

Social Work Communication with Native American Families

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**Abstract**

Child Protection Specialists (CPS) are tasked with the impressive duty of protecting the most vulnerable members of society. When a child has been removed from the home due to concerns of child abuse or neglect, the CPS are responsible for working with the family to reunite the child. Although it is easy to get caught up in the requirements we set before parents of treatment plans or therapy, counseling, and treatment, the outcome of the case with a family can be determined by the communication a CPS has with the child and their family members. Native American Children are disproportionately found in the foster care system. CPS in Montana frequently work with Native American families and tribal systems. To be effective in their role, CPS workers must learn to effectively and ethically communicate within a culture that may be very different from their own. This paper will examine the history of child protection within tribal communities and examine the differences in communication which may be presented to the CPS and which must be considered in practice.

*Keywords: child protection, tribal, Native American, communication, intercultural communication*

## Social Work Communication with Native American Families

### **History**

Today, each child placed into the protective custody of the state is assessed to determine if that child is of Indian descent so that the social worker may determine if the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) applies. If so, the social worker must consult with an ICWA expert in order to assure culturally competent services as well as to assure that all steps are taken to place that child with a Native family. However, this process has only existed since the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 (Garner, 1993).

Prior to the passage of ICWA, Native children were placed in foster care at alarmingly high rates. In 1975, 2 out of every 9 Indian children were living in a non-Indian environment and some areas reported Indian children being placed in foster or adoptive care at a rate 27.3 times greater than non-Indian children (Garner, 1993, p. 48). Prior to the passage of ICWA, there was no requirement for Indian children to be placed preferentially into Native homes.

In order to understand the disproportionate number of children in state custody, one must have an understanding of the history and oppression faced by Indian children and their families. Between 1880 and 1939, known as the “boarding school era”, ultimately over half of American Indian and Alaskan Native children were relocated hundreds to thousands of miles from their families to be placed in non- Indian run boarding schools for the sake of assimilation into white culture (Evans-Campbell, Walters, Pearson, and Campbell, 2012, p. 1).

With the last of the boarding schools closing in the 1990's, over a period of 125 years, 180,000 Indian children were forcibly removed from their families and subjected to military grade corporal punishment, loss of their culture, and physical and mental assaults ("Survivors of Indian boarding schools tell their stories", n.d.).

Survivors of these boarding schools tell of the humiliation and confusion which resulted from their placements and the lasting effects which they had on the survivors and their families. In an article titled "Survivors of Indian boarding schools tell their stories" one survivor remarks:

"The whole move was to make Indian children white. Of course at the end of the school experience, the children still weren't white. They were not accepted by white mainstream America. When they went back to their tribal homelands, they didn't fit in at home either."

American Indians and Alaskan Natives have the highest rate of mental illness in the United States additionally, rates of PTSD among Native individuals is at 22% with non-Indians being closer to 8%. Rates of death by alcoholism, early death, suicide, and illicit drug use are also the highest of any ethnic population (Evans-Campbell et al., 2012).

A 2012 study of 447 two spirit Native individuals showed significantly higher rates of poor health, poor mental health, and illicit drug use among those who had either attended boarding school or been raised by an individual who had attended boarding school (Evans-

Campbell et al., 2012). Understanding the historical context that shapes current policy, advocacy, and reform is essential.

Since the first meeting of American Indians and white colonists, the imbalance of power has been at the center of the creation of oppression with Indians. White colonists created treaties that were never upheld and systematically forced Indians out of their home territories. The actions which led to boarding schools being implemented led from the misbelief that white culture was better than that of Indian culture. White government felt that in order for the “savage” Indians to become successful they must be systematically separated from one another and assimilated by force into white culture.

The false belief that all cultures and all individuals must be held to the standard of the white male is something that shapes policy and something which must be considered as a practicing social worker. The Indian Child Welfare Act sought, in some ways, to implement the social work values of dignity and worth of the individual and cultural awareness into public policy.

The implementation of ICWA into federal policy acknowledges the need for self-determination for Native children and families and addresses the right for Indian children to be placed with Indian families, know their tribal affiliations, and for all active efforts to be made to ensure that the child and family are treated with culturally competent practice with the desire to keep their families in tact. In the face of a history of force and assimilation, ICWA is a step in the right direction.

Despite all that ICWA hopes to do when it comes to keeping children and families united, power and oppression are still at work. As previously mentioned, the generational trauma from boarding schools is of large concern. As children were removed from their homes and families and placed into institutionalized care, the abilities for those children to parent their own children in a way which is sensitive to the culture was severely impacted. Additionally, the power differentials between non-white social workers and native children and families plays out even when ICWA is implemented.

Understanding the history, it is easier to take a critical look at the way which state social workers interact with children and families. ICWA states that the child's tribe has the right to assume jurisdiction of a child abuse and neglect case at any point in the proceedings. However, tribal social services is limited in federal funding to consistently enact the rights granted through ICWA (Evans-Campbell et al., 2012). Too often, informing the tribe, hiring qualified expert witnesses, and assessing for kin placement off of the reservation becomes a check box.

State social workers continue to lack training in engaging with tribal families. The Montana Child Abuse and Neglect training is required of all new Child Protection Specialists in the state. Within this training, the policies of ICWA are reviewed and social workers learn the additional requirements needed for Indian children. While there is focus on when and how to notify tribes, new social workers are ill prepared to understand why these requirements are in place. Despite having 12 tribes within Montana, no emphasis is given to social workers on how to engage with Native families in a culturally competent manner.

The same difference in power that was seen in the enactment of lot allocations and boarding schools is too easily translated into practice in current day. As Indian children were asked to assimilate into white culture, families engaging with state social service workers in Montana are held to the parenting standards of white families. Upon being placed in state care, the lack of competency which the social workers are afforded in relation to tribal custom results in children often losing contact with extended family and with parents being asked to complete treatment plans where culture was not a factor during development.

It is the responsibility of the CPS worker to make themselves culturally competent both in their practice and in their communication with Native families and agencies. As we learned in this semester's education, barriers in communication go far past language differences and ineffective communication shapes the experience that one culture has with another. In the following, I will examine the culture and communication as it pertains to Native families (particularly of the Blackfeet and Salish Kootenai Nations), and offer suggestions on how social workers may better engage with the families that they serve.

One of the first considerations that needs to be taken into account when discussing culture of Native American tribes is to understand the diversity found within this demographic. There are 562 federally recognized tribes in North America with 33 of these tribes residing within the United States (Indian Nations in The United States, n.d.). Each of these Nations is independent of the other with their own unique culture, traditions, and language.

Across various tribes, one will find matriarchal and patriarchal groups, varied non verbal

communication, and differentiation on the makeup of families and identification with one's Native identity. As social workers, it is imperative to learn the customs, history, and culture of the Nation with whom you are working rather than to assume, as is so often done, that Native Americans are a homogenous group.

One thing that is consistent throughout tribal nations is the impact of white colonialism through generations and the impact this has on current culture. As discussed earlier, these tribes were uprooted and resettled through the Dawes Act and the implementation of reservations. True to colonialism, reservation were formed in areas which may lack natural resources with desirable locations being allocated to white homesteaders. Often, historically adversarial tribes were placed within the same territories in a purposeful act to create even more chaos to undermine the legacy of tribal culture. This history needs to be taken into consideration as social workers. Issues of chemical dependency, poverty, and domestic violence which may bring Native clients into our offices are the direct result of the historical genocide that has been waged against the Native community.

### **Historical Trauma**

Once the social worker has an understanding of the history of the tribal nation with whom they are working with, they can begin to develop a framework to enhance their efficacy in communication with that population. The new social worker may be idealistic in their approach to working with minority groups, it is ill-informed to work from a "color blind" approach. The



trauma from the boarding school era and the colonialism of white settlers is fresh in the lives of the Indian families with whom we work. The boarding school era ended in the '80s and '90s which means the families that we engage with in child protection have been directly impacted by this. Parents who were raised in boarding schools left often with a limited framework of how to create their own parenting style as well as often fractured relationships with their extended families.

When we, as child protection specialists, engage with Native Families, the mistrust that we often face is well-warranted. Regardless of what intentions a social worker may have or what their level of cultural competency, this generational trauma creates a very real barrier to effectively working with families in a way that does not continue to repeat the cycle of placing Indian children with white families.

### **The Blackfeet Nation**

The Blackfeet Nation is comprised of over 17,000 members and makes up one of the largest tribes in the United States. The reservation for this Nation is located in northwestern Montana (Blackfeet Nation, n.d.). Historically, the Blackfeet people were a nomadic tribe who followed buffalo herds to hunt and later sell to white settlers. One of the principle beliefs of the Blackfeet people is that no human can be born evil -- truth and honesty were highly valued and all people were to be treated with respect regardless of age or rank (Blackfoot Indians, n.d.).

From a communications standpoint, the Blackfeet Nation is a collectivist culture. Ting-

Toomey states that collectivist cultures value “harmony, face-saving, filial piety, equality in the distribution of rewards among peers, and fulfillment of others’ needs” (p.49). Collectivist cultures like the Blackfeet Nation value the group over the individual. The focus of collectivist groups is on the “we” rather than the “I” with a focus on teamwork and collaboration.

As social workers, what we ask of our clients may be in conflict with their collectivist culture values. Take for instance the treatment plans parents are given after adjudication. These treatment plans give parent a list of tasks they must complete in order to work towards reunification with their child. Each parent is given their own individualized treatment plan and there is the possibility that one parent may successfully complete their treatment plan while the other parent fails to do so meaning that only one parent may successfully reunify with the child(ren). Understanding the strong collectivist values within the Blackfeet Nation, we can understand how these individualized treatment plans may, in themselves, create huge barriers for the success of Native families.

In many ways, ICWA attempts to address this. The ICWA expert who is assigned to cases with children who are enrolled or enrollable is tasked with ensuring that the family's cultural traditions are upheld. Often though, Native culture and white governmental bureaucracy can be at odds.

In the world of child protection, one of the best ways we have found to respect the collectivist culture of families is to hold frequent family engagement meetings (FEM) While treatment team meetings generally consist of attorneys, therapists, and treatment providers, the

family engagement meeting calls upon the family as the true experts. A skillfully facilitated FEM will give the family an understanding of the expectations of the Department but then allow the family to develop the plan that best works for them. This may include assistance with respite child care or using tribal services such as the Urban Indian Health Center to reach the goals for safety needed for reunification. When the family can wrap around the parents and offer support, treatment outcomes can be much more attainable.

Traditionally, Tribal governments were made up of chiefs of the various sects of the Blackfeet Nation and issues were discussed openly and respectfully until the chiefs could come to a consensus rather than relying on one individual to make decisions for the group. Although within the Blackfeet family structure all individuals are treated with respect, there is traditionally a large power differential culture within the Blackfeet Nation.

According to Ting-Toomey, small power distance families encourage a democratic process among all family members with children being encouraged to question their parents and an emphasis on interpersonal equality (p.49). Large power distance cultures are more hierarchical in nature.

Ting-Toomey explains that large power distance families “tend to accept unequal power distributions, hierarchal rights, asymmetrical role relations, and rewards and punishments based on age, rank, status, title, and seniority” (p.48). While all individuals are treated with respect, parents and elders within the Blackfeet family are seen as a source of wisdom and guidance for younger parents or children.

Understanding this, we can apply it to our engagement with families within Child and Family Services. As FEMs are used to respect the collectivist culture of Native families, they also respect the cultural value of family members and elders. Parents working with the department who are connected with their natural support structure of extended family and other tribal members may have better outcomes in meeting their goals in their treatment plan. Although a legal case may only be formally involved with the parents, the entirety of the family cannot be ignored.

Also to be taken into consideration is the dynamic between the social worker and the parent. In these large power distance cultures like the Blackfeet, a lot of power is given to rank and title. Acting as agents of the state, Child Protection Specialists hold a lot of power and must be able to manage this ethically in order to engage with families. This needs to be even more a consideration when dealing with families who are very connected to the large power distance in their culture. These parents may be less likely to question the authority of the social worker or advocate for their own needs. A skillful social worker will want to ensure that the family understands the purpose for the tasks on the treatment plan and is an active participant in the work being done rather than just doing what they are told or “jumping through hoops”.

Similar is the role that weak uncertainty avoidance has versus strong uncertainty avoidance. Ting-Toomey explains that strong uncertainty avoidance cultures prefer to have clear expectations, roles, and rules. These cultures value structure and routine and are likely to avoid addressing conflict (p.51). As social workers it may benefit us to ensure that clear expectations

are set with regular meetings and defined roles. Again, the concern for the avoidance of conflict, especially with an authority figure such as a CPS worker, should be taken into consideration within this dynamic.

In reviewing the sex role patterns within Blackfeet families, they likely fall under a more feminine structure. Historically, women's roles within the tribe included cooking, caring for the home, and tanning the hides of bison. Sex role specifics are not as strong within modern culture. For both the men and women within the families, there is a focus on nurturance and the family life. Ting-Toomey describes this as being more typical of feminine families while masculine families may value achievement, academic success, and a focus on career (p.52). Within Native American families, more importance is given to the family life and relationships between family and tribal members than the success in career or academics.

### **Communication Styles**

Not only are there differences in the family structure within Native families, there will also be differences found in the ways which these families communicate. Native Americans for instance value silence with careful consideration given to the words that are spoken (Cultural Differences in Communication, n.d.). Especially during the incredibly emotional discussions which happen in the interactions with social workers or child protection specialists, Native parents may often be silent. While this could be misconstrued as apathy or a lack of openness by white social workers, this would come from a difference in culture rather than reality.

When not silent, storytelling can also be a valuable tool in communication. Storytelling is a valuable asset within Blackfeet culture and can be used to teach lessons, explain oneself, or pass down history. This is not something that can be overlooked when engaging with Native families.

### **Conclusion**

Often when we think of intercultural communication, it is easy to automatically think of applying the knowledge to travel or to cultures far removed from those that we know here in Montana. But in actuality, we are likely to come across a variety of cultures during our practice even in Missoula. Although their tribal lands lie in Browning, hours away from us, one's culture does not disappear once you leave the arbitrarily assigned reservation. Understanding the significance of the difference in culture in combination with the historical trauma and relationship between Native families and whites will place us in a position to learn to communicate in a more culturally competent manner.

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