

Constructing Meaning to the Indian Boarding School Experience

Stephen Colmant, Lahoma Schultz, Rockey Robbins, Peter Ciali, Julie Dorton, and Yvette Rivera-Colmant

This study investigated the complex meaning of the Indian boarding school experience. Using grounded theory methodology, a multi-member research team conducted and analyzed interviews and observations with 30 alumni of various Indian boarding schools, and 16 students and seven staff in one Indian boarding school currently operating in Oklahoma. Five main factors emerged that appear central to constructing meaning to the Indian boarding school experience. These factors were (1) background context, (2) perception of reasons for attending, (3) severity, (4) coping during experience, and (5) coping after experience. Explanations and excerpts from the data are provided to illustrate each of the factors. Potential use of these factors to practitioners working with survivors of Indian boarding school abuses in counseling and therapy is discussed.

Introduction

In April 2003, seven American Indians filed a \$25 billion class-action lawsuit in the US Court of Federal Claims in Washington, DC against the federal government for physical, sexual and psychological abuse they suffered while attending Indian boarding schools. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of hundreds of thousands of American Indians/Alaska Natives who attended boarding schools from 1879 to the present day. Since the lawsuit was filed, the number of plaintiffs has expanded to include hundreds (Waxman, 2003). Although many are coming forward to speak out on the abuse experienced in Indian boarding schools, many are also coming forward to defend their schools and say that, “allegations of abuse are exaggerated, and that the schools educated children and gave them opportunities to succeed in mainstream society” (Waxman, 2003, p. A01).

There are currently 72 Indian boarding schools in the United States funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which house more than 10,000

American Indian/Alaska Native children (Bureau of Indian Affairs [BIA], 2002). Thirty-seven of these schools take children as young as six-years-old. These numbers do not include the private and parochial Indian boarding schools. In September 2000, Kevin Gover, then head of the U.S. federal Bureau of Indian affairs, apologized for the agency's "legacy of racism and inhumanity" that included massacres, forced relocations of tribes and attempts to eradicate Indian languages and cultures. He stated, "Worst of all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs committed these acts against children entrusted to its boarding schools, brutalizing them emotionally, psychologically, physically and spiritually." Gover went on to link abuse suffered in boarding schools to a generational cycle of "rampant alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence that plague Indian country" (Gover, 2000).

While the Indian boarding school situation remains a controversial issue in the U.S., the last of the Canadian federally operated residential schools closed in 1984. In 1998, Canadian government officials apologized to their First Nations residential school survivors for the widespread physical and sexual abuse that occurred and allocated \$350 million for counseling as a gesture of reconciliation to First Nations people. There has also been a series of widely publicized lawsuits and settlement conferences against the Canadian federal government and various churches, which had operated boarding schools for Natives. Numerous healing projects devoted to First Nations residential school survivors were initiated throughout Canada.

Since the 1980s, many have incorporated personal narratives of boarding school life to describe and analyze the institution: Brumble (1981); McBeth (1983) on West-Central Oklahoma American Indians; Trennart (1988) on Phoenix Indian School; Adams (1988,1995) on Federal policy and practice integrated with student experience; Hyer (1990) on Santa Fe Indian School; Mihesuah (1993) on the Cherokee Female Seminary; Coleman (1994) on American Indians attending boarding schools from 1850-1930; Lomawaima (1994) on Chilocco from 1920 to 1940; Bloom (1996) examined the meaningfulness of athletics; and, Child (1996,1998) explored rebellion and runaway behavior and the boarding school experience of Ojibwe people from 1900 to 1940.

These studies, drawing from various sources including personal interviews, autobiographies, and archival letters and tape recordings, provide rich description of Indian boarding schools. Descriptions often detail the intense loneliness and despair felt upon being separated from family, how children struggled to avoid severe abuse at the hands of staff and other students, the effects of losing the ability to speak one's native language, and how children were used as cheap labor to sustain the institution. Descriptions also include the strong friendships and bonding that occurred between students, how students rebelled against and outwitted their oppressors, and the emergence of pan-Indianism.

The purpose of the present study was to understand the experiences of people who attended Indian boarding schools between 1950 and 2004 and to generate theory grounded in the complex meanings often attributed to those experiences. From research conducted in the United States, personal interviews with boarding school alumni are often described as complex and include a range of opinions (Child, 1998; Lomawaima, 1994; McBeth, 1983). While some emphasize negative aspects of the experience (loneliness, abuse, loss of culture) others emphasize positive aspects (friendship, a sense of belongingness, self-efficacy). Many report a range of mixed emotions. While many variations of opinions are reported and described, there is a lack of systematic examination to account for these differences. Information regarding meaning construction is important to practitioners working with American Indians/Alaska Natives, policy makers, school administrators and staff, and parents, students, and child advocates considering child placement in Indian boarding schools. Furthermore, the available research has overwhelmingly focused on early pre-1950 experiences. Research using interviews with current students housed in Indian boarding school dormitories is nonexistent.

Method

Researchers–Interviewers

This study reflects a collaborative team effort. The researchers–interviewers were two American Indian women, an American Indian man, two White men, and a Mexican-American woman. Four were doctoral students in counseling psychology, of which three were licensed professional counselors (LPC). One was an assistant professor of counseling psychology and one was a master of social work student. Their average number of years of counseling experience was 10.3. In addition to working as mental health professionals, the team members' backgrounds included various personal and professional experiences in Indian education and specifically with Indian boarding schools.

Participants

This study included two samples: (1) 30 American Indian adults of various tribal backgrounds who were alumni of one or more Indian boarding schools, and (2) 16 American Indian youth and seven staff currently residing or working at an Indian boarding school dormitory. Participants varied on dimensions of socioeconomic status, age of attendance at boarding school, the number of years attended at boarding school, and the time era that the boarding school was attended. The study used the grounded theory technique of theoretical sampling as data collection proceeded.

Sample 1 included 15 men and 15 women whose ages ranged from 18 to 72 with a mean age of 45. Their average level of education was 14 years. Their experience in boarding school ranged from two months to 12 years.

The Indian boarding schools they attended were in Oklahoma, California, and Kansas. The researchers solicited participants in Oklahoma through newspaper advertisements, fliers, and word-of-mouth.

Sample 2 included eight boys and eight girls of various tribal affiliations residing in an Indian boarding school dormitory. Their ages ranged from 14 to 18 and their time living in a boarding school dormitory ranged from 2 months to 8 years. The staff participants included 2 residential aides, 2 dorm counselors, 2 teachers and the school superintendent. The boarding school investigated in this study was located in Oklahoma and traces its roots back to the 1800s. In the 2002-2003 school year, the school census was 350, of which 140 were dorm students.

Procedure

In Sample 1, after reviewing and obtaining informed consent and completing a brief demographic data form, the participants were asked a series of predetermined open-ended questions followed by prompts designed to evoke discussion of the study's research topic: understanding the meanings of the boarding school experience. We asked, for instance, "What are some of the things that you remember about boarding school?" and "What are the most memorable events associated with being at boarding school?" Participants were free to answer questions as briefly or extensively as they chose. The interview took between an hour-and-a-half to three hours. Sample 1 interviews took place in a variety of settings including participants' homes, tribal social service offices, schools, university counseling clinics, pow-wows, alumni meetings, and educational conferences.

Procedures with Sample 2 included obtaining youth assent and informed consent from youth guardians. The researchers also completed numerous observations of youth and staff behavior in their school and dormitory settings. The interview style and questions with Sample 2 were similar to that of Sample 1 but were modified to be appropriate for youth and staff. Follow-up formal and informal interviews took place with several participants. In both samples, researchers reviewed options for counseling services with participants at the end of the interview. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analyses

Over a two-year period, (2001-2003), the researchers met frequently in weekly research team meetings, by telephone and email, and in various informal meetings. The researchers used grounded theory methodology in this study to analyze qualitatively, participants' reports of their subjective experiences with Indian boarding schools. The grounded theory method was selected as the means of data collection and analysis because of its potential to contribute to the development of theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory, considered by some to be one of

the most influential paradigms for qualitative research in social science, is a method developed in the 1960s by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. It employs systematic procedures to understand processes and interactions in order to develop theory about a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Our analysis began with open coding by examining participants' responses to interview questions and forming categories in "think tanks" consisting of all members of the research team. Hard copies of interviews, memos, and field notes were distributed to team members as they were generated. Our units of analysis in open coding varied from a line by line analysis, to paragraphs and whole documents. The data were broken down into incidents and were closely examined and compared for similarities and differences. This process led to the development of categories and further data collection as we compared data to data, and concepts to more data, to further saturate and integrate categories and their properties based on fit, work and relevance. Team members wrote memos as categories and their properties and theoretical codes emerged. Open coding ceased with the emergence of a core theoretical variable: *Alumni and students construct meaning to their boarding school experience through an interaction of personal circumstances and coping*. This basic social process became a guide to further data collection and theoretical sampling. Codes, memos and integration occurred in relationship to this core category. After theoretical findings seemed sufficiently grounded in core variables, we reconnected findings to related literature in examining how individuals seemed to construct meaning from their Indian boarding school experience.

Results

Five main factors emerged from the data that appear central to constructing meaning from the Indian boarding school experience: (1) background context, (2) perception of reasons for attending, (3) severity, (4) coping during experience, and (5) coping after experience. To illustrate our findings, we present interview segments and think aloud transcripts.

Background Context

The effects of contact with Europeans for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples have been catastrophic. The severity of the conditions suffered by American Indians in America is not comparable to that of any other ethnic group (Sue & Sue, 1999). Warfare, disease, forced relocation, and hostile institutional policy have reduced the American Indian/Alaska Native population to a small fraction of its original number. Sue and Sue note that these conditions "have had great negative impact on family and tribal cohesion and prevented the transmission of cultural values from the parents to the children" (1999, p.273). Duran and Duran (1995) contend that a severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder exists among American Indians and it

is perpetuated from generation to generation. They state further that because of the profoundly disruptive and destructive effects of European-American incursions on American Indians, the resultant suffering should be viewed through the historical perspective of colonization.

What native people learned about boarding schools prior to attending them seemed to have a large impact on how they perceived their boarding school experience. For many, their standard of comparison on the quality of care was the view of boarding schools held by previous generations. Most participants in this study reported first learning about boarding school through the stories of their relatives. Many heard stories of how their elders were abused and humiliated. Some participants were threatened with being sent to boarding school if they “did not mind.” For others, what was not talked about was more important. Many discussed problems with attachment to parental figures who themselves had attended boarding school. Many reported that their parents and grandparents would not talk about their experience in boarding school and were afraid to teach their language and cultural ways. For others, the stories they heard seemed to act as a protective factor in coping with life in boarding school. Some told hero stories of their elders who rebelled and beat the system:

Nancy (age 41)

My grandpa told us he wouldn't teach us anything because they used to wash out his mouth out with lye soap . . . And my grandpa even said that they just cut his braids off. Made him wear those wool clothes, he said; made him wear those boots. And they couldn't talk. Even brothers and sisters couldn't talk. They wouldn't teach us. In fact, my grandparents would threaten us with Indian school if we acted up. Because if you act up they might send you up to that school and boy they would get you. And they said everything they did back there was done by a bell. So, when they rang that bell that meant something. And they used to have to march. My mom went to this Indian school and she went to Concho, she said she would never send me. I don't know what the deal was there. My grandpa and grandma had 11 kids, maybe that is why some of them went . . . but, it really hurt my feelings when we went to that Jamalan, my grandma was gone already but my grandpa wasn't, but when I actually seen the little baby beds, you know that there were a lot of Indian kids that died. That they came down here, the government moved them down here and they had malaria, they had smallpox, they had all those diseases. And when they would die they didn't have parents so they would just bury them by one of those building up there. So, it just hurt my feelings to know that they were mistreated and to see them boots. They were—oh, my gosh—they were probably that wide and my grandma didn't come from Nebraska, but before she went to boarding school she wore moccasins and then they put them in those little itty bitty boots, her feet were all funny. Her feet were all crunched up in her older days and that was from wearing those boots she said. Her feet were trying to grow but they couldn't because they kept putting her in those boots.

Susan (age 41)

. . . they didn't slap me in the hands that they did a long time ago, like my folks, when you speak Indian and you wear your hair long in braids and they made them cut them off. They hit you when you spoke Indian, and there was nothing like that, and it was too late because their generation, their spirits, were broke about being Indian because it was such a . . . you had to learn this other way that was totally different, the White man's way, and you had to convert yourself and brainwash yourself and it was called self-discipline yourself. My dad knows three languages, English, Cheyenne, and Kiowa, and when we ask him to teach us, he can talk fluently, but when it comes to teaching the next generation, but now when we wanted to learn, they were afraid to teach us.

Lisa (age 48)

She (my mother) went to Sequoyah when it was an orphanage. It was an orphanage a long time ago and she was a little girl when she went there. I don't know how long, I think maybe a short time and then an aunt took care of her part of the time and I really don't know the length of time, but she was there awhile, maybe back and forth, she may have gone to school and lived at the boarding school during the school year and stayed with her aunt at off times. It is really something that my mother has never really talked about. She is really private about that part of her life.

Olivia (age 48)

. . . my stepfather went to Riverside and he made us clean up. I learned later in life that he never learned how to nurture. All he knew was, basically, a military-type life he learned at boarding school. So I grew up, even at home, with someone who basically is a military person. So, I had to deal with that.

Elizabeth (age 60)

Yeah, he (my father) would work like shift work and he would work days or evenings or nights. He just seemed like he was always gone. I don't know. Like me, I would be in (boarding) school when he was off or something and when I got home he would go off into work and things like that and so it was really different. But I got used to that, I mean, I grew up with that. And I got married and I married a man who did the same thing (laughs) isn't that funny. So it was the only thing I knew basically all of my life, you know. I'm divorced now.

Andrew (boy's dorm staff age 51)

It was a lot stricter then. As the years went by, I'd say from 1915 to 2000, it has changed dramatically. They wouldn't let them talk their Native tongues in here and they had to—some of them—had to wear uniforms. I don't know what that was for. I guess trying to make it like military. But that was a long, long time ago. And my mother she went to Chilocco. Well what they were trying to do, I think, is get the Indian away from his culture. And make him into a White person, I guess. I

don't know, I have mixed feelings about it, but I guess you would have to in order to get a job, you know. Otherwise, it would just be like digging a ditch or something like that.

Thomas (age 16)

. . . from what my grandma said, this is totally from my grandma, and her experience with her grandpa and her mom. At the beginning when she was talking about the boarding schools, I guess the Catholic priests and the nuns used to beat the children whenever they used to even whisper some of their language. And most of the kids, well all of the kids, they grew up in their house, they basically they haven't spoken any form of English and so once they went to the boarding schools that's all they knew, so when they went to the boarding schools and they didn't know any other language, so then when they spoke Crow, they beat the children. They like they beat 'em with rulers and. my grandma was telling me like a bunch of beatings, what they used to do. When they first got there too, they stripped them of their clothes and what got my grandma mad was and why Iron Chest, my grandma's grandpa, was that they chopped off his hair. In the Crow way, that's, we pride ourselves in like our hair. And it was basically really long and it was like a form of manhood and once they chopped off that hair it was sort of a sign of taking away their pride, their culture. And taking away basically their manhood made him into like in what we saw as a coward because they chopped off their hair. Iron Chest, he went to this school called Pretty Eagle or . . . Saint Xavier. It was on our rez and that's when they first established the boarding school there. After he went to there he graduated from there and then he went to Carlisle. I don't know if you heard of it or not. He went to Carlisle to go to school there and after he went to Carlisle, he had my grandma's mom. And then after that, Iron Chest, he died of dropsy from the heart. And then my grandma's mom, she went to . . . They finally established another boarding school on our rez, on Crow agency. Its called Crow, Crow . . . um . . . I don't know what it was. But it was a school, another boarding school that they established on the reservation. And they took her, my grandma's mom went to school there. They did the same exact stuff like that and she didn't like that so she decided to go to the same school her dad went to but it was basically the same too, so. So she decided to do nothing about it even though she went to a different school, a different boarding school. And then, let's see, and then she had my grandma. My grandma said that by the time she was born, she, she didn't have to go to the boarding schools so they...yea, she didn't have to go to the boarding school when she was born but it was basically her mom on up that went to the boarding schools.

Perception of Reasons for Attending

The reasons participants believed they were sent to boarding school also appeared to be a primary influence on perceptions of their experience. Some were angry for being abandoned. Some appreciated being saved from abuse and neglect. Some were glad they helped their families out by lessening the burden of having to be cared for at home.

Michelle (age 53)

We went to school and all I remember is . . . we're pow-wow people remember. And we would go to pow-wows and we were at a pow-wow and my mom said, "Oh, by the way, all of your clothes are in the car." And, we went directly from the pow-wow to the school and she dropped us off. I had no clue that we were going. It was me, my little sister, and my older brother. The reason why she did it, she tells me, was that she was going to school, she was working, she was a single mom, and she had five kids. Two of us were able to take care of themselves and three of us couldn't. So, she sent the three of us off to have the school take care of us. My brother ran away the first or second month that we got there and he never had to go back. We would ask after the first few semesters, we asked why we had to go back and she said, "Well, you have to go back." I would say, "Why do I have to go back?" "Well, because." After that, I started to say, "I don't want to go back home." I guess, that was my way of saying, "I don't like what you are doing."

John (age 47)

My mother died back in 1962 and I was living with my grandmother here in Ripley. My grandmother couldn't care for us. That was what she told everybody. But the fact is she had severe drinking . . . mental, severe mental anger problems. The best way I can describe my grandmother, a lot of people don't like hearing this in this tribe who are related to her. I describe my grandmother as murderous—vicious, beyond belief! Murderous is a good word. She was. It was common at my house to be beaten, not just with a belt. When I first went to the boarding school it was pretty much a relief to get away from grandma, actually it was a relief because at the boarding school we got fed good.

Alicia (age 54)

My parent's couldn't take care of us because we kind of came from a broken home so we had to go up there. We were forced, we didn't have any choice. We didn't have anywhere else to go. Now, I have some relatives, I did go and spend a little bit of time with them, summer or something. I have some relatives that didn't have to go to the boarding school because their parents were still together and they had a good family life, you know. And they didn't send their children to the boarding school. If they had a good home life, family life, they kept their children with them. To me it was all the children that went, were children from broken homes and no place to go, you know, that went to Concho.

Jennifer (age 15)

What brought me here? Well, it was my mom because she was having problems at home because my dad left and he's in prison right now. And so she had me, my sister, my other sister, her baby, and her boyfriend living at my house, or at our apartment. And it kinda made it hard on my mom because she had the bills. And my sister wasn't helping and it was just kind of crowded, you know? So me and my sister decided one day. It was like in May probably. We were just talking about going to boarding

school because we heard that they were fun and stuff so it was like, OK. So we asked my mom about it and she said she was thinking about it because this was where my mom and dad met so it was like, yea. So I was just sitting there and I was just thinking about it and she said, well, she guesses because she needs like a break and its kinda like hard for her right now because she has all this stuff to take care of so me and my sister decided to come here.

Severity

There was a range in severity of conditions at boarding schools that influenced how the experience was perceived. Many reported multiple forms of abuse and neglect. Forms of neglect included poor academics, being prevented normal contact with the opposite sex, being separated from siblings, physical neglect, emotional neglect and negligent supervision. Forms of abuse reported included cultural abuse, physical abuse from staff, physical abuse from peers, hazing, and sexual abuse. Participants commonly reported experiencing these conditions in varying degrees.

John, an attendee of the 1960s, explained that physical abuse was not just perpetrated by lower level staff in the school he attended, but also by the highest school officials:

His way (school superintendent) of dealing with any kind of misbehavior was to, you had to grab down at your ankles and if you moved at all then you had to start back at one. If he hit you and like three or four and you moved then you had to start back at one. So the whippings I would say were pretty severe, if you moved two or three times, let me tell you they were literally beating the s--t out of you. S--t ran down your leg after awhile. As a little bitty kid you get hit by a big man with a board, they literally can knock the crap, I mean the crap, the s--t out of your body.

One condition reported by all respondents was intense loneliness and homesickness. Many related these feelings to having little opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with caring-consistent adults. They also commonly reported staff ratios of one staff per 80 youth. Alicia explained how emotional neglect often pushed youth to bond with each other:

They had broken families, broken homes, they were put in a boarding school because there was no place else to put them, for them to go, so they went to the boarding school. And they were stuck there and that was their home and that was a terrible home for little children to be raised at because, you didn't get that parental love, you didn't get that hug that I love you feeling that parents give to children, things that children should be given where they are raising up, um, growing up. The only ones we had to do that was each other as roommates or to our brothers and sisters. That is the only hugs, kisses, and love we got.

Older alumni frequently compared the boarding schools to the military while younger interviewees compared the dorms to "detention centers."

Whether interviewing alumni who attended in the 1930s or with students attending in 2003, a central theme was the same. Participant descriptions of Indian boarding schools were reminiscent of Goffman's concept of a total institution (Goffman, 1961). Once dropped off, parents have little involvement in their children's lives while at school and the youth themselves felt essentially powerless. A role previously enacted by a youth in his/her family and community is disrupted. Sleep, play and school are now under the same authority. Youth are placed with similar others whose days are scheduled en masse. Mary, an attendee of the 1950s, describes the excessive routinization in her school:

We were always in a line, everywhere we went. What I really remember most about now, even now today when I hear it, I think about it, a flash of the school comes back. It's that old church bell, you know that old Catholic church bell, that ding, ding. That one? Ok, when I hear that now, for a second I think of Concho, because every morning they woke us up with that bell, that church bell. And when it was time to go eat they rang that church bell. And when it was time to go to school they rang that church bell. And when it was time for lunch they rang that church bell. And when it was time for supper and bedtime, they rang that church bell. Day after day, after day, year after year, after year...and then we always used to have roll call, we would have roll call all of the time, before we went to school, well before we went to breakfast they would call out names and we had to say "here," you know? And they would check our name off and go on to the next name, they would do that to everybody there. After they would have roll call then we all go over to get out and get in line. We would always meet in the basement of the dormitory where we had the roll call. And then we would march over to the dining room, which was the next building over, well not really march, but they made us get in line, you know. Every morning get in line and get over there. We would eat our breakfast and stuff and get ready and we would just come back to the dorm. And then we would get ready and go to school. And they would ring the bell to let you know it was time to go to school and we would get back down to the basement and go again. It is just that all time I just remember that. Forever having roll calls and marching off to school. And the same thing at bedtime, they would come and check us like that.

There was a general trend found that the younger the age during dorm attendance, the more severe the loneliness and homesickness experienced. Other trends of severity observed were based on time-era of attendance and between Sample 1 and 2. Within Sample 1, the severity of cultural abuse moved from more overt to more subtle with later attendance. No sexual abuse by staff was reported by youth in Sample 2. Physical abuse by staff was rarely reported by youth in sample 2.

Coping During Experience

Coping has been defined as the process of managing external or internal demands that are perceived as taxing or exceeding a person's resources

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping may consist of behaviors and intrapsychic responses designed to overcome, reduce, or tolerate these demands (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). Many distinctive strategies emerged regarding how participants coped during their boarding school experience. While there was a range in the severity of conditions reported, there was also a range of both active and avoidant coping strategies reported. For example, while all participants reported experiencing intense loneliness at boarding school, there was a marked difference in how people responded to feeling lonely. Some were more resilient than others and coped through involvement in sports, bonding with peers, maintaining an optimistic attitude, and staying active by making phone calls, writing, or socializing with friends. Others isolated themselves, engaged in substance abuse, overused defense mechanisms or became depressed.

Many participants described developing either attachment-seeking or survivalist cognitive styles in Indian boarding schools. Some students attempted to connect with night attendants, matrons, teachers, cooks, or older students. One said, "I was only six and was very scared. An older student let me sleep with her. She looked after me." Another said, "I immediately became close to the cook. She showed me how to cook some things. She had her own family but she was nice to me." One recalled, "The night watchman told a lot of jokes and was like an uncle. I showed him my grades but he left." The attachment-seeking students reported almost desperate attempts to replace or find new parent types that could provide them with a security base.

The "survivalists" described lives of "fight and flight" and learning how to manipulate the system. Many described first day experiences as being on the "look out" for danger and opportunities. One said, "I saw a peach tree the first morning I got there. I got caught trying to steal one." Another said, "Right off the bat I joined a gang for protection." Another said, "I got a job with the cooks. I snuck out food and traded it for things." Another said, "I got on a boxing team to learn how to fight." and another, "I got in with some girls who knew how to get into town without being caught." Still another said, "I learned how to go under the school to smoke and to sneak off to town to drink."

Many students internalized the regimentation values in an effort to acquire greater acceptance from authority figures. They concerned themselves with cleanliness, moralistic attitudes, and with an intensity of activity. Many who adopted this coping style commented that they felt accepted by authorities in their school. "I was the matron's favorite because I kept my room very clean. I was most proud of that." Another said, "I always liked to keep my things very neat. I was a leader. They knew they could count on me to lead activities with students because I was organized." Many were able to cope by gaining some form of reinforcement from authority figures by learning to think, feel, and act in ways that were indispensable to the smooth functioning of the boarding school. This coping style might be described as

introjection. Other forms of introjections were found in reports of kid-on-kid abuse such as in the carrying on of hazing traditions.

Sublimation was also a commonly used coping strategy of students. Sports were a common way of releasing repressed emotions. "Boxing was an outlet for a lot of pent-up anger for not being with my mom. And I didn't know my dad. I was angry. I was really angry. At night I thought about everything. I was confused about everything and I wasn't happy. I was mad I guess." Another said, "It is kind of like I am free getting the ball into the goal." Another said, "The way I deal with my difficulties is I work out sometimes." Physical exercise and sports provided participants an avenue to sublimate potentially destructive emotions into constructive outlets.

Altruism is still another way that students of boarding schools cope. One student said, "One year I stayed over Christmas because I wanted to be there for those who couldn't go home." There were also countless stories of students helping younger and new students to get adjusted to the boarding school. When in most cases the altruism appeared to be of psychological benefit to those who utilized it, others complained of it not meeting their own needs.

Resistance is yet another way students coped with what they felt was an oppressive environment. "They would be beating up somebody and you would speak out of line trying to stick up for someone." Another said, "We couldn't take it no more . . . So a bunch of us ran away." One said, "You didn't have any power at all . . . When you got older you were not going to do this, you were not going to do that." Resisting expectations they felt were unjust were often viewed as moments of transcendence in systems that were deemed as intolerable.

In terms of coping with boarding school environments, past and present students were similar in their uses of introjection, denial, sublimation and altruism. But there was a marked difference in resistance. Current students are likely to have means of sublimation or alternative energy outlets that were lacking or less available to former students. Current students appear to be more pacified than past students. That is, they spend a great deal of time watching television and playing computer games. The games and movies may offer a 'tonic' or a substitute gratification. They may also inculcate students with prevailing norms that encourage them to accept the status quo. Current students, because their families have greater transportation resources, are more likely to drop out of boarding schools than past students. Consequently, current students are more likely to leave the boarding school rather than challenge the authority there.

Coping After Experience

It was important to boarding school alumni to tell us how their experience affected their lives today. This revealed a range of ways of coping. Some discussed the effects on their marriages and parenting. Others continued to

maintain defense mechanisms, which sometimes became transparent to them during interviews. Many were able to work through their traumatic experience toward personal growth.

Mary (age 52)

After my husband and I were married for 19 years, we divorced. I sometimes blame my upbringing, the way I was raised. It might have had, I don't know. I just had problems with that from my upbringing...many years being raised in a boarding school that I didn't have the kind of home he did. He was never raised in a boarding school. He was raised by his parents. He went to public school, see. We were just raised opposite. He never went through what I went through. We were just different. Opposites attract I guess. I used to think to myself, maybe as a mother, I never had a mother to learn from, as far as raising my children and keeping my home because I lacked that. I didn't have a mother to pattern myself after. I just felt like I didn't do something right, you know? I just tend to think it was because of that.

Common defense mechanisms revealed through interviews included denial and minimization. Some reported only positive experiences at boarding school until they were asked to explain why they would not allow their children or grandchildren to attend. Many comments made in interviews might be characterized as "undoing" remarks. One interviewee said, "They would backhand you or whip you . . . But they were good to us." Another said "I would have liked to have gotten closer to the matron but she was nice to me anyway. You know she wasn't our mother. She had her own life." Another said, "You know you did not get that I love you feeling... but it was a place to keep warm." The ironic resignation, which involves hardening yourself to a neglecting situation, was a common theme.

Another common defense mechanism used was introjection. Some of the most profound examples of introjection came from boarding school staff who were once dorm students themselves. Several interviewees explained how the regimented atmosphere of boarding school influenced their later joining the military. Also common was the use of reaction formation. In the following example, a dorm staff person, who was also a boarding school alumnus, described how she dealt with authoritarian staff through a combination of introjection and reaction formation:

One (staff) was really strict and she always stands out because everyone thought she was really mean, you know. But I liked her. I like strict people. Even in the military, people were like, "Don't get her, you won't like her." But I always turned out liking them because I could relate to that and that didn't bother me because I wasn't the one that tried to do anything wrong I guess, you know or something. And I always got along really well with them you know, and they really liked me it seemed like. I walked the straight and narrow (laughs). I like everybody, I guess. It was the same way in boarding school. Teachers that were really strict; I liked them, for some reason. I never got into any trouble. It never bothered me.

Areas of growth reported included a commitment to higher education standards, enhanced empathy, the belief that the experience made one stronger, enhanced spirituality, and a commitment to better parenting. These categories support and extend Constructivist Self Development Theory [CSDT] (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998). CSDT explains both negative and positive changes in the wake of a traumatic event through the process of adaptation and making meaning. The underlying constructivist assumption is that individuals construct their own realities in response to traumatic events, subsequently, each individual is uniquely affected. CSDT postulates that “posttraumatic growth” occurs in three main life domains following a traumatic event including, identity, worldview, and spirituality (Saakvitne et al., 1998).

Several respondents reported changes in their self-perceptions (identity) as a result of their boarding school experience. One man stated, “...because I was there so long and I am such a fighter and I never give up. I actually—you might even say as a young person because I never gave up or gave in—I became well respected among the other students. But, it was only after many, many battles, personal battles. I never give up.” One woman explained how she perceived herself as being more self-reliant. She stated, “I really didn’t need my mom. I learned that I could do my own laundry. I could clean my own room. I didn’t need that family. I liked it, but I knew I could live without it. I learned to speak up for myself . . . I learned that I could go to school, have friends and, still survive and never go back to that family I had before.”

One of the respondents explained how her boarding school experience made her feel stronger personally and as a parent. She stated, “I just see how I was raised and how I was treated and what kind of life I had. That made me stronger. Made me strong to make my kids life better, you know . . . it made me a stronger parent you know.” Another woman stated, “After growing up and having my own child, I told him I would never let him go to a boarding school as long as I am living because I never wanted him to face the situation that my little brother faced.” One respondent described a mixture of positive and negative emotions regarding her relationship with her children as she stated, “As a parent to raise my children, I was a lot closer to them. I think I might have been too close. I never wanted them to have that experience of not having a parent, not having parents. I wanted to have a home. I wanted to be there for them, to have every moment to be involved in their life. I don’t know, I just didn’t want them to go through what I did. I don’t know, it was kind of tough you know.”

Many of the respondents reported experiencing changes in their worldviews, such as increased self-disclosure, appreciation of differences, and emotional expressiveness in interpersonal relationships, as a result of their boarding school experiences. One respondent reported, “I think that there is one positive thing that I learned and I think learning to associate with

people. Learning how to accept other people for the way they are and to respect the kind of culture they come from.” One participant stated, “It made me more fair...it don’t matter . . . no skin color makes no difference to me . . . black, white, red, or whatever, we are all the same.” Responding to a question asking to identify any positive outcomes from his boarding school experience this respondent further stated, “...getting along with different kinds of people, since we come from different tribes.” Regarding emotional closeness one respondent stated, “Umhum, till this day there are people that went to the boarding school that work around here, and we work in the mental health field and I go places and see them. And we just embrace and cry. We don’t care who sees us. It’s just a closeness . . . I know our love for everybody was stronger because I know at home we didn’t have it.”

Discussion

Themes about working with abuse and neglect victims of Indian boarding school trauma is absent from the counseling literature. This study represents a systematic examination of the complex meaning of the Indian boarding school experience from the perspective of boarding school alumni and current attendees. Using grounded theory methodology, a multi-member research team conducted and analyzed results of interviews and observations with boarding school alumni, current students and boarding school staff. Five main factors emerged from the data that appear central to constructing meaning to the Indian boarding school experience. These factors are: background context, perception of reasons for attending, severity, coping during experience, and coping after experience.

Insight into these primary factors may be useful to practitioners and clients. Many survivors of boarding school abuses present themselves with conflicting thoughts and emotions about their experience. Dialoguing these five factors in counseling or therapy with Indian boarding school survivors may help practitioners better understand the individual’s perspective and the complexity involved. For example, in this study there were instances in which two people experienced nearly identical conditions at boarding school but had very different evaluations of their experience. Differences in background context and perception of reasons for attending explained much of these differences. These two factors in turn influenced how people coped with their situation. For many, the coping strategies themselves greatly defined their experience.

Consideration for background context helps one be aware of multigenerational effects of Indian boarding schools on a broad scale as well as the unique experience of the individual’s background. The process of contextualizing the present in the past sets the stage by helping to promote empathy and normalization and can help make defense mechanisms unnecessary. Attention to the person’s perception of the reasons for attending boarding school is especially critical as these perceptions are often tied to an

array of strong emotions including anger, feelings of abandonment, despair and guilt. Appreciating severity of conditions is important so that practitioners are aware of the types of abuse and neglect reported by boarding school alumni while considering the client as expert and not assuming the severity experienced. Knowledge of severity of conditions can also help people realize that they are not alone. Understanding coping strategies particular to American Indian/Alaska Native boarding school students and alumni can help practitioners better appreciate the adaptive nature of these strategies. The remarkable resiliency and growth demonstrated by many participants in this study cannot be overstated. Such examples provide models of success and roads toward healing that may prove useful to many others.

Future researchers should investigate the usefulness of dialoguing these factors within the context of counseling and psychotherapy with boarding school survivors. Future researchers would also do well to include a wider cross-section of boarding school attendees and alumni. While there was a wide range in both samples concerning demographics such as age, socioeconomic status, and school attended, there may have been an under-representation of people with more severe problems such as those with chronic mental illness, substance dependence, and those incarcerated.

Many tough decisions face Indian families and communities regarding child welfare and the future of Indian boarding schools. Many American Indian/Alaska Native families lack adequate access to basic necessities for healthy human development: health care, childcare, housing, job training, and employment. Often, families who send their children to boarding schools are experiencing severe poverty and family breakdown. For these families the boarding schools serve as a kind of foster care for children where they are at least assured adequate food and shelter. In addition, the boarding schools often received children who are difficult to manage at home or in a regular school. Piatote (2000) discusses the trend of Indian boarding schools across the U.S. adopting a “therapeutic model” in an effort to try to meet the needs of the youth they serve. In the boarding school we studied, 100% of the youth in the dormitory qualified for Intensive Residential Guidance (IRG). The Bureau of Indian Affairs makes additional funding available to support dormitory programming for youth that meet IRG status. To meet IRG status, the youth must have a combination of mental health, behavioral, and social problems. IRG programming generally includes additional staffing, counseling, and cultural activities. In the school we studied, the amount of IRG money being used for “administrative costs” at the tribal government level versus actual programming was a controversial issue for school staff and administrators.

Rather than evaluating the quality of today’s Indian boarding schools by comparing them to Indian boarding schools of generations past, it is our hope that the standard of comparison on the quality of care for these youth becomes state-of-the-art treatment and educational programming. If boarding

schools are to truly take on a therapeutic model, they need to offer a range of treatment options which should be considered before placing the youth out of the home with a ‘least restrictive philosophy’ in mind and a goal of building and strengthening families and communities. Standard treatment options include case management, individual, family and group counseling, and psychiatric care. Traditional healing methods should be integral. If a family cannot manage a youth at home then a placement with a relative should be considered. If no viable family exists, then treatment foster care (TFC) or group home placement should be considered. Residential treatment via boarding school is to be considered as lying on the more severe end of the treatment continuum. The ultimate plan should be to reintegrate the youth back with the family. Only in the most extreme cases should boarding school be considered the best alternative for long-term placement of high-needs youth. Generally, youth referred to the dormitory program from out of state or far distances should not be considered appropriate since it would not be possible to include the family in the youth’s treatment. Instead, that family should be aided with finding local treatment options.

From 1879 to the present day, hundreds of thousands of American Indians/Alaska Natives attended boarding schools. The meaning of one’s Indian boarding school experience is continually constructed as people reflect on their experiences. Some meanings are reaffirmed and others are reshaped as new insights develop. As the legal events of the recent class action progress, greater attention will be given to this issue. While many welcome the attention as an opportunity to finally be heard, many may resent the intrusion. In any event, many individuals and communities will take stock of their individual and collective experiences and will continue to construct the meaning of the Indian boarding school experience.

Stephen Colmant, Lahoma Schultz (Creek), **Peter Ciali**, and **Julie Dorton** (Kiowa-Absentee Shawnee) are doctoral students in counseling psychology within the School of Applied Health and Educational Psychology at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. **Rockey Robbins** (Cherokee) is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at the University of Oklahoma. **Yvette Rivera-Colmant**, MSW is a social worker in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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