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Across Generations:
Culture, History, and Policy
in the Social Ecology of American
Indian Grandparents Parenting
Their Grandchildren

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ABSTRACT. This article describes an investigation of ecological factors related to the experience of American Indian grandparents raising their grandchildren. Elements of American Indian culture and history, and United States policy, were used to generate explanatory hypotheses that were subjected to a thematic analysis of qualitative interview data. This approach was used to apply ecological theory and test the derived hypotheses. Results of the thematic analysis indicate that participants value maintenance of traditional culture in their efforts to parent their grandchildren. Support also emerged for the hypothesis that participants would evidence distrust of government and mainstream programs. The hypothesis that the assimilation policy and its use of boarding schools would increase participants' reluctance to access services encountered mixed results, but some participants expressed strong beliefs that this legacy is a contributing factor. The hypothesis that the Indian Child Welfare Act

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would facilitate participants' efforts to parent their grandchildren also met mixed results, but some clear descriptions of its effectiveness were offered. doi:10.1300/J039v10n04_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Grandparents, kinship care, American Indian, native American, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), elders

The collective experience of culture, history, and United States government policy has created an ecological context that pervades community, family, and individual life for many American Indians. This study outlines and investigates a set of hypotheses drawn from the literature that describes such experience, and focuses specifically on American Indian families with grandparents parenting their grandchildren. The relevant literature is reviewed, data from interviews of a sample of American Indian grandparents are presented and discussed, and implications for family social workers and related professionals are offered.

KINSHIP CARE AND AMERICAN INDIAN FAMILIES

The care of dependent children is one of society's greatest responsibilities. It has taken many forms, which have produced varied results for children and their families. For almost 200 years, the child welfare system favored residential intervention and placement of children out of their family homes (Mooradian, 2003). Kinship care is one means of caring for children that has received increased attention in recent years. It has been defined as "the full time care, nurturing, and protection of children by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child" (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.).

Kinship care allows a child to grow up in a family environment, despite parental problems. It is increasingly perceived to be an alternative to foster care and a means of relieving pressure on the child welfare system (Berrick, 1998). Kinship care is consistent with the cultural norms of African American families and Latino families (Barrio & Hughes, 2000; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Roche, 1994), and it is also consistent with American Indian culture (Glover, 2001; Red Horse, 1980; Weaver & White, 1997).

Erera (2002) reports that grandparents are responsible for the care of 5.5 million grandchildren in the United States. Often, this responsibility comes unexpectedly, with little preparation or planning for the change in lifestyle. Grandparents raise their grandchildren for several reasons that are usually related to parental problems. These include teen pregnancy, abandonment, incarceration, alcohol or drug addiction, divorce, lack of childcare resources, unemployment, mental health issues, serious illness, and death (Bell & Garner, 1996; Brownell & Berman, 2000; Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Joslin & Brouard, 1995; Franklin, 1999; Gleeson, 1995; Mills, 2001).

It has been estimated that one percent of the 5.5 million grandparents raising their grandchildren are American Indians (Erera, 2002). This number, however, does not include grandparents who have informally adopted their grandchildren. Since the care of grandchildren within American Indian communities has been, traditionally, informal (Ryan, 1981; Bahr, 1994; Weibel-Orlando, 1990), the true number of American Indian grandparents providing care for their grandchildren without the benefits of legal adoption, foster care, or legal guardianship is likely to be much higher.

The literature reveals an extremely limited amount of information on American Indian grandparents parenting their grandchildren. The major focus has been on the historical roles of elderhood and grandparenthood as strong fibers of American Indian cultures (Bahr, 1994; Erera, 2002; Herring, 1992; Ryan, 1981). It has also been recognized that the roles of elders and grandparents are significantly affected by historical traumas, levels of acculturation, and contemporary social, educational, economic, and political events (Adams, 1995; Adams, 1998; Archuleta, Child, & Lomawaima, 2000).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The general theory guiding this investigation is the social ecosystem framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social ecosystems are composed of interconnected and hierarchically embedded entities that form the context and the outcome of transactions between people and their environments. Within this theory, the term *transaction* means that the individual, family, group, and environment interact reciprocally, and that participants and their environments are each changed through every sequence of interaction (Germain & Bloom, 1999). Such a perspective inextricably links person and environment in each behavioral event.

It has been observed that group identification and cultural experience are primary contexts for individual decision-making (Hays, 2001). Simply put, culture surrounds and guides personal perceptions, and sets parameters for private actions. Observers have also noted that individual differences exist within the bounds of common cultural frames (Paniagua, 1998; Slattery, 2004). Therefore, inquiry is enhanced when culture is acknowledged and individual difference is explored.

Human experience, even at the group level, is fluid. For example, cultures are shaped over time, and, in fact, can be preserved or destroyed by attrition within the larger social system (Hays, 2001). Collective group experience evolves through a common history of interaction between a particular group and its social environment. This environment is determined, in large part, by public policy.

The individual decisions of American Indian grandparents to raise their grandchildren are conceptualized here as being rooted in collective experience that unfolded over time, within a policy arena. These decisions, therefore, potentially interact with elements such as culture, history, and governmental policy. In order to pursue balanced inquiry, the method used in this study is based on consideration of collective experience, in interaction with individual perspective.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. American Indian grandparents who decided to raise their grandchildren were interviewed individually about factors that influenced their decision, as well as their experience as caregivers. In addition to demographic items, relevant interview questions included inquires about the reasons for caring for the child(ren); grandparents' experience with representatives of the child welfare system; the impact on child care decisions of grandparents' own experience in boarding schools, foster care, and adoptive placements; and the impact of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) on American Indian kinship care.

With this particular sample, it was not culturally appropriate to use audiotape or videotape to record responses. Therefore, researchers took careful notes to capture responses in the participants' own words. Key phrases from the participants' responses were written on the interview schedules by the interviewers.

Interviewers were social work graduate and undergraduate students who were trained in qualitative methods, culturally sensitive interviewing

techniques, and specific aspects of American Indian culture. These four students worked in two-person teams, where one was American Indian and one was not. They were supervised by a social work professor who is also a member of a federally recognized tribe. This professor sat in on all of the interviews to help ensure reliability of interview procedures.

It was deemed important to establish rapport and develop the participants' comfort with the research process in order to obtain valid data. Interviews were scheduled after an initial face-to-face contact by members of the research team with each group of prospective participants to introduce the research project and provide personal interaction. The success of this effort is illustrated by the fact that researchers were often invited to participate in upcoming events, such as pow-wows, art exhibits, and feasts. Researchers were repeatedly asked, "When are you coming back?"

For the purpose of operating with cultural sensitivity and employing an ecological perspective, cultural, historical, and policy information was used to generate hypotheses that were later subjected to a thematic analysis of qualitative data provided by participants. These hypotheses were derived from a thorough literature review and the cultural knowledge of the research team. The goal of the analysis was to extend understanding of the experience of grandparents who occupy the role of parents in an American Indian sample, and to test the specific hypotheses.

To further pursue validity, separate thematic analyses were conducted by the three authors. These analyses were then joined through an adaptation of the triangulation approach originally described by Denzin (1978), and later by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The triangulation process yielded conclusions based on themes and specific phrases that were deemed relevant to each hypothesis by all three authors. It, thereby, represents a consensus among the authors regarding the fit of data to the hypotheses.

Participants

A total of 31 American Indian grandparents with sole caregiving responsibility for their grandchildren participated in this study. They were all members of Michigan's thirteen federally recognized tribal nations and bands.

Participants ranged in age from 43 to 86 years, with a mean age of 56.8 years. On the whole, 3 were male and 28 female. A total of 11 lived on reservation land, and 20 lived in cities and rural towns. Seventeen were married, seven were widowed, three were single, three were divorced,

and one person was separated. Grandparents reported an average of 9 years of primary responsibility for their grandchildren, with a range from 1 month to 21 years. Of the 31 grandparents, 20 held no legal status as caregivers; 7 had adopted; 3 were legal guardians; and 1 became a foster parent. Grandparents cared for a total of 26 male grandchildren who ranged in age from 18 months to 23 years, with a mean age of 12.5 years. Nineteen female grandchildren ranged in age from 2 to 20 years, with a mean age of 9.

Of the 31 grandparents, 23 decided to raise their grandchildren despite their own health issues. When asked to report the health problems they faced, 11 reported diabetes; 8, heart disease; 8, high blood pressure/hypertension; 7, arthritis; 2 suffered strokes; 2 noted Parkinson's disease; 2, thyroid disease; 1, renal failure; 1, pancreatic disease; and 1 had cirrhosis.

The familial circumstances that led to the grandparents' decisions to take care of their grandchildren were also obtained. The reasons that applied to their particular families, as reported by the grandparents, were: 26 reported parental substance abuse; 8 parental abandonment; 5 reported parental incarceration; 5 parental unemployment; 4 teen pregnancy; and 4 separation/divorce. Two grandparents said that the child's parent was deceased; two indicated that child abuse had occurred; and two said that the child's mother was in school. One each reported termination of parental rights, parental mental disorder, serious physical illness of the parent, health problems of the child, and parental learning disability. One also cited the importance of cultural tradition, and another, the desire that the child avoid foster care.

HYPOTHESES AND FINDINGS

Application of social ecosystems theory led the authors to consider the effect of macro system elements, and focus on three contextual domains that were deemed especially relevant to this study. Culture, history, and policy emerged as crucial domains from a careful consideration of the literature on American Indian populations. Each following subsection summarizes relevant information from culture, history, or policy, and presents the hypotheses generated from that information. For purposes of clarity and brevity, data that address each hypothesis are presented immediately following articulation of the hypothesis.

CULTURAL PRACTICES

Relevant cultural aspects are outlined briefly below. They include an extended family model, the importance of intergenerational relationships, and the role of the elders as multigenerational transmitters of the culture.

Traditional American Indian families are composed of an extended network. Historically, child-rearing responsibilities were shared among several persons, which included kinship relationships and tribal clans (Cross, 1986). These extended families included parents, grandparents, and others related by blood (Cross, Earle, & Simmons, 1999; Fischler, 1985), and could also include non-kin members who were incorporated through a series of formal and informal processes (Red Horse, 1980).

Many American Indian tribes embrace the concept of Seven Generations, which emphasizes the significance of intergenerational relationships and responsibilities, and the importance of continuity across generations. Lum (2007) describes two perspectives. One version interprets the concept to mean that the people alive today can look back three generations, and forward three additional generations to locate their own lives. Another version recognizes that the ancestors of seven generations ago were planning for the people of today, and that those plans are the reason there is still language, culture, and land available to indigenous people. One of the present authors learned that the current generation carries the responsibility to plan for the seventh generation to come.

The role of the elders in American Indian culture is expansive and hallowed. The elders view themselves collectively, and transmit traditional culture and skills valued by the tribal nation (Cross, 2004). Hendrix (2002) defines "elder" as a position of leadership based on experience, spirituality, and community service, rather than chronological age, although entry into grandparenthood often helps define status as an elder (Cross, 2004). Elders serve as keepers of the culture and kinship, teachers, mediators, unifiers, counselors, healers, and caregivers (Bahr, 1994). Bahr (1994) also notes that one of the most common expectations among American Indian people is that grandparents will play a major role in the physical care and training of their grandchildren.

Cultural Hypotheses and Thematic Analysis

American Indian culture is communal, focused on tradition, and respectful of the role of elders. Consideration of cultural information

yields the following hypothesis: *Participants will identify the value of traditional culture in descriptions of their caregiving experience.* Thematic analysis of data from the individual interviews supports this hypothesis.

A "multigenerational" view of traditional culture emerged as an explanation for the decision to parent grandchildren. One grandparent directly stated that the reason she decided to care for her grandchild was "tradition." Others seemed to have absorbed the multigenerational perspective, "I just thought that I should take care of them"; "My granddaughter will be safer, I don't want anyone else to take her." Another said, "how my mother brought me up was my training," and that her own "heart guidance" was the basis for making childrearing decisions. This view was also expressed in the statement, "I was taught Indian ways as a child and know what they need—close togetherness."

This respect for tradition reverberated in a commitment to raise children within the general American Indian culture. Exemplary comments included, "I would not want non-natives raising my grandchild"; "My grandchild was in non-native foster care for over a year, child welfare workers should get to know the children before they take them." Another said that it was necessary for children to "stay with the culture."

A theme emerged that centered on the transmission of cultural elements. One participant noted the importance of "handing stuff down." Another said that she made "room for children to learn arts and crafts—the old way." This theme was extended by participants who felt somewhat deprived of opportunities to be immersed in the culture during their own upbringing at a time when American Indian culture was especially discouraged. "There was no Indian culture then." One participant who attended a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school said, "Mom did not teach us the Sioux customs because of discrimination."

The valued role of the elders was also evident in a grandparent's description of the circumstances surrounding abandonment by the children's mother. "She left them at a neighbor's house and they would have been put in foster care. The male child told the neighbor to call his grandmother." One grandparent also noted the extended family support provided by her peers in a housing complex for elders.

I took the kids to see my daughter (their aunt) in [another city]. I don't drive, but the housing complex and the elders that lived here helped me out. My grandchildren had many grandmothers and grandfathers here. We had a birthday party for each of the kids and all the elders bought them a birthday present.

Participants also offered suggestions for keeping children both safe and immersed in their heritage. One emphasized the need to "Encourage elders to take the kids, even if they think they can't do it; there is help out there." Another said that she "would like to see training for mentors" to "do things in a good way," including "Big Brothers and Big Sisters that are native." An additional creative idea was provided by one grandparent who suggested that child welfare workers:

Not put native children with White families. Indian children need to be with Indian families. Not split them apart; [use a] temporary home for all of them to stay and get help together. Keep mother and children together in a home so they can be counseled together. Not adopt them out so quickly, or send them back to foster care so quickly. Help "natural" mother keep her children despite being poor or sick.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Although the history of American Indians is rich and long, it has been written primarily from a Eurocentric perspective. Evidence of this exists in the general use of chronological periods that describe interactions with colonists and the United States government (Cross, 2003; Russell, 2000; Schaefer, 1993). For purposes of this investigation, only historical information from these periods that directly affects the formation and maintenance of families is considered.

During the Pre-European Contact Period (prior to 1492), most indigenous families were organized communally and formed successively complex systems including clans, bands, and tribal nations that provided political and military protections (Cross, 2003). American Indian families, thus, held a significant position as both the building block and expression of the tribal nation. This position holds implications for the current study because it highlights the integral role of extended family ties in relation to common survival and welfare.

The legacy of the Treaty Period (1492-1871) is primarily one of broken trust. Many of the responsibilities assumed by the federal government during this period, such as housing, education, and health care, remain unfulfilled (Cross, 2006). Because of the essential value of these provisions and the chronic nature of broken promises, it is possible that American Indian grandparents are wary of the promise of governmental entitlements. Lum (2007) indicates that many American Indians harbor

an intense distrust of representatives of state and federal governments, due to historical experience.

The Removal Period (1830-1887) overlapped the Treaty Period, and is characterized by turmoil and travail. Purchases of land, which were foreign enough to American Indians, gave way to forcible removal by the U.S. government. The most frequently documented in the historical literature is the removal that targeted the Cherokee in the forced march along the "Trail of Tears" in the late 1830s, but similar removals were directed toward other tribes (Lum, 2007).

During the Termination Period (1887-1968), the U.S. government took steps to end the legal status of several American Indian nations and revoke previously established treaties (Lum, 2007). The sovereign status accorded to American Indian nations was systematically attacked through legislation and economic oppression. Public Act 280, passed in 1953, allowed state courts to exercise civil and criminal jurisdiction over Indian lands. By 1962, over 100 tribes had been directed to dissolve their governments.

The process of relocating indigenous people from familiar lands and climates to remote and barren locales, induced upheaval in a communal system by diminishing the relevance of skills and knowledge suited to the original environment (Green, 1992; Russell, 2000; Schaefer, 1993). Traditional American Indian education involved children in the daily work of the tribe, where they discovered and developed skills as they worked side by side with the adult members. Within families that relied on the transmission of these skills from generation to generation, relationships, as well as the process of intergenerational transmission, were significantly impacted.

Historical Hypothesis and Thematic Analysis

Taken together, the historical experience of American Indians may offer an explanation for the decision of these grandparents to parent their grandchildren rather than have them removed by non-tribal governments. In an historical sense, child protective services, foster care, and adoption may offer the potential for additional broken promises, cultural dissolution, and painful loss.

The primary hypothesis that issues from this historical summary is: *Participants will identify distrust of mainstream culture and/or the U.S. Government in descriptions of their care-giving experience.* Thematic analysis of data from the individual interviews supports this hypothesis.

Experience of racial discrimination and cultural ignorance emerged as an underlying theme. One said, "[The] attitude in my city is we're lower than colored people." Recognition of enduring racism was clearly articulated in the following statement:

American Indians are still targets of racism—the logo issues are a prime illustration of the ignorance that still exists. We are perceived as "abusers of the system," or worse yet, that we are financially dependent on our reservations and thus a burden on the government. We are perceived as "non-tax-payers," which is ludicrous. In short, there is still a big misconception about native people in general and it carries over to society not being supportive of grandparents raising grandchildren.

Another plaintively noted that, "All are created equal, different, but equal."

Descriptions of contact with child welfare workers echoed this theme. "White people run these programs and don't understand native needs and culture." "I have experienced some prejudice." [Child welfare workers] need to know more about the people they are working with, their culture and their ways." "[Child welfare workers] don't always understand culturally important things." "They talk down to us like we were little kids." One said, "Non-natives look down on us because they don't know us. If you work with a certain culture, you need to be aware of its practices."

A theme of general distrust of mainstream culture and programs became clear. "[The] American Indian didn't trust the government or society." "I don't like social services; don't like the questions and the process." "Most grandparents would not go to training sessions led by the White community." Perhaps the most direct statement of this position is: "I will only take it from a native. Non-natives will never 'get it.'"

Fear also surfaced as a theme. One grandparent didn't use services available from the state foster care system, due to a "fear of the system." Another said, "There are plenty of services available, however, you have to be able to access them without fear." One "considered adoption," but said, "I fear the court decision." Another noted that "They [the agency] threatened to take guardianship."

Counterbalancing the themes of fear and distrust is one of hope that personal contact and relationship building can bridge the gap between people. "Maybe rapport hasn't happened and trust is lacking," is one explanation for a rift between service providers and grandparents. One

participant recognized the systemic limitations on personal effort, "My social workers have been as supportive as the system allows them to be." The value of professionals developing "community ties" and "experiencing the culture" was noted, as was having "contact with the Elders" to "learn history, stories, and experiences." "[Workers] need to learn about the tribe, culture, history on their own." "Understand where we are at, where we have been—the true history." The value of the relationship was confirmed in the statement, "Services need to be delivered face-to-face; it's genuine; genuineness can be felt," and also by a participant who said, "Grandparents need to feel that they can trust the person before they can let down their guard."

POLICY INITIATIVES

Two elements of policy are considered here that directly affect the formation and maintenance of American Indian families. Of primary significance is the establishment of the boarding school system, and subsequent passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act. Both of these policies recognized the importance of American Indian children as carriers of the culture, albeit for opposing purposes.

The general undermining of traditional culture culminated in the Bureau of Indian Affairs' campaign to "civilize" the American Indian population. Civilizing, in this case, followed the slogan, "Kill the Indian: Save the Man" (Lum, 2007, p. 261). It included banning traditional language and religious practices, systematic instruction in the English language, and conversion to Christianity and mainstream culture (Cross, 2006).

The boarding schools were established to advance the policy of "assimilation." Lum (2007, p. 261) states decisively, "The mission of the schools was essentially cultural genocide." Children were removed from their families, sometimes by force, and sometimes under the duress of economic threats, and placed in boarding schools that were usually several hundred miles away from home (Cross, 2000; Ellis, 1996; Lum, 2007). Oftentimes, these children had no contact with their communities for years at a time, and many were never reunited with their families (Torpy, 2000). Most of these schools were based on a strict military model and imbued with contemporary Christian beliefs. Uniforms, marching drills, inspections, and strict schedules were used to make the Indian children look, live, and talk like White people. Rigid

discipline and punishment were used to maintain order. Other measures were also used in an attempt to eliminate the Indian children's cultural heritage, pride, and tribal identity. These included forbidding native languages, replacing Indian names with English ones, and forcibly cutting the children's hair (Earle, 2000; Churchill, 2004). Beyond these formal policies, American Indian children also suffered from systematic emotional, physical, and sexual abuses that were pervasive in many schools (Lum, 2007).

Although the policy of separating, confining, and controlling American Indian children was not totally successful in destroying American Indian culture, it had sweeping impact. Growing up in these institutional settings with no models of parenting other than the severe discipline of military and/or religious personnel affected generations of American Indian adults. In fact, nearly half of the American Indian people alive today were not raised by their parents or within their tribe, but in boarding schools or non-Indian foster homes (Cross, Earle, & Simmons, 2000).

More recently, efforts have been made to redress the imbalance of American Indian children removed from their family homes through legislative acts. When congress investigated the state of American Indian child welfare, it was concluded that, "an alarmingly high percentage of Indian families are broken by the removal, often unwarranted, of their children from them by non-tribal public and private agencies and that an alarmingly high percentage of such children are placed in non-Indian foster or adoptive homes and institutions" (P.L. 95-6087 25 U.S.C. § 1901 (5)).

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA) was implemented to correct the acknowledged damage that had been done to American Indian families and the intentional suppression of American Indian culture (George, 1997). ICWA set forth explicit rights for American Indian children, their families, and their tribes, in order to protect the children and maintain their cultural ties (Cross, 2006).

Despite specific provisions, American Indian children are still being removed from their families and communities without full consideration or implementation of the Act (Jones, 2002). Such removal often occurs due to lack of knowledge of ICWA's existence, limited funding to support implementation by tribes and states, and inadequate training of child welfare workers (Jones, 2002; Matheson, 1996). Therefore, even though the Indian Child Welfare Act exists, its impact on preservation of cultural contact between American Indian children and their extended family may be limited.

Policy Hypotheses and Thematic Analysis

The boarding school experience was profoundly disturbing for many American Indian children who grew into adulthood, and it affected large numbers of family relationships. One hypothesis that emerges from this review is: *Participants will identify the policy of assimilation (most notably manifested in the use of boarding schools) as a basis for reluctance to access supportive services in their efforts to parent their grandchildren.*

Thematic analysis provides mixed results for this hypothesis. Although only 4 of the 31 participants attended Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools as children, others noted significant effects of foster care. Taken together, these participants' comments illustrate a theme of disruption of family relationships that creates reluctance to access supportive services.

"I went to boarding school for two semesters. Came home for Christmas and never went back . . . too home sick . . . everyone there cried and was lonesome." "I was in foster care, in 10 to 12 homes. I was always placed on a farm . . . foster children provided farm labor." "Children were taken to foster care. I went to school one day, in ninth grade, and four students were just gone." "My grandmother's children were placed in a home. They went out and ran away." Encapsulating this point of view is the comment, "Removal of children makes me reluctant to access services." Another grandparent said, "I don't trust adoptive placements or foster care."

The legacy of the assimilation policy is summarized in the following statement regarding grandparents by one of the participants:

They want to protect their grandchildren and may be fearful of removal. They need to know that the system supports them while caring for grandchildren, and when parents re-enter the child's life, feel safe that the system will continue supporting them and the child during transition.

On the other hand, another contingent indicated that they did not think negative experiences with boarding schools, foster care, or adoption particularly increased the reluctance of American Indian grandparents to access supportive services. It may be that the negative collective experience of history and policy overshadows even the most direct attempt to remove children. One participant said that although the boarding school experience made many American Indians reluctant to

access services, "Natives would be reluctant even if they hadn't gone to boarding school."

The Indian Child Welfare Act was written into law to redress perceived damages to American Indian families and culture that issued from prior policy. A second hypothesis that emerges from the summary of policy is: *Participants will indicate that the Indian Child Welfare Act facilitates efforts to care for their grandchildren.*

Thematic analysis provides mixed results for this hypothesis. Participants' statements range from negative assessments of the application of the Act, through descriptions of limited knowledge of the Act and its provisions, to positive accounts.

Statements that describe inappropriate use of the Act include the following: "ICWA is not working here. I've had to fight the system and my own people." "It hasn't impacted our family at all." "ICWA didn't help other members of my family . . . took children away because of health issues . . . who were later adopted out. ICWA acted too quickly and took them."

Thoughts regarding the need for familiarity with the Act were also expressed. "I have not heard anything about it. Indians don't want to talk about it." "I don't know anyone who has used it." A key point expressed by more than one grandparent is that ICWA can be helpful, "if it's explained and grandparents know about the Act." Results of not knowing about the Act can include families being separated. "The children are already adopted and are 10 and 12 years old. They didn't know about ICWA . . . and were not formally informed."

Acknowledgement of ICWA as a useful support includes the following statements. "At least it gives tribal members the first consideration for parenting." "ICWA allows children to know their heritage . . . and to play with other children on the reservation." One participant said that ICWA "helped a lot of people" and allowed them to "feel like they have some backing" by knowing, "I have some rights that are written down." "I believe that ICWA has helped. There's more of a protection for the children—if it's followed."

Accounts of specific ways in which ICWA helped grandparents with their grandchildren were also provided by participants.

ICWA was involved. Set up intertribal visitations . . . my granddaughter/adopted daughter was from another tribe and was registered with her bio mom's tribe. We talked about changing tribal memberships when given sole physical and legal custody . . .

They were very helpful to me. ICWA helped me obtain a clothing allowance, groceries, and cash assistance. The tribe offered to [provide] a home if the placement was to be permanent. I told them no, this was only temporary. The tribe allowed me to raise my grandchildren in the senior housing complex.

LIMITATIONS AND VALUE OF THE STUDY

This study holds clear limitations for generalization and is not intended to direct large scale initiatives. It employs a small sample. It is tightly focused on a particular racial/ethnic group. It utilizes less than ideal procedures for ensuring reliability and validity of data.

It also holds notable advantages as an exploratory study. It utilizes qualitative and ecological methods to advance knowledge of the increasingly common practice of kinship care across all cultural groups, but has specific implications for American Indian families. It applies this method in culturally appropriate ways. It also illustrates one way to operationalize an ecological perspective that may be used to direct other inquiries. In addition, it provides information that would otherwise be unavailable, advances understanding, and disseminates findings. In this manner, it serves to build what has been described as "incremental validity" (Sechrest, 1963).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

Participants in this study represent a range of ages, durations of care, legal status, and reasons for assuming kinship care. Their dispersion around the state of Michigan provides some geographic and intra-cultural diversity, but future research should include participants from other geographic regions and tribal nations, as well as larger samples.

Participants were very clear about the importance of keeping American Indian children with their extended families and immersed in their culture. Professionals can support this aim by increasing their understanding and application of American Indian culture, history, and policy (Weaver & White, 1997). It would also be useful to build cultural competence in line with the standards established by the National Association of Social Workers (2001).

This study confirmed the cultural value of the role of the elders. Many American Indian grandparents operate from this traditional perspective in their efforts to care for their grandchildren. The decision of many participants to parent grandchildren despite their own health issues is consistent with prior investigations (Gibbons & Jones, 2003). Other challenges, however, such as addiction, abandonment, unemployment, and child abuse, complicate the role. Social workers may occupy a unique helping position, if they grasp both the role of the elders and particular solutions to the issues that families encounter. Application of systems theory and multigenerational family therapy approaches may prove to be useful guides for service delivery (Paniagua, 1998).

It is clear that relations between the American Indian communities represented in this study and mainstream culture remain strained. Research and practice with racial/ethnic minority populations, including American Indians, often centers on the difficulties faced by the communities rather than their strengths. Such a focus on problems may inadvertently lead to identification of deficits, generalization, and stereotyping. A useful alternative that is consistent with both social work values and American Indian culture is the strength-based approach (Glick, 2004; Saleeb, 2005; Waller, 2005). Recognition of the commitment of the grandparents, families, and communities to preserve family and communal relationships would serve future practice, policy initiatives, and research activities. Employing the strengths perspective, professional efforts could incorporate the cultural theme of planning for the seventh generation, as a relevant metaphor for validating resilience.

Although only a small number of participants attended boarding schools, others experienced foster care placements. Many noted the impact of this disruptive experience on their families. Despite some participants' statements that the history of boarding schools and foster care does not directly contribute to reluctance to access services, it is clear that the assimilation policy reverberates through tribal communities from person to person, and generation to generation. In fact, it has been characterized as an "historical trauma" for American Indian families (Deschenie, 2006). It would be beneficial to focus additional research on this intergenerational phenomenon in order to potentially improve utilization of service by American Indian grandparents and reduce their daily stressors.

This study reveals that the Indian Child Welfare Act was helpful for some grandparents, but clearly not all. Some families had their children removed despite ICWA, and others expressed limited or no knowledge of ICWA. This finding highlights the need for informed advocacy and

empowerment of American Indian families. An initial focus for advocacy could be increased awareness of ICWA and its provisions among the American Indian population. It is apparent that many grandparents would benefit from information sessions, which might involve tribal and state judges, attorneys, social workers, and American Indian foster parents and kinship caregivers who are willing to share their own experiences with ICWA and the child welfare system. Advocacy efforts could move toward improving access to the supports established by ICWA, along with specific resources for individual families. Advocacy could also address improved monitoring of the application of ICWA standards to child welfare cases.

In sum, an ecological approach to understanding the care-giving experience of American Indian grandparents illuminates the interplay of culture, history, policy, and individual decisions, in the context of family relationships. An ecological approach also highlights the need to examine the efforts of professionals in cross cultural transactions.

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