

2014

# Chapter Four of Overcoming Adversities: Resilience in Rural Southeastern Montana

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## Recommended Citation

Knows-His-Gun, Kristie; Bufford, Rodger K.; and Seegobin, Winston, "Chapter Four of Overcoming Adversities: Resilience in Rural Southeastern Montana" (2014). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. 288.

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## Chapter 4

### Discussion

The current study evaluated the amount of adverse childhood experiences the employees of St. Labre Indian School, St. Charles Mission School, and Pretty Eagle Catholic School (collectively called St. Labre) experienced, along with their religious functioning, and current levels of resilience. We will examine childhood adversity, spiritual wellbeing, and resilience, in turn, and then will address overall conclusions.

### Adverse Childhood Experiences

It was revealed that of the 10 adverse items encompassing the Adverse Childhood Experience Rating Scale (ACE), 75% of the St. Labre employees were exposed to a variety of negative childhood experiences. In order to capture the dynamics of this diversified population, data analysis evaluated scores by racial identity, geographical location where the individuals were raised, and their current employment level.

Knowing that historical trauma has wounded generations through the inheritance of ancestral pain (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999), it was imperative to understand this

population by exploring their exposure to negative childhood events. When specifically looking at race it was found that when compared to the Caucasian participants, the Native American group experienced significantly more physical and emotional neglect, household members abusing drugs or alcohol, household members being incarcerated, and exposure to their mother being treated violently. A federal report released by MSNBC stated that almost 12% of deaths among Native Americans/Alaskan Natives are alcohol-related, which is more than three times the percentage in the general population. Their study found that the greatest number of tribal alcohol-related deaths occur in the Northern Plains, where reservations are remote and often destitute (msnbc.com). John Yellow Bird Steele, the tribal president for the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, reported that 90% of criminal cases in the court system, and a similar number of reservation illnesses, are caused by alcohol. It was also noted that fetal alcohol syndrome, fatal drunken driving accidents, and beer-fueled murders have hindered the Pine Ridge reservation for decades (Williams, 2012).

Felitti et al. (1998) explained that experiencing four or more different adversities during childhood is considered significant and creates an increased risk for serious adverse adult outcomes. The St. Labre employees only endorsed an average of 2.41 adversities, which reveals that, as a whole, these participants were not exposed to a debilitating amount of negative experiences. However, with further examination it was found that 34.5% of the Native American population and 15.1% of the Caucasian population experienced four or more such negative events. Yet, this also reveals that 65.5% and 84.9% of participants within these groups were not exposed to the number of adversities considered significantly harmful.

Looking within geographical location of upbringing it was found that individuals who were raised in Southeastern Montana, but not born in that region and individuals who were raised in Midwestern United States experienced the most negative events; whereas, individuals from Western and Eastern United States endorsed relatively fewer. However, geographical locations where the employees were raised were not found to be significantly related to the number of adversities experienced. This, therefore, suggests that the local participants from this rural area of Montana have experienced similar amounts of adversities when compared to participants who originally resided across the United States and subsequently moved to southeast Montana.

An exploration of the relationship between adversity and the different levels of employment established by St. Labre revealed that the employees in positions that require a greater amount of education or skill experienced fewer adversities than employees in positions with fewer requirements. Level 1 employees (*no degree or skill set required*) endorsed a significantly greater exposure to physical abuse, physical neglect, a household member abusing drugs or alcohol, and a household member being incarcerated when compared to Level 4 employees (*degree required*). It was also found that the Level 1 employees had the largest proportions of individuals experiencing four or more negative events during their childhood at 43.4%, whereas only 9.4% of the Level 4 employees were exposed to this significant amount. It was revealed that approximately one quarter of the Native American participants retain Level 1 employment (24%), yet almost half of the Native American participants also have a college education (43%). While, this is significantly lower than the Caucasian population, where 71% have a college education, these statistics reveal that the employees of St. Labre are not only able to maintain employment, but also pursue higher education.

Some participants struggle to maintain stable employment and have been employed numerous times by St. Labre. It was revealed that adverse experiences are positively correlated with how many different times an individual had been employed. This suggests that increased exposure to negative experiences hinders the ability to maintain stable employment.

It was also revealed that childhood adversities are negatively correlated with the amount of time an individual stays within a particular employment position. Therefore, as negative experiences increase, changes within employment positions decrease. A possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that these results are portraying a curvilinear approach to these factors. For instance, people doing well change jobs through advancements and people doing poorly lose their jobs or quit. Individuals in between these two polarities are able to manage their positions for long periods of time, but without progression or decline.

### **Spiritual Well-Being**

This sample was found to have relatively high levels of spiritual well-being when compared to other published studies. Due to this study's positive correlation between Spiritual Well-Being and how satisfied the employees of St. Labre are with their employment, we can conclude that overall these participants have a sense of fulfillment. This is likely to only further enhance their capacity to maintain stable employment.

While participants in this study possess relatively high levels of spiritual well-being, these scores may be an underrepresentation of their current level of spiritual functioning due to the inclusion of three reversed items within the SWB-6. Anecdotal findings by



Carlson et.al, (2011), suggested that reversed items tend to be less reliable for ethnically diverse older adults. They are found to have less internal consistency, were associated with lower item-scale correlations, and were often answered in atypical ways at an intra-individual level. To illustrate this, in the present study a Native American participant asked for clarification on how to answer one of the reversed items on the SWB-6 during this study. Therefore, these reversals may have adversely affected the overall score and internal consistency for this scale.

It was also found that women had significantly higher levels of spiritual well-being. This may be due, in part, by the fact that there were almost three times as many female participants than male. Yet, this difference is still worth noting as most studies did not find gender-related differences when comparing levels of spiritual well-being (Paloutzian, Bufford, & Wildman, 2012).

It should also be noted that the results for the SWB-6 were computed for this study so comparisons could be made with other published data. The mean item score for the SWB-6 of 5.293 corresponds to 105.86 on the twenty-item scale; see Bufford et al. (1991) for a further comparison of scores.

### **Resilience**

Despite undergoing a variety of adverse experiences, St. Labre employees were found to have essentially normal levels of resilience. Even though they scored significantly lower than Connor-Davidson's general population sample, the effect size was minimal. Also, no differences were found between the current participants and an African-American college sample, participants of which were found to possess highly resilient features. The current sample also scored significantly higher than several clinical samples ranging

from primary care patients to PTSD patients. Therefore, it is likely that these individuals were exposed to protective factors that promoted their capacity to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning.

This may be explained by focusing on the reverse percentage of exposure to adversities. For example, 10 to 45% of the participants in this study reported experiencing the various negative events listed on the ACE. However, these results also reveal that 55-90% of participants reported that they were not exposed to any specific negative event. Therefore, this is another finding that suggests these individuals were exposed to protective factors that promoted wellbeing and resilient qualities.

Despite the fact that the Native American group experienced more adversities and retain more Level 1 employment positions, they were not found to possess lower levels of resilience. This suggests that these individuals utilized personal skills and strengths to cope and recover from the problems or challenges they experienced.

Employment position and resilience were found to correlate negatively with adverse experiences. Therefore, as exposure to negative events decreases, employment and resilience levels increase, and vice versa. Because this population of participants, as a whole, has not been exposed to a debilitating amount of negative experiences, they possess higher levels of resilience, which in turn, has allowed stable employment.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Historical traumas and the inheritance of ancestral pain have crippled generations of Native Americans. Prior research shows that genocidal acts distorted cultural identity, self-concept, and values, thus causing depression, self-destructive behavior, substance

abuse, and chronic bereavement for many Native Americans (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999). This study found that the Native American participants were exposed to significantly more childhood adversities than Caucasian participants. The Native Americans also reported lower levels of education and lower employment status when compared to the Caucasian counterparts. Despite this, however, the Native American employees of St. Labre, in general, are unusual in the fact that they were not debilitated by their exposure to adverse experiences. Although many Native Americans within this sample reported that they had endured at least four or five adverse childhood experiences, suggesting intense hardships, they were similar to normal samples in terms of resilience and spiritual wellbeing. This is an interesting outcome, as it reveals the Native Americans within this sample possess more resilient qualities than we might expect.

While resilience factors were not a primary focus of this investigation, these scores suggest that the current sample had exposure to many of the resilience factors found by Connor and Davison (2003). These include: (a) personal competence, high standards, and tenacity, endorsing one's strong sense of power and adherence to one's goal when facing setback situations; (b) Trust in one's instincts, tolerance of negative affect, and strengthening effects of stress; (c) Positive acceptance of change and secure relationships with others, adaptability; (d) Control of achieving one's own goal and the ability to access assistance from others (social support); and (e) Spiritual influences, one's faith in God or in fate.

Resilience was also found to be positively correlated with Existential Well-Being, an additional protective factor (Paloutzian et al, 2012) that was closely examined. The St. Labre employees have relatively high levels of spiritual wellbeing. While the Native

American group showed significantly greater scores, both racial groups expressed moderately high levels. This perhaps is not surprising since St. Labre is a private Catholic institution. Due to the findings that spirituality is positively correlated with employee satisfaction, it is likely that this organization is providing an environment that promotes a sense of wellbeing and satisfaction for their employees.

A stepwise regression showed that time on the job, existential wellbeing, and years of unemployment, in that order of significance, all predicted resilience. Because the data are correlational, it is not possible to make causal conclusions. However, job stability is the most powerful predictor of resilience. Because St. Labre provides a stable work environment, supplementation of achieving college advancement, encouragement of spiritual participation, and honors cultural beliefs, it is hypothesized that St. Labre itself is one protective factor providing the emergence of resilience. To further support this, no significant differences in resilience were found between the differing employment levels, which imply that all levels of employment are exposed to similar protective factors within this same organization. Therefore, participants of this rural population are gaining the necessary tools that encourage and promote successful outcomes.

Previous research by Long and Nelson (1999) and Belcourt-Dittloff (2006) examined resilience specifically within Native American populations. They both found that cultural beliefs and traditions, community, hope, spirituality, and identity are important resilient factors. Native American individuals who relied upon these resilient, culturally specific, internal and external coping strategies were likely to report higher levels of positive psychosocial status. The employees of St. Labre were found to possess resilient qualities regardless of their race, region of upbringing, employment level, or exposure to harsh conditions. While the current study cannot explicitly state what protective factors

encouraged resilience for these individuals, we found, that in general, this population had been protected. As one might suspect, individuals are able to function in a more sufficient manner when defended from crippling experiences. For these individuals it has been expressed through their ability to thrive as adults through employment, rather than succumb to poverty and hardship.