



Forgotten children: A critical review of the reunification of American Indian children in the child welfare system



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ABSTRACT

Reunification is the preferred permanency path experienced by children following out-of-home placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011, 2012). Emerging literature suggests a number of child, parent, family, and child welfare case characteristics predict the likelihood of reunification. However, research on the reunification of American Indians in child welfare system is limited. Given the unique historical and cultural context of American Indian families, a need exists to better understand what contributes to achieving permanency through reunification for these families. To develop a better understanding of reunification research, this article provides a critical review of the literature on predictors of reunification that is inclusive of American Indians. A search of the literature resulted in the inclusion of 17 articles. Findings suggest that although awareness of the factors associated with reunification for American Indian families is helpful, without consistent inclusion of child, parent, family, and case-related variables across statistical analyses, limited conclusions can be drawn. It is significant to note that a level that is not currently considered in literature is the tribe or band and what is done to assist the child in reunification from the tribal level.

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Approximately half (51%) of all children in the child welfare system exiting out-of-home placement are reunified with their family of origin (Children's Bureau, 2010; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Although such statistics on reunification exist for the general population, national rates for American Indian children remain relatively unknown. Furthermore, most existing studies have focused on factors associated with reunification for Caucasian, African American, and "other" race families, rather than American Indian families as a distinct subgroup. Being subsumed in the "other" category does not create space to understand how the unique cultural and historical characteristics of American Indians have led to their overrepresentation within the welfare system or how those characteristics contribute to the outcomes such as reunification after exiting the system. Based on this contextual situation, American Indian children are considered "forgotten children" not just because they are not included in reunification research, but also because of the literature's failure to consider their unique cultural and ethnic history as a distinct subgroup. Some unique cultural characteristics of the native community include defining "family" much broader than the majority culture. Family extends beyond the parent-child relationship to emphasize other critical caregivers within a child's life (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, etc.). This critical literature review provides a lens into the current state of understanding within

the literature and suggests some directions for future research related to the reunification of American Indian children.

Reunification is the preferred permanency path and most frequent outcome experienced by children following out-of-home placement within the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011, 2012). It is not yet known, however, whether reunification is the most frequent outcome for American Indian children. Furthermore, reunification studies including American Indian children have revealed mixed findings. Although a number have found no significant differences in reunification between American Indian and Caucasian children (see Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Courtney & Hook, 2012a, 2012b; Grant et al., 2011; Green, Rockhill, & Furrer, 2007; Kemp & Bodonyi, 2000; Rockhill, Green, & Furrer, 2007; Shaw, 2010), other research suggests that American Indian children are less likely to reunify compared to Caucasians (see Needell et al., 2014; Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005) or children of other races and ethnicities (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Multiracial) (see Farmer, Southerland, Mustillo, & Burns, 2009). So a question arises as to reasons why these conflicts exist. Does it have to do with the definition of reunification in the system or a sampling and measurement issue?

The conventional definition of reunification within the child welfare system has referred to the returning a child in out-of-home placement to their family of origin and reinstating custody to birth parent(s). However, broader definitions of reunification have emerged that include the process of returning children to their family of origin, the return of children to other relatives, and the planned process of reconnecting (Child

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Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Wulczyn, 2004). This broadened definition of reunification is much more appropriate considering core beliefs within the American Indian community such as viewing “family as tribe” versus viewing “family” as only the nuclear family.

To enter a discussion about an outcome such as reunification, one must first understand the nature of the processes within the welfare system that occur prior to that outcome. For instance, an alarming number of children in the U.S. experience foster care each year; 397,000 children within the general population were in foster care on the last day of 2012 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Within that number, American Indian children had the highest rates of out-of-home care, with 13.0 in care per 1000 children compared to 10.1 for African Americans, 4.3 for Caucasians, 0.7 for Asians (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Even though American Indian children are overrepresented in child welfare and foster care systems, data about them and their families are underrepresented in child welfare literature. That lack of information is found on two dimensions of the issue; first, there is a lack of attention to the population itself even though they are overrepresented with the welfare system and, secondly, from a conceptual perspective, there is little known about permanency outcomes (i.e., reunification, adoption, kinship, legal guardianship) for American Indian children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

Historical acts of relocation, assimilation, and systematic child removal distinguish American Indian families from other racial and ethnic groups. These acts have had a profound cross-generational effect. The following are some of the historical acts of forced child removal that American Indians have experienced. Between 1878 and 1930, American Indian children were forced to attend boarding schools based on the belief that their families were inferior; this action has been described as the first wave of child removal (Red Horse et al., 2000). Between 1940 and 1978, the U.S. federal government (Indian Adoption Project – Bureau of Indian Affairs and Child Welfare League of America) systematically removed American Indian children and placed them into foster care, adoptive homes, or institutions (Jacobs, 2013; Red Horse et al., 2000). State and national statistics documenting the alarming rate of removal of American Indian children (Atwood, 2008) served as a springboard for the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978 (Red Horse et al., 2000).

ICWA places precedence on the return of American Indian children to their home nations by requiring child welfare workers to work with American Indian Nations on cases involving American Indian children (Graham, 2008). Many American Indian children in today's foster care system were born into families where their parents and/or grandparents experienced the detrimental effects of systematic child removal. The impact of this systematic child removal has been cross-generationally transmitted and is often described as a critical dimension of the historical trauma experienced by this population.

Boarding schools deprived these children of experiencing parenting as a caregiving function or even witnessing interactions between young children and their caregivers. American Indian children experiencing boarding schools went on to give birth to children of the adoptee era – many of whom were raised in the absence of traditional Indian values, customs, and parenting practices on top of not experiencing a parent/child caregiving function. Additionally, there are also cultural differences between collectivist American Indian families and families from individualistic orientations (such as Caucasian families; Schmidt, 1995). For instance, many American Indian families are informed by knowledge that stems from tradition, rather than western science (Red Horse et al., 2000). American Indians also have a broader definition of family that extends beyond the nuclear structure of parent-child relationships (Red Horse et al., 2000).

Given the unique historical and cultural context of American Indian families, a need exists to better understand what contributes to achieving permanency through reunification for these families. This knowledge gap is addressed by critically reviewing research about child

welfare permanency, more specifically reunification that is inclusive of American Indians. The following research questions are considered: What picture currently exists about American Indian reunification in the literature? What child, parent, family, case, and community level factors are associated with reunification for American Indian families within the literature? What is the relationship between race or ethnicity (specifically American Indian) and reunification? This review makes a timely and substantial contribution to the literature because reunification remains a pressing issue in the lives of children in underserved minority families (e.g., American Indian families) and a critical review of literature relating to reunification specifically for American Indian children has not been conducted to-date. The purpose of this review is to summarize (1) the relationship between American Indian children's race/ethnicity and reunification and (2) predictors to reunification for American Indian children.

1. Methods

1.1. Search process

A comprehensive search of the reunification literature of the last 15 years was conducted. The aim was to find empirical peer-reviewed journal articles that described predictors of reunification for American Indian families. The search term “family reunification” is primarily recognized by OvidSP (powering PsycInfo) as encompassing family services that attempt to reunite children in out-of-home care with their birth, or extended, families of origin. Academic Search Premier, PsycInfo, and Google Scholar databases were utilized to conduct the search. Search terms were executed exclusively, and in conjunction with other terms. The following key terms guided the search: reunification, permanency, child welfare, family preservation, family processes, family relations, and family outcomes. Ancestry and descendant searches were also conducted on the initial articles deemed appropriate for inclusion, until saturation was achieved. An ancestry search looks at the references cited within a particular article, whereas a descendant search looks at the subsequent articles that cited a particular work – this is distinct from a content or conceptual review. The use of ancestry and descendant searches was particularly important to ensure that all articles relating to reunification were found, as articles are flagged by different key words and may otherwise be missed.

In a broad search of “family reunification” literature, 252 articles were identified through Academic Search Premier and 130 articles in PsycInfo, though many articles were considered duplicates as they appeared in both engines. When articles focused outside the child welfare system, they were excluded, the results narrowed to 116 articles in Academic Search Premier and PsycInfo. Articles were excluded if they did not include the outcome variable of reunification or if they did not include American Indian children in the sample. The search parameters were constricted by the addition of terms such as “family processes” or “family relations”, and/or “child welfare.” This yielded 51 articles. Literature was subsequently narrowed by the review of abstracts to verify meeting inclusion criteria.

1.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The following criteria were set for articles selected for inclusion: (a) empirical articles in peer-reviewed journals accessible in English; (b) published within the last fifteen years; (c) reunification was included as an outcome variable, even if other types of permanency exits were explored; (d) the population of interest was children in U.S. child welfare system who experienced out-of-home placement; and (e) included American Indian children, parents or families in the sample.

To focus on reunification, the following were excluded: (a) studies focused on other paths to permanency but did not include reunification; (b) intervention and evaluation studies that did not focus on predictors of reunification aside from an intervention's efficacy or effectiveness;

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