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American Indian youth experience a wide range of risk factors for emotional and behavioral problems, such as high poverty and unemployment; high drop out rates from school; alcohol and drug use, discrimination; and acculturative stress. Yet they also may exhibit characteristics of resiliency in the face of adversity. Defining resiliency as “a protective mechanism that modifies an individual’s response to risk situations and operates at critical points during one’s life” (p. 194), the authors investigate the factors associated with resiliency among American Indian youth. Maternal warmth, community support, and enculturation were found to be significant predictors of resilience in this high-risk population.

Youth ($N = 212$) lived on or within 50 miles of one of three American Indian reservations in the upper Midwest. The reservations were located in rural areas and had similar rates of unemployment and poverty. Boys ($n = 115$) and girls ($n = 97$) were between the ages of 10-15. All participants were enrolled tribal members, and had similar tribal affiliations. Interviewers, also with tribal affiliations, conducted interviews in the home of the youth. There was a male caregiver present in 68% of the homes.

A battery of instruments measured: youths’ self-esteem; identification with American Indian culture; engagement in traditional spiritual practices and activities; maternal warmth; community support (i.e. perceived support of the community for the youth’s academic success, engagement in sports, and tribal enculturation); discrimination (by peers, teachers and other authority figures); pro-social behaviors (i.e., attitudes toward school, grades, and college), and problem behaviors (i.e., alcohol use, drug use, externalizing behaviors). Another battery of instruments measured risk factors that may be present in the youth’s home, such as having a family income below the poverty line or having a parent with alcohol or drug problems. Some measures were designed with the assistance of tribal elders.

Latent class analysis identified four classes of youth: (a) low adversity (38.4%; i.e., low poverty and low parental problems); (b) high poverty, low parental problems (22.9%); (c) low poverty, high parental problems (17.2%); and (d) high adversity (21.5%; i.e., high parental problems and high poverty). Results revealed no significant relationship between living on the reservation and resilience. Nor was there a significant relationship between gender and resilience or between self-esteem and resilience. The absence of a father figure also was unrelated to resilience. Age, however, was significantly associated with less resiliency; with each increasing year of age (between 10-15), there was a 10% decrease in resilience. Perceived discrimination was a significant factor for lowered resilience, with resilience declining by approximately 40% for each unit of perceived discrimination.

However, even though over 61% of all youth lived in homes with moderate to high adversity, 60% of all youth had successful school outcomes and low levels of problem behaviors, indicative of resilience. Further, maternal warmth and community support were significantly associated with resilience. The strongest predictor of resilience was perceived enculturation, regardless of where the youth lived (i.e., on or off of the reservation); this effect suggests that youth can maintain strong cultural ties to their community even if they do not live on a reservation.

According to the authors these results are promising, because the three most important predictors of positive outcomes—maternal warmth, community support, and enculturation—are things that can be addressed from within the Native American community. Intervention efforts that address these factors “could have the greatest potential for helping youth successfully face the challenges in their day-to-day lives. If these efforts could also address the substantial risks for resilience embedded in exposure to discrimination, then further gains might be realized” (p. 205).