

**BEING INDIAN:  
STRENGTHS SUSTAINING FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES  
IN SASKATCHEWAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study asked the question: what were the strengths that contributed to the survival of First Nations peoples during their stay in residential schools? Six elders who are survivors of residential schools in southern Saskatchewan were asked to respond in narrative form to this research question. Analysis of interviews revealed that, drawing on community-building skills of First Nations cultures, they created their own community with each other within the confines of this oppressive environment. The strengths they identified are consistent with sense of community identified in community psychological literature, yet are also unique to First Nations cultures. These strengths are: autonomy of will and spirit, sharing, respect, acceptance, a strong sense of spirituality, humour, compassion, and cultural pride. It is suggested that community-based mental health initiatives which identify traditional sources of strengths within First Nations communities will be most effective in promoting healing from residential school trauma.

**INTRODUCTION**

Residential schools were implemented in western Canada during the late 1800s to evangelize, educate, and assimilate First Nations peoples into dominant Euro-Canadian society (Miller, 1996). They were operated primarily by churches and funded largely by the federal government (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1998). It was thought that the most effective way to promote assimilation of the First Nations was to remove children from the influence of parents and communities and to place them in residential schools for socialization and training (Dickason, 1992; Tobias, 1991). Historians and scholars have documented the negative effects on First Nations cultures of the residential school experience (Caldwell, 1967; Bull, 1991; Miller, 1996). Former students have published memoirs and spoken publicly about the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that they suffered in the school environments (Knockwood, 1992; Johnston, 1998). These schools were based on a Western middle-class system of values which required First Nations students to make major cultural adjustments, including changes of language, customs, diet, and lifestyle (Caldwell, 1967; Bull, 1991). The regimentation of routine, segregation by gender, ban on speaking their

own language and practicing their traditions, and separation from family were very traumatic for the children (Johnston, 1988). Loneliness and lack of nurturance was pervasive (Miller, 1996, p. 337). Further devastation came in attempts to replace traditional First Nations spirituality with Christianity; students were routinely called heathens, savages, and pagans (Cardinal, 1969; Knockwood, 1992).

The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1998) made clear the extent of the damage suffered by entire cultures as a result of the residential school movement and made recommendations to fund treatment for those suffering from the effects of these schools. This recommendation is just, although there remains the risk of perpetuating a similar "colonialization" mentality if mental health and healing efforts are filtered through a Western, non-Native paradigm (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997). So far, research on the psychological effects of residential schools acknowledges and focuses on various negative psychological effects, such as stress, depression, substance abuse, suicide, parenting difficulties, and acculturation (Irwin & Roll, 1995; Morissette, 1994). Studies such as those conducted by Haig-Brown (1993) also document the "resistance" and resilience of First Nations peoples. However, there exists little research on the kinds of strengths that First Nations peoples possess which have allowed them to survive the residential school genocide. More questions remain about what inner resources or cultural strengths First Nations peoples possess which sustained them during their residential school stay.

Identifying the positives which individuals and cultures bring to such traumatic situations can be of help during the healing process. A community psychology paradigm is useful for this research since it has a tradition and language for talking about strengths and diversity (Seidman & Rappaport, 1983). Mental health initiatives promoted by community psychologists focus on competence, strength, and wellness rather than on pathology (Trickett, 1996). Sonn and Fisher (1998) articulate the kind of community resilience among some cultures, which has allowed them to persevere during years of oppression. Focusing on strengths is also the most useful paradigm from which to contribute to models of successful mental health initiatives originating from within First Nations communities (Boone, Minore, Katt, & Kinch, 1997; van Uchelen, Davidson, Quressette, Brasfield, & Demerais, 1997; Peters & Demerais, 1997).

The purpose of this research is to explore the psychological and cultural strengths of First Nations residential school survivors. The intent is to discover what helped them during their school stay. Our research does not frame the participants' experience in Western psychological concepts such as *coping* and *defense mechanism*. Instead, we focus on strengths and qualities of the human spirit which may have more meaning to people from Aboriginal cultures. The strengths will reflect both the individual characteristics of the participants and the qualities which occur on an interpersonal/collective level. The intended contribution of this research is threefold: (a) to contribute narrative data to our growing understanding of residential schools life, (b) to contribute to the body of literature on indigenous psychology of First Nations peoples, and (c) to respect the positives which may serve as a contribution to healing initiatives.

## METHOD

The narrative-inquiry method was chosen as most appropriate for understanding ways in which First Nations peoples have responded to residential schools as a discrete form of oppression (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997; Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Trickett, 1996). Transmission of culture and history by the First Nations peoples of the plains was by oral tradition through story telling, so the use of narrative or the telling of stories was appropriate. An attempt was made to listen to the construction of these narratives from an indigenous perspective rather than from the Euro-Canadian dominant psychological and cultural framework (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). The first author, who served as the interviewer, is a member of a Saulteaux First Nation who spent six months in a residential school when she was a child. The second author is non-Native with close family ties to First Nations communities. Combining our perspectives from inside and outside of First Nations culture challenged our individual interpretations of the narratives (Uichol & Berry, 1993).

**Data Collection**

**Participants.** Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who: (a) had been in residential schools in the Southern Saskatchewan region when they were young, (b) were over the age of 50, (c) represented both urban and reserve residents, (d) were not intimately acquainted with the researchers, and (e) represented both genders (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first author contacted First Nations elders in Regina, Moose Jaw, and a reserve in southern Saskatchewan to ask for names of people who might be willing to be interviewed. She then telephoned nine potential participants, informed them about the nature of the research, and set up interview times. Three declined participation: one of the three was out of town and two stated they were not ready to discuss their experiences. Six participants (three women and three men) were interviewed. They ranged in age from 53 to 82, with an average age of 67. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes and lasted approximately 1 1/2 to 3 hours each. In this sample, three participants are Cree, one is Saulteaux, and two are Nakota (or Assiniboine). The six participants comprised a diverse group and experienced residential schools in discrete socio-historical periods. Table 1 describes each participant.

These participants are referred to as "elders" since they have earned the trust of people around them, share cultural knowledge, and are living a lifestyle that encourages respect by their communities.

**Interview.** According to Plains Indian custom and protocol, each participant was presented with a tobacco offering to indicate that the information the researchers would receive would be valued and appreciated. A qualitative interview was used, and participants were asked to tell the story of their experience in residential school (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The first author listened respectfully to participants as they constructed the narrative of their life experience. Questions or prompting were added to focus the narrative on the research purpose, which was to explore strengths they drew upon during their stay in residential schools. The interviews consisted of questions such as:

**TABLE 1**  
Participants

Participant (Pseudo-nym)	Age	Gender	Current Place of Residence	Number of Years in Residence (School)	Time Period in Residential School	First Nation	Faith of School Attended
Sarah	82	Female	Urban	13 years (ages 4-18)	1919-1932	Nakota (Assiniboine)	Catholic
Jane	77	Female	Reserve	12 years (ages 3-15)	1923-1935	Cree	United
Bob	68	Male	Reserve	2 years (ages 14-16)	1943-1945	Nakota (Assiniboine)	United
Joe	67	Male	Reserve	8 years (ages 8-16)	1938-1946	Saultaux	United
Joyce	53	Female	Urban	12.5 years (ages 5.5-18)	1948-1961	Cree	Catholic
Bill	56	Male	Urban	8 years (ages 8-16)	1949-1958	Cree	Catholic

- (1) Tell me about your residential school experiences?
- (2) What experience or feeling stands out in your memory of residential schools?
- (3) Did you draw on any internal strengths or beliefs that helped you deal with these experiences?

Re-creation of objective or factual memories was not the purpose of the interview. Rather, as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) describe the purpose of the self-narrative, "the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller's culture and social world" (p. 9). Researchers were prepared to offer support for participants who experienced distress as a result of the interviews; however, these participants seemed to have previously resolved many issues through participating in traditional ceremonies. To maintain confidentiality of easily recognized participants, researchers decided that no actual names of participants, reserves, bands, or residential schools would be used. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### Data Analysis

The holistic-content method of narrative analysis was chosen for analysis of the life stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). Each narrative as a whole was taken as the unit of analysis and sections of the story were interpreted in the context of other parts of the narrative. Through a process of "empathic" reading, the researchers detected meanings constructed and communicated by the participants. Specific themes emerged through this type of reading and were followed through the story, with details and sections of narratives highlighted to illustrate the themes. These

foci or themes were then taken to the interpretive level and compared to previous literature and psychological theory. This step allowed the researchers to compare narratives as constructed by the participants from an indigenous frame of reference to Western psychological theory and synthesize an interpretation of strengths into an indigenous psychological paradigm (Kim & Berry, 1993). The resulting interpretative categories, presented in order of greatest content, include autonomy of will and spirit, sharing, respect, acceptance, spirituality, compassion and humour, and pride in being First Nations.

A follow-up interview was conducted with four participants who were available to discuss the accuracy of the findings and to share the results. The participants were pleased with the results, and made statements such as, "It's the way it was said," and "It's the way I would have liked to present my story." The first author asked participants whether it was significant for them to have a First Nations interviewer. Two of them stated that it was an important factor, since they felt more comfortable disclosing information to another First Nations person who would understand how they felt and whom they trusted not to distort the information. The other two participants stated that it made no difference since they were comfortable sharing their stories.

## RESULTS

The themes that emerged from the narratives are organized under categories that reflect the individual as well as cultural or collective strengths which participants identified as sustaining them during these difficult times.

### Autonomy of Will and Spirit

The narratives revealed that participants actively engaged in a process of resistance which reflects their sense of will and spiritual autonomy. This category emerged as the largest category, reflecting common themes in how participants responded to injustices in residential schools. For example, participants spoke of the hunger they experienced during their stay. This was extremely painful for these children. As Joe stated, "But a lot of times we used to go hungry down there, hungry down at [school]." They laughed when they related "hilarious" times when, to offset the hunger, they exercised autonomy of will and took some crabapples or grabbed a scoop of peanut butter. Bob remembered a time when he conveniently didn't hear the school bell ringing after dinner so he could eat the staff's leftovers. He did not feel either shame or guilt, because, "They give us that, I worked for it."

Of the many rules that were rigidly enforced, the ban against speaking their own Native language seemed the most unjust. The participants remembered instances when little children were forced to kneel for hours with clothespins on their tongues for speaking their language, or were "strapped" and slapped. They were particularly aware of this injustice when the nuns and priests spoke French, yet the children were not allowed to speak their language. Joyce questioned a nun about this injustice when two of her friends were punished for talking Cree; as a result of her questioning, Joyce also was punished. One day, Bill similarly questioned a nun about the injustice of their being able to speak French when his friends were not allowed to speak their language and the nun "cuffed" him. How-

ever, the participants stated that they exercised autonomy of will and spirit when they spoke their own language anyway, regardless of punishment. As Jane explained, "Sure we got a scolding for talking our language, that's nothing. It made us feel bad. We could speak our language because that's the way we were brought up."

All activities in residential school were segregated by gender. Girls and boys were forbidden to have contact with one another or to relate to one another. This was particularly difficult when brothers and sisters were separated, or during adolescence when it would be natural to want contact between genders. As Bob stated, "I think I was in hell . . . it was bad that first year; I didn't like it. Can't come home, can't do as you like, can't even talk to girls." Since he came to residential school as a teenager, this policy ran contrary to what he was used to in his home community. He said that the most he could hope for was that a girl he liked would walk by. Jane stated that the students worked around this policy when possible, for instance, drilling holes in the lockers so girls and boys could talk to each other. Bill had a girlfriend for three years, but was rarely able to see her and never kissed her. Joyce stated that separation by genders "didn't prevent boys and girls from having boyfriends and girlfriends." Daring seniors met in the coal room on "dates, if you could call them that."

Other examples of resistance to the unfair amount of work expected of these children included their running away from school and, very rarely, hiding from chores. Joe recounted how they would bring him his lunch box over dinner so he could keep working: "Don't stop, don't stop, go right through [the lunch hour]." They kept Joe and his brothers during summer to work in the fields, "Three of us—they used to keep us. The other kids used to go home for holidays. They used to keep us for July so eventually they let us go for a month in August to come home. I told [my brother] after we came home, 'Hey boy, I'm not going back to school. Hell with that noise. I didn't learn a damn thing.'" One time, Joe and his brothers received "damn good lickens" for something they felt they did not deserve. Joe was angry because it was an unjust punishment, but was able to avenge himself on the principal who beat him:

So one time I got a licken there and I knew my principal. I said, 'You are the bugger that gave me a damn good licken with a long strap.' It happened that evening there were enough boys to make a football team—kick this ball around. . . . He was on the other side. I don't know what come into my mind that time. Boy! There's the bugger that gave me a damn licken with a strap and he was running around. Me, too, chasing this ball around. Me, too. I chased him. I tripped that damn principal that time. I said stuff like that. I done it on purpose but I said I didn't do it on purpose [laughs]. He's the one that gave me a damn good licken. Boy! He come up and chased me for awhile but he wanted me to apologize for what I had done to him. I said, 'No.' I didn't want to apologize. At that time he wanted to give me a darn good licken. Now it is my turn. I must be getting to be about fourteen years old that time.

Among the other practices that were considered unfair was the policy of opening the students' mail. Bill found a stash of letters for him and other students when he was cleaning an office. After this discovery, he and other boys bought a post office box and they sneaked downtown to get their mail. One day, Bill received a letter and money from his parents to him and his sisters, so he sneaked

over to the girls' side to give the money to his sister and let her read the letter. A nun discovered him and slammed him against a wall. Bill felt good about being able to express his autonomy. Sarah summed up the response of all participants to the injustices they suffered in the residential schools:

I always had that understanding of—how to say it now—to be honest to yourself or whatever, to have your feelings tell you your feelings, your own feelings—how you feel. I always went that way. I never depended on anybody to like to learn me things especially if they're bad stuff. I never went through that. Nobody tell me anything like that.

Despite the fact that most of them were subjected to abuse, these participants did not internalize this or model their behaviour after it. Their will and their spirits were not broken. They found ways to persevere in speaking their language and to express themselves within the limits of their prison.

### Sharing

In their narratives, the participants described the importance of friendship and of sharing resources with each other. When students "stole food," they were punished by the residential school staff as having committed criminal acts against the cultural value of private property. Sarah, who did not have family to send her parcels, stated that her friends "shared goodies" received from home with her. Once her friend took a can of sardines from a counter top and shared it with Sarah. Joe and "the boys" were often hungry and sneaked away to eat cream, bread, and chickens that they had "stolen." To them, they were not stealing, but enacting their traditional cultural values of sharing.

Bob related a story that is an example of the ways students practiced their traditions of gathering together for a feast:

When we cleaned out a chicken coop, killed some roosters. Threw them in that load of hay, all covered up. Bring them back in the bush. We worked hard out there. Cleaned them chickens. Saturday afternoon we'd go back there. Cook them [laughs]. Potatoes, too. Throw potatoes in the fire. We'd have one guy sitting up in the tree watching the school, if anyone's coming [laughs]. Boys' supervisor. Four o'clock we got to get back there, do chores. Chore time.

The language Bob used reflects their cultural construction of these events:

After dinner we'd go out there to the bush [laughs]. Feast out there [laughs]  
... we had nothing but soup and we had a good meal like that.

The feast is an example of a community tradition which, through actual and ritual sharing of food, reinforces the importance of interdependence and the blessings of mother nature.

### Respect

Respect is a fundamental First Nations value, and one that is fairly consistent across indigenous cultures. All people deserve respect because all are equal in the eyes of the Creator. Bill explained that following the rules was a form of survival, but also an aspect of the respect which is a strong cultural value:

You kind of followed the rules and just went along with, when they talked, you never questioned. In those days you never questioned their authority.

Nothing. You never did. I think because the respect for them as well and we believed in them, I guess.

Jane, like Sarah, said that she listened and tried never to do anything out of her way to displease some of the "mean" nuns. Once she was hit on the head with keys when she couldn't remember a multiplication fact. We were "always scared to do something wrong." Joyce recalled that the discipline was similar to that received at home, "one crack and one crack on either hand." However, the reasons for punishment differed, with punishment in school for talking in class or in hallways, or for speaking the Cree language.

The participants were aware that they were not given the same kind of respect they gave to the staff and teachers. This violation of the value of respect offended them. Joyce remembered one exception—a nun who was also First Nations, who treated the children with respect. She didn't speak French in front of the children, for example, which they considered an act of respect.

### Acceptance

The concept of acceptance was identified in the narratives as an aspect of this respect. Acceptance often has been labelled as a passive quality, or a stoic attitude toward life. However, the participants described this acceptance as a state of mind towards which they worked, an acceptance of the way things were at that moment in time. Bob's father wanted him and his brothers to go to residential school "to learn" and to "know something." Because Bob respected his father, he actively decided to accept his father's wishes. During his first year, he was very lonely and he cried a lot, but eventually "made up our mind that we might as well stay so we could take it, because if I was thinking low, the same place was right there." Joe also accepted the hard work and attempted to make the best of the situation.

Sarah said that the nuns and priests were "strict" and expected blind obedience to the rules and procedures. The students had to pray on their hands and knees, and Sarah reflected, "maybe that's what made me think I had to listen to everything [staff] told me." She accepted the school's directive of what she was supposed "to do or go," and believed she didn't receive the strap because she could "listen" well and follow instructions. If punished, she accepted it and thought "she had it coming to me because I did wrong, but I listened good."

Listening and observing are traditional ways of teaching First Nations children, so this cultural strength was helpful to the participants. However, the children encountered limits of this acceptance when their sense of autonomy of spirit was violated. For example, Sarah related an instance when a nun slapped her "for no apparent reason." Sarah responded by ripping the nun's sleeve off and felt justified in this action. She insisted that, if there had been a reason for the slap, she would have accepted it.

Bill felt that the missionary staff tried to take First Nations culture away:

And at the time, I think, we didn't know enough of our culture to feel we had that right to speak our language. Our culture, I think, they were really trying to take away from us at that time. And I guess I didn't know enough myself to argue that point. Just kind of accepted it and, I think, that's the only form of abuse I can remember seeing.



### Spirituality

Three participants reported that they were exposed to a heavy dose of Catholicism in the residential schools. However, spirituality, as a core aspect of First Nations cultures, sustained them during their school stay. As Bob said, prayer helped sustain him, "Do a little praying, I guess. Do some praying before I went to bed anyway. Dad always tells us that when you pray in your language God understands you." Today Bob actively practices his culture's spiritual traditions through participating in traditional ceremonies and pow wows.

Those participants who grew up in the residential schools still relied on spirituality to help them in times of trouble, but found Christianity to be their spiritual tradition. Sarah was baptized at age nine and, as an orphan, was raised in the residential school. She is grateful for having been raised by the school, and Christianity is important to her, "That's how I felt. I don't know why I was feeling that way because maybe I had no guardian, nobody to protect me. I had to go to prayer, to God to help me."

Bill felt resentment for being "brainwashed" into believing that Catholicism was the "only good religion." He stated that the missionaries used fear tactics, so he was afraid that "every little thing was a sin in those years to them." He said that it was "sickening" the way some of the clergy projected their "evil-minded" thoughts onto the children:

All of a sudden this brother, that was kind of one of the child-care workers, snuck up on me and he slapped me on the head. So he said, 'What are you doing down here? I know you're sitting here thinking bad thoughts.' [laughs] Oh boy! I was so angry! I said, 'I'm sitting here. I'm enjoying the lake, it's just like a glass . . . I'm studying . . . Why would you think I'm thinking bad thoughts?' 'Well, that is what young boys do.' So he sat down and gave me a preaching for like forty minutes about sex. It had absolutely nothing to do with what I was trying to do. [laughs] It was things like that that were upsetting.

Although no participants described instances of sexual abuse, they did describe these types of encounters with clergy. Both of Bill's parents had gone to residential schools and his father worked in one. They were dedicated Catholics and made sure that Bill and his siblings attended mass and practiced Catholicism. As a result, he did not learn the spiritual traditions of his people to pass on to his children.

We really didn't push religion on [our children]. I think that was because it was pushed on us and I've never, like if they don't [want] to go to church; mind you we don't go to church ourselves anymore. I've never pushed that on them either as they grew up I guess. I tell myself that's why because I don't want to. Because my parents pushed it on me. I don't want to push it on them.

The participants also introduced a concept that is often heard in Native cultures. They felt "lucky." Sarah said that she felt lucky not to be one of the children getting punished. For her, this meant that she was obeying a natural spiritual, or intuitive, sense of what was right. Luck was not a random whim of nature, but an ability to tune in harmoniously to a spiritual force. Joyce stated that it bothered her not to be able to talk to her brother while in residential schools, but she was "lucky" she saw her sister every day. Feeling lucky is a form of optimism, of being grateful for what you have or what you are given.

## Humour and Compassion

Humour was heard throughout the narratives. The participants, through an active construction of their experiences, *found* humour in many situations. At times, participants looked for ways they could experience relief in situations that might otherwise be constructed as overwhelmingly painful. All participants described "hilarious schemes" to work around the rules in residential schools. All participants stated that a sense of humour helped them during their school stay. Sarah recalled that "we had lots of fun after I was getting older like knowing things, doing things, but we had fun, there were times we had fun." The children were able to create fun and find humour.

Compassion also is deeply valued and nurtured in indigenous culture. The participants all evidenced a deep sense of compassion for themselves and for the others who suffered in the residential schools. For instance, Jane and Sarah were just three and four years old when they were taken to residential school. Sarah recalled:

I used to cry. I used to cry lots because I didn't know where I was. You know when you are a little girl you don't know. You got nobody there. You got no grandmother there, no mother, nothing. It was very hard on me but I went through it.

All participants said that the school environment was cold and sterile, with no nurturing given the children in their loneliness. As the participants told their stories, it was the moments when they were forbidden to act on their compassion that they remembered and still found painful. As Sarah related, "Sometimes when the kids would be getting straps or lickens, I used to cry lots for them." She witnessed the physical abuse of children and called it "torture;" it was torture for her that she was forbidden to comfort them.

Bill remembered that the little boys got the strap, but the big boys didn't. It was painful to him when "some of the younger ones come September, they'd hang onto their parents when the parents were dropping them off, cry for days." He and the other children were forbidden to comfort these little ones: "if you were an older brother you couldn't even go and cuddle with your little brother or go over there, even if they were in the next playroom." Joyce saw how much her friends missed home when they received parcels with dried meat from their parents:

They'd grab the bag with the dried meat and they'd smell it, and you could just see them thinking of home, and then they'd hold it against their chest and then they would just drag it out as long as they could . . . probably because that is the closest connection to home.

Joyce would take friends who couldn't go home to her home during visiting time. She and her other friends, come September, "used to cry, cry, cry." The importance of compassion is described by Joyce, who talked about a First Nations nun and two other nuns who had a "big heart" and gave the children hugs. Another comfort was a First Nations woman who worked in the kitchen; she "always had a smile" and "always gave you a hug." Students gravitated toward her and she was like a grandmother or mother to everyone.

### Pride in Being First Nations

All participants stated that, although they were subjected to extreme oppression and racism, they persevered in feeling pride in being First Nations peoples. Sarah explained that her language and culture were called "evil" and "pagan," but she didn't accept this: "I always figured being an Indian was something great about me." Bob retained his Native language as his first language and reiterated what his father told him, "When you pray in your language, God understands you."

First Nations beliefs, traditions, and rituals sustained three of the participants during their stay in residential school. Joe learned First Nations beliefs and rituals from his parents. He stated that his father was a wise man and taught him stories and rituals that he still practices today. Joyce said she was never ashamed of being First Nations, although Métis members of her family looked down on them:

You can't change who you are, so you have to make the best of . . . and you should be proud of who you are. You have to know that you're not the same as everybody else but that doesn't mean you're not as good.

Joyce said that she believes she lost her language and her family since she couldn't go home during the school year. She remembered the Catholic sisters calling the children "les sauvages." She said that a First Nations nun who came to the residential school helped her very much. She gave the children hugs and had "nice brown skin." A First Nations family who moved onto the grounds was also helpful because "you could go there and talk to them." Bill, whose parents also were survivors of the residential school system, did not learn about his heritage when he was growing up. However, he "enjoyed being what [he] was." He was aware of being First Nations: "we knew who we were." But there were times, particularly when the Métis neighbours called them "little savages" that, he stated, "I don't think we were really proud at that time of our heritage." He also recalled receiving "flak" because he was more light-skinned than other First Nations persons. He used the term "blue-eyed Indian" when referring to himself.

Three of the participants feel as if First Nations is their first and only identity. The three other participants feel as if they are part of two cultures, with the primary and most important one being Indian. Bill was raised Catholic and said, "I can't fall asleep unless I say my three Hail Marys." But his First Nations traditions are very important and meaningful to him, and he would like his children to know about them: "I'm kind of using the two now more than I ever did." For Jane, the fact that her grandfather passed on rituals and stories about First Nations beliefs "when she was old enough to know" has sustained her psychologically and spiritually. According to custom, he also provided her with a name whose legacy to her was to be old and have gray hair and to be as strong as a bear. She describes herself as a Christian, but she is an Indian first: "When there's an Indian gathering, an Indian ceremony someplace, I'm there. I'm not in Church because I'm an Indian."

Five of the six participants in this research evidenced loyalty to the residential school and articulated some positives as a result of their attendance. Jane and Sarah attended their schools at an early age, so they felt grateful for the school's guardianship. Joyce and Bill, who attended the schools after the 1950s transformation to a more "regular" educational setting, enjoyed participation in extracur-

ricular activities which they believed promoted self-esteem and confidence. Jane, Sarah, Bob, and Joyce were thankful for the strong work ethic they received at residential school. However, Joe felt bitter about the "lickens" he received, for not receiving a quality education, and for the severe abuse and neglect he suffered.

## DISCUSSION

The interviews revealed a narrative of "creating community" within the confines of the oppressive residential school environment. The themes that emerged from the narratives identify strengths that sustained the participants when they were children in residential schools. These strengths included: autonomy of will and spirit, sharing, respect, acceptance, a strong sense of spirituality, the psychological attributes of humour and compassion, and cultural pride. The residential school movement is one example of genocidal policies that disrupted First Nations at the individual, familial, and cultural levels. We suggest that the strengths identified in analysis of these narratives illustrate not only individual strengths, but convey aspects of First Nations cultures which have contributed to the ability of Aboriginal peoples to survive despite such policies. Drawing on community-building strengths of First Nations cultures, these participants survived without losing themselves. As First Nations communities heal from the impact of the residential schools, it may be useful to recognize and celebrate the strengths of survivors. The devastation suffered as a result of the residential schools must not be minimized, but the People survived thanks to those who made it through this experience.

Narratives of this study confirm the results of research by other First Nations in Canada—that the cultural traditions of Native peoples hold within them the spirit of community (van Uchelen et al., 1997). These aspects of community are strengths in Native cultures and are present in relationships, dialogues, and community gatherings. For example, while in residential schools the participants in this research shared food, resources, and support with one another and engaged in traditional activities such as the feast. In indigenous cultures, the sharing of food and resources is a fundamental value and act of community, subsistence, and spirituality (Katz, Biesele, & St. Denis, 1997). This value of sharing as an aspect of strength in First Nations communities has been emphasized in previous research as useful in building collaborative teams (Boone et al., 1997). During the interviews, the participants were able to laugh about the hilarious schemes they constructed with each other to work around oppressive rules. In indigenous culture, joy and laughter are essential psychological ingredients for any healthy community. Laughing at ourselves and community members in a teasing way also serves to minimize arrogance and build humility. Compassion for the other children was a major part of the narratives. When they were forbidden to act on this compassion, were forbidden to comfort the other children, the participants described this as torture. They were able to exercise their autonomy of will in the face of disrespectful treatment by relying on the cultural value of respect. This emphasis on respect allowed them to see injustices clearly and to resist these injustices (e.g., speaking and praying in their own language and "stealing" the food which should have been fairly distributed). They also found the two spiritual systems, Western and Aboriginal, to be separate since they were called "heathen,"

"pagan," and "savage" for practicing First Nations spiritual traditions. Despite the attempt at brainwashing in the schools, the participants continued to practice Native spirituality and today feel pride in their cultural heritage.

Reinterpreting from an indigenous perspective qualities portrayed in Euro-Canadian literature as passive (such as stoicism) reveals that participants actively constructed a positive worldview within this destructive environment. As children in residential schools, these participants *found humour*, even in painful moments. Out of respect, they *actively worked toward an acceptance* of the way things were at that moment in time. And they *cultivated spiritual optimism* through feeling lucky and grateful for what they had. Some Native elders state that you have to "take care of your luck" or it will leave you (Alaska Native Human Resource Development Project, 1988). This concept has been distorted as a belief in supernatural forces rather than correctly interpreted as a form of spiritual optimism and care of the spirit. Dasen (1984) found that being lucky in the Baoule culture is an aspect of traditional spirituality and reflects a valued aspect of social intelligence in this culture. Similarly, the stealing of food for these children was an *enactment of the cultural value of sharing*, rather than a violation of the western concept of private property as it has been interpreted (Boone et al., 1997).

However, there were limits to the participants' acceptance when their sense of injustice was outraged. In these instances, the children *exercised autonomy and actively resisted unjust treatment*. This sense of injustice was most likely to be activated when they witnessed their peers treated in unjust and abusive ways. In those moments, the children risked punishment to themselves by speaking up on behalf of the other children. They risked their own safety to bring letters to their siblings, give food to their friends, or defend other children's rights to speak their language. Resistance has been well documented in the literature on residential schools; yet, the narratives in this research suggest an active process better expressed by the concept of *autonomy of will and spirit*. How did these participants resist hunger or the ban on speaking their languages? They exercised autonomy of will and stole food. They spoke their language because that was how they were brought up. The term autonomous has been used in Western mental health terms to describe individual independence or separateness. We are using the term here to describe agency, integrity, and active practice of cultural values. In these ways, their spirits were not broken.

Through listening to the narratives of the six participants, it appears as though the ecology of residential schools in the southern Saskatchewan region of Canada shifted after 1950. From 1919-1950, participants described little or no academic education—just a life of gender-segregated hard work, bordering on slavery. Children were allowed to go home to their families for two months in the summer. During this period, children were graduated at age 16 with the highest grade achievable (grade 8), whether or not the school actually provided an education. All staff were clergy members. Corporal punishment was the norm; hunger and abuse were common. After 1950, the participants describe the residential schools as being more like a "school" in that there were classes, extracurricular activities, the introduction of lay teachers, and monthly visits home. We found, as have Chrisjohn and Young (1997), that residential schools differed from place to place and existed in discrete time periods. The "residential school experience" is diverse.

Narratives revealed evidence of the division between First Nations peoples created by the 1851 *Act for the Better Protection of Lands and Properties of the Indians of Lower Canada* that defined "status" or "registered" and "non-status" or "non-registered;" that is, "status" meant "Indian" and "non-status" often meant Métis or mixed-blood (Dickason, 1992). Only status Indians attended residential schools, so another consequence of the residential school systems is that divisions were created in families and communities that may not have previously existed. The RCAP (1998) report documents the horrendous problems experienced by First Nations survivors of residential schools who did not experience pride in their heritage. So the *pride in being First Nations* theme in the narratives illustrates a strength that sustained these participants, but may not be representative of other peoples' experience, just as many of these themes may not be generalizable to all First Nations peoples.

The cultural and personal strengths that helped the participants build their communities within an oppressive environment are familiar to community psychologists. Sonn and Fisher (1998) found that spirituality is the foundation of many peoples' resilience in the face of genocide. McMillan (1996) described spirit in the form of friendship as a fundamental element in the sense of community. This understanding suggests a community psychology paradigm as a natural framework from which to base theoretical and practical guidelines for mental health initiatives. There are unique aspects of First Nations cultures that participants brought to their residential school experience which are complementary to yet distinct from community-building activities found in the literature. For example, compassion as the heart of community-building is a psychological trait that is highly valued and encouraged in First Nations cultures, but often needs to be taught or strengthened in Western models of community building. Likewise, laughter and play activities often are built into community building, but are ever-present in First Nations gatherings in the form of humour. In designing and implementing healing initiatives, indigenous discourse must be used to ask the right questions and to hear the answers—since, as these participants stated, "being Indian" always comes first.

## IMPLICATIONS

The need for healing from the trauma of residential schools is a result of genocidal policies designed from a Euro-Canadian worldview. Mental health initiatives for survivors based on this worldview run the risk of perpetuating the original goal of eradicating First Nations peoples. Healing initiatives that are culturally appropriate and self-directed by First Nations communities provide the best models for healing (RCAP, 1998). Community-based healing initiatives that identify traditional sources of strengths within First Nations cultures have been most successful in redressing the wrongs done to Aboriginal peoples across the world (Hampton, Hampton, Kinunwa, & Kinunwa, 1995; Mowbray, 1994). We suggest that First Nations cultures have within them the resources to heal. Initiatives that nurture wellness and strengths—such as autonomy of will and spirit, sharing, spirituality, respect, humour, compassion, and cultural pride—will promote healing.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative pose la question suivante: quelles étaient les forces de caractère qui ont contribué à la survie des autochtones pendant leur séjour dans les écoles résidentielles? Six anciens et anciennes qui ont survécu à l'expérience des écoles résidentielles du sud de la Saskatchewan ont répondu à cette question sous forme de récit. L'analyse de leurs réponses, données au cours d'entrevues, a révélé que les anciens et les anciennes ont utilisé les capacités de créer une communauté qui existent dans les cultures autochtones pour établir leurs propres communautés dans l'environnement limité et oppressif des écoles. En plus, l'analyse a identifié les forces de caractère suivantes: autonomie de la volonté et de l'esprit, partage, respect, spiritualité, humour, compassion et fierté culturelle. Ces forces de caractère, identifiées dans la littérature de la psychologie communautaire, sont néanmoins propres aux cultures autochtones. C'est en identifiant les forces de caractère traditionnelles des communautés autochtones que les initiatives de santé mentale communautaire pourraient mieux contribuer aux tentatives de guérison prises par les survivants et les survivantes des écoles résidentielles.

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