

Stringing Rosaries: A Qualitative Study of Sixteen Northern Plains American Indian  
Boarding School Survivors

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of 16 Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School survivors. Using qualitative interview methodology allowed me to capture the essence of how the participants viewed their boarding school experiences. Four themes emerged: Participants attending boarding school experienced loss in the form of loss of identity, language, culture, ceremonies traditions; loss of self-esteem; loneliness due to loss of parents and extended family; feeling of abandonment by parents; feeling lost and out of place when they returned home. They experienced severe abuse in the form of corporal punishment; forced child labor, the Outing program, hunger/malnourished, sexual and mental abuse. The participants experienced unresolved grief: maintaining silence; mental health issues, relationship issues and alcohol abuse. Participants expressed they had a poor education at boarding schools they attended. Finally, participants expressed ways for healing in the form a government apology, personal therapy and a return to Native spirituality and forgiveness.

## Introduction

In this article I report on qualitative interviews with 16 American Indian Northern Plains boarding schools survivors, adding to a growing body of information documenting boarding schools and their devastating consequences for American Indian families and communities (Adams, 1995; Child, 2000; Ellis, 1996; Coleman, 1994; Colmant, Schultz, Robbins, Ciali, Dorton & Rivera-Colmant, 2004; Johnson, 1988; Lomawaima, 1994; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; (Beiser, 1974; Brave Heart, 2004; Dlugokinski & Kramer, 1974; Irwin & Roll, 1995; Noriega, 1992; Tanner, 1982). The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of those attending boarding schools during the years 1921 to 1986 in the Northern Plains region of the United States. My interest in American Indian boarding school survivors' stories evolved from recording my father and other family members speaking of their experiences. I never knew these stories existed because my family members had all maintained silence on their experiences until I began asking questions.

I present my research on Boarding Schools to non-Native audiences of educators and students at schools and universities throughout the Northern Plains. With a few exceptions, the majority of the attendees had never heard of American Indian boarding schools, perhaps speaking to a colonial mindset of selectively forgetting this chapter in U.S. history (Regan, 2010).

### Background of Study

In 2008 I contacted the National Boarding School Healing Project (NBSHP). The NBSHP is a coalition of several American Indian organizations working to document boarding schools' impact on individuals and communities. As an American Indian researcher I

volunteered to interview boarding school survivors in the northern plains area, using the NBSHP interview protocol for this study.

#### Conceptual Framework: Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grieving Theory

Historical Trauma Theory as proposed by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart describes the collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generations, resulting from cataclysmic history of genocide. Historical Trauma is the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events (Brave Heart, 1999a; 1999b, 2000; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins & Altschul, 2011; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt & Chen, 2004). Over successive generations, American Indian people have experienced traumatic assaults that have had enduring consequences for families and communities. These assaults include forced removal of children through Indian boarding school policies, and prohibition of spiritual and cultural practices. Evans-Campbell (2008) noted, “Many of these events are not only human initiated and intentional but also fall under the category of genocide (e.g., physical, cultural, or ethnocide), making them particularly devastating” (p. 321). Historical trauma has become increasingly important in considerations of wellness among American Indian communities

Historic Trauma Transmission (HTT) model describes possible social and psychological manifestations of historic trauma. According to the model there is no single historical trauma response (HTR), rather there are different social disorders with respective clusters of symptoms, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociative disorders, and maladaptive social patterns (suicide, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and interpersonal maladjustment). Historic trauma disrupts adaptive social and cultural patterns and transforms them into maladaptive ones that manifest themselves in symptoms, causing deep breakdowns in social functioning that may last

for years, decades, or even generations (The Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series, 2004).

Historical Unresolved Grief Theory describes the grief resulting from the historical trauma of genocide, grief that has not been expressed, acknowledged, and resolved. Like trauma, it can span across generations. When we look at multi-generational trauma, and how that has been passed on from generation to generation, virtually every tribe U.S. tribe has their own stories of attempted genocide, warfare, relocations, and boarding school trauma.

#### Historical Background of Boarding School Era

On March 3, 1891, Congress authorized the Commissioner of Indian Affairs “to make and enforce by proper means such rules and regulations as will secure the attendance of Indian children of suitable age and health at school established and maintained for their benefit” (Statutes at Large of the United States of America, 1891, p. 1014). Two years later Congress authorized the Indian Office to “Withhold rations, clothing and other annuities from Indian parents or guardians who refuse or neglect to send and keep their children in some school a reasonable portion of each year” (Statutes at Large of the United States of America, 1891, p. 635).

Boarding schools physically separated children in the formative years of their lives from the influence of family and tribe (Adams, 1995; Lomawaima, 1994; Child, 2000; Archuleta, Child & Lomawaima, 2000; Trafzer, Keller & Sisquoc, 2006; Cooper, 1999; Horne & McBeth, 1998). Imposed upon American Indian children was a Eurocentric educational system, based on an Anglo-conformist assimilationist approach (Yeboah, 2005). As Adams (1995) states, “The word was civilization...Indians...were savages.” Civilization “served as a legitimizing rationale for the hegemonic relationship that had come to characterize Indian-white relations” (p. 12).

Carl Schurz former Commissioner of Indian Affairs concluded in 1881 that Indians were confronted with “this stern alternative: extermination or civilization (Schurz, 1881, p. 7).

On March 3, 1819, the U.S. Congress passed an act to provide education for the teaching of their American Indian children in reading, writing and arithmetic (US Statues At Large). The federal government allowed day schools and mission schools run by churches and missionary societies to be located on the reservations they served (Smith, 2005). Assimilationist of the time viewed this as a disadvantage, as the students remained in their home communities under the influence of parents and tribal elders, and often went 'back to the blanket,' sloughing off ‘civilized’ habits in favor of maintaining tribal traditions and language (Adams, 1995, Jacobs, 2009; Utley, 2004).

#### Kill the Indian In Him, And Save the Man

Captain Richard H. Pratt’s boarding school experiment began in the late nineteenth century after the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowa prisoners incarcerated at Fort Marion in Saint Augustine, Florida became subject to Pratt's newly devised civilization program. Pratt's program of half days in the classroom and half days spent at some form of manual labor soon became standard boarding school curriculum (Child, 2000; Cooper, 1999; Lomawaima, 1993; Littlefield, 1993; Utley, 2004). A staunch nineteenth-century assimilationist, Pratt's position differed slightly from the popular slogan in the west which held that the only good Indian was a dead one, "In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man ... “(Pratt, 1892, p. 46). Pratt believed the solution to students reverting’ back to the blanket' by living at home and attending reservation schools was to remove Indian children, as young as four years of age, (Child, 2000; Reyhner & Eder, 2004) to off reservation boarding schools insuring they would be

"thoroughly Christianized, individualized, and republicanized" (Adams, 1995, p.335). Pratt was allowed to found a school in 1879 at the site of unused cavalry barracks at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, organizing his school along rigid military lines, including harsh disciplinary tactics (Lomawaima, 1994). The years between 1874 and 1920 are important to the history of American Indian education because of its dramatic effect on Indian children across the United States, and in turn, the tribal cultures they came from. Hamley (1994) explains,

During this time-span, boarding school education for Indians was conceived, inaugurated and developed into a large-scale and complex system of schooling unrivalled in American education for what it attempted to accomplish - the destruction of tribal cultures as a means to assimilate Indians into the lower levels of American society. (p.15)

The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, created in 1874, also established boarding schools on and off reservations. President Grant announced his "Indian Peace Policy" to Congress on December 5, 1870 declaring, "The proper treatment of the original occupants of this land, the Indians, is one deserving of careful study. I will favor any course toward them which tends to their civilization and ultimate citizenship" (Richardson, 1910, 3962). His policy allowed religious denominations to undertake the work of civilizing the Indians.

### **They Came For the Children**

Rations, annuities, and other goods were withheld from parents and guardians who refused to send children to school after a compulsory attendance law for American Indians was passed by Congress in 1891 (Adams,1995; Archuletta, Child & Lomawaima, 2000; Trennert Jr., 1988; Lomawaima, 1994). By 1887, about 14,300 American Indian children were enrolled in 227 schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or by religious groups (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). In 1931, 29 % of Indian children in school were in boarding schools and an estimated two-thirds

of American Indians had attended boarding school at some point in their life. The total number of off-reservation boarding schools by 1902 was 25, along with 157 on-reservation boarding schools (Adams, 1995).

Indian Boarding schools, or industrial schools, prepared boys for manual labor or farming, and prepared girls for domestic work (Adams, 1995; Utley, 2004; Lomawaima, 1993). The schools also extensively utilized Pratt's 'Outing' program where boarding schools often kept students for the summer sending them to White homes in nearby towns to be further schooled in domestic chores. Rather than sending students home during summers, they were involuntarily leased out to White homes as menial labor during the summer months (Smith, 2005).

Additionally, government expenditures for boarding schools were always small, and the schools exploited the free labor of Indian children in order to function (Child, 2000). Due to overcrowding in these schools, tuberculosis, trachoma and other contagious diseases flourished (Adams, 1995; Child, 2000; Smith, 2005). Adams (1995) states " ... epidemics of tuberculosis, trachoma, measles, pneumonia, mumps and influenza regularly swept through overcrowded dormitories, taking a terrible toll on the bodies and spirits of the stricken ... thus, disease and death were also aspects of the boarding school experience" (pp. 124-125). The boarding school, whether on or off the reservation, became the institutional manifestation of the government's determination to completely restructure the Indians' minds and personalities. Boarding schools were established for the sole purpose of severing the Indian child's physical, cultural, and spiritual connection to his tribe (Adams, 1995; Lomawaima, 1994; Cooper, 1999; Hamley, 1994; Smith, 2005).



## Methodology

Qualitative research allowed me to capture the essence of how the participants view their world. (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1984). Participants were allowed to freely express individual perceptions and concerns. To gain access to the experiences of boarding school survivors, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Information regarding the study was published in several tribal newspapers. Participants willing to be interviewed then contacted me by phone or email. My criteria for participants were that they be American Indian males and females over the age of forty who had attended off-reservation boarding schools in the northern plains geographical location.

### Procedure

I traveled to the participants' homes in several Northern Plains states to conduct the interviews. I would introduce myself in my Ojibwe tribal language and, as is customary in my tribe, *asema* or *kinnickinnick*, a traditional tobacco made of red willow, was also offered to the participants as a respectful way of asking for information from them. 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 a discussion of the study's research topic: understanding the experiences of American Indian boarding school survivors. Following the NBSHP question protocol, I asked: "What was your childhood like before attending boarding school? What were your initial experiences upon arrival at school? What about discipline, chores? Did you experience or witness sexual abuse? What was your favorite subject, teacher or friend and what were any happy times had at the school? How is your current mental, spiritual, and physical health? What do you think would help heal

you and other boarding school survivors from any trauma experienced? I used a small tape recorder to record all interviews, which lasted from one to two hours. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the privacy of the individual participants. At the end of the interview, following my tribal tradition, the participants were gifted with blankets, red willow basket, and wild rice. The interviews were transcribed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved administrative assistant. The transcribed interviews were then mailed back to the participants with instructions to add or delete anything they felt necessary. Two participants refused to have their interviews returned for their review, stating they did not want to have the hard copies of their interview in their homes where their children or grandchildren could find and read them.

### Profile of Participants

Sixteen American Indian boarding school survivors participated in the study. Thirteen were female and three were males; ages ranged from 47 to 88 years. All were born and spent their earliest years on a northern plains reservation. They attended boarding schools between the years of 1921 and 1986. Eleven participants were 6 years old when sent to boarding school; five were between ages 10 and 13 years old when sent away. One participant has an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, two had GEDs, one a high school diploma, two participants held doctorates, two had master's degrees, with one female currently in a graduate program, one dropped out at 11<sup>th</sup> grade, two had bachelor's degree, one had a master's degree, one a nursing degree, and two held a two year college degree. Participants worked at jobs ranging from professor to principal, waitress, poultry factory worker, cook, construction worker, and secretary. Seven were retired at the time of the interviews. Eight were sent to boarding school for the first time at age 5 or 6. Others were between the ages of 7 – 13. The number of years attended at boarding school varied; four attended one year or less, seven attended 1 ½ to five years, and 5 attended from eight to

twelve years. Two females and one male had attempted to run away from their boarding school, citing loneliness as the reason. Fourteen did not send their own children to a boarding school; two did, citing extreme poverty as the reason. Twelve had never learned their tribal language, but all heard it when at home; four began school speaking no English at all. All had at least one parent who had attended boarding schools. All participants had both parents who were American Indian. The 9 American Indian boarding schools they attended were located in 2 northern plains states, with four run by the Catholic Church and five managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

### Data Analyses

My analysis began with open coding by examining participants' responses and forming categories. The data were broken down into incidents and were closely examined and compared for similarities and differences. Transcriptions were color coded using key words based on the frequency and significance of the respective data. Coding and supporting data were grouped and regrouped through a review of the codes key concepts. Categories emerged from the codes. An analysis of the supporting evidence related to each category resulted in five themes.

### Overview of Themes

Analyses of the interviews with American Indian boarding school survivors revealed five major themes emerging from the data. The first theme, participants experienced loss, was subdivided into five subcategories that identified loss in the form of tribal identity, language, culture, ceremonies and traditions; loss of self-esteem; loneliness due to loss of parents and extended family; feeling of abandonment by parents; feeling lost and out of place when they returned home. The second, participants attending boarding school experienced abuse, was subdivided into corporal punishment; forced child labor; the Outing program,

hunger/malnourished, and sexual and mental abuse. Theme three, the participants' experienced unresolved grief was divided into the four subcategories of maintaining silence; mental health issues; relationship issues; and alcohol abuse. A fourth theme arose from the participants expressing that they felt they had an inferior education at the boarding schools they attended. The fifth theme came from participants expressing ways for community and personal healing was divided into three subcategories: a government apology; returning to American Indian spirituality, forgiveness, and therapy.

All participants in this study have been assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

## Presentation of Themes

### Theme One

The first theme, participants attending boarding school experienced loss, can be subdivided into five sub elements that contributed to loss, namely, that they experienced loss of identity, language, culture, ceremonies and traditions; loss of self-esteem; loneliness due to loss of parents and extended family; feeling of abandonment by parents; feeling lost and out of place when they returned home.

#### *Loss of Identity, language, culture, ceremonies and traditions*

Reine said, "Kids were crying shock, it was a horrible thing to see ... some of the kids would get sick and they'd throw up. We came from a caring and loving home then they [nuns] just treated us like we were little animals." Arriving at school with only the clothes she had on, Alvina said, "The school provided us with Government Issue (GI) clothes; we always wore dresses." Ida remembers, "We were given numbers for our clothes, mine was seventy-six." Alma recalled, "Kerosene on our heads, and put plastic bags [over hair] ... my [scalp] used to burn ... used to burn my head." Cleopie said, "They just went with a scissors ... just chopped our hair

off, they just took the braid up and cut it right across." Alvina said, "... they had these DDT cans, like when you spray for bugs, that powder, it's amazing they never killed anybody." Attendance at church was mandatory. Alma, who attended a Catholic boarding school, said "you didn't have a choice or you got beaten with a strap or knelt in a corner on a broom handle ... you knelt on marble floors." Josephine said "I was ashamed of being Indian ... they [nuns] called us names ... I don't want to say what, I still can't say." Cecelia said, "They [nuns] made me feel ashamed of being Indian, yes that's still with me to this day."

All of the participants were children of earlier boarding school survivors and their parents were disciplined harshly for speaking their language and didn't want their children to have to go through what they had. Rosetta said, "My father went to [boarding school], they put soap in his mouth and slapped him for not speaking English." Two participants did not speak English and upon arriving at school Julia said, "... they'd [priests and nuns] grabbed us off the bus and we said, 'no, no, we want to go back home!' They would yell at us and we'd say 'we don't understand, we don't understand! While learning English Joseph said the nun would beat them into learning telling them "You're not going to be talking that way [Indian] by the time you leave here!"

#### *Loneliness due to loss of parents and extended family*

Rosetta said, "I remember my sister crying all night until we fell asleep." Reine believed kids died from loneliness because, "They just stopped eating." Cecelia was at school when her grandmother died and wasn't allowed to go home, "I really took it hard." Reine said, "you couldn't call home ... when our parents did call we were given a lecture by the nun to say 'everything was good ... everybody's nice to me, 'and there'd be tears streaming down our cheeks." Cleopie cried every night the first two or three months, "it was just such a different

experience not living with your family, and having so many people around me. That was kind of hard."

#### *Feeling of abandonment by parents*

Rosetta said, "Why wasn't my dad able to get us ... so that we could have stayed [home]? It's kind of like they just let you float out there." Josephine said "Everybody there just thought their folks deserted them." Joseph said, "I wondered why my parents hated me." Lola said she used to, "wonder what I was doing there."

#### *Feeling lost and out of place when they returned home*

Josephine said, "When I got off the bus and [mother] says 'I'm your momma' and I said 'you're not Mother Superior!' I didn't even know what a mother was." Unable to adjust to being home Ida said, "...it like I was just taking up space ...I was in the way."

#### Theme Two

The second theme, participants attending boarding school experienced abuse, was subdivided into corporal punishment; forced child labor; the Outing program, hunger/malnourished, and sexual and mental abuse.

#### *Corporal punishment*

Julia was six years old when a nun threw her down stairs into the pantry where she was forgotten about for three days, "I got so sick that they put me upstairs in a room [infirmary]. I didn't have nothing to eat." Josephine remembered, "They'd [nuns] would take them rulers and hit you on your knuckles ... sometimes [your] hands would just bleed." Reine talks about a horrifying scene she witness while in confessional line "She [student] was talking in line, all of a sudden Father [name] lost his temper and he started slugging her in the head literally ... everybody was horrified." Alvina said, "When some girls had run away from government

boarding school ... they had to stand in line there then all the staff people, all the men and all the matrons ... even the superintendent of the school ... would hit them with a belt [as they ran through]." Kathryn said, "One of the girls was swinging and her feet went in the water by accident and they took her and they had a horse whip and [matron] literally beat her on the legs and back, she was cut open and all the welts on her were all bleeding." Other students saw the abuse and resolved to behave. Elcide relates, "I seen a lot of kids being beaten, just physical abuse, it was an ongoing situation every day." Josephine said: "... wet the bed and the nuns would rub your face in it ... "Elcide said the priest would bring a boy to a small room and all the boys in the dorm could hear the boy being beaten and crying, "Happened every morning." Cecelia recounted, "The nuns found hidden pee stained sheets. No one would own up to it. She made the older girls pee in a bucket, she then slammed our faces into the bucket one by one." Ida remembers she would have to "kneel down and the nun would put that wet sheet over my head and face." Reine said, "Kids tried to runaway ... would send dogs after them ... " Cecelia said, "When they [girls] ran away they took them and they cut all their hair off, shaved them bald ... and they made all five of them stand in front of us and tell us 'if you run away this is what we're gonna do to you."

### *Forced Child Labor*

Evelyn was assigned to the laundry, "We had to iron shirts and we had to run the mangle." The eldest of the participants, Ida said, "We'd go to school half a day and we worked half a day. Alma said, "On Monday, the whole day you're in the laundry room - why I don't remember where we got the classroom time in!" Rosetta recalled, "We had chores all the time ... had to mop ... a big stair way ... scrub it on our hand and knees." Reine: "you'd have to use those great big polishers and polish the floors ... bake bread, help with the meal, scrub." "Cleophie

would get a bucket and get on my hands and knees and wash up the floor and move the desks, all by myself. Then I could go to Arts and Crafts. The deal was to do seven paintings for [name] Indian School and you can keep one. The paintings went to school benefactors." Reine explained how she was made to string rosaries that were in turn sent to benefactors, "We'd get paid for stringing rosaries, like a penny. We had to work detail, we all did, it was like slave labor...they'd put them plastic rosaries in begging letters and send them out all across the country"

### *Outing Program*

Alvina said she, "cleaned houses, they paid us. We got fifteen cents an hours. Yeah, the houses were in town. We vacuumed, we swept, mopped, cleaned the bathroom, the shower, we dusted everything, she had a big home. I also ironed clothes for her." Lola said she was forced to do outing jobs while in high school. Her jobs including cleaning homes for four White families, "I worked like a horse for 25 cents an hour!"

### *Hungry/malnourished*

Reine said she was assigned to help serve the priests, "The priests ate like kings ... they had a chef ... fresh vegetables, fresh fruit and steaks and we got some kind of slop in a bowl." Instead of milk, even though the school ran a dairy farm, Postum coffee was served at all three meals. Alma whispered she was hungry, "all the time." Lola recalled, "We had this gruel and sometimes there'd be worms in it, you know little maggots. Even though I was a cook I wasn't supposed to taste it...I'd put [food] in my apron pocket." While students had only oatmeal and corn mush for breakfast, Cleophie had a job preparing the noon meal for the priests, and she also got to eat in the refectory, "and that saved me from losing weight, I did lose weight, but it saved me from becoming a skeleton." Cleophie also stole food from the school's walk-in cooler.

### *Illness*



Alma related that "If you caught chicken pox, the whole place had chicken pox, *everybody* was down." Reine tells of having blood poisoning, "a red streak going past my elbow. The nun sat up all night with hot compresses. They refused to bring me to hospital...and they refused to call my parents ... we were threatened, all of us, not to tell them [her parents] what happened."

### *Sexually Abused*

Josephine said. The nuns would bring me to the priest. I remember serving the priest wine... when I was five. I remember getting in there but never remember leaving. What did they do - get me drunk?" She went on to say she was taken to the doctor a lot, driven by the priest, because she had a lot of problems "down there" [female part]. Another survivor spoke in a whisper, "Father [name] would come and get me from church or if we went to the gym ... they always came after me, because no one else played with me. The head nun would say 'Father [name] wants to see you.' I would say 'no, I don't want to go!' He would pull my pants down, fondle me ... come get me twice a week. Happened until I left school when I was ten." Joseph witnessed sexual abuse saying, "It would happen late at night, they [Brothers] would come in and take somebody out ... they [boys]) would come back crying ... they didn't want to be touched and they were always scared." LaFee went to a federal boarding school and was molested at six years old by a male school worker, "There were times, in the middle of the night, when there were unwanted hands under the covers, and the fear, the overwhelming fear, waking up to that." Albert said when he was eleven years old, "The head maser at the dorm would grab boys, me, and touch us inappropriately, grope our butts and private parts. That lasted for two years."

### *Mentally Abused*

Josephine told, "If you peed your pants they'd [nuns] make sure that all the kids were around you, so then the kids would laugh at you." Reine said, "they would hang their sheets out the window to advertise, and they'd humiliate them [the bed wetter] throughout the whole school and then they'd get beat besides ... she had a little red stick and you'd have to bend over this little bench and she'd literally beat you with the stick,. If she got really into it she'd break the stick." Cecelia tells, "This one matron [name] she kept picking on me, nagging at me and nagging at me ...I just couldn't take it and I had a nervous breakdown. I was seven and spent three months in a hospital."

### Theme Three

The third theme, participants experienced unresolved grief, was divided into the four subcategories of mental health issues; maintaining silence, relationship issues; and alcohol abuse.

Josephine reflected, "To this day as old as I am, it still hurts ...it's something that you don't forget, you know? When you get it deep into you, it [sexually molested] wasn't like it happened just once. It was almost every day." Josephine is still a Catholic, but she said she shrinks back from shaking hands with the priest after services. Kathryn said since leaving boarding school she is a, "recovering Catholic, I no longer practice an organized religion."

Julia, sexually abused by priest for five years, said, "Sometimes I think about it and think about it and I can't sleep at night. And I shouldn't, you know?" Reine said, "At boarding school "everything was regimented, everything was times. To this day I can't stand a schedule ... and I'm also traumatized by institutional settings." When offered a job at a psychiatric hospital she said "I can't even be in that building, it brings flashbacks of boarding school to the degree that there's no way I can be in that setting." Cecelia said "when now I look back, it makes you feel kind of lost; being in a boarding school had some effect on that, I isolated myself." Julia remained

claustrophobic, "When the priest would come get me to his room, another priest would come in and he didn't want the priest to know ... he'd put me in the closet."

#### *Participants maintained silence about their boarding school experiences*

Josephine refused to ever see a therapist saying, "I kind of deal with it in my own way ... every time I think of something I've got my grandkids around me so I usually do something with them and it goes away." Julia said, "I just keep everything to myself." She had not told anyone in her family about the abuse saying "I don't know why I'm talking about it now, but there are some things you just don't talk about sometimes ... but all of this stuff now is starting to come out.

Reine, aware of secondary trauma, said, "Some things you blot out; you had to numb your emotions, we don't discuss it ... and I think that they [siblings] have worse stories than me, that's like being traumatized all over again we don't do that to each other." Albert said, "I had a brother that went to boarding school with me, we've never sat down and said 'do you remember this or that.' I've never talked to any of my brothers or sisters, or my children, some of the things that went on are just so painful."

#### *Current mental health issues*

Julia had a nervous breakdown caused boarding school sexual abuse trauma, and was hospitalized, yet she never told her doctors or therapists about the abuse, "I just couldn't bring myself to talk about it." Reine, who did not want a copy of her interview mailed to her, told me, "I've had to think of this horror every day of my life; I don't want my children or grandchildren to have to think about what I went through for one minute."

#### *Abusive relationships/History of alcoholism*

Cecelia, who has been sober for over 20 years said, "I used to have an alcoholic problem ... drank every day." Joseph believes that, "A lot of what happened to me caused a lot of

resentment, bitterness, a lot of hatred. I became abusive to women. When a person is being abused, then that person may also become the abuser, and that's part of what happened with me as well." Rosetta went into therapy for her anger, "I've been to therapy ... sometimes I get mad ...I don't want to be a mean person."

#### Theme Four

The fourth theme emerged from the participants believing they received a poor education at boarding school. Kathryn said, "School was really easy for me because we weren't challenged. Had I not gone to boarding school I would have gotten a better education. I was much more advanced at 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the public school than the 4<sup>th</sup> grade at boarding school." Albert said "We were considered too dumb to educate so I was forced to take welding and shop, and that took away from my academic areas.

#### Theme Five

The fifth theme came from participants expressing ways for community and personal healing was divided into three subcategories of an apology from the government; a return to American Indian spirituality, forgiveness, and therapy

#### *Apology*

Reine believed an apology from the Catholic Church and from the federal government would help heal the hurt from boarding school trauma, "it would represent ownership of what was done, it happened and voice and voice can't tell these stories and then have them deny it." Alma said, "The government can give an apology, they're just words, and it has to have meaning, not just something to pacify us." Joseph says, "An apology will make the abusers admit to what they did, they can admit to themselves, who they are, and they can themselves heal." Josephine thinks perhaps a lawsuit would help speed an apology, "Make the government

take ownership so we can move on toward healing. What happened to us should be known on the worldwide stage.”

### *Return to American Indian Spirituality*

Joseph, who is deeply involved in his tribal clan system and ceremonies, eloquently stated, "I would like to see them [tribal members] stop the abuse and go back to the old way of doing things ... the four ways of life, Simplicity, Honesty, Respect and Honor ... I believe in our Native spirituality. Return to ancestral ways given to us by the Creator. It's mostly spirituality that needs to be brought back to the (boarding school) survivors, the medicine people have to be involved to help them along. Rosetta said "I want to have my traditions back, I want it for my son, and in memory of my grandparents who taught me what they could." Reine wants to see "a reconnection to (tribal) spirituality, the spirituality where you see it, feel it, touch it, hear it and can be changed by it - a remembering, are-honoring of who we are as a people ... to appreciate the absolute beauty and strength that's in the culture." Kathryn said, "I'd like to see the Catholic Church apologize."

### *Forgiveness*

Elcide said that for those who carry hurt from boarding school, "It's a hard thing to do ... and that is they need to forgive. You need to get rid of that hatred ... then you can truly heal." LaFee said, "I went to group therapy...I remember turning in a chair and just losing it, hitting it and hitting it. I was angry for the things that had happened to me. I became totally exhausted. I went home, took a bath, sprinkled my bed with baby powder – it was like I needed some nurturing, and I didn't have anyone else to do it so I had to do it. Somebody said 'you survived.' I said, 'no, I conquered.'" Albert returned to the boarding school he had attended. He said, "It

was emotional for me. I went back by myself. I wanted to go through this alone; I didn't want any one witnessing me crying. I didn't cry, but came close.”

### **Conclusions**

Fundamental human rights of American Indian children were violated in boarding schools as documented by this study. Even though asked about positive experiences, favorite teachers or mentors and friendships, these interviewees had a majority of negative experiences. These boarding school survivors' stories reflect the legacy of accelerated forced assimilation into White culture. They were treated as less than human and undeserving of respect and dignity as children, as human beings and as members of an ethnic group. The boarding school survivors in this study attended or were sent to boarding schools hundreds of miles away from their home reservation where they experienced severe beatings or they witnessed the beatings of fellow students by staff; were caused mental and emotional harm; were sexually abused or witnessed sexual abuse; they were forced to do manual labor; were hungry; and they experienced the forced loss of language, culture, tribal traditions and spirituality. These boarding school survivors are experiencing continued emotional trauma from beatings, hunger, physical and sexual abuse. Until this study the majority had maintained silence on their boarding school experiences. They all believe they had a poor education at boarding schools they attended. The survivors have expressed a way for healing these *soul wounds* (Duran, Duran, Yellow Horse Brave Heart & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998; Smith, 2003) both personally, and as tribes, is through a governmental apology, therapy and a return to American Indian spirituality, including language and ceremonies.

Discussion: Where to From Here?

*Healing*

It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered. Increasingly, the damage from boarding school abuse, loneliness and lack of love and lack of parenting is being seen as a major factor in ills that plague tribes today, passing from one generation to the next and manifesting in high rates of poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, depression and suicide. We look to our Canadian relatives for models of healing from boarding school trauma and historical trauma. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) report *Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing* prepared in 2004 by Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux and Magdalena Smolewski proposes a new model of historic trauma transmission ‘to create a better understanding of the actiology of social and cultural diffusion that devastated Aboriginal communities for so many years’(p. 65). AHF research has shown that it takes “approximately ten years of continuous healing efforts before a community is securely established in healing from boarding school trauma. Impacts of programs reports positive improved family relationships, increased self-esteem and pride, achievement of higher education and employment; to preventions of suicides. Community impacts are growth in social capital indicators such as volunteerism, informal caring networks, and cultural events. One of the notable impacts reported by case study communities is that the “silence” and shame surrounding boarding school abuses are being broken, creating the climate for ongoing healing” (p. 4).

In McCormicks’s (1995/1996) study, First Nation people utilized several healing modalities to heal their communities and themselves. These included: exercise and the expression of emotion to restore balance; establishing social connections to create inter-connectedness between family, community, culture and nature; He concludes that three aspects: balance, inter-connectedness and intra-connectedness, and transcendence are the most important

means and ends of healing process. For American Indian people, the definition of health evolved around the whole being of each person – the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of a person being in balance and harmony with each other as well as with the environment and other beings. Many American Indian counseling programs already use the concept of interconnectedness in their initiatives, using symbolism of the Medicine Wheel or the Healing Circle that integrate different elements of American Indian philosophy of life. Also important to community healing is partnerships with Elders' groups, shelters/assault centers, youth organizations, police, addictions, social service, education, and health, with the last two the most needing to be the most utilized resources.

The Canadian healing model emphasizes a wholistic, community-based approach that emphasizes training and capacity building in healing, and reliance not only on 'professional' healers, but healers with lived experience and cultural knowledge. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998) developed a Lakota grief experience questionnaire and the semantic differential, as well as a self-reported evaluation instrument and a follow-up questionnaire. AHF (2004) states,

Based on this assessment, an experimental curriculum intervention has been delivered to a group of ten Lakota parents and two Lakota parent facilitators on a Lakota reservation. Similar healing modalities can be devised and successfully implemented to help American Indian people negotiate and successfully practice their social and cultural knowledge in a contemporary world, and use their disastrous experience of de-population and forced assimilation to their benefit. (p. 77)

### *Apology*

According to *Evaluation of Community-Based Healing Initiatives Supported Through the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's* final report, "The majority of respondents felt that the



Government's formal apology had had a significant impact at the personal, community and national level. For some Survivors, this was the recognition and acknowledgement of their suffering that they had been awaiting for a long time; some reported that the heightened awareness caused by the Apology made them feel at last entitled to come forward for healing; Survivors said the government Apology in a sense gave public authenticity to the private pain and shame many had endured for most of their lives" (2009, p. 42).

Senate Joint Resolution 14, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2009, acknowledges "*a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes*" and recommends that an apology be made "*to all Native peoples on behalf of the United States.*" The resolution, titled, Resolution of Apology to the Native peoples of the United States, was incorporated into the Defense Appropriations Act of 2010 where it became buried in the Title VIII, Section 8113. Although the resolution '*urges the President to acknowledge the wrongs of the United States against Indian tribes in the history of the US in order to bring healing to this land,*' no apology has occurred. As a result, there is to date no meaningful apology from either Congress or the President.

### *Unresolved Grieving*

This study provided a vehicle for sixteen boarding school survivors to tell their story. What remains poignant to me is the resounding silence the interviewees have maintained throughout their lives regarding their experiences at boarding schools. Whether positive or abusive, they have refused to, or were unable to talk to their parents, siblings or their children. The stories told here are filled with sorrow, pain and lasting trauma. Yet they are stories told with a look to the future, a future filled with American Indian traditions, language, culture, and most importantly, forgiveness. These survivors have demonstrated enormous resilience in light

of their personal boarding school experiences and their tribal history. These events have taken a toll, on their individual mental health but also on the healthy function of their families.

Dr. Brave Heart (1998) has developed historical trauma and unresolved grief interventions among American Indians that has shown to be effective among a small segment of the American Indian population with elevated psychosocial issues. Other studies show the importance of incorporating culturally specific assessments, allowing for traditional healing approaches. (Fisher & Ball, 2002; Strickland, Walsh & Cooper, 2006; McCabe, 2007).

The next step will be, to paraphrase the words of Paula Gunn Allen (1986) to change American Indian people's social and cultural status from an isolated, dispossessed victimhood to one of incorporation into the fabric of society as knowledgeable, empowered and belonging equals. "In the transformation from one state to another, the prior state or condition must cease to exist. It must die" (79-80). As individuals American Indians can continue the healing process through group, and family therapy as well as attending to their own spiritual development. Further, American Indian tribes will need to facilitate communal grief rituals, incorporating traditional practices.

### **Future Research**

Scholars must increase our understanding of how current life stressors and traumatic events are experienced within the context of boarding school trauma. Scholars of trauma must be committed to developing effective treatments for current and historical trauma. Future scholarship must directly investigate resilience and healing around the continuum of boarding school trauma in American Indian communities. Scholars should give consideration to occurrence of generational trauma, unresolved grieving and post-traumatic stress disorder, and their effects, among boarding school survivors and their descendants living today.

At conferences, gatherings, trainings, across the United States, current research, production of historical materials, must promote the awareness of and understanding of the needs and issues surrounding residential school trauma and its legacy

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