

Multicultural Center

Multicultural Guest Interview



Joseph P. Gone: Native American Historical Trauma vs. Postcolonial Distress and a Few Thoughts About Retention
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Thanks to a partnership among Stone Child College, Hill County Mental Health Local Advisory Council, and the MSUN Office of Diversity Awareness and Multicultural Programs (ODAMP) in April 2015, MSUN had the pleasure of sponsoring Dr. Joseph P. Gone to present on: Explorations in Cultural Psychology: “Striving For Ambitious Achievement in an American Indian Community: A Study of Gros Ventre Cultural Ideals” and “Traditional Culture, Professional Treatment, and Therapeutic Integration: Lessons from a Native American Community Healing Lodge.” Dr. Gone (Gros Ventre) is an international authority on the topic of American Indian and First Nations mental health. Currently, he is Associate Professor of Psychology at the University Michigan in Ann Arbor. Thanks to a fellowship he received from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation during the 2014-2015 academic year, he occupied the Katz Family Endowed Chair in Native American Studies as a visiting faculty member at MSU Bozeman. Dr. Gone has published more than 50 articles and chapters exploring the psychology of self, identity, personhood, and social relations in Indigenous communities with particular attention to therapeutic interventions such as psychotherapy and traditional healing. Most recently, he has been working on a book on American Indian/First Nations mental health, called “Rethinking Psychological Wellness in Indian Country,” which is primarily aimed at students in the clinical disciplines associated with mental health services.

Those of us who are particularly interested in cultural sensitivity and mental health were excited to receive Dr. Gone on campus. Since his family is originally from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, some of his close relatives drove about 90 miles (or more) to attend his evening presentation. It was also moving that his brother, Victor Gone, along with the Secretary/Treasurer of the Sweet Grass Society, the American Indian club on campus, David James introduced his morning presentation. Although Dr. Gone lectured about achievement, treatment, and therapeutic integration for American Indians/First Nations people, this interview is centered on ideas for American Indian students’ achievement and retention. This is an area that needs to be further researched since national statistics show that American Indian retention and graduation rates are in need of intervention, to put it in psychological terminology. After his first conference, Dr. Gone paid a visit to the MSUN Multicultural Center, where he graciously responded to my questions in a hectic busy early afternoon almost at the end of the semester.

On a college campus, how can those who aren't mental health professionals help American Indian students to be to be successful?

I think Indian students might not be so different from other students who are coming to Northern; many might not have the resources to be able to pay for everything and make ends meet. The number one thing any institution should be doing for any subpopulation that has a record of low higher education success is to invest in providing the resources they need to attain success; for example, making sure that financial aid is adequate. Besides financial aid, making sure there is an emergency fund for when something goes wrong; for instance, if they suddenly have to travel home, and therefore can't pay for their rent that month; then they have to face eviction in the middle of the term, drop, return later, and find out their financial aid is messed up. Many obstacles that Indian students face are economic.

Any institution that wants to promote academic success should provide services similar to other lower-income students. It is just trying to make sure that when things come up, they have a safety net. There are other things about interpersonal sensitivity, like being nice, supportive, and helpful but resources are the number one thing. Any of us who are driven to accomplish something, can [to a certain extent] manage our feelings of frustration or alienation—the feelings are not the story: that story is inadequate resources.

Faculty and staff should understand the fact that, in the case of Indian students, education has alienated them historically, so they should avoid reinforcing alienating messages, such as “I don't have anything for you; you don't belong here; you can't excel; we

don't have much hope for you." These obviously will not help them. They should try to send the opposite messages. These future graduates need to be helpful to their families and to ultimately find their way in life while giving back to their communities.

Culturally speaking, do you have any particular recommendations as it relates to Native and the pre dominate White cultural interactions?

Making sure that people know that Indians have a long and fraught relation with education in general. It starts from early in our histories when missions and boarding schools whose specific assignment was to civilize "the savages." The relationship that Indians had with the schools is one where these institutions made them feel completely inferior, while being educated for a status in society that was not going to be very high. That is where it starts. Then up to this day in a state like Montana, especially in border towns near the reservations, there is White racism that can still influence the school system. If Indian kids from the reservations go to these schools, they will reflect the low expectations of the teachers, and they can still find hostility. There is an alienation that can happen at school, in general, which those students who make it here to Northern have been able to negotiate and overcome just to be able to walk in the doors here. Resources are the first and foremost need because if they have them, they can be supported while they come here. They have already shown they can overcome obstacles: they have a track record of pushing past.

On the other hand, what can American Indian students do to help themselves to be academically successful?

These things might result more organically than as a result of any institutional planning: they might want to form study groups. It is understandable that they will want to participate in extra-curricular activities, but they need to participate in a way that doesn't detract from their studies because that is what is important: they need to be focused on passing their classes and getting their degrees. Cultural activities are important because they give them a sense of belonging—but the more the institution can support them in undertaking these activities, the more likely they will do well in their classes (instead of fundraising for the powwow, for example). Institutional support is crucial, so they won't be distracted, but rather go to class, pass their exams, and get their degrees. Beyond that, they will figure out their own best mutual supports: study groups together, study break together. They will find how to support themselves and each other.

To what extent should we include in this conversation the term "historical trauma"?

I think people frequently use the term "historical trauma" as a synonym of what I call "postcolonial distress." However, a number of researchers differentiate them. I think that there are reasons to prefer the term "postcolonial distress" instead of "historical trauma." Part of what I object to in historical trauma is more the "academic version" of it, not the colloquial. Still, even colloquially, using the term "postcolonial distress" is better because it includes more ideas than those included in "historical trauma." "Historical" directs attention to history. For example, if we talk about Wounded Knee, we are referring to an event that happened 125 years ago, which is a few generations back. Postcolonial, as a modifier for distress, means "after colonization," which includes attention to the past, but it also refers to the present: our current state in the wake of Euro-American colonization (i.e., historical dispossession, confinement, impoverishment, etc.). -We should focus more on the attention to the present than to the past. I don't think the problems with Indian Country are Wounded Knee. I think the problems of Indian Country today are inequality, entrenched poverty, lack of a chance to develop resources, no jobs, no opportunity to provide for a family and make a good living. The best mental health intervention we can make for Indian Reservations would be a massive job program for everyone who wants to work and to make a decent wage. In this context, a lot of mental health issues would eventually take care of themselves, culture would take care of itself, so we are back to the issue of resources.

Horrible tragedies like Wounded Knee show that people can be really resilient. "Historical trauma," is modeled on the experiences of Jewish Holocaust survivors and their descendants. Jews in the world today are thriving: their accomplishments, influence, and power are amazing. I would say they bounced back from the Holocaust in a single generation—that has not been the case for Indians, so this is why I prefer "post-colonial" to "historical" because we are truly referring to the absence of present opportunities, not past events that no one can change. Those are my thoughts in regards to the qualifiers of "historical" versus "post-colonial".

In regards to "trauma" instead of "distress": trauma not only means pain, it also means injury, that is, damage as a form of experience that is pathological in some way. On the other hand, distress doesn't have to be pathological, damaging, or injurious. There are many ways someone reacts to distress. I prefer not to present a view in which Indians are victims of historical trauma in a way that this single label classifies us as dysfunctional, when in fact there are many ways in which Native people have reacted to colonization. Certainly, one could be injured, too many of our people have been and are today, but many others are not damaged, many of them resist and cope. In between, there are many other options that include fighting oppression, mobilizing for action, or being outraged more so than being wounded. Trauma, for me, is a narrow term for the way one can react to colonization history and its current effects.

Going back to the topic of student success, having experienced your own personal journey all the way through a PhD, imagine you have a group of freshman American Indian students in front of you, what would be the best piece of advice you would give them?

To identify the people in their life, whoever they are, who are the most supportive, the most encouraging, and keying in on their ability to advise them, and to receive their advice regularly. That could be a family member or a specific advisor in higher education. They should look for a mentor who doesn't have a romanticized image about American Indians. Students should look for someone who makes some effort to connect with them and interact with them to better assess if this person can be the right mentor. If not, they should find someone else. If they don't find someone who can guide them, they are fighting with one hand tied behind their back, because they will miss the benefit of knowing how something unfamiliar to them (such as higher education) works. They will not have the advantage of having an advocate when something "breaks down" and someone who can encourage them when all looks lost. That is what all of us need when we are trying to do hard things.