

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Political Economy of American Indian Identity: Maintaining Boundaries and Regulating Access to Ethnically Tied Resources

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4fj8q025>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 22(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

1998-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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Peer reviewed

# Drinking, Foster Care, and the Intergenerational Continuity of Parenting in an Urban Indian Community

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Despite widespread concern within American Indian communities, the world of research has paid scant attention to how Indian parenting traditions have been undermined by institutions such as boarding schools, urban relocation, and foster care. My goal in this paper is to begin to address some of these questions by documenting, both statistically and with case studies, the ways in which placements outside of Indian families and communities have often compromised the ability of Indian people to parent their children. I will focus specifically on the predicaments of former foster children, for these are people who have often vowed to be good parents, but have frequently been unable to live up to their expectations for themselves as all too often they have seen their children taken by the very foster care system they so hoped to avoid.

While the dynamics I will be describing here are to be found throughout Indian country, there is reason to believe that they are especially common in urban Indian communities. In the course of my work in Minneapolis, I met many people who

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had come to the city after childhoods spent far from their natal communities. These were people who had been largely cut off from the communities into which they were born when they were placed in the homes of foster parents. And, while they now found themselves in the urban environment associating freely with Indian people, their childhood experiences continued to color their adult lives, especially their relationships with their children. The stories of these individuals speak powerfully to us about the predicaments of an as yet undetermined, but no doubt significant, number of urban Indian people.<sup>1</sup>

### THE EFFECTS OF OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT ON PARENTING

The implications of foster care and boarding school for the mental health of children and adolescents are relatively clear, and these have received the bulk of attention among clinicians and researchers.<sup>2</sup> In particular, analysts have focused on the effects of out-of-home placement on a child's developing sense of self and identity, and special attention has been given to the effects of placement in White<sup>3</sup> foster homes because of the very real risk that a child's developing sense of himself or herself as Indian will be compromised.<sup>4</sup> However, the effects of these identity dynamics on the next generation are much less clear.

Indeed, only one study has systematically explored the connections between childhood experiences and subsequent parenting among American Indian people. In that study, which focused on the effects of boarding schools on the parenting skills of Navajo mothers living in the San Francisco Bay Area, Metcalf found that childhood experiences in boarding school exerted strong effects on the mothers' adult evaluations of themselves, with those mothers who had the most disruptive schooling experiences tending also to have the most negative self-image.<sup>5</sup> In turn, Metcalf found that mothers' self-images were correlated with the observer's rating of their children's contentment during a free-play episode: Those mothers who had a negative self-image tended to have children who were rated as less contented during free play with their mothers.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there appeared to be an important connection between the development of an Indian girl's sense of self during childhood and at least some characteristics of her children when she was an adult. However, Metcalf did not find any other effects

of boarding school on her measures of mother-child interaction, which meant that there was only limited support for her hypothesis that a disruptive placement in childhood would affect parenting in the next generation.

Given the lack of research attention to these topics in Indian communities, we are fortunate that research in non-Indian communities exists which can help us to clarify the connections between childhood experiences and parenting as an adult. In particular, the research program of Quinton, Rutter, and Liddle has contributed tremendously to our understanding of the connections between out-of-home placement and subsequent parenting difficulties.<sup>7</sup> For example, in a study that retrospectively examined the childhood experiences of London women, these authors found significant differences between women whose children were placed out of the home (in care) and a control group of mothers from the same neighborhood whose children were not in care.<sup>8</sup> Mothers who had their children in care were significantly more likely to have had fathers with drinking or criminal problems, to have been placed outside of the home during their own childhoods, and to have received harsh discipline from their parents. Unfortunately, these mother's difficulties did not end in childhood. They were also significantly more likely to have experienced problems in school and with their parents as teenagers, and they were subsequently more likely to leave home for negative reasons, to become pregnant before the age of eighteen, to marry for negative reasons (for instance, to escape home or because of pregnancy), and to marry or partner with a man who experienced similar difficulties. Thus, the parenting problems these women had did not exist in isolation; the mothers whose children were in care were characterized as much by a complex of family, psychiatric, and environmental difficulties as by parenting difficulties as such.

These findings were extended in a prospective study by the same researchers that examined the outcomes for a group of girls who, in 1964, were in one of two children's homes (the ex-care group) and a comparison group of women of the same age and from the same general area of London who had never been in care.<sup>9</sup> The results of this research suggested that those mothers raised in care were at a significant disadvantage when compared to the control group. The ex-care women were more likely to have become pregnant before their nineteenth birthday and less likely to be in a stable cohabiting relationship. Nearly a fifth of the children of ex-care women had been placed out of

the home, and fully one-third of the ex-care mothers had suffered a parenting breakdown during which their children had to be taken care of by someone else for at least six months. No evidence for either out-of-home placement or parenting breakdown was found in the control group. The ex-care mothers were also significantly more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorder, to have criminal records, and to have substantial difficulties in their interpersonal relationships. Importantly, as in the retrospective research, there was strong evidence that parenting difficulties did not occur in isolation: Little continuity in parenting across the two generations was found in the absence of other psychosocial difficulties.

While some suggest that findings like these may result from the circumstances leading up to the placement and not from placement *per se*,<sup>10</sup> there are also some good reasons to think that placement, in and of itself, may also exert an important effect. Especially in the case of people who cycle in and out of multiple foster homes, placement out of the home can amount to a repetition of the very same destructive care-giving environment that led to the child being removed from the home in the first case. Undoubtedly, we should hesitate to put all of the blame on out-of-home placement, but we must also think seriously about its potentially destructive impact. Before turning directly to my findings, though, I want first to provide some context for the work I did.

#### FIELDWORK IN AN URBAN INDIAN COMMUNITY

My most intensive fieldwork in Minneapolis was conducted along a central street known simply as “the Avenue” by people in the community. Unlike many other urban Indian communities, which lack defined Indian neighborhoods,<sup>11</sup> Minneapolis has a major aggregation of Indian people on the near south side of downtown, which is where I worked. The majority of the people I came into contact with were living in extreme poverty, no doubt because they were, for the most part, people I met at an immensely popular social service agency on the Avenue, known simply as “the Branch” by people in the community. The Branch housed both a food shelf and a soup kitchen, and it served a population of people whose lives were marked by underemployment, unemployment, and the vicissitudes of dealing with changing social workers and welfare policies.<sup>12</sup>

My data in this paper are drawn primarily from interviews with fifty American Indian people (twenty-five men and twenty-five women). These interviews were conducted with people from a number of different tribes—Ojibwe, Dakota, Lakota, Winnebago, and Cree—and the focus of the interviews was on drinking. My approach in these interviews was to invite people simply to talk about their experiences with alcohol, both good and bad, and I probed for specific information only in the context of a person's own account. I made no attempt, beyond the initial framing question, to collect systematic information from each individual. Instead, my goal was to examine the different ways that people made sense (or did not make sense) of their drinking experiences; I attended much more to the pattern within a particular case rather than the regularities that characterized the set of cases.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, important generalizations do emerge from these interviews and, where appropriate, I will present statistical information in what follows. But I ask the reader to be extremely careful when interpreting this information. These numbers indicate only how often people mentioned a particular issue in the course of our conversation about their experiences with drinking, *not* how often the topic would have come up had I asked a direct question of everyone I was interviewing. Hence, I use numbers only to begin to develop my argument. The heart of my data remains the stories of individual Indian people and it is these to which I will return throughout the analysis.

### CHILDHOOD AND DRINKING PARENTS

The majority (34/50) of the men and women I interviewed reported being raised, for at least part of their childhood, by parents who were often drunk, but it is likely that the extent of parental drinking is even higher than this. Only four people stated explicitly that their parents did not drink, while the twelve remaining people offered accounts in which parental drinking was not mentioned, either because they were placed out of the home before they even knew their parents—surely, for some, an indication of their parents' drinking—or because their parents' drinking was not an explicit focus in their accounts of themselves and their drinking.

Although few people overtly condemned their parents for drinking, their appraisals of their childhoods reveal something

of the extent to which their parents' use of alcohol had a negative impact upon them. Having parents that were frequently drunk meant that children were often left alone, which left children often lonely and afraid of what might happen to them. The fear was sometimes even worse, though, when one's parents were actually around, since children often had to listen at length to their parents' drunken conflicts. For example, Ben,<sup>14</sup> an Ojibwe man, was explicit about how frightened he was of his parents' drinking:

It was kind of scary. Because there was some violence, y'know? Fighting and stuff.... Um— ... my dad wasn't a drinker like my mom. But my mom, she drank a lot. And all my relatives up there, they drank too, y'know? So I was pretty much around it a lot, y'know? [And] I can remember hiding up under beds and stuff like that. When things were getting kind of rough.<sup>15</sup>

While Ben was also able to appreciate that his parents sometimes got along well when drinking, his account leaves little doubt that fear was one of the dominant experiences of his childhood.

Parental drinking also meant that many young people were left alone with their siblings, and several women described to me how they were responsible for taking care of their younger brothers and sisters while their parents were out drinking. Certainly, some caretaking for younger siblings was probably always expected of older Indian children and therefore relatively untroubling.<sup>16</sup> But when these responsibilities were thrust upon children because of a parent's drinking, they had a very different feel. Ionia, a Lakota woman, told me that as a young child she had to take care of her entire family, even her mother and father:

I more or less grew up taking care of my father when he was drunk. Otherwise protecting my sisters from my father when he was drunk. Protecting my mother when she was getting beat up by my father. I don't know why. But he never abused me. He never struck me. He never was abusive to me, like the way he was with the rest of the family. And I was kind of like the peace maker, y'know? I was the only one that could stop my dad from his rageful bouts with ... everybody. So, that was a big responsibility for me. I think I remember doing that when I was six, seven, eight years old. As far back as I can remember. And um—when I was



eleven years old, my father started taking me around with him on his drunks. And he taught me how to drive so I could drive for him whenever he got too drunk to drive.

Although Ionia laughed when she related these episodes to me, her relationship with her father obviously bothered her. In fact, she told me that even to this day her childhood experiences have continued to color her relationships with her parents, especially with her mother, who still mistrusts Ionia because she was so often put in the position of keeping secrets about her father's extramarital adventuring.

Some parents may have dismissed the implications of their drinking for their children, but the ways in which absent or drunken parents could injure a child were well recognized by others in their communities. Evelyn, another Lakota woman, told me how her grandparents reacted when they saw how she had had to grow up so soon because of her absent parents:

I was two and I remember my grandmother crying, and saying look at her. She's tying her own shoestrings. My god, she's never been a baby. Yeah. When I got up early in the morning and laced my high tops up to go to the bathroom. 'Cause in the Lakota way, the *hakelas*, the last born, and particularly the little girls, are really precious. We're a child-based culture so, I mean, to see a child struggling to grow up because of some demonic thing like alcohol, to them, was just really personal. And really a spiritual affront to god. So I remember her crying about that.

Observations like this give us good reason to be wary of attempts to cast such behavior as traditional, since, in these cases, "tradition" may be used to justify acts that are far outside the range of what was aboriginally endorsed.<sup>17</sup>

Even more devastating than neglect and its implications for the child, however, was the fact that a parent's drunken obliviousness could sometimes set the stage for sexual abuse, particularly for young women. While none of the people I interviewed reported being victimized by their biological parents, three women did tell me that, in their view, the fact that their parents were drunk and inattentive made it possible for others to abuse them sexually. I suspect that the number of people who were sexually abused was, in fact, higher than this; however, people were able to avoid the topic simply by not relating such incidents to me.



## THE EXPERIENCE OF OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT

Whatever the particular experience of growing up with drinking parents, it is abundantly clear that the child's well-being was often compromised by their drunken inattentiveness, and both the state and the children's extended families often intervened to get the children out of these environments. Almost half of my sample (twenty-three) spent most of their childhoods in the custody of someone other than their birth parents.<sup>18</sup> Thirteen people were raised by *strangers in foster care* (eight women and five men) and ten were raised primarily by *kin other than their birth parents* (four women and six men). Yet, although both kinds of intervention were probably intended to get children out of bad situations, each action had very different consequences.

It is useful in this regard to contrast the experiences of those raised by strangers in foster care with those who were raised by kin other than their parents. For convenience I will refer to the former as foster care and the latter as kin care.<sup>19</sup> While not all kin care was peaceful and nurturing—sometimes relatives were plagued by the same problems that parents were—growing up with one's sober grandparents was often represented as a wonderful opportunity to learn about American Indian ways of life. Evelyn put it this way:

'Cause I never saw alcoholism, per se, in my face. I was not allowed. We really lived a very cultural life. Language, food, everything was all Lakota. Oglala. Language, everything. And of course we were raised kind of spiritually so it didn't matter, the food, or the table setting, or the surface things, looks. It was with what heart we came to the table. We had to come to the table with a good heart. To eat. They were very mindful of that. Of the way our attitude, or heart, or whatever, was. At every life's activities that we have. They didn't care if we ate off our feet. They didn't care if we, y'know? Sat naked at the table. Deal was what was in your heart. You do not come to our table and eat with us with hate in your heart.

For Evelyn, the contrast between drinking and sobriety could not have been clearer. In fact, she recalled that her grandfather actually chased her parents from the family property when they showed up so much as smelling of alcohol.

Other children may have been less separated from the drinking of others, but their experiences with their grandpar-

ents nevertheless provided a valuable refuge, as is so evident in the following recollection by Lyman, an Ojibwe man:

Well I was raised by my grandparents. Grandma and grandfather. They're up in their eighties now. But neither one of them drank when I was growing up. My grandfather used to. But, ... I never seen him drunk, y'know? He'd gotten into an accident. He got five years in prison for that. Some kind of manslaughter there. For a car wreck.... Anyway uh—growing up up there, y'know? As a little boy, and stuff, it was good. I like it up there. My grandmother and grandfather didn't use, y'know? Drink. I never seen the stuff. But I did see it. That's why I'm saying the good and the bad that I've seen, y'know? My mother and my uncles, y'know? Abusing us as children, y'know? Drinking and, y'know? Scaring the shit out of us guys. Us kids, y'know? And, I think there's a lot of jealousy there with my uncles, y'know? Myself being the oldest. And uh—my grandfather's first grandson, y'know? Uh—so I took a lot of abuse, I guess, from my uncles. They were drunk all the time, y'know? Come home and raise hell with us kids.

While being raised by his grandparents did not always give Lyman complete protection from the drinking that was so common in his family, the experience was nevertheless valuable because it provided him with knowledge about who he was and where he was going in life—lessons that emerged even more clearly through the contrast between the drunken lifestyle of his parents' generation and the sobriety of life with his grandparents.

The situation for children raised in foster homes was often quite different. Instead of the stability of grandparents' care, these children often were rapidly cycled in and out of multiple homes, seldom getting the chance to form any significant relationship with their foster parents. Even for those lucky few who were placed with Indian foster parents,<sup>20</sup> these placements were seldom long lasting and, since they were frequently with strangers who had developed very negative opinions about reservation life, they remained quite difficult situations. For example, Verna, an Ojibwe woman, described to me how two sets of foster parents, even though they were Indian people, refused to allow her to return home for the funerals of her relatives:

Well after I left my grandma's ... they put me in um—that foster home way out uh— ... almost a hundred miles from

my home. And I didn't like that. We ran away from there. Me and these other two Indian girls. We took off. Tried to steal a car (laughs). Then we went and got drunk up on their reservation. And they picked us up. Took us right back there. And I didn't wanna stay there. So then from there they ... put me at this other foster home. Indian people. Well, Indian woman. Her husband was a White guy. And they acted like everybody else, y'know? They wouldn't let me go to my uncle's funeral. So I ran away again. Went and got drunk.

Paul: How come they wouldn't let you go?

Verna: They said all them Indians do is drink anyway so ... they wouldn't let me go. So then from there they put me out in jail. And they sent me to the girl's reformatory, in Wisconsin. Stayed there for ... six months? Stayed for six months. And then, I got out of there, they put me in another—this Indian foster home. And ... just ... I stayed there for like most of my junior year in high school. And part of my senior year. Till my grandpa died. And they wouldn't let me go to the funeral. So I ran away again.

Furthermore, while those Indian children who were raised by their grandparents describe how loved they felt, those raised in foster care knew that they would never be accepted as full members of their foster families. George, an Ojibwe man, told me that even today he feels quite estranged from his kin:

And my foster parents couldn't really say they loved me, cause they didn't really. I wasn't theirs (laughs) to say that with.... Yeah.

Paul: So you didn't feel like you were loved by them? Or—

George: Yeah. To a point. Yeah. In a way. I know they cared, and all that, but it's just that—like me and my real brothers, we—we're more strangers than—than brothers, y'know? (laughs)

George is not simply cut off from his family, however; he is equally alienated from his identity as an Indian person:

I'm almost non-Indian compared to most of the people that are supposed to be real Indians.

Paul: Yeah, you said that before. Why do you feel that way? What are you thinking about?

George: Being brought up White. With the Whites. Because I don't know my culture.

- Paul: Do you get that, like from other Indian people then?  
That uh—  
George: That's just how I feel, and what I think.  
Paul: So you feel less an Indian than other people?  
George: Right.

The fact that people can grow up feeling like George is probably one of the most disturbing effects of placement in White foster homes and, as I noted above, it is this dynamic that has received the lion's share of attention in the research literature. Westermeyer, for example, offers a compelling analysis of the way that placements in White foster homes disrupted young people's developing senses of themselves as Indian. These children were raised in a White milieu, in which people generally did not understand Indian cultures, at the same time that they were deprived of a meaningful role in the White and generally suburban settings where they were raised. This left them with no place where they were accepted, and Westermeyer argues that these dynamics make the effects of foster care even more damaging than those seen in boarding schools: Foster children were often deprived of any contact with Indian people, while boarding school children were at least housed with other Indian students and usually permitted to return home during the summer and some holidays.<sup>21</sup>

The testimony of the people in my study constitutes additional evidence for the destructive impact of out-of-home placement on an Indian person's developing sense of self. In the comments of George, in particular, the implications of care by strangers emerge with vivid clarity. George did not believe that his foster parents really loved him, even if they said they did. And while he also describes a sense of not fitting in with Indian people—of not being a "real Indian"<sup>22</sup>—he also talks about a more general sense of existential insecurity that is driven by not fitting in with either Whites or Indians. Of course, to be fair to those dedicated foster parents, this situation sometimes may have had more to do with the child's perceptions than with their actual behavior, but it is clear that each new placement in each new home with each new family of strangers only worsens the child's predicament.

## THE REPRODUCTION OF PARENTING

Not everyone who was placed in foster care had a negative experience—at least two Ojibwe men told me that they were

glad to have been raised in homes that provided them with a sense of security and the structure they needed to ensure they got to school—but many of the foster children I interviewed vowed not to put their children through what they had experienced, a commentary that appeared to be as much about the drinking and neglect of one's parents as it was about foster care per se. The question is whether or not they were successful, and to this end I have extracted some numbers from my transcripts which begin to tell the story.

For those women who were raised in foster care (eight people), it is notable that fully six of them lost custody of their children, three to foster care and three to members of their extended families.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, only one of these women raised her children continuously; the remaining woman did not have any children. While those women who lost custody of their children to their kin were able to get them back at some point, none of the women whose children were in foster care had been able to get them back. In contrast, of the four women raised by kin other than their parents, two were able to raise their children continuously, while only one lost her children to foster care and she only recently. The remaining woman's account was unclear about what had happened to her children due to the way she structured her story. Finally, of the twelve women who were raised by their birth parents throughout their lives, only two of them lost their children—one to foster care and one to kin—and both had been able to get them back. A clear pattern emerges in this data, which suggests that, in terms of one's ability to parent when an adult, a childhood with one's parents is least disruptive, a childhood with other kin is somewhat disruptive, and a childhood in the care of strangers is most disruptive.

For men, the situation is similar, but it is easier to speak of their involvement with their children since many men simply stopped playing a role in their children's lives without formally losing custody. Of the five men raised in foster care, four had no discernible role in their children's upbringing and the remaining individual's account was not clear on the issue. In contrast, of the six men raised by kin other than their parents, two were now raising their kids, three had not had children, and one man's account was not clear about his relationship with his kids. Finally, of the six men who were raised by their parents and whose role with their children was relatively clear, three had played no role in their children's lives, two had played a clear role, and one had not had kids. Fully one-half

(six) of the men raised by their parents offered accounts in which their role in their children's lives was unclear, so speculation about what was going on for this group is obviously quite dangerous. The patterns in the men's data are much less clear than those of the women, but it is notable that for those men raised by kin other than their parents (and who had children), two of the three were currently raising their children, which contrasts with no involvement for four of the five men who were raised by non-kin in foster care.<sup>24</sup>

From the perspective of quantitative research, this data is hampered by a number of shortcomings<sup>25</sup> and, as I noted earlier, my study was not designed to investigate parenting experiences systematically. Nevertheless, certain patterns do emerge. Most clearly, a childhood in foster care seems to be associated with the loss of contact with one's children as an adult. The combined figures for men and women here indicate that seven of these thirteen people had no contact with their children at the time of the interview. The situation with kin care is more ambiguous, but certainly not as bad, especially if one considers both men and women together, for these data indicate that only one of these ten individuals, a woman, is now out of touch with her kids, and she only recently. Finally, for women at least, being raised by one's parents is associated with the best parenting outcome; all of the women raised by their parents were taking care of their children when I interviewed them. More powerful than these numbers, however, is the testimony of the Indian men and women I interviewed, for it is here that the most important lessons from my study are to be found.

### THE TEXTURE OF PEOPLE'S LIVES

In each of the cases in which parents have lost custody of their children, alcohol has inevitably been involved; the realization that, in drinking, they have started to treat their children exactly the same way that they were treated has often been profoundly disturbing to these parents. This was stated in especially powerful terms to me during an interview with a Lakota woman whom I call Alayna:

Cause that's the way I was brought up, y'know? And I didn't want [my children] to start that. It was like a cycle I didn't want them to go through, y'know? Grow up and be sent



[to a] foster home—foster family. And I never knew prom or anything like that. I never graduated from school. I had to get a GED. And I never knew anything like that, y’know? Cause I was tossed and busted in the foster home, and um—I don’t know. Some foster homes are good, and some weren’t, and I remember all that, y’know? Just by running away. How much you run and run and run all the time, never knowing where you’re gonna end up, or where you’re gonna go, or something like that, y’know? That’s about the main thing that I wanted was to just remember that being lost all the time, y’know?

These concerns appear to be felt most acutely by women, but one does not have to listen too hard to hear men expressing concerns that are, at least in part, also about their failures as fathers, and sometimes they were explicit about the matter, as in the following excerpt from my interview with Ben:

You know, I don’t like to blame, but I know it had a lot to do with it, y’know? Growing up in all these foster homes, and my parents being what they were, y’know? Separated. And, y’know? I thought that well, hell, when I have kids, I’m gonna keep my kids, y’know? I’m gonna keep the family together. Well, so, in 1973, when we divorced, I lost my kids. I just gave in.

When I asked Ben what he regretted the most about drinking, without hesitation, he answered “my relationship with my kids.” Yet, as he observes in the quote above, it was precisely because he had lost touch with his kids that he “gave in,” abandoning himself completely to the drinking life. How, then, are we to understand how quickly Ben gave up once he and his wife divorced?

Social service agencies probably intend a placement in foster care to effect a change in parents’ behavior—at least that is how many women have understood the demands made of them—but, among the parents I came to know, such changes were unfortunately quite rare. The reaction of a mother when her children were taken from her was often further drinking, *not* a steadfast attempt to meet the demands of the social service agency. And there are some good reasons for this reaction. After all, as children, many of these women never made it back to their birth parents, so they had little reason to hope that they could be reunited with their children. Furthermore, there is



also considerable support in the community for the view that it is difficult, if not impossible, to meet all of the demands of the child welfare system. For example, Marlene, a Dakota woman who had just lost her children for the first time, was already citing her cousin's experiences with the system to support her contention that little could be done to get her children back:

I got a cousin that lives here, and him and his wife got their kids taken away, and they started going through treatment, and they said what you wanna go through treatment, they said. They're just playing games with us. They told us that if we went through treatment we'd get our kids back they said. Trying to do what they want us to do. And they said they're still messing with us, y'know? Here they won't give our kids back, so they told 'em that they just—they said no, we don't—we're just gonna quit this. They were drinking real heavy too. After they lost their kids.

Like her cousin, Marlene responded to the loss of her children by drinking even more heavily. And, by the end of my fieldwork, it was still not at all clear that she would be willing to do what the system demanded of her in order to get her children back.

#### THE RELATIONS BETWEEN FOSTER CARE AND DRINKING

As I noted in my review of the work of Quinton, Rutter, and Liddle above,<sup>26</sup> parenting difficulties cannot be divorced from the more general pattern of problems in a person's life. Certainly, this is also true for the people with whom I worked. In most cases, there was evidence that their parents drank heavily before they were placed out of the home. And, similarly, most of these parents lost custody of their children, in part at least, because of their own drinking. Yet this does not in any sense mean that a childhood in foster care is irrelevant to understanding the intergenerational continuities of parenting that are evident in my data. At least four pieces of evidence from my study suggest that, even if alcohol is involved, foster care remains significant in understanding the situation I have described here.

First, while it is possible to argue that those children who ended up in foster care were simply born to heavier drinking parents, this is not evident in my data. After all, most of the people in my study were born to parents who were drinking quite heavily, and little in people's accounts would lead us to

suspect that drinking in the homes of those who were taken from their parents was significantly heavier than it was in the homes of those who were allowed to stay.<sup>27</sup> The arbitrariness of placement decisions is further emphasized by the fact that, for the thirty-three people whose parents were heavy drinkers and for whom I have data on their childhoods, there is almost an even division between those who were and those who were not raised by their parents: Sixteen of these individuals were raised by their parents, while seventeen were not.<sup>28</sup>

Second, there is even less reason to believe that the drinking of those parents whose children were raised by their kin was any worse than those whose children were raised by strangers since, in both cases, some kind of intervention took place. Yet the rates of these placements in the overall sample were quite similar (thirteen people were placed in foster care while ten were raised by kin other than their parents), and, again, nothing in the accounts of these individuals differentiates the level of the parents' drinking. In both cases, parents appeared to be equally heavy drinkers. Nevertheless, despite the apparent similarities in family history of alcohol problems, the overall outcomes for those raised by kin other than their parents were better than for those raised in foster care, which supports the contention that placement into the homes of strangers constituted an additional insult to these children that has had a direct impact upon their ability to parent.

Third, among the women I interviewed,<sup>29</sup> there did not appear to be significant differences in the drinking of those mothers who lost custody of their children to their own kin and those who lost custody of their children to the foster care system. Again, the accounts of their drinking seem to be fundamentally similar, and there were similar numbers of women whose children ended up in kin care (four) and foster care (five). Yet, while all of the women whose children were in kin care got their children back, only one of the women whose children were in foster care got her children back (and she was raised by her parents). Three of the four women whose children were still in foster care when I interviewed them were themselves former foster children, and, as I noted above, former foster children may be inclined to give up hope of ever getting their children back once they are taken from them. It would seem, then, that the fact that former foster children have been unable to get their children back has more to do with their own experience as foster children than the level of their drinking, per se.

Fourth, and finally, the idea that we might distinguish alcohol involvement from foster care is, itself, something of an analytic fiction. As we have already seen, there is good reason to suspect that parenting difficulties cannot be divorced from the other difficulties that a mother experiences. In no sense, however, does that mean that the problems of formerly institutionalized children can be divorced from their childhood experiences. In fact, one could argue that problems with alcohol among former foster children are a direct result of their foster care experiences. For example, Alayna told me that she drank to overcome her feelings of being lost as a foster child: "Along with that feeling of being lost—I didn't like that feeling so what—what's the next best thing to do but drink, y'know?" And Beth, an Ojibwe woman, found that drinking with other Indian youth provided her with a way of reconnecting to Indian people after a childhood in foster care. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> drinking provides Indian people with a means of establishing and maintaining social connectedness, and this function may be especially pronounced among people who have spent their childhoods in foster care.

For all of these reasons, then, it becomes difficult to maintain that the poorer outcomes evident for former foster children are explained only by their parents' or by their own use of alcohol.<sup>31</sup> This said, though, it remains to be seen what this research means for contemporary Indian people. I have divided the implications of my findings into two sections: one for people making current placement decisions and the other for providers who are working with former foster children.

#### THE LESSONS FROM KIN CARE

While passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act will hopefully prevent much of the harm I have described here, nevertheless, important lessons can be gleaned for the present from my data. The findings from my study suggest that it is not enough simply to place children in an Indian family. They should be placed in a *loving* Indian family, and the surest way to guarantee this is to place them with a member of their extended family. Recalling George's observations about being raised by foster parents whom he knew could not love him like he was "really their child," it is important to emphasize that experience with a loving caregiver is important, in and of itself. It allows chil-

dren to develop a sense of who they are as people more generally, not just as Indian people. So, for example, Ionia, who was raised by her grandparents, described their importance to her without ever mentioning their Indianness:

I was a lonely child. I remember being all alone. And I remember we lived in the country. And I used to walk all over them hills. And I used to cry. And I used to say, y'know? Somebody out there has to love me, y'know? And then I would get tired. And I would go down—run to my grandparents, and my grandma—I remember how she would always comfort me. And then when I told her what my mother said to me, she'd say, oh, they don't know. Your mother doesn't know anything, y'know? And she'd say, oh, don't worry, grandma loves you. And then she'd tell my grandfather, you know what she said to her? Y'know? She'd tell my grandfather. Un un, y'know? He'd say that's not good, she shouldn't say that to her, y'know? And, so—well, stay here with us.

From Ionia's perspective, it was her grandparents, not her parents, who loved her, and her relationship with them was a vitally important corrective for the negative experiences she had with her parents. At the end of a long list of the things she did with her grandparents, she told me, "Those were the things I did with my grandparents. Not with my parents. There wasn't anything good I remember about being with my parents."

This is not to say that children raised by their grandparents had no problems; both Lyman and Ionia struggled with alcohol as young adults, and Lyman had little to do with his children for several years. Yet both of these individuals were able to sober up and reclaim their roles with their children. Furthermore, the only woman raised by her extended family who was now without her children, Marlene, was raised by kin who were as heavy in their drinking as her own parents, so there was little that was therapeutic about life with these relatives, which may help us to understand her situation.

Kin care, then, was not always effective, but it seems to have been more helpful than foster care for two reasons. When the kin providing the care were sober and doing well—as they usually were—they were able to: (1) provide loving and empathic care, and (2) transmit and model a clear sense of Indian identity to the child. In doing both of these things, they thereby engendered resources that people were able to call

upon as adults raising children of their own.

We cannot allow ourselves to be trapped into the false choice between drunken neglect by one's parents and systematic neglect by the foster care system. Clearly, neither of these is desirable. There is, however, a third option: care in the loving environment provided by those members of the child's extended family who may be doing much better than the parents. The evidence I have suggests quite clearly and unequivocally that such care, in any case where it can be accomplished, is preferable to foster care.

I would go further, however, and argue that placement with kin is as much a benefit for the parent as it is for the child, since the hopelessness that develops when a child is taken by the system does not seem to be nearly as profound when the child is taken by a relative. In part at least, this is because the limits on contact between parents and children are much less strict when they are imposed by family than when they are imposed by the state. The numbers, although small, seem to bear this out. No woman who lost her children to her own family was, when I interviewed her, still without her children. All four of these women had managed to get their children back.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT PARENTS

Unfortunately, the Indian Child Welfare Act will do little for those parents and grandparents whose childhoods have already passed. As we have seen, these men and women often feel a good deal of guilt when their children are taken from them, in no small part because they had often resolved to do much better for their children than their own parents had done for them. Clearly, clinicians working with Indian people need to be aware of these dynamics, working with these former foster children in a supportive rather than punitive way to help them become the best parents they can be. But doing this requires no small amount of effort in addressing the childhood issues that are so clearly involved in a person's own parenting. Here, I think, is cause for some optimism.

The work of Mary Main, which has focused on the intergenerational transmission of attachment, suggests that even those people who have had unfortunate childhoods may nevertheless be able to put those behind them and establish good relationships with their children. Centrally important is what

she calls “the state of mind with respect to attachment,” which is indicated, fundamentally, in the way that people understand and talk about their childhood experiences. In her work with the Adult Attachment Interview, Main has discovered that individuals who are able to answer questions about their childhoods in ways that are internally consistent, clear, and relatively succinct are more likely to have children who are securely attached to them. In contrast, parents who seem dismissive of or preoccupied with their childhood experiences have children who are much less secure in their attachment to them.<sup>32</sup>

These states of mind with respect to attachment have less to do with the specific events in a person’s childhood and more to do with the ways in which those have been resolved and worked through. And, insofar as this is the case, it would seem that real possibilities exist for Indian communities and clinicians to work to break the cycle of neglect and out-of-home placement that is so evident in my data. The only way to do this, however, is to focus, in counseling these troubled individuals, on the overall pattern of their lives and the ways in which their current difficulties—including alcohol use—are rooted in much earlier experiences. By providing former foster children with a way to work through their own experiences of neglect and abandonment, service providers can work toward helping these parents make peace with the events of the past, equipping them to move forward into new and satisfying relationships with their children and their fellow Indian people.

The work of Quinton, Rutter, and Liddle<sup>33</sup> further suggests that a supportive relationship, even if it does not occur until adulthood, can serve as a corrective experience for what was missed in a childhood spent in institutions. While these authors focus on the marital relationship, there is no reason to believe that their finding could not be extended to other kinds of relationships, and there may be an important connection between later supportive relationships and how one is able to make sense of one’s childhood. Rutter, for example, has suggested that persons who appear to be clear, consistent, and succinct on the Adult Attachment Interview despite their traumatic childhoods may have benefited from later positive experiences that have allowed them to reevaluate their childhood experiences.<sup>34</sup>

But I do not mean to overly psychologize the kinds of work that can be done with former foster children. Healing from a childhood away from Indian people would also necessarily



appear to involve some form of reconnection to one's values and culture. An example of how this might be done is provided by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, who has developed a Lakota parenting intervention based on healing from the historical traumas that the people have experienced and reconnecting parents to the *Woope Sakowin*, or Seven Sacred Laws, of the Lakota.<sup>35</sup> This approach was developed to help people on the reservation heal from the wounds of their pasts in order to become better parents, but it would also probably prove useful with urban populations like the one described here, especially when we recall the degree to which former foster children are alienated from the cultural traditions of their people.

Finally, these former foster children would probably benefit from community-level initiatives to welcome them back into Indian communities. Given what we already know about the value of kin care when growing up and the importance of supportive relationships in adulthood, it would seem that the power of communitywide events to help former foster children heal from the isolation and alienation they have experienced would be unrivaled.

## CONCLUSION

The stories of these urban Indian people all underscore the vital importance of childhood, emphasizing the multiple ways in which children can be victimized: first, to be sure, by the drunken neglect of their parents, but second, and probably as significantly, by the system that is ostensibly designed to help them. While foster care has undoubtedly been indicated in some situations, my data emphasize the importance of attending to and utilizing the strength of Indian families before turning to strangers.<sup>36</sup> Much work certainly remains to be done in this vital area of research, and this paper has demonstrated, in only the most preliminary of ways, some of the effects of foster care. But what is unequivocal in the stories that I have presented is that the best place for Indian children is in their extended families, where they can be raised among people who will love and care for them. And perhaps the most powerful lesson that emerges from this research is just how much work still remains to be done in welcoming back to Indian families and communities those former foster children who have yet to overcome the alienation caused by their childhood experiences. I can only



hope that this paper contributes, in some small way, to our thinking about how this might best be done.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most indebted to the Indian people of Minneapolis. Without their generosity with their stories, this paper would have been impossible. I would also like to thank Tina Mitchell, Joan Piasecki, Terry O'Neill, Tim Dunnigan, David Lipset, John Ingham, and three anonymous reviewers from the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The research reported here was funded by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (5386) and the National Science Foundation (BNS-9121746). Time for writing as a faculty member of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (RO1MH48174A3).

### NOTES

1. Unfortunately, given the lack of research on this subject, systematic information on the extent of foster care experiences among urban or reservation Indian people is extremely hard to come by.

2. This literature includes Morton Beiser, "A Hazard to Mental Health: Indian Boarding Schools," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 131 (1974): 305-6; Robert Bergman, "The Human Cost of Removing Indian Children from Their Families," *The Destruction of American Indian Families*, ed. Steven Unger (New York: Association on American Indian Affairs, 1974), 34-36; Irving Berlin, "Effects of Changing Native American Cultures on Child Development," *Journal of Community Psychology* 15 (1987): 299-306; Hideki Ishisaka, "American Indians and Foster Care: Cultural Factors and Separation," *Child Welfare* 57 (1978): 299-308; Martin Topper, "'Mormon Placement': The Effects of Missionary Foster Families on Navajo Adolescents," *Ethos* 7 (1979): 142-160; Joseph Westermeyer, "Ethnic Identity Problems among Ten Indian Psychiatric Patients," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 25 (1979): 188-197; and Joseph Westermeyer, "The Apple Syndrome in Minnesota: A Complication of Racial-Ethnic Discontinuity," *Journal of Operational Psychology* 10 (1979): 134-140.

3. I capitalize *White* because I also capitalize *Indian*, and I am reluctant to set either term off from the other, since both are cultural constructions of racial differences.

4. See especially Westermeyer, "Ethnic Identity Problems among Ten Indian Psychiatric Patients" and "The Apple Syndrome in Minnesota: A

Complication of Racial-Ethnic Discontinuity."

5. Ann Hilyer Rosenthal Metcalf, "The Effects of Boarding School on Navajo Self-Image and Maternal Behavior," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Stanford University, 1975).

6. Metcalf does not provide a detailed description of her observational measures, but she notes that the coding for self-contentment emerged as they realized that there was variation in the affective quality of attention-seeking among the children. While some children whined and cried, others hummed and smiled. The code of contentment captured this distinction. Metcalf, "The Effects of Boarding School on Navajo Self-Image and Maternal Behavior," 161.

7. An extensive body of literature has emerged from this research, including David Quinton and Michael Rutter, "Parents with Children in Care—I. Current Circumstances and Parenting," *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology* 25 (1984): 211-229; Quinton and Rutter, "Parents with Children in Care—II. Intergenerational Continuities," *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology* 25 (1984): 231-250; Quinton and Rutter, "Parenting Behavior of Mothers Raised 'In-Care,'" *Longitudinal Studies in Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, ed. A.R. Nicol (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1985), 157-201; David Quinton, Michael Rutter, and Christine Liddle, "Institutional Rearing, Parenting Difficulties, and Marital Support," *Psychological Medicine* 14 (1984), 107-124; Michael Rutter and David Quinton, "Long-term Follow-up of Women Institutionalized in Childhood: Factors Promoting Good Functioning in Adult Life," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 2 (1984): 191-204; and Michael Rutter, David Quinton, and Christine Liddle, "Parenting in Two Generations: Looking Backwards and Looking Forwards," *Families at Risk*, ed. Nicola Madge (London: Heinemann Educational, 1983), 60-98.

8. Quinton and Rutter, "Parents with Children in Care—I. Current Circumstances and Parenting"; "Parents with Children in Care—II. Intergenerational Continuities"; and Rutter, Quinton, and Liddle, "Parenting in Two Generations: Looking Backwards and Looking Forwards."

9. Rutter and Quinton, "Long-term Follow-up of Women Institutionalized in Childhood: Factors Promoting Good Functioning in Adult Life"; Quinton and Rutter, "Parenting Behavior of Mothers Raised 'In Care'"; and Quinton, Rutter and Liddle, "Institutional Rearing, Parenting Difficulties, and Marital Support."

10. This is argued, for example, in Stephen Wolkind and Alan Rushton, "Residential and Foster Family Care," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: Modern Approaches*, ed. Michael Rutter, Eric Taylor, and Lionel Hersov (London: Blackwell, 1994), 252-266.

11. For example, the Los Angeles Indian community represented in Joan Weibel-Orlando, *Indian Country, L.A.* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

12. While my data speak to the experiences of an important segment of the Minneapolis Indian community, it is important to note that my sample was in no sense random. It is heavily biased toward people living on the streets, which

means that there is an inevitable emphasis on problems or difficulties in what I will report. However, the group of people I interviewed was not nearly as homogeneous as it may at first appear. Despite the poverty of the people I interviewed, there were important differences in their experiences as parents. Most significant was the fact that only some of them replicated their own childhood experiences in raising their children.

13. This approach is outlined in more detail in Paul Spicer, "Narrativity and the Representation of Experience in American Indian Discourses about Drinking," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 22 (1998): 139-169.

14. All names in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the people who shared their stories with me. These interviews were conducted between 1991 and 1992.

15. All transcripts follow the conventions outlined in John W. Du Bois, Stephan Schuetze-Coburn, Susanna Cumming, and Danae Paolino, "Outline of Discourse Transcription," *Talking Data: Transcription and Coding in Discourse Research*, ed. Jane A. Edwards and Martin D. Lampert (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 1993), 45-87. However, some repetitions and restarts have been eliminated from the excerpts in this paper so that they are easier to read.

16. For example, some of the cases cited in Ishisaka, "American Indians and Foster Care: Cultural Factors and Separation."

17. For similar observations on relativistic interpretations of child abuse and neglect, see Lemyra DeBruyn, Carol Chiago Lujan, and Philip May, "A Comparative Study of Abused and Neglected American Indian Children in the Southwest," *Social Science and Medicine* 35 (1992): 305-315; Lizabeth Hauswald, "External Pressure/Internal Change: Child Neglect on the Navajo Reservation," *Child Survival*, ed. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1987), 145-164; and Carol Lujan, Lemyra DeBruyn, Philip May, and Michael Bird, "Profile of Abused and Neglected American Indian Children in the Southwest," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 13 (1989): 449-461.

18. It is not possible to provide detailed information on the placement histories of these children since this was not a focus of the study. However, for the twenty-three people included in the analysis, living away from their parents was a major focus in discussions of their childhood experiences. No information is available on the parenting experiences of three people, one woman and two men, whose accounts simply do not mention where they spent their childhoods.

19. Because I am relying here on people's memories of their childhoods, the legal arrangements behind different placements are seldom articulated. While placement in the home of a stranger almost certainly involved the intervention of the state, those children who were raised by kin other than their parents may also have been placed there by the state. Nevertheless, the contrast between being raised by strangers in foster care or by kin other than parents is an important one. It is this distinction that the contrast between foster care and kin care is meant to capture.

20. The experiences of children who spent time in Indian foster homes suggest that it was more the experience of being raised in a succession of strangers'

homes than the actual racial identity of the foster parents that caused problems. However, since only two people reported spending time in foster homes with Indian parents, conclusions on this question are beyond the scope of this study.

21. Westermeyer, "Ethnic Identity Problems among Ten Indian Psychiatric Patients" and "The Apple Syndrome in Minnesota: A Complication of Racial and Ethnic Discontinuity."

22. See Theresa Deleane O'Neil, *Disciplined Hearts: History, Identity, and Depression in an American Indian Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 45-73, for an interesting analysis of the discourse of "real Indians" on the Flathead reservation.

23. My use of the expression "lost custody" is not meant to imply permanence. While it often did become a permanent situation for those whose children ended up in foster care, those who lost custody of their children to relatives were often able to get their children back.

24. Only forty-seven cases are presented in these analyses since, as noted in note 18 above, three people's accounts provide little or no information about where they spent their childhoods.

25. Especially problematic is the small sample size, a shortcoming that is compounded with each division of the sample into subcategories (e.g., men in kin care, women in foster care). For that reason, I have performed no statistical analyses and I use the numerical data primarily to frame the presentation of my discursive materials.

26. Op. cit. See note 7, above.

27. As I noted earlier, given the nature of my study, there was not a standardized set of questions to determine the extent of parental drinking, so we must remain open to the possibility that there might have been real differences in the level of drinking in the homes of those who were placed compared to the homes of those who were not. However, on the basis of the evidence I have, this does not appear to be the case.

28. Furthermore, the people I interviewed grew up at a time when the rates of out-of-home placement of Indian children in Minnesota were twenty to eighty times higher than those for non-Indian children. This is, of course, far out of proportion to what we know about the extent of problems with alcohol in these communities, which suggests that other factors were determining placements when these children were growing up. See Joseph Westermeyer, "Indian Powerlessness in Minnesota," *Society* (March/April 1973): 50, for a discussion of the prevalence of out-of-home placement for Indian children in Minnesota. Philip A. May, "Overview of Alcohol Abuse Epidemiology for American Indian Populations," *Changing Numbers, Changing Needs: American Indian Demography and Public Health*, ed. Gary D. Sandefur, Ronald R. Rundfuss, and Barney Cohen (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1996), 235-261, provides a review of the existing epidemiological evidence for alcohol problems in American Indian communities.

29. I only report data on women here given the already noted ambiguities in men's relationships with their children.

30. Paul Spicer, "Toward a (Dys)functional Anthropology of Alcohol: Ambivalence and the American Indian Experience with Alcohol," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11 (1997): 306-323.

31. A more comprehensive test of the hypothesis I've developed here would certainly control for levels of drinking in each generation. However, the hypothesis I've developed here certainly suggests that drinking, while undoubtedly an important part of the story, will by no means explain the entirety of the parenting experiences of this cohort.

32. Mary Main, "Discourse, Prediction, and Recent Studies in Attachment: Implications for Psychoanalysis" *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 41 (1993): 209-244.

33. Op. cit. See note 9, above.

34. Michael Rutter, "Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms," *Risk and Protective Factors in the Development of Psychopathology*, ed. Jon Rolf, Ann Masten, Dante Chicchetti, Keith Neuchterlein, and Sheldon Weintraub (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 181-214

35. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, "Oyate Ptayela: Rebuilding the Nation Through Addressing Historical Trauma Among Lakota Parents," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (in press).

36. I have taken the expression "strength of Indian families" from Carolyn Attneave's essay, "The Wasted Strength of Indian Families," *The Destruction of American Indian Families*, ed. Steven Unger (New York: Association on American Indian Affairs, 1974), 29-33.