which concluded both genetic and environmental factors majorly contributed to susceptibility.

The Navajo Nation gave COVID-19 the Navajo name *Dikos Nitsaaígíí Náhást'éíts'áadah* translating to “Big Cough 19” (McPaul 2020). *Dikos* in the Navajo language translates to cough or the release of air from the lungs. *Nitsaa* in Navajo means big or large and *-ígíí* is a nominalizer which is added to a word to make it a noun. *Náhást'éíts'áadah* is the Navajo word for the number nineteen. A more literal translation of the word *Dikos Nitsaaígíí Náhást'éíts'áadah* would be “the one that is a big cough or large release of air from the lungs number nineteen.” The number nineteen is added to *Dikos Nitsaaígíí* because without it, it is used to mean pneumonia.

At this time, the Navajo Nation took serious actions, by implementing mask mandates, stay at home orders, weekend lockdowns, and highway checkpoints to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Perrot et al. 2020; Crepelle 2021; Romero 2020). During the Navajo weekend lockdowns, police officers were on the scene to make sure people obeyed this mandate and the

consequences of breaking curfew were thirty days in jail or a thousand dollar fine (Romero, 2020). Many clinics and hospitals did not have the space to house COVID-19 positive patients for quarantine from their families and the National Guard had to set up temporary sites for positive patients to stay so they were not exposing their families (Romero 2020; Emerson & Montoya 2021). The Navajo Nation had to go through a lengthy process, lasting months, in order to receive emergency grants to fund COVID-19 projects and provide assistance to the Navajo people (Romero 2020).

The impacts of COVID-19 were unequally distributed and impacted Indigenous communities at higher rates due to structural racism and violence, settler colonialism, environmental racism, and social and economic disparities present and impacting disempowered communities (Emerson & Montoya 2021; Parkhurst et al. 2020). According to the CDC (2020) “American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic persons” had the highest cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in the country. The rate ratios compared to “White, Non-Hispanic persons” were 1.6 times the cases, 2.5 times the hospitalizations, and 2.0 times the deaths (CDC 2020). Displacement of Indigenous peoples and lands continue to cause long lasting negative impacts through colonial systems, which confine and create many risks for Indigenous peoples (Keovorabout 2021; Dimock 2021; Emerson & Montoya 2021).

Emerson and Montoya (2021) frame the Navajo Nation as a case study to examine the effects of settler colonialism and how historical factors play a role today in health inequality, especially the COVID-19 health crisis. Some of these inequities and social problems include lack of access to basic needs, such as running water, electricity, roads, grocery stores (7 total on Navajo Nation equal in size to the state of West Virginia), inadequate healthcare (11 hospitals located in a large area), etc. (Parkhurst et al. 2020; Emerson & Montoya 2021; Perrot et al.

2020). Due to these unequal structures, the Navajo people experienced more severe health impacts and faced a higher possibility of death than their non-Native counterparts during COVID-19 (Parkhurst et al. 2020). At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, many Indigenous communities were experiencing high infection rates, the Navajo Nation had one of the highest infection rates in the U.S (Perrot et al. 2020; Crepelle 2021). They had 4,002 (2,304 per 100,000 people) confirmed COVID-19 cases in May 2020, surpassing New York City at 1,806 cases per 100,000 people (Perrot et al. 2020).

Despite the many hardships the Navajo Nation had to face, leaders and community members worked endlessly planning and creating public health strategies, as a result, the Nation moved from the horrifying statistic of 2,304 confirmed cases per 100,000 people to a nation with the highest rate of vaccination in the United States (Crepelle 2021). The first COVID-19 vaccines were available December 2020 for healthcare workers (CDC 2022). However, many Indigenous tribes chose to vaccinate their elders, fluent language speakers, and healthcare workers first before the rest of the community (Dimock 2021; Crepelle 2021). Navajo peoples were hesitant to receive the trial vaccine offered to them first because of the long history of mistreating and using Native peoples as “lab rats” (Dimock 2021; Crepelle 2021). However, in January 2021, the Navajo Nation started vaccinating the elderly first, and the following month, vaccines were open to the general Navajo public (CDC 2022). The Navajo Nation and many other Indigenous peoples confronted *Dikos Ntsaaígú-19* (COVID-19), “the big cough,” the same way they pushed back on colonial systems—with incredible strength (Dimock 2021).

Since the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines, the Navajo Nation slowly withdrew some of their protective mandates and moved to only having social distancing, masking, and no large gatherings mandates. On January 20, 2023, the Navajo Nation announced an end of mask

mandate and stated that masks only be worn in early childhood centers, nursing homes, and healthcare facilities (Silversmith 2023).

The Navajo Nation alongside many others, despite having the highest rate of infections per capita, was able to decrease the number of infections by setting up the best policies, regulations, and strategies in the country. The Navajo Nation tackled COVID-19 by applying Navajo *K'é* values and the teachings of *Hózhó* to these different regulations and strategies, as well as the understandings and perspectives of the virus as a monster. and by tackling inequalities throughout the Navajo Nation.

Chapter 3: Theory

All my life, as a *Diné* woman, I have learned through the many stories of my great grandparents, grandparents, mother, family, *K'é* relatives, community members, and through my very own experiences. When the COVID-19 pandemic first began, the teachings did not stop, the learning did not stop. I was taking in the many different views and perspectives of COVID-19 and tying them into my own experiences. I use relationality and interconnectedness as a lens for both gathering and interpreting data, as well as phenomenology as a framework for understanding this research. The paradigms of relationality and interconnectedness are seen in my research through my interviewees' views and perspectives expressed about COVID-19, the way that I talk about COVID-19, as well as by the way my interviewees introduce and establish relations between each other. My research is centered around the lived and embodied experiences of not only myself, but my participants, which fits what phenomenology is as an approach, understanding worldviews through how we embody experiences. Below is an overview of each one and what they entail as they relate to my project.

Relationality and Interconnectedness

Littletree et al. (2020) discuss the importance of centering relationality and provide a model for Indigenous knowledge organization. Relationality is what differentiates Indigenous ways of knowing from western views involving relationships that encompass responsibility, reciprocity, and respect (Littletree et al. 2020; Wilson 2008). It is through relationality that as Navajo people belong, based on the relationships we build and maintain with each other, our responsibility to one another that helps us live a balanced and positive life (Littletree et al. 2020). Relationships impact the way one views the world and influence ways of knowing about ourselves, others, and everything around us. Relationality is informed by holism, the way a

person is made whole and healthy by the interrelatedness of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical realms (Littletree et al. 2020). An example of this is the Navajo philosophy of *Hózhó*. Relationality is a part of Indigenous ways of knowing, which goes all the way back to creation stories and carries into institutions (Littletree et al. 2020). Being Navajo embodies so much more than a tribal I.D. card it ties all the way back to ancestral relations to land and kinship, relationships are what make you who you are. Indigenous ways of knowing encompass direct experiences and the relationships people have with knowledge (Littletree et al. 2020).

When applying methods, I refer to Wilson (2008) who provides the framework for an Indigenous research paradigm that I will apply in my own research, which includes the incorporation of Indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, or Indigenous Lifeworlds. This research paradigm has entities that are inseparable, blend together, and focus on relationships. Ontology is the way we view reality and epistemology is how we think or know this reality (Wilson 2008). Both of these are based on relations that create a mutual reality. Axiology is your ethics and morals, while methodology is how you are going to gain more knowledge about reality (Wilson 2008). These two combined are based on maintaining relational accountability. All four of these ideas are part of a circle that indicates each part of the circle are equal, they exist because of each other, and its entirety is greater than all sections combined (Wilson 2008). Relationships are the heart of what it means to be Indigenous, and all of these entities involve relations that provide an Indigenous research framework.

These relationships referred to in relationality are with people including family, community, and other networks. Creating these relations can lead to strong research (Wilson 2008; Littletree et al. 2020). Another kind of relationship are those relations to the environment and land, which relate to a sense of belonging, sacred spaces, and knowledge. This ties to

research because it's about building relations and bridging the sacred spaces (Wilson 2008). There are also important relations with the cosmos and with ideas. These two relationships deal with spirituality and culture, and how they are all intertwined with other relationships, which creates knowledge and includes ways of knowing (Wilson 2008). Accountability to different relationships involves considerations of these relations which will influence what topics people choose to study, what methods to apply, how to interpret data, and how to present research (Wilson 2008). These are important to all our relations, as Indigenous peoples, because they involve collaboration, trust, and positivity.

Todd (2017) discusses the concept of interconnectedness as the interrelationships of people to the land and animals. Interconnectedness involves viewing animals and land as kin and having a responsibility to one another (Todd 2017; Littletree et al. 2020; Wilson 2008). The most important aspects of interconnectedness are respect for all living things and responsibility to one another, to kin, to the land and animals. Todd (2017) discusses interconnectedness within an example of fish as kin and how the fish in the area are being impacted by an oil spill, which also impacts the land and humans. However, oil is still seen as kin and not as being the problem. Todd (2017) writes that wrongdoing comes from oil companies and other entities regulating oil for profit, because they are the ones that weaponized the oil and did not think about the consequences of oil spills. When oil is abused in this way, it can forget its place in the world, as a member of kinship that has respect and responsibility to all others (Todd 2017). This idea of interconnectedness is closely related to the Navajo philosophies of *Hózhó* and *K'é* which will be used as a lens for my research analysis. *Hózhó* embodies ideas of beauty, harmony, and balance, along with respect for all living things. *Hózhó* and *K'é* can be seen as a way of life, living in balance encompasses positivity, respect, taking care of yourself, and maintaining family

relationships. Overall, interconnectedness is entangled with relationality, which both focus on the relationships people, land, animals, ideas, and the cosmos have together. This is a helpful lens to use when looking at my research because it ties into the Navajo concept of *Hózhó* and *K'é* and how those teachings relate to perspectives and views about COVID-19.

Phenomenology

I use phenomenology as an approach to help understand how people interpret illnesses and wellbeing through their experiences of seeing others become ill, becoming ill themselves, wearing masks, etc. and then making sense out of these experiences through their own worldviews, such as through the understanding of COVID-19 as a modern *Naayéé'* or monster. Phenomenology, initially described by philosopher Edmund Husserl, is the observation and reflection of what and how things appear to one's subjective consciousness as they encounter them in the world before any prejudice or preconceived ideas are attached (Čargonja 2013). Interpreting experience can also be influenced by intersubjectivity, which involves the thoughts and feelings of the conscious and unconscious between two people, a shared understanding (Čargonja 2013; Duranti 2010). Phenomenology goes beyond language and examines the other physical ways of knowing and interactions (Čargonja 2013). This means that one's bodily and sensorial experiences also shape the way they view and know about the world around them (Čargonja 2013; Merleau-Ponty & Bannan 1956; Duranti 2010). Merleau-Ponty's explanation of phenomenology discusses how the body cannot be separated from one's view of the world; one's body influences the way they perceive the world (Čargonja 2013; Merleau-Ponty & Bannan 1956).

Phenomenology, the study of lived experience, is an acceptable method to use when capturing the experiences, oral traditions, and voices and words of a people whose worldviews

are holistic, such as many Indigenous communities (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine 2005). Indigenous oral traditions and narratives carry with them cultural meanings, experiences and events that shape worldviews, Indigenous Lifeworlds (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine 2005). Narratives shape the understanding and identity of people through the teachings and lessons of lifeways, values, and experiences. Narratives are organized in ways that construct and share meanings which allow the learners to interpret and engage with meanings (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine 2005; Christion Myers 2016). Oral tradition is culture within itself, it brings together a people's ancestors and connects them to future generations (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine 2005).

Christion Myers (2016) discusses Heidegger's early work on being-in-the-world, the phenomenological perspective to understanding place. A person's being is shaped by place, it has a relationship to the world through its engagement within it, in a specific place (Christion Myers 2016). These places that people inhabit shape the way a person sees the world, it involves a reciprocal relation with people and the land, and together both people and land co-evolve (Christion Myers 2016). Places serve as a foundation for all experience, understanding one's identity and meaning. Identity is tied to land and cannot be separated. Places have such significant meaning in one's life that narratives and stories have been created and passed down that reveal the relationships between people and the places they live, as well as the ethical responsibilities to land (Christion Myers 2016; Struthers & Peden-McAlpine 2005). These approaches to phenomenology are important in understanding one's worldview and how oral history plays a huge role in understanding identity and bringing the past to the present in order to think about the future. Ways of knowing and experience told through these narratives also assist in finding ways to adapt to present situations, such as illnesses and hardships. This will be beneficial to my research because traditional cultural knowledge in the heart of oral histories and

narratives shape the way people view the world and figure out ways to deal with present hardships based on past experiences.

These theories have informed my research by influencing the choices I have made in designing my research methods and interpreting my data. I chose to use an autoethnographic approach to writing my thesis, social media content analysis, and ethnographic interviews with Navajo adults because there have been limitations in academia, especially anthropology's past, surrounding ontological, epistemological, and axiological knowledge (Ellis et al. 2011). These theories allow me to use my lived experience and the personal stories of my interviewees to produce meaningful research based on our own identities (Ellis et al. 2011). My personal experience informs and frames my research and places Indigenous knowledge at the center of it (Ellis et al. 2011; Pham and Gothberg 2020).

Chapter 4: Methods and Analysis

Over the summer before I started my first semester of graduate school, I started thinking about research ideas for my thesis. I remember thinking about COVID-19 and all the things I was learning and hearing about it from a Navajo perspective. I became really interested in the Navajo teachings, lessons, and stories surrounding COVID-19 because as a young Navajo woman, I am still growing and learning through my culture, and I loved seeing my community come together during this pandemic and showing such resilience and strength. My own experiential knowledge influenced my research and questions. Experiential knowledge is the technical knowledge, research background, and personal experiences a researcher has, although some say that this is very biased, others have argued that it is valuable to research (Maxwell 2012).

Designing my research project for my thesis included the steps laid out by LeCompte and Schensul (1998), which included 1) developing my research questions, 2) deciding research methods, 3) developing research guidelines regarding human subjects, 4) deciding how to analyze data, and 5) figuring out how to disseminate research. As stated in my introduction, my research question was: What role does Navajo traditional cultural knowledge play in understanding COVID-19 and promoting wellbeing during the pandemic? My overarching goal was to understand how Navajo traditional cultural knowledge shaped Navajo wellbeing and perceptions of COVID-19 and how people promoted, practiced, and implemented those perspectives to combat the pandemic. After figuring out my research questions, I decided to use autoethnography, social media content analysis, and semi-structured interviews. These methods of research allowed me to not only bring in my own experiences and knowledge but weave it

together with the stories and perspectives of my interviewees and with what was being expressed and shared on social media.

Autoethnography

First, I used an autoethnographic approach to develop my research questions and methods. This approach is also how I am writing and communicating my research through my thesis. Autoethnography is an approach that uses personal story to analyze and interpret research but is also a self-reflexive practice (Snyder 2015; Pham & Gothberg 2020). This approach emphasizes analyzing (-graphy) the self or personal experience (auto-) to understand the culture (ethno-) of research (Snyder 2015; Pham & Gothberg 2020; Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnography provides the tools and strategies to integrate personal lived experiences and reflections with the overall goal being to contribute to the wider realm of cultural and social understanding (Pham & Gothberg 2020; Wall 2008), specifically how *Diné* strategies of resilience and philosophies have created a space for using ancestral and traditional knowledge to protect contemporary people and communities.

I use an autoethnographic approach to position my existing knowledge and lived experiences from the point of view of a Navajo woman at the center of this study. I incorporated the teachings and perspectives I learned from family members and others in the Navajo community about health, wellbeing, and COVID-19 into my analyses. Ethnography is based a lot on memory, but in autoethnography memory is significant because it is a part of who we are and as humans we always find connections to what we remember (Wall 2008). I wanted to be able to acknowledge my subjectivity, my emotions, and my influence on my thesis research, which autoethnography, as a method, gives me that opportunity (Ellis et al. 2011).

I documented my experiences and learning as a researcher in the field by taking field notes. While I was interviewing my participants, I took notes and memos. This included ideas, themes, the participants behavior, body language, reactions to questions, the setting, and more. These notes are just as important as the information collected from the participants. Fieldnotes are what make up ethnography, as well as give context to what is happening within the setting, in the moment (Sanjek 1990). My field notes included any thoughts that came up during and after my interviews, any and all emotions I was feeling throughout my research, and descriptions surrounding the interviews or work I was doing. Providing sensory details such as sight, smell, taste, touch, and emotion adds to a setting or situation and even provides an understanding of what is going on (Stoller 1989). Understanding the world and meaning making from a *Diné* perspective contributes to the importance of ancestral knowledges which can improve and maintain Indigenous health and wellbeing. My positionality as a *Diné* woman and a student in graduate school also adds and informs the larger discipline of anthropology by providing a different perspective to research and by validating Indigenous ways of knowing.

Social Media Content Analysis

Second, I conducted social media content analysis to collect public knowledge from the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Content analysis is a powerful method to use in combination with other methods for research and is great for summarizing social media posts (Columbia University 2016; Bernard 2011; El-Awaisi et al. 2020). I documented social media posts from Facebook, specifically posts that I have either seen or shared. I took note of pictures of signage on the Navajo Nation along with teachings expressed, perspectives, views, remedies, and data posted by social media participants. These included posts made by Navajo community members

and the Navajo Nation government. I took screenshots of these posts in order to archive this information for analysis.

Content analysis is a systematic research method used to analyze, to make inferences, and to code texts and other forms of qualitative content obtained in research (Bernard 2011; United States Government Accountability Office 2013; White & Marsh 2006; El-Awaisi et al. 2020). This method is mainly used to determine the presence, meanings, and relationships of words, themes, or concepts in a dataset (Columbia University 2016; El-Awaisi et al. 2020). The content of textual data is subjectively interpreted by the process of coding the text for themes and then identifying the themes for patterns (Bernard 2011; Hsieh & Shannon 2005; White & Marsh 2006). Content analysis is a highly flexible and widely used method and identifying the appropriate data does not have to be strictly text (Bernard 2011; United States Government Accountability Office 2013; White and Marsh 2006). Utilizing content analysis allows for closeness to data and provides significant historical and cultural insights over time (Columbia University 2016), such as in the case of Navajo cultural views and teachings during the pandemic.

In order to conduct content analysis, I identified the appropriate data sources and units of analysis to use based on my research questions (United States Government Accountability Office 2013; White & Marsh 2006). I documented social media posts including photos, data shared, teachings and other knowledge shared, as well as remedies and opinions shared by users from Facebook that I have seen or shared myself. I used purposive sampling for this content analysis, selecting data based on the characteristics and research purpose (Bernard 2011). I chose these as my data source and unit analysis because it ties into my own experiences during COVID-19, and

what I saw on social media, which was my main source of gathering up to date news on coronavirus rates.

When searching for these posts, I used key words and phrases such as “Navajo Nation COVID-19,” “COVID-19 Navajo,” “Navajo covid stories,” and “Navajo covid teachings” in the search bar. I also refined my search by narrowing it down specifically to “posts” in the year 2020 and selecting the tab for “posts I have seen.” From each of these key search phrases and other markers, I documented sixteen social media posts. I started with whatever was at the top and then skipped any repeats. I then repeated this process but with the “posts I have seen” tab unselected. I then documented twenty posts from these key search phrases and markers. Altogether there were thirty-six posts screenshot and saved. Although I searched a lot of places for these posts, I was only able to document and use a small number of posts due to the specific and narrow criteria for the inclusion of these posts.

The second step was to develop, refine, and define categories within the data (United States Government Accountability Office 2013; White & Marsh 2006). Categories will be presented in the analysis section of this paper. The third step was to code the data, this is where data are coded with a phrase that will then be placed into a category they have in common. After coding, the fourth step is to assess reliability (United States Government Accountability Office 2013; White & Marsh 2006). One limitation to this research method was the ability to have my categories checked by another researcher because I did not have any other members on my team. However, I tried my best to keep my coding as unbiased as possible, as well as to keep myself aligned with the determined categories. I acknowledge that a limitation of this content analysis is that I was searching Facebook as myself, which means that content I was able to access was curated by Facebook for me. Given the autoethnographic method used, however, acknowledging

my positionality and how Facebook algorithms targeted people like me with information means this collected information is relevant to my project. The fifth and final step was to analyze and summarize the results from the data. Content analysis is a very descriptive method, in the results this is where findings will be highlighted, and context will be given to the data (United States Government Accountability Office 2013; White & Marsh 2006).

I utilized guidelines provided by Bruckman (2008) regarding data collected on human subject research on the internet. I followed the “light disguise” guidelines, which included naming public groups, but changing names of individual users, as well as other identifying details such as location and places names (Bruckman 2008). I also quote posts exactly as they are written but leave out any identifying details and names (Bruckman 2008). This approach helped to protect the identities of social media posters.

Ethnographic Interviews

I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with Navajo adults and elders living in Flagstaff, Arizona to gain current and past COVID-19 experiences and views, as well as cultural knowledge about health and wellbeing. I selected these community members as my participants because of their traditional knowledge and depth of expertise about many Navajo cultural aspects and traditions, and that they were people that would be willing to talk with me about my research questions. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because I wanted to gain qualitative perspectives and input on my research questions (Bernard 2011). Semi-structured interviews provide a more in-depth discussion about areas of interest, you can ask for clarity, gain more information, and get the person’s reaction and emotions (Bernard 2011). My main objective was to discuss the importance and implications of Navajo traditional cultural knowledge to understand health and wellbeing with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic. I scheduled times and

places for the interview, as well as used a premeditated script of open-ended interview questions (Bernard 2011).

For my interviews I created an interview guide to help me navigate my interviews more efficiently and to make sure I asked about the topics I wanted to learn more about.

Autoethnography influenced my questions which were based on cultural knowledge I already knew, as well as a scoping literature review, where I used these concepts and teachings to help set up what questions I wanted to ask. Before I started with my interview questions, I asked people to tell me about themselves, such as “where are you from? What do you do? What are your clans?” For my interview guide, I broke my questions down into three sections. The first section of questions involved gaining the perspectives of my participants on health and wellbeing. The second section had questions looking to gain experiences, perspectives, and views on the coronavirus (COVID-19). The third section of questions related to gaining input on how to respectfully present and discuss Navajo culturally sensitive subjects, such as COVID-19. Each section had four to six questions specifically tied to each category of questions. I also added probing questions to add more context to my main questions or to spark ideas and expand on answers given. Depending on the interview, I was able to ask all the questions I had prepared, however in some cases, I only had time to ask a few questions from each section. At the end of the interview questions, I did provide my participants with the opportunity to share any additional thoughts or information if they wanted to. Please refer to the appendix to see full interview guide and questions.

To recruit for these ethnographic qualitative interviews, I used non-probability and convenience sampling strategies. Convenience sampling is appropriate for finding interviewees that are available and representative of your research (Bernard 2011). I started my recruitment by

reaching out to Navajo adults and elders that I knew held Navajo traditional cultural knowledge. I recruited my participants by contacting them based on the contact information I had for them and asked if they were willing to be interviewed by me regarding the purpose of my research. I also reached out to multiple local Indigenous organizations in Flagstaff, Arizona. However, I had one of the anticipated challenges happen, difficulty with recruiting interviewees, but I was able to navigate around it.

I anticipated that I might have trouble recruiting participants. In the very beginning of the summer, I had a difficult time finding interviewees. None of the different Indigenous organizations that I went into or tried to get a hold of in Flagstaff, AZ got back to me. I also had some of my anticipated and referred interviewees decline my interview offer. I then referred to network sampling, where I asked my thesis advisor who would be best to interview regarding my research (Bernard 2011). This strategy was beneficial because my advisor knew who to refer me to, including people who were knowledgeable about what I wanted to find out. After a couple of months, I finally received replies from some of the people I either called, emailed, or messaged through Facebook.

My participants were Navajo residents of Flagstaff, and it is very important to acknowledge and understand the past of harmful research done with Indigenous groups. Providing full transparency helps to prevent exploitation and adheres to the principles of community engagement (Drabiak-Syed 2010; Mitchell 2018). I made sure my participants were fully aware of what my research entailed, that there is no ambiguity, and that they understood their involvement completely before giving consent. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants could at any time revoke their consent and choose to no longer participate. I also followed NAU Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols for adult interview consent. The

NAU IRB approved my research goals, questions, methods, and consent form. Since I did not obtain permission or approval from the Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board, I ensured my participants were Flagstaff residents living off tribal lands to make certain no violations occur, and to respect Navajo tribal sovereignty.

Along with informed consent, I wanted to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of my participants. Research was kept confidential in that I did not use real names and disguised or removed any identifiers, unless my participants chose to have their identity revealed. I followed all data protections according to my IRB proposal and prevented permissions for data use by any other project to ensure no misuse of information (Drabiak-Syed 2010). Throughout my entire research project, I made sure I was respectful and not destructive to anyone's worldviews. I wanted to make sure the dignity of the group I was gaining information from stayed intact, and I did no harm physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually (Drabiak-Syed 2010).

Before I conducted any interviews, I made sure I got informed consent and had my participants decide whether they would like to be audio-recorded or not. My consent form included an overview of my research project, a statement saying that the participants' information would be kept confidential, as well as protected and encrypted. The consent form also included a section regarding the interviewee's identity, asking if they would like to remain anonymous or not. The consent form also asked if the interviewee wanted to give permission to be audio-recorded, and that it would be erased as soon as it was transcribed and enclosed that all information will only be used for the context of my research.

My interviews took place both in person and over Zoom. During the time of my interviews, I was still taking precautions against COVID-19, I was masking up and social distancing. Additionally, I made certain that these interviews took place wherever or however the

participant found safe and comfortable due to the pandemic. Interviews lasted approximately an hour, with some extending longer than that, and I provided an incentive in the form of a \$25 gift card of their choice to the interviewees. See **Table 1** for a summary of my research sample. After each interview, if given permission, I uploaded the audio-recording to Otter.ai, a transcription service app, to transcribe my interviews.

Table 1. Summary of Research Sample

Interview	Interviewee	In person or zoom	Length	Recorded	Transcribed
1	<i>Shideezhi</i>	Zoom	52 min	X	X
2	Danell	In person	Approx. 1hr		
3	Rose	In person	1hr		
4	Steve	In person	1hr 57 min		
5	<i>Shimá yázhí</i>	Zoom	38 min	X	X
6	<i>Shádi</i>	In person	1hr 40 min	X	X
7	Liv	Zoom	50 min	X	X
8	Brionna	In person	Approx 1hr		
9	Ezekiel	In person	Approx. 1hr		
10	Carmenlita	Zoom	1hr 11 min	X	X

Thematic Coding

Following transcription, I used thematic analysis for both my social media content analysis and interview methods. For my analyses I did them all by hand since there were only ten interviews and thirty-six social media posts. This consisted of printing all transcriptions and social media screenshots, going through, and making notes of codes, as well as using highlighters to help determine the different themes. I identified common and important concepts throughout my data (Bernard 2011). These then became my themes and subthemes. I used inductive and deductive coding since I knew some of the themes I was looking for, but also documented any emerging themes (Bernard 2011).

Thematic analysis looks for the clearly stated and implied ideas in a dataset and focuses on identifying and describing them into themes (Guest et al. 2012). Thematic analysis offers and allows for more context in qualitative data because it moves beyond the counting of words and phrases and is more about the concepts and meaning within data (Guest et al. 2012; Terry et al. 2017). The first phase of thematic analysis was familiarization, this involves knowing and immersing yourself in the dataset (Terry et al. 2017). I did this by rereading interview transcripts and social media posts, by rewatching the social media posts with videos, and relistening to my audio-recorded interviews. The second phase was to generate codes, this includes identifying relevant data and creating words or phrases to describe that section of data (Terry et al. 2017). I did this by going through and reading a paragraph and writing out a word or phrase that described what was being said. I used both inductive and deductive coding for this phase. Inductive coding allows for understanding to emerge from the dataset, this is where you create codes based on the data (Bernard 2011). Deductive coding is concept driven, where in some cases you already know the themes and areas of interest, so your codes come from those (Bernard 2011).

The third phase was theme development, where you combine codes together into bigger meaningful patterns, where research questions can be a guide as well (Terry et al. 2017). The fourth phase is to review the themes to make sure they do work with and follow the dataset (Terry et al. 2017). I did this phase by taking similar codes and combining them together to create an overall theme, or by placing them in a theme that was determined based off of my interview questions. The fifth phase was to define the themes by providing short summaries of the main ideas and meanings of each theme (Terry et al. 2017). The sixth phase, the final, was to provide the report, where you describe the approaches taken in the analysis and show what came

out of it (Terry et al. 2017). I present my data in a narrative form to express what people are saying using their own words. I used the social media data gathered and tied them into the narratives that I obtained from my ethnographic interviews.

Social Media Content Data Themes and Codes

I used inductive coding for my social media content analysis. I started by coding all thirty-six posts by pulling out the important concepts that emerged from each one. I then organized all my codes into themes. I came up with four themes within the social media posts: COVID-19 information, social inequalities and health disparities, COVID-19 personal experiences, and Navajo teachings and stories. The codes included within the “COVID-19 information” theme were prevention, symptoms, updates, and resources. The “social inequalities and health disparities” theme consisted of the codes: inadequate healthcare, lack of and access to resources, no running water, no electricity, underlying health issues, coal and uranium exposure, food deserts, and unemployment. For the “COVID-19 personal experiences” theme the codes were: COVID-19 symptoms and prevention, hope, fear, prayer, pain, and community heroes. The codes for the “Navajo teachings and stories” theme were: *K’é*, remedies, prayer, self-reliance, Navajo Twins story, warning signs, giants and monster stories, the Navajo new year, community, Navajo language, and Navajo clothing symbolism. All these themes tie into one another in different ways, which will be evident when discussing the social media posts. For a visual representation of my coding and themes please refer to **Table 2**.

Table 2. Social Media Content Analysis Themes and Codes

COVID-19 Information	Social Inequalities and Health Disparities
- Prevention	- Inadequate health care
- Symptoms	- Lack of and access to resources
- Updates	- No running water
- Resources	- No electricity
	- Underlying health issues
	- Coal/Uranium exposure

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food desserts - Unemployment
COVID-19 Personal Experiences	Navajo Teachings and Stories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - COVID-19 symptoms and prevention - Hope - Fear - Prayer - Painful - Community Heroes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>K'é</i> - Remedies - Prayer - Self-reliance - Navajo Twins story - Warning signs - Giant and monster stories - Navajo new year - Community - Navajo language - Navajo clothing symbolism

Interview Data Themes and Codes

I used both deductive and inductive coding for my ten interview transcriptions, I utilized my interview guide and the way it was sectioned to determine my main themes: *Hózhó, K'é*, and staying healthy, COVID-19 views and perspectives through teachings and stories, and culturally sensitive subjects and respecting COVID-19. For my first theme, I asked my participants questions relating to what wellbeing means to them and how to stay healthy. Some of the codes within the “*Hózhó, K'é*, and staying healthy” theme are balance, holistic, family relations, positivity, eating healthy, physical activity, ceremony, and prayer. For my second theme, I asked my participants questions regarding their experiences with coronavirus, what cultural teachings and stories they have heard being tied to COVID-19 and how to prevent getting it. The “COVID-19 views and perspectives” theme is the only one I divided into subthemes: personal experiences of COVID-19 and resources, COVID-19 protection and prevention, and COVID-19 views and perspectives. Within these subthemes some of the codes are stressful, fear, home remedies, offerings, monster, and consequence. For my third theme, I asked my participants questions surrounding discussing culturally sensitive subjects and if it is okay to talk about COVID-19.

Some of the codes listed in the “culturally sensitive subjects and respecting COVID-19” theme are respect, powerful, and causality. There are even more codes listed under each theme, please refer to **Table 3** for more code details.

Table 3. Interview Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

Themes	Codes
<i>Hózhó, K'é, and Staying Healthy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Health - <i>Hózhó</i> - SMBH model - Wellbeing - Balance - Holistic (spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical) - Individual and community level - Self-respect - Meditation - Positive mindset - Family relations - Self-care - Self-empowerment - Everything is living - Songs - Prayer - Planning - Herbs - Offerings - Being active - Family - Positivity - Community workshops - Listen to stories/experiences - Never stop learning - Eating healthy - Teach children - <i>T'áá Hwó Ajít'éego</i> (it's up to you) - Vent/Talk to someone - Don't be lazy - Go outside - Cook traditional foods - Therapy - Ceremony - Positive environment - Powwow dancing

<p>COVID-19 Views and Perspectives Through Teachings and Stories</p>	<p><i>Personal Experiences of COVID-19 and Resources</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fortunate/Lucky - Strict - Hard - Scary - Loss - Fear - Stressful - Out of no where - Anxiety - Financial Stress - Chaotic/Crazy - Separation - Isolation - Overwhelming - Need to protect family/elders - Uncertainty - Lack of employment - Living paycheck to paycheck - Family needing help - Hardship and loans - Work from home - Family or self got COVID
	<p><i>COVID-19 Protection and Prevention</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Home remedies - Prayers - Ceremony - Mountain smoke - Offerings - Herbs - Shields (sacred stones from sacred mountains) - Sweat lodge - Horse meat - Sage - Arrowheads - Bear root - Bitter powder - Corn pollen - Corn meals - Sap - Skunk - Stay home - Leave house for essentials only - Burn Cedar - Gloves, mask, sanitizer

	<p><i>COVID-19 Views and Perspectives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Living being - COVID has a spiritual level - Monster - Twin Warriors story - Consequence - Reminder - Lesson - Need to continue culture - “End of world” - Need to care Mother Earth - Mistreating Mother Earth - Not following our traditions - Telling us something, need to listen - COVID not the enemy - Bring science and tradition together
<p>Culturally Sensitive Subjects and Respecting COVID-19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Doo ajinída</i> (don’t talk about it) - Powerful - Respect - Positive - Becomes the environment around you - Put something out, asking for it - Not to scare us - Seen as superstitious but not - Putting something at risk - Don’t dwell on things/negativity - Give it more life - Don’t agitate it - Shouldn’t talk about it all the time - Times changing - Talk for healing - Part of consciousness - Bring/draw things to you - Need to talk about things to move on - Can’t ignore it - Causality - Jeopardizing space - Opposition of how you conduct self as Navajo - Being mindful of what we say - Make intentions known - There’s a time to talk about it - Not taboo

Chapter 5: Data and Discussion

Introducing my Participants

All my participants reside in Flagstaff, Arizona (AZ), some of them I already had established relationships with. These relationships varied such as friendships, relatives, previous classmates, and even my significant other. Some of the participants I did not know, but we were able to establish kinship through clans or even share the bond of being Navajo. All my participants were over the age of eighteen, the ages ranged from young adult, adult, and elders. Due to some of my participants not wanting to be named, I will refer to them with a kinship term as they relate to my age instead of calling them interviewee #1. I felt that this was not only the right thing to do as a *Diné* woman, to recognize and acknowledge my K'e relationships, but it also ties into my framework of relationality and interconnectedness. Establishing relationships with my participants allowed for a stronger connection built on trust and bonding.

My first interview took place on June 28, 2022, at 1pm via zoom and ended at 1:52pm. My interviewee is a young Navajo woman originally from the Monument Valley area in Utah and has a master's degree in public health, emphasizing Indigenous Health. I will refer to this participant as *Shideezhí* meaning my younger sister, as her clans are: “*Tó dích 'i 'nii 'éi nishliigo, Kinyaa 'áanii 'éi bá shishchíín. Kin líchii 'nii éi dashicheii adóó Ta 'neesahnii 'éi dashináí.* I am the Bitter Water clan, born for the Towering House clan. My maternal grandfather is of the Red House Clan. And my paternal grandfather is of the Tangle clan.”

My second interview took place on July 7, 2022, at 11:30am, in person. Danell is a young Navajo woman originally from Kayenta, AZ. She is enrolled as a full-time student at Coconino Community College pursuing a career in nursing while working a part-time job. Her clans are

Tó'aheedlínii (Water flows together clan), *Tl'ízi lání* (Many goats clan), *Tó dích'í'nií* (Bitter water clan), and *Bilagáanaa* (white).

My third and fourth interview took place at the same time on July 18, 2022, at 1pm in person and ended at 2:57pm. My interviewees, a married couple, Rose and Steve invited me to their hogan near their home to complete the interview. Rose had to leave at 2pm, but I sat and talked with Steve for the rest of the time. They have three sons together and raise them traditionally here in Flagstaff, AZ. Rose's clans are *Táchii'nií nishłj*, *Kin líchii'nií bá shishchíín*, *'Áshijihí dashicheii*, *Hashk'qq hadzohí dashinálí*. She is originally from Cove, AZ and has bachelor's and master's degrees from NAU. She works for the City of Flagstaff as the Coordinator for Indigenous Initiatives. Steve comes from *Diné*, Cheyenne, and Euro Mestizo (Swedish) lineage. He grew up in Ft. Defiance, AZ and has two degrees from NAU in anthropology and business. He is self-employed as an artist, consultant, public speaker, and traditional practitioner.

My fifth interview took place on July 26, 2022, at 5:40pm over zoom and ended at 6:18pm. My interviewee is a young Navajo woman originally from Shonto, AZ but has lived in Flagstaff, AZ for most of her life. Her clans are "*Táchii'nií* born for *Tó dích'í'nií*. *Bilagáanaa dashicheii* and my *nálí* is *'Áshijihí*." She has a premedical degree in environmental science. She is currently working for a local nonprofit doing suicide prevention. I will refer to this participant as *Shimá yázhí* meaning little mother or aunt.

My sixth interview took place on July 27, 2022, at 1pm in person and ended at 2:40pm. My interviewee is a young Navajo woman originally from Kayenta, AZ. Her clans are "I am *Táchii'nií* born for *Bit'ahnii*. My maternal grandfathers of the *'Áshijihí*, my paternal grandfather is Mescalero Apache." She has gone to school all her life in Kayenta, went away to college, and

has now been living in Flagstaff for three years. I will refer to this participant as *Shádi*, meaning older sister.

My seventh interview took place on July 28, 2022, at 5:45pm via zoom and ended at 6:35pm. Liv is a Navajo woman originally from Ganado, AZ, who received her undergraduate degree in philosophy and graduate degree in applied behavior analysis. Her clans are “*Táchii’ni nishłj, Ma’ii deeshgiizhnii bá shíshchíín, Kin líchíi’ni dashicheii, adóó Tábaqahí dashinálı.*” She works with a local nonprofit doing Indigenous advocacy.

My eighth interview took place on August 16, 2022, at 5pm in person. Brionna is a young Navajo woman whose mother is from Kayenta, AZ and father is from Chilchinbeto, AZ, so she grew up in both places. Her clans are *Tó dích’ii’ni* born for *Bit’ahnii*. Her maternal grandfather’s clan is *Dibé lizhini* and her paternal grandfather’s clan is *Tsé níjikiní*.

My ninth interview took place on August 16, 2022, at 6:30pm in person. Ezekiel is a young Navajo man originally from Kayenta, AZ. His clans are *Ma’ii deeshgiizhnii nishłj, Bilagáanaa bá shíshchíín, Tó dích’ii’ni dashicheii, Bilagáanaa dashinálı*. He received his bachelor’s degree in Parks and Recreation Management with a minor in biology and sociology. Ezekiel works for NAU as a Talent Search Student Development Coordinator.

My tenth interview took place on August 18, 2022, at 3pm over zoom and ended at 4:11pm. Carmenlita is a Navajo woman originally from Kayenta, AZ. Her clans are “*Ádóone’é nishłínígú ’éi Kin líchíi’ni nishłj dóó Lo’kaa’ dine’é bá shíshchíín. Adóó Honágháahnii dashicheii dóó Yé’ii dine’é dashinálı.*” She conducts public health research for NAU’s Center for Health and Equity Research.

COVID-19 Information, Social Inequalities, and Health Disparities

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic my only source for updates, information, and news on COVID-19 was through my Facebook and my family back home. I remember seeing a post about COVID-19 being documented on the Navajo Nation for the first time. The first case was only thirty miles away from my hometown. I remember feeling scared and stressed because my mother, my younger little sisters, and niece were so close to the outbreak, as well as my fiancé's grandmother, uncle, and cousin sister. It seemed to happen so suddenly; we were just wandering around Flagstaff the weekend before celebrating my mother's birthday mask free, next thing we knew everything was shutting down.

Within my social media analysis are materials that inform what the COVID-19 symptoms are and how to prevent getting it, updates regarding COVID-19, such as rates, mandates, and guidelines, as well as financial, food, and relief fund resources. I remember former Navajo Nation Jonathan Nez posting daily updates on Facebook about how many people have tested positive for COVID-19 and how many have passed away from it. This was saddening to see every day, but these updates were there to show people how serious the symptoms of this virus are. I also remember my mom calling almost every week to tell me that another one of our extended family relatives, or well-known community members passed away from the virus. She said that she could hear the helicopters flying out all day and all night. It was depressing and was taking a toll on our mental health.

Posts under the "COVID-19 information" theme involved visuals such as posters and videos, links to articles, people sharing information and testing schedules. Many of the posts or videos shared described the symptoms of COVID-19 and prevention methods in both English and Navajo, the videos with people speaking Navajo had English subtitles. Other posts made in this

area included statements made by the Navajo Nation with prevention methods such as lockdowns, mask mandates, and stay at home orders. One example of a social media post seen in **Figure 1** is that made by the Navajo Department of Health with posters stating COVID-19 symptoms and prevention measures in the Navajo language and in English.



Figure 1. Navajo Department of Health COVID-19 Symptoms and Prevention

Most of these Facebook posts were made by Navajo community members, news groups, and the former Navajo Nation president’s page. Many of these posts were culturally symbolic, meaning there were depictions of people wearing Navajo traditional clothing and hair buns, implementation of the Navajo sacred colors (white, blue, yellow, and black), and appealing to the importance of the home and *K’é* (kinship). The Navajo Nation and Navajo Department of Health implemented their own COVID-19 advocacy and information to include cultural factors, such as protecting families. One example of this is seen in **Figure 2** below, which was posted by Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer asking the Navajo people to “keep wearing your mask.” Throughout the pandemic I also saw many signs and posters while driving home that stated, “Mask Up for *Shimá* (Mother)” and “Keep Our Elders Safe.” Another

example, was a huge sign that hung outside of the Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) that had a picture of hands coming forward holding Navajo people within them and words reading “Their lives are in your hands wash your hands stay home and stay safe.”



Figure 2. Wear a Mask in Public Facebook Post by Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer

Many posts discussed the hardships, such as social inequalities and health disparities the Navajo Nation were facing during COVID-19 and highlighted the inequalities in healthcare and health issues being brought to even more attention during this time. These posts are under the theme “social inequalities and health disparities.” These posts had news links and videos of people discussing the over capacity of hospitals and clinics on the Navajo Nation, the difficulties to access resources, unemployment rates, and underlying health issues such as diabetes and cancer, and how the lack of running water and electricity played a role in high COVID-19 rates. One post made by Democracy Now! was a video discussing the Navajo Nation’s water and electricity crisis amplified the impacts of COVID-19. Some Navajo families do not have running warm water to wash their hands, which is one of the ways to help “flatten the curve” or prevent

rates from increasing. The video also explains the Navajo Nation has the highest rate of water poverty, and most homes are not likely to have indoor plumbing, potable water, or sanitation.

Many Navajo families do not have access to clean or running water and the number one preventative measure against the coronavirus is handwashing. This made it more difficult to stop the spread of COVID-19. Many families find it a necessity to travel to the nearest well or water station to get water, which also risks exposure to COVID-19. Giant barrels are usually filled up with water and last a family about a week or two. This water is used for everything in the household and is tactically conserved to last as long as it can (Lee 2014). Water is used for drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning, washing clothes, etc. Many rural homes on the Navajo Nation also do not have electricity. Because some families do not have electricity, they do not have television, therefore do not have access to current news on COVID-19. One way that this was improved was with battery powered radios. KTNN, the Navajo Nation radio station, provided updates all the time on the radio in both English and Navajo. This made it accessible for families and elders to stay up to date on information about the virus.

On the other hand, some posts were also addressing the ways these hardships were being tackled. This included posts about test donations the Navajo Nation were receiving and how other hospitals around the country were sending doctors and nurses to help in our clinics and hospitals. There were also posts discussing the Navajo Nation's role in getting running water and electricity to households that did not have these, the Navajo Nation Hardship Assistance program, and how Miss Navajo Nation was helping distribute food with food banks. Another post by Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez was discussing the CARES act funds and how some of the funds were allocated to bringing electricity and running water to 381 homes across the Navajo Nation.

Other posts also discussed what people were doing to help, either at the individual level or as a collective, such as the Navajo-Hopi COVID-19 Relief Fund. *K'é* relationships are tied to different responsibilities we have to one another; we must respect and honor those relationships. They are what keep the community strong, if someone is in need, your *K'é* relations will always be there to help you. During the pandemic, one example of maintaining responsibility to family and community relations was many Navajo youth took the initiative to start relief funds to help our community. Many brought food donations to elderly living in rural areas, others made sure that families living with stoves had firewood to keep warm during the cold months, and others set up booths outside grocery stores giving away masks and hand sanitizer. In **Figure 3** the first post shared a link that discussed the Navajo and Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund and their aim is to help elders and struggling families during the pandemic. The second post, by CNN, shared a news link to an article about Navajo hospitals' challenges and high COVID-19 rates.



Figure 3. Navajo and Hopi COVID-19 Relief Fund & COVID-19 Impact on Navajo Nation

Hospitals and clinics on the Navajo Nation were also not well equipped to handle a situation as big as the COVID-19 pandemic. All hospitals across the Navajo Nation lacked the capacity to keep people overnight or to quarantine, and only had a few ICU beds. Doctors and nurses also did not have enough personal protective equipment to keep them shielded from the virus as lines of people came through for testing and to be seen. **Figure 4** shows a line of vehicles waiting to get tested for COVID-19 at the Monument Valley Health Center located in Utah, where in two days more than a thousand people got tested (Donaldson 2020).

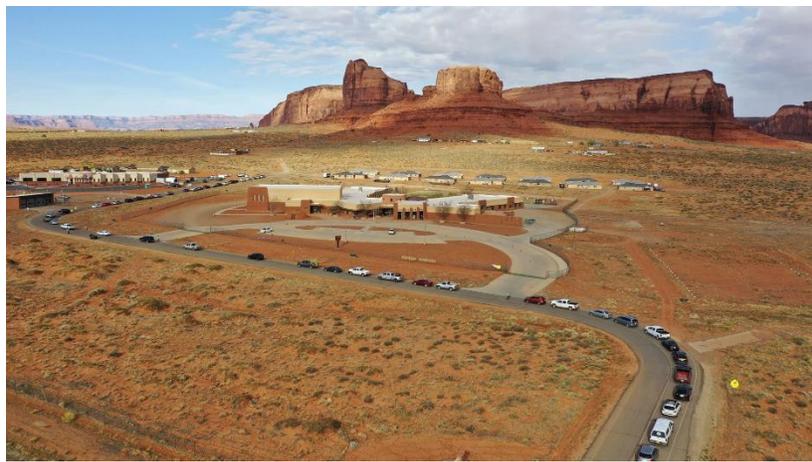


Figure 4. Vehicles line up for COVID-19 testing outside of the Monument Valley Health Center

At the beginning of the pandemic, my roommate worked at Tuba City Regional Health Care Hospital and she explained that they had to reuse a lot of their gowns, shields, masks, and gloves. She said that if something ripped, they had to do their best to repair it before throwing it out. Testing kits were also low in stock, so people were told to quarantine if they thought they had the virus. Due to a national shortage of masks for healthcare professionals, people were told to resort to making cloth masks, so that healthcare workers could use the medical-grade masks. Many people around the country sent handmade cloth masks and hand sanitizer to the Navajo Nation.. The Navajo Nation government also opened school gyms and created improvised hospital rooms for patients to stay in while they quarantined.

Hózhó, K'é and Staying Healthy

The *Hózhó, K'é* and staying healthy theme includes the interview questions I asked first, such as what wellbeing means to my participants, what they do to keep themselves well, and what they do when they feel their wellbeing is going off balance. Cultural teachings and practices are intertwined in all of these. The Navajo philosophies of *Hózhó* and *K'é* were expressed by interviewees regarding wellbeing and how to keep themselves healthy.

When I asked my participants “what does wellbeing mean to you?” many described wellbeing as holistic, finding balance, positivity, and encompassing all things *Hózhó*. For example, Danell said that wellbeing to her means everything is living, life, not taking things for granted, staying healthy, and taking care of oneself. *Shádí* responded by saying that there is a balance between mental and physical health, and that putting the mental forward rather than the physical has been important, as well as attending therapy sessions and surrounding herself with a positive environment.

Rose explained that wellbeing means to have a spiritual center, being able to relate to the Navajo deities, the *Diyin Dine'e* (Holy People). The *Diyin Dine'e* are spiritual beings that brought life to the Navajo people, they also set the cultural path and identity of the Navajo people. They taught the Navajo people what *Hózhó* is and how to maintain *Hózhó*. The *Diyin Dine'e* are important in the spiritual life of the Navajo people, they are there for us to pray for guidance and for restoring balance. The Holy People She also said that well-being is being able to respect all aspects of who you are as a person, four beings make up who we are: the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Rose also mentioned that listening to our caring physicians about our physical being is also important. Another aspect of wellbeing Rose discusses is to be

vigilant and do things and uphold things that are important to you, such as your beliefs, your family, and yourself.

Her husband, Steve, started with the “Teachings of *Shimá*,” he held out his hand and spelled out LIFE, starting with his index finger and ending with his pinkie finger, and then went on to spell out BODY and MIND. He said that the pinkie finger represents the spiritual, our ring finger the emotional, middle finger the mental, and our index finger the physical. Steve said that in western thinking they want you to look at your hand like this, he gestures holding his index finger with all fingers lined up towards him in front of his face but says that we need to look at it like this and flips his hand around so that the pinkie is lining up with his view. He explains that western thinking has you look at the physical body first and the spiritual last, but in Navajo culture it is the spiritual that should come first and everything else will fall into place. Please refer to **Figure 5** for a visual of “Teachings of *Shimá*.” Steve says that not everyone wants to look at it this way because they are too stubborn, and it is not easy.

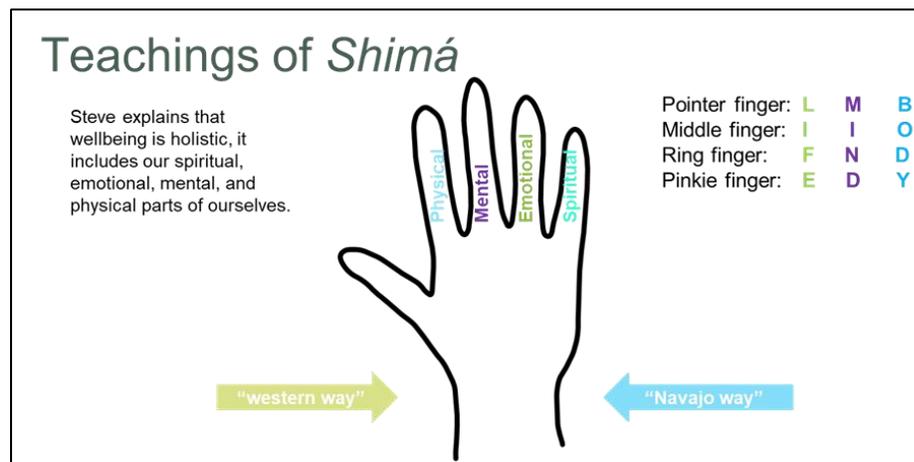


Figure 5. Teachings of *Shimá* by Steve

Another important factor of wellbeing is community. Carmenlita describes wellbeing as having two different levels, the individual wellbeing encompassing the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical and the community level meaning communal wellbeing where different

aspects have to be aligned and balanced to have a healthy thriving community. She goes on to discuss the SNBH model and explains how the four directions correspond to a specific domain in keeping community health. She says that the eastern direction is around ethics and values, the southern direction is economy, livelihood, things that contribute to that, so families take care of themselves, the western direction is community, such as family and governance, and the northern direction is the natural world and environment. She states:

So, when you have those four, when you have alignment of those four domains and they're balanced, um that contributes to my understanding of communion, communal wellness, communal wellbeing. But I think that what we understand is that the individual is reliant on that sense of community. So, it's not like you're trying to be your healthiest self because you're doing it for your own good, for your own benefit. It's like you understand that you're a part of a larger whole. Whether that's your family, your community, or other social groups that you belong to. So, you do the best that you can to keep yourself healthy in order to kind of also ensure that this system of family and community, you're contributing to that healthiness as well, of that group.

Liv started answering the question by saying that she is very cognizant about wearing, thinking, and being with an Indigenous lens and being able to distinguish between a western lens.

Wellbeing to Liv means living in the realm of *Hózhó Ntsáhákees* or good way of thinking, that everything is good, harmonious, balanced, and just. She also states that in the western realm they have their own dimensions of wellness and those speak to quality of life, financial wellbeing, and managing emotions, but traditionally the Navajo have those too. She explains:

So, we sort of without explicitly saying, these are the spaces in places where I desire to be happy, we sort of just try to live our lives so that you know, by natural consequence, we receive, and we bring upon health and wellness to our total beings. So, in a simplistic form, I would say, having a sound mind, heart. That's what wellness is.

I then asked my participants “what do you do to keep yourself well?” and many replied with being active, eating healthy, and prayer. Brionna discussed how you should not be lazy and always keep busy or work because then everything will fall into play. Danell described staying well as self-empowerment, such as self-affirmations, meditation and doing things she loves such

as “jamming out” to music or hanging out with friends. *Shimá yázhí* said that spending lots of time outside helps with wellbeing because being stuck inside all day working from a computer is just the opposite of balance, and it is nice to get outside because you get to feel the wind, the rain, and the sun. *Shimá yázhí* also said that she does a lot of cooking with traditional foods and explains that:

I try and grow traditional foods at home. And so that helps me feel connected to different traditions and like my ancestors, um yeah. Because I don't, yeah, I don't speak the language, I'm trying to learn but um for now, just like cooking different things with like, you know, those ingredients that are just like out there. Um ingredients that either like grow or forage or you know, buy at the flea market. It is kind of my way of connecting.

Carmenlita, in regard to keeping herself well, also started gardening to have access to healthier foods and explains that it keeps you productive because you must wake up early and water the plants, but gardening also provides a connection to the earth by paying attention to the sun's movements, the land, and the environment. She also says that you can never stop learning as she continually attends community workshops, for mental stimulation, where people are doing weaving, silversmithing, storytelling, and different types of art. For the physical side of things, she does yoga, stretching, trail running, and hiking.

To keep himself well, Steve says that on the physical level he utilizes a trampoline and walks around his home area every day, he expressed how grateful he was for having a space he can go outside and not have to worry about masking up and risking exposure. He says that for the emotional and mental levels he smokes tobacco and does his prayers and for the spiritual level he relies on prayer and ceremony. Rose stated that culturally you need to keep your spiritual and physical wellness in check otherwise it can go off balance and that the mental and emotional naturally follow if everything is in check. She also said that we need to turn to prayer, that prayer is not a one-time thing, you pray in the morning, evening, and throughout the day.

Shideezhí explained that keeping well involves prayer, she says that when she was younger, she did not really pray a lot but as an adult she felt she needed to start. She has been practicing a little prayer here and there in the morning with different herbs. Sometimes she does her prayer in Navajo, but she is still learning. She says that praying to the Holy People is just as powerful as ceremony to her, and that as long as the Holy People know I am here they will look after her and her path. She also described that having a positive mindset is important to staying healthy. She explains that staying in contact with close family like her siblings, nephew, and nieces is a big part of what helps her stay positive. *Shideezhí* explains that another teaching that ties into keeping her wellbeing balanced and herself well is:

T'áá Hwó Ajít'éego, it's up to you what kind of life you want to live. And so, you know, you have choices that you can make that will better your life or worsen your life. So, *T'áá Hwó Ajít'éego* is like, one of the main teachings that really helped me. You know, it helped me become who I am and where I am right now. Um yeah, that was one of the main teachings I really, really ingrained in myself to do.

Ezekiel stated that working out and playing basketball are things he does to keep healthy because getting exercise helps keep your muscles, joints, and bones healthy for longevity. He says that along with physical activity, keeping a positive mindset, focusing on positivity, and surrounding himself with positive people and things that are good for him. He also describes smoking mountain smoke and living in a way that Navajo people are supposed to live—in *Hózhó*—a philosophy and idea with a lot of meaning. Ezekiel describes *Hózhó* as basically keeping yourself living in a way that is positive for yourself. He states that most people say it is balance but its more than that, he said “to say it is balance, to have good and bad in everything, but when negativity comes up, they tell you don’t talk about it, don’t accept it, or don’t let it in. That’s not balance.” He says that he thinks that it is more complex and that it has lost its meaning or is being misinterpreted due to the world we live in today, such as trying to incorporate the

balance of work and home life. He says it is separating them instead of encompassing them because *Hózhó* encompasses everything. Overall, Ezekiel says that *Hózhó* is finding peace, prosperity, happiness, and positivity not just balance.

I also asked my participants, “When you feel that your wellbeing goes off track, or becomes unbalanced or off, what do you do to rebalance or get back on track to wellbeing?” Many answers revolved around engaging in prayer, ceremony, and connecting with *K’é*–family. Brionna explained that she turns to prayer and ceremony, as well as talking to her grandma and parents all the time and telling them everything that is going on. Danell says that venting in a healthy way helps to let emotions out because holding them in is not good, they will eventually burst. Carmenlita explains that she follows several steps if she feels her wellbeing is off, but throughout all of them she said she makes sure to communicate what she is feeling to her fiancé, so he knows what is going on. The first thing she does is pray either in the morning with corn pollen or over the stove with cedar and say a prayer letting everything out that is on her mind, how she is feeling, and asking for clarity and guidance on what to do next. The next step she follows is to smoke mountain smoke to help restore mental peace of mind and calm anxiety. She then states that if she is not able to manage on her own, she will turn to a *Hataalii*, a healer to get the issue diagnosed and treated.

Ezekiel explained that he will sometimes neglect wellbeing until someone tells him to go to a hospital or to see a medicine person. He says this is partly due to it being harder to be traditional nowadays because of the history Native people went through in general, “white man medicine” such as hospitals and clinics do not include the things you get done with traditional Navajo ceremony. Ezekiel says that elders tell you to pray all the time using white and yellow corn meal and corn pollen. He explains that when you pray or make an offering you are creating

a tether or line from us to the Holy People. Ezekiel says the corn pollen, after you pinch, taste it, and put it on your head, you have a little bit between your fingers that you drizzle in front of you. He states that the line of pollen has contact with the earth, that line serves as a telephone like those cup phones—you hold yours and pray and the Holy People listen and help you.

Shádí explained that she was not really raised traditionally because of the role assimilation had on her family, her grandmother never spoke Navajo to her or her siblings and she did not teach her own children because of the abuse experienced at boarding schools for speaking her Native language. She goes on to explain that she burns cedar and prays when things get hard, but also when they are going great. *Shádí* also started discussing how she remembers the type of healing and teachings she received through powwow dancing. She used to dance and wants to get back into the circle, to start dancing again. Growing up, her dad taught her to always take care of her powwow outfit because “if you take care of it, it will take care of you.” She explained that she has carried this teaching with her and has applied that same thought to everyday life, such as to her home and her relationships.

Shádí also compared the healing of powwow dancing to what people get out of yoga, running, and weightlifting. She explains that the progress is the same and that you can physically see and feel it. She goes on to say more about the healing from powwow stating:

So, you know, you're at this thing that provides you healing, you know, you will see the progress. And with powwow, that progress might not be you know, a six pack or flexibility you didn't have the year prior. The progress with powwow comes from how well you become known in the circle, and how much, not even you, but your dancing exudes your power and your energy. And the progress comes from people telling you how much, how much your dancing has influenced their lives and they could be somebody you don't even know, could be somebody you don't even know who just comes up to you is like, has tears in their eyes like telling you. Like ‘watching you dance is it's freeing,’ you know, and like, having that sort of emotion over people, it's, it's healing for yourself, like it, it makes you believe you have power and that not only you have it, but you can share it, you can you can give it to other people without taking it away from yourself.

The healing that *Shádi* feels from powwow radiates beyond just her own being, but to those who are in the presence of the dancing.

COVID-19 Views and Perspectives through Teachings and Stories

My second set of questions influenced the theme “COVID-19 views and perspectives through teachings and stories.” I asked my interviewees questions, such as how COVID-19 has impacted them and their families, what they knew and heard about COVID-19, any cultural stories and teachings related to both COVID-19 itself and how to prevent or keep it away.

The subtheme “personal experiences of COVID-19 and resources” stems from the questions I asked my participants, which were “How has COVID-19 impacted you and your family?,” “Did you feel like you had the resources you needed during the pandemic?,” and “What did you know about or what were your thoughts about COVID-19?” These experiences are personal so I will present each experience without comparing or clumping similarities together. I want to provide the space for each story to be heard. Understanding and learning about people’s personal lived experiences and stories ties into the frameworks of relationality and phenomenology. Not only am I gaining their experiences and understanding of the world around them, but I am learning from my *K’é* relations through storytelling.

Brionna stated that everyone in her family got COVID-19. Her father and *Náli* (paternal grandparent) got COVID-19 when the pandemic first happened. She expressed that it was hard to go back home because of the lockdown quarantine on the Rez (reservation). Brionna explained that hours were cut at her work and she had to work two jobs just to equal full-time pay. She said that work hours were weird, and it was hard for employees to share workloads because they were not allowed to go clean certain rooms because lots of people were sick. She said that she felt like she had access to resources, but barely had enough money to buy food. In the beginning, Brionna

said all she knew was that COVID-19 was not good and was killing lots of people and everything was crazy. She also said that she got most of her information from Facebook and health centers, but there were lots of conspiracy videos going around. She felt like there was not really anything she could do to protect herself because she had to go to work.

Danell said that she and family stayed away from public places, and only went out to get the essentials. They always masked up, sanitized their hands, and disinfected their home and vehicle every day. She explained that there was a loss in work hours, and they could not pay for stuff, they were living paycheck to paycheck and had to start budgeting. She stated that there were not really any resources besides the food bank. She said that her family back home on the rez needed help, and that water and gas stations were far. Danell said that she knew in the beginning that COVID-19 was a deadly disease and that over time variances started to emerge. She said that there were times when things felt steady and comfortable, but then something new came up.

Shideezhí explained that COVID-19 seemed to have come out of nowhere, she remembered just being at a concert with everyone really close to each other and then not wanting to be near anyone. She stated that she felt like she was one of the fortunate ones, that it did not impact her close relatives as much. She said she did get COVID-19 a few times, but the symptoms were not major. She also described how they were strict with everything because they were taking care of her mother, who was elderly. *Shideezhí* described how she felt during the height of the pandemic:

Yeah, but I think at the same time, it was also like, very stressful like, mentally and not so much like physically. But for me, because I do have some of my siblings that live back on the rez, and for them, it really took a major toll. It really impacted them there. And like, just hearing her stories. It was really sad back home. But yeah, so that was one of the things that really kind of stressed me out throughout grad school. I was like, oh my god, I have to think about this and then I think about school and all this stuff. And oh my gosh,

but yeah, so I think um health wise, I was okay, but like mental it was like, like crazy stressful.

She also explained that she felt they had access to resources, especially here in the city, but back home things were a lot harder, especially job wise.

Shima yázhí described how at first, she was really scared, she thought COVID-19 was going to be like the movie *Outbreak*. And it was stressful at first not knowing how it spread and that everything was centered around keeping her parents safe. She explained her family was really lucky, nobody in her immediate family and people she keeps in close contact with got COVID-19. She said her sister living in Alaska got COVID-19 a few times, but luckily no one had to be hospitalized. She said that there was a lot of separation and isolation from each other, which she said was hard. *Shima yázhí* shared, “I’ve only seen my grandma like two times since COVID started. And that’s really not normal. Before I used to try and see her like every, at least once a month.” She also explained that her family was fortunate enough to work from home, so it did not affect them financially. However, she said her family back home needed a lot of help and that she would bring them groceries, wood, and dog food.

Rose and Steve explained that they were able to still have income as a result of planning ahead for unforeseen events. Rose said the city allowed her to work remotely and that they only had to rely on a small loan while they waited for work to start remotely. She also explained that the Navajo assistance, both the hardship checks and an artisan grant for traditional healers were very helpful. She said they only came together with their closest friends. Steve said that his business was still able to provide income. He would get art orders and send those out, and they had a rental home where renters were lucky enough to have money for rent. Steve still held ceremonies during the pandemic, and Rose helped him out by making sure everyone was

masked, sanitized, and tested negative for COVID-19 at the time of the ceremony. Steve said that they even had someone drive over six and a half hours from another tribe to get a ceremony from him because their medicine people were not holding ceremonies.

Liv shared that unfortunately, they lost some relatives and a long lifetime friend. She also talked about how some family members with compromised immune systems continued to have long term effects and that they have medical issues that they did not have before. Liv discussed how her family of eight all got COVID-19 and it was very mild because they all received their shots and boosters, but it came in waves because after a few of them were better, the next few would be sick. She expressed how grateful she was for all of the resources that a local organization called Native Americans for Community Action (NACA) provided for her family, such as paying for hotel rooms so her family could quarantine and providing access to food. NACA is a local Indigenous agency that provides health and wellness services to Native peoples in the community. She explained that having a strong support system or network was really important. She said that having a space to go helped relieve some of the stress of putting others at risk. Liv explained that she was able to have a lot of good information upfront about COVID-19 due to her job, so she knew what they needed to do to keep the employees and community safe. Liv also shared that it was hard no to see her mom even though she lives locally, and explained:

So, yeah, so but we were able to visit my mom. You know, for the, for the first several months we would come in, we would make sure that we had, were just freshly showered, especially myself, because I was the one that, fortunately, was able to work from home, but I was the one that would go get groceries or go to the gas station on occasion. And I would make sure that I was fully showered. And then the kids would load up and we'd go over there. And for the first few months, we would just air hug. And we would just cry and look at each other from the across room and be like, oh, I wish we could hug, and I love you. But it's still, it's still great to be in the same living room space.

Shádi explained her family got COVID-19 and how grateful she was that it did not affect them the way it has been going through communities. She shared how politics impacted family views on masks and the pandemic and how there were lots of disagreements. *Shádi* said that she and her boyfriend were taking all the precautions, masking up, sanitizing, and only going out to get essentials, but she still got COVID-19 somehow and only lost her taste and smell. She said that they did not feel the financial effects until later in the pandemic, and that luckily, they still had a rent waiver they were able to use. *Shádi* stated that the first thing she did when she heard about COVID-19 was to learn how it spread, the growth process from when symptoms start to when you are no longer contagious. She said they were looking for the facts of it all and did not involve the media.

Carmenlita started off by sharing the positive, that she did not lose anybody close to her and that her family was safe. She said that hearing about all of the different symptoms and how the virus was attacking the lungs was really scary, especially for her mom and dad. She explained how she became overly cautious when it came to people visiting her mom, and how hard it was not to see her. She said she would bring her mom necessities from the stores in Flagstaff back to the Rez. Carmenlita also explained how she and her siblings would sometimes not see eye-to-eye on the seriousness of the precautions she wanted them all to follow with her mom. It even got to the point where they did not speak for a while, and she said that was really hard on her. Carmenlita said that she started listening to a podcast called “Up First” to get updated information on COVID-19. She explained she and her fiancé were diligent about staying home and staying physically active with doing home workouts and eventually moving to going on hikes while still wearing a mask outside.

Ezekiel said that in the beginning, he did not know anything about COVID-19 except that it stems from the SARS virus. He also said that before we knew COVID-19 was in the U.S., there was a cold going around, but it was not the flu. He said it was like someone flipped a switch and it was here. Everything went on lockdown, mask mandates, and curfews. Most of the information Ezekiel was receiving about COVID-19 came from his grandmother who works for a clinic back home, who shared both scientific and traditional information about COVID-19. Ezekiel explained COVID-19 impacted his family quite a bit, his family did not have any in-person events though they usually have large family gatherings for every holiday. He explained that his great grandma was reaching old age and coming to her final days so they were not able to spend time with her, and not many could attend the funeral when she passed. Ezekiel explained that at first financially everything was okay, but then he had to quit his job due to all the stress and anxiety from COVID. He stated resources were good most of the time but there were a few scary weeks where the food shelves were empty and there was a toilet paper shortage. He said “we laugh about it now, but it was scary, the world was in chaos.” He said that how chaotic and irrational people were getting was more scary than the virus itself.

During the height of the pandemic, I could not see my great grandparents and grandparents because of the risk of exposure. It was really hard to not see family, especially when they are such a big part of your life. My great grandpa passed away from coronavirus in November 2020 and because he was in an old home after being hospitalized, we were not allowed to see him since the pandemic began. It was an upsetting and sad situation, the place he was staying at had an outbreak and many Navajo elders passed away. My mother said that we could not have a family gathering for his funeral because of the risk, so many resorted to phone

calls. I also remember feeling a lot of anxiety and stress because I was constantly thinking about my family and how they were all living in different areas.

Personal experiences and stories are powerful and provide people with a way to make sense of things, hope, and connection. This idea ties into the social media “COVID-19 personal experiences” theme which consists of people sharing and discussing what it was like to come into contact with COVID-19. People discussed their COVID-19 symptoms, home remedies, emotions, and messages of hope to others. The Western Navajo Fair page was making posts throughout the height of the pandemic called “Community Heroes” dedicated to the people who were making a difference in the community. Another series of posts set up by Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez’s page was called “messages of hope series-COVID-19” where people would share their stories about their recovery from COVID-19 and give words of encouragement.

The Western Navajo Fair page posted a video of two Navajo community members who shared their experiences with COVID-19, they discussed how they think they contracted COVID-19 by coming from a close-knit family, who checked in on them and usually shared food. Although they were sick, they still had family and clan relationships to rely on to help them, people were sharing their resources with each other. They also discussed their symptoms and what home remedies they were using, such as drinking sage, using pine sap, eating horse meat, and bear root. They talked about how they became hospitalized and how scary and isolating that felt. They also expressed concern about social media, and to not let the fear overcome them.

I also asked my participants “Have you heard any cultural stories, teachings, lessons, aspects related to COVID-19?” and “What are some cultural practices or teachings that you have

heard of that are said to prevent or keep COVID-19 away?” These questions are where the subthemes “COVID-19 views and perspectives” and “COVID-19 protection and prevention” derive. Many participants talked about COVID-19 as a new “monster,” as well as a consequence for not following our traditions or a reminder to remember who we are and where we come from. Other people discussed ways to protect yourself from COVID-19 such as home remedies, sacred stones, prayer, and herbs.

Shádí said that one of the main things she heard about COVID-19 was that people were upset that the Navajo government gave COVID-19 a Navajo name because it was just giving it more power. She described how Navajo words are not a direct translation of something, they are describing what someone is talking about. So, when COVID-19 was at its strongest point, we named it, and it was killing people and we were defining it at its strongest characteristic and that is why people see it as problematic. She also explained, how she heard people saying why COVID-19 is here and her thoughts on what they were saying:

People do say that because we're not, because we're not speaking our language, because ceremonies are dying, because people don't know the songs, people aren't learning the songs, and people aren't learning the stories it's because of all of that, is why COVID-19 is here. Is why, you know, we can't get running water, is why this, this, and that, you know. But then all you heard was why the learners aren't doing it. You know, you always hear like, well, people aren't learning the stories. People aren't learning the songs. You never hear, well people aren't teaching the songs. People aren't teaching the stories. People aren't teaching the language. You're more so bashing and criticizing the person who is trying to learn, without actually being constructively, you know, critical. So, it's just, it's just like this Catch-22 you know.

Shádí went on to say that these things are happening to us as a people and that we are losing our way but also questioning why no one is doing anything about it. She also discussed some home remedies she used or was told to use, such as tree sap, drinking tea, peyote, and doing a prayer while burning cedar.

Shideezhí heard that this COVID-19 is a modern day monster and reminder for us to learn and not forget our teachings, she explains:

Kind of going back to the creation stories about the twin brothers, Born for Water and Monster Slayer. And how they had slayed all these monsters and things like that. And they left like, a couple of them. I've heard that this, now, is one of the modern day monsters that we are dealing with. And it's kind of like our fault, I guess, as *Diné* people, that we're kind of like forgetting, not forgetting, but we're not teaching our younger generation, like all the stories and the songs and ceremonies and things like that. And it kind of taught us to, like, start doing that, again, doing offerings to, you know, like to the *Diyin Dine'é*, and taking care of mother earth and all those kinds of things. And I think it's just one I've heard that it's like not a punishment, but like just reminding us to kind of go back, don't forget our old ways and things like that.

She went on to say that a *Hataalii* said something similar to this in a presentation for one of her classes and that some students were disagreeing with what he said. However, she stated, that in the Navajo ways it makes sense that these modern day monsters would come and they are telling us something— “we need to listen, react to it, or do something about it.” She said that it helped us stay home, to go back home and learn some things like stories and language, it is here reminding us to remember who we are.

Shideezhí also shared ways we could protect ourselves from COVID-19, she first talked about horse meat and how powerful it is, and it is supposed to help with respiratory issues. She also said that people can also pray at home using corn meal and make offerings to the Holy People letting them know we are here, and to help protect us. She said by doing this we do not always have to rely on medicine people. Ezekiel also mentioned eating horse meat and how it goes back to time when the Navajo people were experiencing times of famine, disease, and other viruses and how we eat it now when we are sick. He explains horse meat is good for your health because horses are lean and muscular, and their meat has lots of nutrients and protein.

Some other remedies that Ezekiel talked about is going to the sweat lodge. He explained that people said the virus dies at high temperatures, and sweat lodges provide humidity, steam,

and heat into the body, along with prayer, meditation, and songs. He states that the sweat lodge is a sacred practice because it is you going back into the earth or the womb, and ties into how as babies we get our immune system from our mothers. When we go into extreme heat and come out and it's cold, we build an immune system. He also said he heard people saying COVID-19 is afraid of shiny things, which he described as the Navajo sacred stones, the quartz crystal used by medicine people, and arrowheads used for protection in ceremony. Ezekiel said that another thing that came about during the "Spanish Flu" was to kill or take a dead skunk and hang them in your doorway because they scared off the sickness. He also said their scent is so strong, that to this day his grandma will tell him to take a deep breath whenever they smell a skunk to help clear your sinuses and relieve chest congestion.

Ezekiel talked about how the first thing he heard about COVID-19 was that it is a spirit, and it is a living being. He said he heard that you are not supposed to talk bad about it and not to see it as something evil. He said that people were saying COVID-19 is here because we are not practicing our culture or speaking our language. He also heard people placing the blame on women being leaders, but he believes this is not truly Navajo, and is a Christian mindset saying it is happening because we are sinners. A Navajo perspective tying into *Hózhó* that Ezekiel heard explains how we should approach looking at our day, viewing it as if it is a sphere and seeing all the good and bad in it. He goes on to say that we should focus on always finding the positives despite any negativity.

Ezekiel said that Navajo people were the only ones that viewed COVID-19 not as something so terrible and saw the positive impacts it brought, such as Flagstaff not having any big wildfire, rainforest growing back, no construction or destruction, and animals were going back to natural habitats. He said there was a lot of environmental positives, saw COVID-19 as a

spirit that came from Mother Earth to remind us that we are not separate from her that we are a part of her, we are her children and without us she would be just fine, so we need to stop separating ourselves from here. Another positive outcome is that the Navajo Nation became one of the largest tribal nations due to people enrolling with the tribe to receive Hardship Assistance (Associated Press 2021). COVID-19 was also bringing people home. This was seen as very important because people were coming home to be with their families, reconnecting with the land, their families, and their culture.

Danell said her *Náíí*, a medicine man, told her and her family that *Cheii*/Creator was saying this is all happening because we are mistreating Mother Earth, that we are hurting her, that a Holy Being shot something down to teach the people a lesson, that there are consequences. That something shot down was COVID-19, and that *Cheii*/Creator had to travel far from out in the universe to tell and warn her *Náíí* this was going to happen, but it was already here by the time he heard. Danell said that we have to look at science and the traditional sides of things to protect ourselves and our families. She said that one of strongest things we can do in situations like this is pray. She also said to turn to natural herbs to help us, such as bitter powder.

Brionna said that bad things happen when we start losing our culture, and that monsters are coming back for sure. She said some of her own family members and others she heard about were having dreams and visions especially when they were really sick to the point of almost dying, involving the world in drought and fire, the end of the world. Brionna and her family turned to boiling sage to drink and inhale as a way to protect themselves from getting really sick. Also putting tree sap in boiling water and inhaling that too, to clear out the lungs. She said that she would drink tea everyday and turn to the natural stuff like vitamin C.

Shima yázhí explained that she heard people saying things jokingly, that her sister in Alaska keeps getting sick because they are away from home, that it makes them more susceptible because they are not within the four sacred mountains. She also mentioned one older Navajo teaching and how it relates to COVID-19 today:

I know that like one of the strengths of some of our teachings is that we have always been, it's always been kind of a taboo to like, interact with um death and the dying part of things. Like if someone's really sick, you know, usually, in the old days, you would make a little like, camp for them out north of the Hogan. And that's where they would kind of spend the rest of their days. Um and that was like, not just like, uh superstitious practice, but like, kind of practical because you're kind of quarantining that person in case they did have something infectious. So that was a way of protecting the rest of the family and not like bringing anything into the hogan. And so, I don't know how much that was practiced during COVID, but I feel like the idea of quarantining someone was not, not extremely new to people.

Liv stated that she did not hear any cultural teachings being specifically tied to COVID-19 but has heard it come into play when talking about climate change and the effects of not living the way we should and upholding our *K'é* values. She said that everything ties back to this idea of causality, that our *K'é* values and clan systems are so broken, things such as climate change and COVID-19 are happening. She said, "If we're not living, thinking, being our best in relation to our traditional knowledge, then there's going to be an effect to all that." Liv said that she heard people theorize it was focused on families and people that were connected to evacuation work, such as mining and extracting coal, uranium, etc. She said she heard a medicine man saying this and that COVID-19 was targeting them because they were disturbing Mother Earth. Liv stated that besides being very diligent about quarantining and not staying home, that she and her family would take lightning herbs and bitter medicine.

Steve described how he would sit in his hogan and learn about COVID-19. He would listen to the PSAs on the radio, learning it by what came to be called *Bilagáanaa* way (white or

western way). Steve said he spent multiple days and hours in his hogan with the fire, charcoal, crystal, and tools and asked about what COVID-19 is: what is it, what is its name, and how do we overcome it. He said he would pray and sing, and that he was physically there in the hogan, but spiritually sitting with the Holy Beings. Steve stated that it taught him that you think you know something, but you don't. He said that traditionally this goes way back to the being, the Gambler. Steve described COVID-19 as having the same energy as the Great Gambler, people have lost their lives, homes, vehicles, possessions, and jobs during the pandemic, and it is very much like the Navajo stories of the Gambler. People were gambling on going to big gatherings although they knew what could possibly happen. When it came to people gambling on social interactions, they had to take into consideration their families, community, and their own safety. People had to decide and figure out how to navigate social relations, whether this meant not seeing grandma for a while to turning to other means of connecting, such as through social media, video calls, and other creative social distancing strategies. Steve said that this virus was told way back that it would come, the Gambler was said to return for vengeance more powerful than before.

Steve said that some answers he received, that were revealed to him, he still does not understand. He would share these answers with his mom, who would help bring some clarity. He then stated again saying that you think you know it, but you don't. Steve said that "Prez Nez" calls COVID a *Naayéé'* which refers to the protection way prayers stating, "I am child, I am son or twins." He went on to say that *Naayéé'* is taking on this energy and faith that we must be warriors, the Hero Twins and monsters are not just stories and myths. He said that we have our shields: black jet, abalone, turquoise, and white shell. They are our armor; we dress ourselves with them. He said that these stones come from the four sacred mountains and are uplifting. He

said that we need to use the Protection Way ceremony to deal with COVID-19. Steve stated not to see COVID-19 as the enemy, because it would impose itself on you. He also said that some people will interpret COVID-19 as male because they say its mean, nasty, and abusive, but he thinks otherwise. He said not to approach COVID-19 in a western way. Steve said that he shares, learns, and understands through prayer, that we will feel joy again.

In terms of protecting yourself, Steve said not to approach COVID-19 as some enemy, that *Naayée* ' are out and about so we need to stay put. We must do our best not to let it in and turn to prayers and songs. Rose said that it ties into cultural teachings, it is how you set yourself not about combating it. She gave the example, when it is thundering and lightning outside we are told not to run around. Otherwise we are asking for things to happen or come our way, we are warned not to do certain things. We respect the rain. She said that our ancestors have gone through diseases and learned to remove themselves from the danger and to respect the space between you and the danger. Rose said today people are thinking in a western way, that we need to be constantly around others, that we need to be constantly entertained, but Navajo thinking is centered around the home, no need to go out, we can tend to crops, animals, and be with family. She said that we need to have respect for the danger by removing ourselves from those energies.

Carmenlita stated there is awareness among medicine people who say there are signs that we as Navajo people need to pay attention to. She describes these signs:

That there's going to be a shift in the world happening. So, when I was little, they used to call it like "it's going to be the end of the world." And so, when you're little you're like, "Oh crap, what is that gonna look like?" Because you, you're just, your mind is just so shaped by movies, of what the end of the world looks like, that you think it's like going to be super catastrophic. But I think, what, now that I'm older. It's like, well, it can either, you can either look at it as a catastrophe or you can look at it as things shifting in society. Um, shifting in lifestyle, shifting in the ways that we do things. So, things that are normal are going to be actually seen as abnormal and we're going to adopt new normalized behaviors, new normalized attitudes. So, thinking there's a shift that's going to be occurring.

She explains that she thinks COVID-19 was a wakeup call in a lot of people's minds that made them question what kind of life they want to live. This is a time for pause and reflection, a reflection of what we think is important. She then emphasized that thinking positively is one the greatest protective qualities we can adopt from our culture, our minds are very powerful.

The other social media theme "Navajo teachings and stories" includes knowledge surrounding COVID-19 and illnesses. These posts consisted of similar teachings such as *K'é* and self-reliance, *Hózhó*, eclipses and the Navajo Twins and monster stories. There was a post discussing how important family and elders are to the Navajo people, it explained that we must protect one another, especially our elders because they are the knowledge keepers. Another post explains the Navajo New Year (which is in October) as a time where Mother Earth is letting us know it is time for changes, reflection, and planning. This post describes how the Navajo people were met with many challenges, but we are strong and hopeful for the road ahead. The post also mentioned the teaching *T'áá Hwó Ajít'éego* and how it means self-reliance or self-determination, and how we should use this teaching to plan ahead. Steve said that we cannot control the past or future, but we can plan our lives.

In one post, someone explained how in November a golden eagle got hit by a car and how after it got hit, everyone wanted it for its feathers. The person who shared this post said that eagles are sacred in Navajo tradition and how he believes the eagle getting hit was a message that something bad was going to happen. COVID-19 came about a little later, he also shared that when everyone was fighting over the feathers, it reminded him of all the chaos that came with COVID-19, such as people fighting over toilet paper in stores. He was able to take the eagle to get help and after the eagle healed it was released. Releasing the eagle was seen as a message to

let the earth heal. He said that we must pray and stay in place, that is the Navajo way. Such as during an eclipse, we stay home and pray.

Another person shared a post, seen in **Figure 6**, that stated they were thinking about COVID-19 and how we are told to stay home reminded them of a Hero Twins story. The story of the Hero Twins and the Roaming Giant starts off with the giant going to Changing Woman's hogan because he thought she had children. The twins heard him coming and would run inside and hide quietly. The giant asked Changing Woman where her children were, and she lied saying she gets really lonely, so she makes fake footprints. She gestured to the ground as she made outlines in the sand with her hand to resemble little feet. The giant felt bad for her and left. The person who posted this story related it to COVID-19, that COVID-19 is representative of the giant, and that staying home will keep us safe. The post said that we must remember that in the end, the monster was defeated with prayer and looking out for each other, and we should do the same with COVID-19.



Figure 6. The Hero Twins and Roaming Giant Story.

Culturally Sensitive Subjects and Respecting COVID-19

The “culturally sensitive subjects and respecting COVID-19” theme revolves around my last set of questions, such as why we do or do not talk about certain cultural teachings and subjects, what *doo ajinída* means, how to talk about something so powerful, and how to discuss COVID-19 without causing harm. These are all questions I wanted to know more about because of the many things I heard about COVID-19 and how to address it respectfully.

At the height of the pandemic, I have heard many people in my community describe COVID-19 as a living entity that must be regarded with respect and that it is here for a reason. I have also heard that we must not talk negatively about the virus because it is bigger than us and carries power. In many Navajo creation stories, illness and disease were referred to as monsters. These monsters were fought off by the Navajo Hero Twins. Many monsters came about because of harmful things done by humans. Some believe that coronavirus is here because we as humans are not doing the right things, that we are not respecting the land, animals, plants, and each other. Coronavirus is the result of *Hózhó* being off-balanced. Navajo Nation president and many elders have also referred to coronavirus as a new monster the people must combat.

I asked my participants “Why is it we do or do not talk about certain teachings or subjects?” and “There are many times, usually an elder, tell us ‘*Doo ajinída* (Don’t talk about it/Don’t say that).’ What does the phrase ‘*doo ajinída*’ mean to you?”

The first three interviews I conducted I used the word taboo instead of teachings in the first question above. It was not until my third and fourth interview with Steve and Rose that I was given a lesson about using the word taboo. Steve started off by saying “*Shiyázhí* there are no taboos in Navajo culture, there are only cultural beliefs, ways of life, and principles.” At first, I had no idea what to do in response. But then they kept talking. They gave me an explanation and

did so in the kindest way. I did not feel like I was in trouble for using that word, instead I felt nurtured to grow and learn. Steve went on to say that taboos are not us, they are labels that were put on us. For example, the government has a poverty level, we do not see it that way, we don't see wealth in those eyes. Rose explained that taboos were an imposed on us by the government, that it is a genocide mentality. She discussed how boarding schools dismantled our teachings on how to be a parent, how to be a man or woman, our teachings and beliefs. She said that this was genocide by education, stripping our identity. The word taboo is imposed by western society.

Steve said that people have adopted this taboo mentality and that it has transitioned into *yeeyah* (scary or dangerous). He said, for example we are born and then make the transition into the next life, death is a part of life not taboo. He said that there is a constellation called *hastiin sik'ai'i* (squatting man) that represents balance, and when this is visible, we can talk about death. Rose said that there is a time for things to be talked about. She said that ceremonies are personal and private between you and your family in the hogan. She said you do not shake hands after a ceremony because you are giving away the blessings you just received. And that you do not talk about them openly because you are protecting the people and legacies given to you by your ancestors. Steve also said that after Ft. Sumner the government instilled fear into the people and that is why we do not talk about things, but we had to talk about someone passing because funerals weren't allowed during the height of the pandemic.

Danell also brought up how you should not be sharing what goes on during ceremony, and how people have been recording them and placing them on social media. Danell said that you need to respect all life, so when you talk about certain things you have to know when to stop. She said that the way she thinks about it is to not agitate what you are talking about, that the topic should be discussed in a neutral kind of way. Brionna stated that you should not talk about

certain things all the time and that things are talked about but in a less gruesome way, such as saying passed away instead of died. She said we have to talk about things respectfully. She also said that if someone tells you “don’t say that” you are supposed to stop. Brionna also said that times are changing, people are talking about things because it helps you process death and other things. She said that *doo ajinída* is a part of her consciousness, that she can sometimes hear her parents or grandparents saying that in the back of her head.

Shideezhí explained that when we talk about certain things, that once we put it out into the universe, you are kind of asking for it in a sense. She said when you dwell on negative things, you are asking for it. She said we should always keep a positive mindset. She explained that she knows for sure it is not meant to scare us, it is more about learning to recognize the power of the world and our surroundings and how powerful they are. *Shideezhí* said that Mother Earth and Father Sky and our surroundings have the power to destroy us and so we need to recognize that and be able to respect that.

Shima yázhí said that from her understanding, when you have a bad thought or say something negative that it has a way of affecting your reality. She explains, “It’s like what you think, is what you say, is how you behave, is like becomes like the environment around you.” She said that if you talk about death, or spooky things you are actually calling those things to you and that is not what you want. She also mentioned that she wonders how much of this is traditional teachings or possibly a coping mechanism of dealing with colonialism. She said it feels like a way to cope with all the traumas people have gone through, because when something bad happens, people do not want to talk about it. *Shima yázhí* said she thinks in a way COVID-19 has made it more open to talk about certain things that are hard to talk about, such as death, it had become a little more normalized.

Shádi after explaining the issue with giving COVID-19 a Navajo name, stated so along those lines you don't talk about that, don't say that because you are inviting it. She says even telling scary stories and stuff like that, you are asking things to come. She said people are applying this to giving the virus a name. *Shádi* also explained that because she did not grow up traditionally, when someone is giving her a traditional lesson, such as "don't say that" or "don't do that" she did not know she was doing something wrong in the first place. She said it is frustrating too because most of the time no one will tell you why, but she said if she was told it would resonate more with her.

Carmenlita said that *doo ajinída* in a literal sense means "you're not supposed to say that" then she provides a deeper meaning. She explains, "a deeper interpretation of that, it's kind of saying that you are verbalizing something that is in opposition to how you're supposed to conduct yourself as a Navajo person." She said that some people think we are afraid of everything because of *yeeyah*, but she explains that it is actually the opposite:

When you are so conscientious and in tune with the workings of the world around you, than you know what will facilitate or what will be a detriment to keeping things in the right order or in this, like the operations of *Hózhó*, keeping that in a *Hózhó*. So by saying *doo ajinída*, it's kind of pinpointing that 'hey, you're actually compromising or you could be jeopardizing this small aspect of this greater understanding of *Hózhó* or this greater manifestation of *Hózhó* either for you or for you like, within your family space or community space, or even in the community at whole,' depending on the level of, maybe the violative thing that you said or that you uttered. Um because I think it really goes hand in hand with the understanding around how they say that you have to be very mindful about what you say because once you utter things, it leaves your mouth and goes out into the atmosphere and into the universe and it just keeps going. Like there's no way of really reclaiming or retracting it or bringing it back. Like once it's out there, it's out there.

Carmenlita goes on to explain that basically you are putting something at risk, because it has a life force of its own and can impact you, other people, and other life forms. She explained that when you are younger it is harder to understand, especially if you are going through a

westernized schooling system that privileges western ways of knowing. She said in this system we are learning things that are in conflict with our own understanding of the world and that something such as *doo ajinída* can seem superstitious.

Liv explained that in the western world we start to acknowledge ego, where in the Navajo world there is no ego. She said you become conscious of how you want to represent yourself and your reputation, but that is not how it is in the Navajo way. In ceremony you are vulnerable and open because that is the only way you are going to get healing. She explains that because of the two worldviews clashing, it becomes hard for people to share everything in ceremony without being afraid of being judged. So people start to walk with that load of being hurt and angry, which starts to affect our practices.

Ezekiel says we are told not to talk about certain things because of the uncertainty that is said to bring or be brought about by doing so. He explains that death is one of those topics not to talk about because it is not positive. He says going back to *Hózhó*, talking about death when it did not happen is a “no no,” it is not helping you in any way, that it is not pushing you forward, and is not bringing peace, however only talk about it when you are grieving or comforting someone because talking about it then is healing. He says that death happens in life, but we don’t experience it everyday, so there is no need to talk about it all the time, there is a right time to talk about, when it is happening. He said we do not talk about bad spiritual things, such as witches, bad medicine, skinwalkers because all of that is negative, unless you are talking about it with a medicine man to get help. Ezekiel also stated that talking about illness, monsters such as COVID-19, is not going to help you or anyone if you are discussing it in a negative light. He said that if you curse it or say bad things about it, or constantly focus on it, you will be more scared of it and that affects you mentally and physically. He says when you get anxious or depressed it

lowers your immune system making it easier for you to get sick. Ezekiel explains that all things that come from *doo ajinída*, have a place and time to be discussed.

I also explained and asked “I have heard many Navajo elders and family members say that these sensitive subjects have power and that talking about them could bring harm, or that we should not talk about them negatively. How should we go talking about something so powerful?” The last question I asked was “I have heard many people discuss COVID-19 as a modern-day monster, as well as it being a living entity that should only be talked about in positive terms. In what ways can I discuss what COVID-19 is without giving it power or causing harm?” Together, in a relational way, we made the choice to share this knowledge about COVID-19. I asked these questions as a way to check in with my participants to make sure that it was appropriate to talk about COVID-19 in these different ways. It was expressed that we need to talk about it, that it brings understanding about COVID-19 and explains and offers ways of protection from it.

Danell stated that we need to talk about COVID-19 in a scientific and cultural way because it will help people understand what is happening. She said that you need to talk about it in a positive light even if it was crazy and scary. *Shima yázhí* said that due to the urgency of COVID-19 you cannot ignore it, and that it is different than talking about other taboo subjects. She said that talking about COVID-19 is like a reminder to get boosted or to wash your hands, and why we are not going to see grandma this weekend. Brionna says that there is a difference between talking about things in respect versus negative, as long as you are being respectful it is okay. She said just to be aware of how you think and talk about things. She said that some things are inevitable not to talk about, such as a pandemic happening, there is no avoiding it, it is everywhere.

Shádi explained that COVID-19. And seeing it as this monster, it has to be talked about and that it does not matter how because everyone is going through the same thing, the same pandemic, but everyone's experiences are different. She said that everyone has different experiences and memories of the same pandemic and that needs to be talked about and addressed. She also states:

And even more so because of the aftermath of it all. Of how everyone is still affected by it. And even being vaccinated, people are still feeling even the symptoms of it. And you know, even at that, like still even just being paranoid and still going getting tested, you know, people are still in that, that stage. So that's why it has to be talked about is because nobody has the same experience. And I think just that, I think it just comes down to just straight up fear is that, you know, don't talk about it, don't talk about it. We don't talk about it. That's just straight up fear.

She goes on to say that we cannot let fear override us, because it is an ignorant and arrogant way of thinking about your culture, to think your culture has no power to jeep those things away. "You know, you're allowing your fear to override the power of knowledge."

Shideezhí said that she knows we need to avoid talking about things not because it is something that is negative but because there are reasons not to. She also explained that she is not sure how to talk about something so powerful, and maybe discussing it with someone just as powerful is the way to go. She said someone such as a medicine person because they are the liaisons between the Holy People and us. Carmenlita said to make clear your intention and to put that out there when discussing these powerful beings. She went on to tell the story of when she was in undergrad and her major in conservation biology had a requirement to work with owls and bears. She explained that there was no way around this and went to see a medicine man for a protection prayer. She explained more about her understanding and experience with working and talking about certain beings:

So, I remember in that prayer that he did, he explained, like why I would have to work with animals and he kind of like asked for their understanding. And I think as long as you

preface what your intention is, and talking about something deliberately that is coming from a good place, that there's always a place for negotiation. I think in talking about those things if it's going to benefit a greater whole, or it's for the greater good, that it's necessary. Then there's, there's ways that you can work through it, but you have to do it through prayer, through offerings, and things of that nature because that's just a way of operating relationally with the things around us, with the other than human beings in, here on Earth and also in the cosmos.

Liv explained that when discussing something powerful, we have to go back to our lenses, the western and Indigenous. She said it can be hard to remember how our elders want us to speak in an educational setting, because it is easy for us to say I can speak factually about something. She states that being cognizant about these types of beings is important because when we practice the traditional ways of thinking, being, praying, we are protected because that is what we are asking for. She says, in this way we can talk factually about these things to help educate, but we also know that we are talking about beings, and we don't know if they are malicious or benevolent. So, in this way we need to acknowledge them for what they are, and we know that they are being which gives us the capability to communicate about them. Liv also explains that in prayer and in song we ask for help over our bodies. She describes a *táchééh* (sweat lodge) ceremony:

Now, when I think about the songs that we sing, we just came back from a *táchééh* ceremony on Monday. So it's just fresh in my mind, when we're singing these Hogan songs, we're traveling, also naming very particularly our body parts and what we want for them, you know, like, we're asking 'bless my legs, bless my mind in a good way, my heart in a good way, shijaa, shigan (Navajo names for body parts).' We're naming everything. But after that, we're also asking everything in a good way. Please bless me and my body parts, my mind. So, we asked for protection. And because we have done that, we now know that they're regarded from them.

Liv also discusses how western science is asking questions like what is causing this virus? What cures or eliminates it? She says we are not asking questions like who is this virus? She stated, "what would happen if we communicated with the virus in that way, rather than just,

you know, when you talk in ‘what’ terms, you're now objectifying something, you're just simply saying, it's just a virus.” She ended with asking what might happen if we communicated in a way where we are asking “Who is COVID-19? How can we relate? How can we do offerings? How can we ask for protection for our families and people at large?”

Ezekiel said not to talk about something with power in a way that is harmful. He says for example, the Catholics and Christians that came to Turtle Island and were talking about something that had a lot of power to them, that thing was God, religion, Jesus, but they were doing it in a way that was harmful. They were using their religion’s power to cause fear, spread uncertainty, and make people feel afraid and worthless. He says that we need to avoid spreading fear. He says there is good and bad in everything, and it depends on how you use them, that determines if it's good or bad. Ezekiel says we need to talk about COVID-19 because it is here and happening now and that talking about it is the only way to understand it.

Steve stated that we have to talk about COVID-19, but we have to discuss it in a manner of how did we get imposed by this? What did we do or not do? Is it because we do not do prayers or practice our culture? Steve also stated that this will not be the last time we deal with something such as COVID-19. He says we have no control over that, so we need to embrace life as it is.

I also found a channel that had dozens of videos regarding Navajo cultural topics and teachings done by Wally Brown. In this video titled, “Negative talk, don’t do it,” Mr. Brown discussed how *Diné* (Navajo) teachings say that words and actions have power and meaning (Navajo Traditional Teachings, 2020). He discussed how during trying times, Navajo people were always encouraged to say positive things because things will become worse if you do it in a

negative way (Navajo Traditional Teachings, 2020). Wally Brown also tied in talking positive to the COVID-19 pandemic by saying:

And so it is that during this virus and dealing with the situation in our communities and in our lives, we have to be positive in the things we think, and the things we say, and the things we do and so on. We're in quarantine and we are at home and not out among the crowds of people. It's very important to be able to think positive for yourself and to do things that will bring you joy, happiness, confidence, and peace. And the only way that you can do that is to think in positive ways and to encourage one another in positive ways. (Navajo Traditional Teachings, 2020)

One important point that all my participants expressed is that their answers are based on their own family's perspectives, teachings, views, and experiences. All of us are in relation to one another in the Navajo way, we all have different ways of telling our stories, what life experiences we have had, but our knowledges interconnect us in many different ways. No one way is right, and no way is wrong. Just like Steve said, "just when we think we know, we don't." I take this saying as we still have a lot to learn, and that our way of knowing is not the only way, we are always learning from others. Like many of my participants said we learn from doing, from observing, from listening, and being present. Liv explains that different families have slightly different teachings from one another and that you learn by experiences, which are personal and different for everyone.

One of the teachings from the Gambler was that it is okay and necessary to have different articulations of our prayers, songs, stories, and teachings. An important lesson from the Gambler is that when we are all the same and have the same interpretations of our teachings, prayers, ceremonies then that could mean the end of us. Ezekiel also describes how everyone has their own perspectives and ways of explaining each cultural belief as a spider's web. Everything is all jumbled up and interconnected, that there is one belief in the center, and it branches out to each individual perspective, story, or teachings from the core. Ezekiel also said "the Navajo Nation is

one people, one nation, one area, one territory, but it is so large and diverse. There are different dialects, ways of telling traditional stories, ways of doing things and how taboos are explained.” All the teachings, stories, and perspectives presented are tied to each individual and may have similarities and differences among each other.

Overall, the Navajo Nation came together and used traditional values of *K'é* and *Hózhó* to combat and protect themselves from the coronavirus. The Navajo Nation also tackled many inequalities in the community. Some of these inequities include no running water and electricity in many homes, lack of food sources, and shortage of hospital beds and safety equipment. Most of these inequalities were already present on Navajo land, but because of the severity of coronavirus they were intensified. Although these barriers seemed impossible to overcome to some, the Navajo Nation government and community members came together to minimize these challenges as family, *K'é*. Understanding and respecting COVID-19 as a living entity allowed for the teachings of *K'é* and *Hózhó* to play a role in figuring out ways to live and contend with this new monster.

Chapter 6: Closing Remarks and Future Directions

Take Away and Importance

Navajo traditional cultural knowledge played a significant role in understanding COVID-19 and promoting wellbeing during the pandemic. The Navajo Nation and its members promoted, practiced, and implemented cultural teachings and perspectives to combat this new monster. Perspectives and views of wellbeing involves surrounding oneself with a positive environment, understanding health involves all aspects of a person's being (spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical), following the path of *Hózhó* and upholding our *K'é* relations. COVID-19 impacted people in many different personal ways and each experience is significant and contributes to our knowledge of this being, this monster. Regarding and respecting COVID-19 as a living entity and understanding that everything is interconnected, a part of our relationships contributed to knowing how to relate and exist with it. Although COVID-19 has had some negative impacts, there have also been positive ones as well. This is a reflection of the philosophy *Hózhó*, that there is good and bad in everything and that there are always ways of reestablishing positivity and getting through hardships.

Our understanding of the world and the beings around us are seen as sacred and worthy of respect. We are a part of a bigger whole, and understanding our responsibilities, caring for our relationships, and being respectful radiates positivity, it is *Hózhó*. Being positive is the motivational force behind moving forward together. Taking care of each other and coming together is fierce, it is resilience, and it is powerful. My participant, Ezekiel from Kayenta, explains that the Navajo people are warriors and always have been. He says that through the connection everyone has, the pride, the warrior spirit, the strength, we were able to overcome the

pandemic. Ezekiel also states that protecting ourselves against COVID-19, also protects the culture and people.

Overall, what I learned in reflection was that the Navajo Nation and its community fought together against the COVID-19 monster, just like the Navajo Hero Twins fought and defeated giants and monsters in creation stories. The Navajo Nation and its people turned to traditional values to help them through challenging times, they have always done so and always will. The Navajo people armed themselves with the values of *Hózhó* and *K'é*, which were powerful in leading the fight against the coronavirus. *K'é* was the glue that held the community together. The relationships that people shared with one another created the responsibility that helped keep each other safe, protected, and cared for. *Hózhó* helped maintain balance in all the chaos. The Hero Twins were given weapons to help them combat the monsters and giants impacting the Navajo people. It is the same idea; our culture gives us the weapons and the protection we need against modern day monsters and hardships. Our stories are lessons, our ways of knowing and ways of being such as *Hózhó* are powerful, and our *K'é* relations are our strength. The Navajo Nation government acted as a shield for the community by mandating policies to keep people safe and by tackling and addressing inequalities that affected the quality of life for its community members. Everyone in the community, the elders, the children, the Navajo government, and healthcare workers were all heroes in such a detrimental time.

Recommendations For Future Directions

There are many recommendations for future directions of this project that stem from ideas that I had but were restricted due to time. The scope of this thesis was designed to fit into a two-year project. In future work I would like to gain Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board approval, which will require additional time and travel. If I were to have more time to get

approval from the Navajo Nation research board, I could interview people that live back home on the Navajo Nation, including many of my family and community members, who I first heard many initial perspectives and views on COVID-19.

If I or others were to add to this research in the future, I think that adding in other research methods such as Indigenous talking circles and wellness mapping would be beneficial. Indigenous talking circles as a research method are very similar to focus groups, and are used to gather lived experiences, perspectives, practices, views, opinions, etc. that are embodied from a person's heart, mind, body, and spirit (Kovach 2009; Lavallée 2009; Tachine et al. 2016; Wilson 2008). Talking circles could allow researchers to gather knowledge through the stories participants tell and are generally set up to touch at the surface level of what you want to get at and then dive deeper as the participants become more comfortable and the conversations grow (Lavallée 2009; Tachine et al. 2016). At the end of a talking circle, the facilitator will usually guide the group towards a more reflective discussion, this is where participants will reflect on their own stories as well as others and discuss what they learned (Lavallée 2009; Winters n.d.).

From utilizing talking circles you will know more about the topic you are inquiring about through the knowledge given through stories, but also what participants learned or the biggest take away from this experience (Wolf and Rickard 2003; Winters n.d.). Applying wellness mapping as a method could also give you information that is less dependent on verbal interactions (Hardy et al. 2014). Some of my interviewees were not as talkative as others. They still gave very valuable information, but including this as a method could open room for different ways people think and share information. Wellness mapping could be a great tool for having people discuss what they feel comfortable talking about and then ask for more details afterward (Hardy et al. 2014).

Making Research Matter

For a research project in a gender and anthropology graduate course, I decided to investigate how the concept interconnectedness and how it relates to people and health. I decided that for my final project I wanted to communicate what I learned as a story, I did this by creating a children's book. My book is called, "Becoming the Doctor my People Need," which tells the story of a young Navajo girl how she became the doctor her people needed (Yenchik 2022; Yenchik n.d.). Bonnie starts off by telling us a bit about *Hózhó* (a Navajo philosophy involving harmony and balance) and why it is important. She then describes how illness and disease in Navajo culture are seen as monsters that can be combated by traditions, respect, and prayer. As she grows older, she starts to realize how her family and community feel about getting help from hospitals. Bonnie describes her people as unhappy and confused. She graduates from college and becomes a doctor at a local hospital in her hometown. As she helps to take care of her community, she notices people are still not happy with their experience because of the disconnect between the patient and doctor, the lack of understanding of illness, and negativity. Bonnie then decides to implement traditions, culture, and the philosophy of *Hózhó* into the hospital's notion of care. Bonnie ends by stating that combining traditional healing and contemporary health care provides a welcoming, people-oriented, and culturally specific space for health care and well-being (Yenchik 2022; Yenchik n.d.). **Figure 7** and **Figure 8** are examples of some of the images I created for my children's book illustrating the perspective of illness as monsters and elements of *Hózhó* (Yenchik 2022; Yenchik n.d.).



Figure 7. *Illness and Monsters*. Book Art Illustrated by Shanell Yenchik. This image represents disease and illness as “monsters” and the rainbow serve as protection from “monsters” which includes prayer, respect, and practicing traditions (Yenchik 2022; Yenchik n.d.).



Figure 8. *Hózhó in Healthcare*. Book Art Illustrated by Shanell Yenchik. This image shows aspects of Hózhó that healthcare providers should implement into care, such as respectful relationships, connection to everything in the universe, and understanding illnesses (Yenchik 2022, n.d.)

I would possibly consider creating another children’s book or something similar for my thesis research because I think it would be a great way to communicate my research for multiple audiences. It would be most beneficial if I were to ask what my community wants to see come out of this research and how I can make it beneficial to them (Ture and Gualtieri 2017). Still, doing something like this could directly benefit my community by providing a way for people to learn about the views and perspectives of COVID-19 and how they tie into Navajo health and

wellbeing. However, it would be most beneficial if I were to ask what people want to see come out of this research and how I can make it beneficial to them (Ture and Gualtieri 2017).

Reflection

This research project took me on a learning journey, for which I am very grateful to have experienced. As a *Diné* woman I am still learning and growing with my culture. I enjoyed talking to every single one of my participants, they all shared with me the various teachings that they have learned and grew up with. I am grateful to have had these opportunities to talk and hear all the stories and experiences from my participants. Many of my own teachings were deepened as I gained more and more information and descriptions about them. I gained more context and ideas surrounding the Navajo philosophy of *Hózhó*. I had a basic understanding of what *Hózhó* entailed but my participants provided different ways and extensive views of what *Hózhó* really is. For example, it is more than just balance and understanding how everything is interconnected. It is a way of life, it is literally living your life in beauty, walking in beauty so that you will be healthy, positive, and joyful. *Hózhó* encompasses family, health, and ways of thinking about the world. It is like Steve, one of my participants, who is a traditional practitioner, kept saying, “you think you know something, but you don’t” and that is very true. Just like Carmenlita, another one of my participants, who is a public health researcher explained, you never stop learning and growing, over the years things become clearer. I know I still have a long way to go in learning and understanding our complex culture, but this project has brought me even closer to my culture in ways I never thought it would.

A lesson that I learned during this research project was that in Navajo culture there are no taboos. I can still hear Steve’s words, “*Shiyázhí* there are no taboos in Navajo culture, there are only cultural beliefs, ways of life, and principles.” I asked the question “why is it that we do or

do not talk about certain taboos or subjects?” I was taught in the nicest but educational way by Rose and Steve not to use the word taboo. For the interviews following, I then replaced the word taboo with teachings. Another very important lesson I learned from Steve as well was regarding the consent process. He expressed his frustration with all the paperwork and how a verbal agreement should be considered enough, especially for Native peoples. He said that paperwork is a western way of doing things. I found this very insightful and would like to figure out how I can provide options for people in future research to provide verbal or written consent, especially without being audio-recorded.

I love learning and that is one of the main reasons I have continued my educational path this far. I will be honest, graduate school is rough. At first, I struggled with what I thought was just Imposter Syndrome, where I felt like I did not belong in this space, and I then began to doubt myself and my abilities. This syndrome was something that I was putting on myself, when, there was also a flip side to this idea. I was feeling this way because I was struggling with finding myself, my space, my worldview in an institution not built for people like me. This imposter phenomenon not only involves my own internal feelings but also external factors of colonial, oppressive structures (Chakraverty 2022).

It took me a bit to come to terms with myself and acknowledge that I do belong in academia, I have gotten this far equipped with strength, motivation, dreams, and love of knowledge. My voice, my perspective, and my identity have a place here. I had many tough times throughout my graduate career but thanks to my wonderful relationships with my advisors, fiancé, and my family I was able to keep pushing through. No matter the situation, personal, financial, and emotional it is always okay to lean on others for support, healing, and empowerment. Hardships are meant to be shared with others because we are not alone in this

world. We will always have our *K'é* relations to rely on. All my relations were there for me, and I am there for them. Just as the Navajo Nation came together to protect themselves against COVID-19, lifting each other up in difficult times can make all the difference.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Title of Research: Navajo Views and Perspectives of COVID-19 and Implications in Health and Wellbeing

Interview Guide

[Everything in bold is being said out loud, anything not bolded is direction or probing questions if needed]

Interviewer:

Hello, ya'at'eeh. Thank you for meeting with me. I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview with me today. How are you doing today? [Building rapport: ask them for their clans, establish kinship. Ask them about who they are, where they grew up, where they live, what they do, etc.]

Alright let's get started. The first thing we need to do is discuss the consent form for the interview. [Give them the consent form, unless you sent it to them prior.] **Would you prefer to just read it to yourself, or would you like me to talk through it with you?** [If they prefer to talk through it, summarize each section clearly.] **Do you have any questions? If this sounds okay to you, please sign the form and indicate whether it is okay for me to audio record.** [If interview is taking place over zoom or phone call, let them know you are going to record them consenting to interview, and only proceed recording if they agree to be recorded].

[If they have stated that they would like their identity revealed, go over how they would like to be referred as: preferred name, pronouns, title, from, etc. If they would like to remain anonymous, maybe ask them what they would like to be called in replacement of real identity.]

Are you ready to start the interview? If so, I'm going to turn on my recording device.

Let me explain very briefly what my thesis research is about. The purpose of my research project is to gain information on the Navajo cultural perspectives and views of COVID-19. I want to learn more about how these views and perspectives of COVID-19 to the Navajo people tie into the implications and importance of cultural knowledge and practices surrounding health and wellbeing. Do you have any questions?

Before we begin the questions, I just want to let you know that you are not obligated to answer all questions, if you want to skip over any please let me know. You can also stop the interview at any time for any reason. You may also request a copy of the interview, or for the recording to be destroyed.

Introductions

To start us off, I'd like to get to know you a little bit more.

- 1. Tell me about yourself.** Where are you from? What do you do? What are your clans? [If haven't stated beforehand.]

Health and Wellbeing

First, I'd like to ask you some questions regarding your perspectives on health and wellbeing.

- 2. What does wellbeing mean to you?** How would you define it? What does it look like? What does it include?
- 3. What do you do to keep yourself well** [or use a word they used to describe wellbeing here]?
- 4. Are there any cultural aspects, teachings, lessons, etc. that you follow in regard to wellbeing?** Or what cultural aspects have you heard about dealing with wellbeing? What are they? Can you give me examples? Explain.
- 5. When you feel that your wellbeing goes off track, or becomes unbalanced or off, what do you do to rebalance or get back on track to wellbeing?** What does this mean?
- 6. Where did you learn these teachings, practices, and lessons from?** How did you learn about them? Growing up? Apprenticeship? Reading?
- 7. Have you seen some of these cultural teachings, lessons, and practices implemented in your community?** What do they address? What was included? How was it presented? Did it deal with illnesses and health issues?

COVID-19

Next, I would like to get your experience, perspective, and views on coronavirus (COVID-19).

- 8. How has COVID-19 impacted you and your family?** What happened? What did you have to do? Did you have any resources? Did you seek support? How?
- 9. What do you know or what are your thoughts about COVID-19? What have you heard about COVID-19?** Think back to the beginning of the pandemic, up until now.
- 10. Have you heard any cultural stories, teachings, lessons, aspects related to COVID-19** [or other illnesses]? Can you give me some examples? What were others saying about COVID-19? What was said about why it is here, how to protect ourselves, etc.?
- 11. What are your thoughts on these views and perspectives? What role did they play in the coronavirus pandemic?** What did others think?
- 12. What are some cultural practices or teachings that you have heard that are said to prevent or keep COVID-19 away?** What are some examples? Have you heard of these anywhere else? Have you heard them being applied elsewhere?

COVID-19 and Culturally Sensitive Subjects

We're getting close to the end, but I just want to ask you a few more questions to gain your input on how to respectfully present and discuss culturally sensitive subjects, such as COVID-19. This topic of future research is still going on and from what I heard it is something that needs to be talked about in the right way.

- 13. Why is it that we do or do not talk about certain taboos or subjects (for example: Death, certain illness, ceremonies, stories)?** Are there ways we can discuss these things the "right" way?
- 14. There are many times when someone, usually an elder tells us "doo a jinii da (Don't talk about it/Don't say that)"** What does this phrase mean to you? What kinds of things does this pertain to? Does this phrase usually mean the way someone was talking about something or the topic overall?

15. **I have heard many Navajo elders and family members say that these sensitive subjects have power and that talking about them can bring harm, or that we should not talk about them negatively. How should we go talking about something so powerful?** Do you agree? What have you heard regarding this? How would you suggest talking about these things? Can you give an example?

16. **I have heard many people discuss COVID-19 as a modern-day monster, as well as it being a living entity that should only be talked about in positive terms. In what ways can I discuss what COVID-19 is without giving it power or causing harm?** Would giving a background to talking about certain topics a certain way be very helpful?

[Make sure to ask after going through interview questions] **While you are still being recorded, is there anything else you would like to add or share** [or Now, that we have gone through all the questions I have for you today, is there anything you would like to add or share?]

Thank you. This now concludes our interview. I will now turn off the recording device.
[only state if being recorded].

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