Maintaining Identities: The Soul Work of Adoption and Aboriginal Children

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Abstract

Identity formation and preservation are complex issues. The purpose of this article is to explore the importance of identity and adoption for Aboriginal children in Canada. Some of the work has been adapted from a PhD study (Carriere, 2005). The objectives of this study were: (1) to describe how connectedness relates to health for First Nation adoptees, and (2) to explore legislative, policy, and program implications in the adoption of First Nation children. I focused on First Nation children in the province of Alberta, where a provincial policy directive existed that impeded the adoption of First Nation children. The findings of the study suggest that, for First Nation adoptees, a causal relationship exists between connection to birth family, community, and ancestral knowledge, and health. The major finding is that loss of identity may contribute to impaired physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health for First Nation adoptees.

This article is presented from a broader lens that will consider how these findings apply to other Aboriginal populations, such as Métis children. This includes an examination of current literature that explores identity for Aboriginal children, including traditional spiritual perspectives on identity formation. The article provides suggestions on how identity can be preserved for adopted Aboriginal children through programs and policies with a focus on practice that honours the holistic development of Aboriginal children. Within this framework for child development, the resilience of children is fostered through a caring network of professional and personal supports. The article encourages the reader to view resilience from a broad range of factors,

including connection to language, land, and culture as formative experiences for Indigenous children.

Terminology

For the purposes of this article the term "Indigenous" will be used to include First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples. The term "Aboriginal" will be used from time to time, as it is a Canadian constitutional description that is widely used in Canada. When appropriate, the article will refer specifically to First Nation, Métis, or Inuit peoples.

Personal Location

I have learned that as Indigenous scholars, our personal location determines much of our research and scholarly work. As a Métis scholar, I wish to present my connection to this research. I am a Métis woman, adopted at birth in the Red River area of Manitoba. I was reconnected to my original family at the age of 12, when I met one of my sisters for the first time, and life since then has never been the same. Throughout my life I have met a large extended family; I know through our genealogy that I am connected to the strong and courageous Métis history of Manitoba. This gives me great pride. In my life I have chosen Western education as a means to survive and to get some important messages out to others, through my social work practice, about our ways of knowing and being. This is partly why I enjoy teaching at the University of Victoria in the Indigenous Social Work program, which gives me an opportunity to collaborate with other Indigenous scholars and students. I also believe that it is important to use an Indigenous methodology as much as possible. I will describe some of my research process within the limitations of this article. Adoption is near to my heart and soul, and it is a driving force in my scholarly work and community affiliations.

Connectedness and Health for First Nation Adoptees

To understand the experience of First Nation adoptees in terms of connectedness and health, participants involved in the study "Connectedness and Health for First Nation Adoptees" (Carriere, 2005) were asked to reflect on meanings attached to the adoption experience. Eighteen First Nation adoptees participated in this study. Their background varies by gender and age. Four of the eighteen adoptees are male; the remainder are female. Their ages

range from early twenties to mid-forties. Sixteen adoptees were adopted at age five or younger, while two were adopted at age ten. Seventeen had their first original family contact during their adolescence or in their twenties, while one adoptee met her birth family at age eleven.

Three adoptees are university students and two are homemakers. Thirteen are employed in professional or paraprofessional occupations. Their geographical locations include the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. Within the adoptive family systems, fifteen adoptees were placed with Caucasian families and three were placed with First Nation adoptive parents. Some of the prevalent issues in the adoptive families are that for twelve of the eighteen adoptees, their adoptive families fostered or adopted other children. Six adoptive parents supported the reunion experience. Individually, seven of the eighteen adoptive fathers had alcohol problems. Three of four male adoptees reported that they had conflict with their fathers, while nine out of eighteen female adoptees reported conflict with their mothers.

Within original family descriptions, sixteen adoptees described drug and alcohol problems with one or both birth parents. Thirteen reported that they had met their biological mothers; ten have not met their birth fathers, including four who described their biological father as unknown. Most adoptees have good rapport with at least one sibling, but there was limited mention of extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles. Two adoptees mentioned aunts or uncles. Ten of the adoptees described their birth family as disappointing, unhealthy, or dysfunctional. Seven reported one of their birth parents as deceased.

The in-depth interviews with each of the 18 adoptees were enhanced by two talking circles composed of Elders, staff, board members, and adoptive parents for the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) Open Custom Adoption program in Alberta. I wish to acknowledge their valuable input into this work, but for the purposes of this article, I will fo cus at this time on findings from participant interviews as they relate to identity and adoption. It is important to note that each participant was asked to choose a name to represent them in this study in order to protect their anonymity and that of their families.

METHODOLOGY

The study was a blend of Western and Indigenous methods. In-depth qualitative interviews were used with participants and two talking circles were used

with key informants. Grounded theory was utilized for analysis. The study itself was guided through a First Nation community advisory committee who provided assistance through identifying research questions, a research protocol, and suggestions for the dissemination of results. The late Elder Bluestone Yellowface took me under her wing and guided me through prayer and specific ceremonies held prior to and during the research. She also held a pipe ceremony the morning of my PhD defense, which was my anchor during this arduous event. Protocol, the sharing of food, and gifting were used throughout the research for participants and key informants. Throughout the entire study, I used a portfolio and journal to capture my own process, which I felt was critical as it bracketed my experiences as an adoptee and created a story for my grandchildren. Since completing the work, I have shared my portfolio on several occasions in the classroom and at training conferences on adoption. It has proven itself to be a useful tool that supports the research process.

Loss and Identity

Loss became the core category in this study. Loss was expressed to some degree by each of the adoptees and often was manifested in their health which, for this study, has been organized into physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health subcategories.

The most challenging task in defining a core category for this study was to determine if identity superseded loss or if loss was an overarching category that encompassed identity as one form of loss. By using a qualitative method of constant comparison analysis while reading and rereading the transcripts, it became clear that loss was the overarching core category. Each adoptee experienced loss in several areas of her or his life. This loss prevailed in profound ways throughout an adoptee's life, eventually manifesting itself in emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual areas. In this study, loss is described as having many characteristics.

Identity was viewed by all 18 adoptees as the main loss that they experienced through adoption. Eagle shares a personal analysis of her loss:

> They just took us, shipped us off, put us somewhere else and forgot about us; that's it. I think they should be accountable for that, because — I know there were good adoptions, and a lot of kids probably had good lives, but I would say the majority of the adoptions were — and foster home placements were not so good. I hear so many stories of things that happened. I hear very few success stories. You know what I mean? I always hear adoptees saying how lost they felt and how

disconnected and "Who am I? Who are my people?" Lots of emotional instabili-
ties, like, I put down right here, there's a lot of unrest and I think — I don't know
what the government was thinking, what their reason was that they felt they had
the right to do this. (Eagle)

All 18 adoptees explained that their drive to seek out their birth family
stemmed from questions about and a longing to know who they are, where
they come from, and where they belong in this world. Molly explains:

For me, I grew up thinking that I was a nobody, like, I didn't know my iden-
tity. So, when I was a teenager, I went through an identity crisis because that's
when I started realizing I WAS different. There was something different about
me. (Molly)

The search for identity encouraged some to begin observing First Nation
people for the first time in their life. Mama Bear states:

When I was 12, that's when I started questioning. I wanted to know more about
Native people. There was a Hudson Bay store, and I knew they did all their groceri-
ies. I was always going there to sit on a bench and watch them. I wanted to know
things. I wanted to be a Native person so badly. (Mama Bear)

Eagle, who grew up in the United States, expressed a frustration that she
couldn't find anyone to identify with:

Actually, the schools I went to, yeah, was mostly Hispanic and white people. I
always knew I was Native, but I didn't know anything about that — like I never
even heard the term Aboriginal until I came up here. (Eagle)

For Donna, finding out about her identity is now central to her life:

So right now, it's identity issues. It's becoming a bigger part of my life, of find-
ing out who I am and putting all the pieces together and finding out about my
culture, and I am drawn more to Aboriginal communities. (Donna)

Mona believes that if she had been placed with her own cultural group, her
life might have been different:

Because if I had been adopted into an Aboriginal family … [pause] … how would
you say it? I'd be the same as them I guess. (Mona)

In contrast, Christina was adopted by First Nation parents. However, she
did not know about her biological family background until she began her
search. Her greatest fear was that she would date someone she was related
to:

> Like I said, finding out that I was adopted, the only thing it did for me was con-
> fuse certain things, that's all. The other thing I was afraid of is, "Who am I related
> to? Who can I go out with?" You know, "Who's my relative?" (Christina)

Similar to Christina, most of the adoptees in this study asked themselves the
same questions: *Who am I? Where do I come from?* This explains part of the
excitement in meeting people you are related to for the first time in your life.
For those adoptees who discovered people who looked like them, for the first
time in their lives, the impact of the experience was overwhelming. On meet-
ing her aunt, Rose explains:

> Oh, it was just like coming home! I mean, she looks a lot like me. We have the
> same eyes — she's only a couple of years older than I am. We have the same
> quirky sense of humor. Her son would be a year older than my son. (Rose)

Similarly, Billy remarks:

> It was finally a relief because I knew that I actually looked like somebody. Because
> maybe as a kid and teenager and as an adult, I always went, "I don't look like any-
> body." I mean, people would say, "You sort of look like your adopted mother and
> brother but upon closer examination you see we don't … [pause] … I don't look
> like them. Now, I know there are people out there who I look like. (Billy)

Jane enthusiastically acknowledged how the resemblance made her feel:

> I felt happy. I'd look at her, and I'd say, "That's where I got my nose from. That's
> where I got my hands and feet, things like that. Just to see her [birth mom] and
> be able to take pictures of her with the kids and stuff like that, and I thought,
> "That's my mom. That's where I came from." (Jane)

The search for and reconnection with original family members provided a
number of adoptees with a sense of belonging that they described as missing
from their childhood. Other adoptees had anxiously sought out a place to
belong during their childhood, even if their actions placed them at risk:

> I barely ever came home. If I did come home it was like late at night which got me
> into more trouble and got me into more confrontation with my [adoptive] dad
> and then it was like when I turned 15, I just, I just couldn't take it any longer. I
> just packed my bags. They asked where I was going, and I just looked at them and
> I said, "I don't know. I just know I don't belong here." (Marty)

Reunions are not always a positive experience for adoptees. Some adopt-
ees described their birth families as dysfunctional or unhealthy, but the urge
to maintain ties creates a traumatic bond that is difficult to break. This expe-

rience caused deep emotional pain for each adoptee who had witnessed this other face of reunion. Sarah describes the disappointment:

> Yeah, sometimes my sister would say; "Ya, I'm going to take you on a trip. We're going to go here, and we're going to go down there." And then, she'd promise me she'd come pick me up to do stuff with me and then she'd never show up. (Sarah)

Paris shares this experience with her mother:

> I met my mom. I got to know people in the family and a lot of them don't talk to each other. There's always that fighting going on, which I don't understand, because I can't imagine not ever talking to my kids or my brother for any length of time. Sure, we get mad at each other, but this family, they get, you say something the wrong way, and they won't talk to you. And, my mom has pulled that off on me since I met her. I express myself, I confront, and I share my feelings and she's the type that thinks that's wrong and then I won't talk to her for two years. (Paris)

In discussing various losses, most adoptees in this study remarked on the need to preserve identity for First Nation adoptees. Angel felt that if she could have had more cultural teachings, it might have helped in her emotional healing in finding herself:

> If I could at least know about what kind of person I was, where I came from, what band and all those things — what my mother's name was and my dad's name and all those things — I needed more interaction with Aboriginal people, instead of white people giving me their idea of what Aboriginal people do. (Angel)

Other adoptees, like Mama Bear, expressed a similar frustration at not knowing, yet feeling like they should have known:

> I would have liked to learn my language and know more about my tradition. That's what I miss; my language and my tradition that I lost it, and it's hard to get back. I'll probably never get it back and my kids lost it, too. (Mama Bear)

Billy, Rose, and Christina wished they had been exposed to more cultural events, such as pow-wows and other traditions. Some adoptees, such as Arthur, Eagle, Molly, and Sierra, did not know what tribal background they were from, which they often found confusing or humiliating. Sierra recounts:

> I never really knew until I was eighteen where I was from. I thought I was told that I was Cree, and it wasn't until I was talking with my biological dad one day

and he said, "You're not Cree. You're Ojibway. You're from [community] and that's all Ojibway land. I had heard for so many years that I was Cree because that's what I had been told by my adoptive parents and that's what they were told. So, it was a shock, it really was. So, all over the place, I had been learning the Lakota tradition thinking I was Cree, but really Ojibway. (Sierra)

IDENTITY AND INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

The poignant experience of adoption and First Nation children is not a singular event in the history of Indigenous children in Canada. The numbers of Indigenous children apprehended through residential schools or child welfare authorities prevail, to date, throughout Canada. In British Columbia, where I currently reside, in some regions over 50% of children in care of the state are Aboriginal — First Nation, Métis, or Inuit (Government of British Columbia, 2008). Blackstock (2008, p. 9) describes these statistics within a context of poverty, stating that over 60% of cases of child welfare involvement for Aboriginal children are due to neglect that is directly related to poverty. Reviewing statistics like these significantly influences my career as a social worker, and I continue to ask myself questions such as "What is the impact of this substitute care on the identity of an indigenous or 'Aboriginal' child, as Canada refers to them?" Bennett and Shangreaux (2005, p. 92) state, "non Aboriginal social workers often do not understand the depth of feelings and the impact that past historical policies and practices have on First Nation peoples today." As Indigenous scholars and practitioners, however, we ask ourselves these questions because these are our relatives. As Michelle Reid (2005, p. 30) points out about her research participants who were First Nation child and family services practitioners,

> the women discussed the 'pressure' and the 'pain' of working under delegated models within their communities where they are dealing with the ongoing 'impacts of colonization' and do not want to be seen as 'perpetrators of colonialism' within their own people.

This painful knowledge haunts our practice as we recognize that maintaining identities of Indigenous children is to maintain the strength and continuity of our families and communities. For me, the haunting includes questions such as "How can we bring forward our Indigenous knowledges on identity formation and incorporate these in today's child caring systems?"

Identity formation has been largely viewed by Western standards as a process of change based on incremental stages and experiences. Leading the-

orists, such as Erikson (1950) in his life stage theory, have influenced sociological literature with tenets of identity formation. Erikson postulated that the definition of self is the fundamental challenge of adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Maslow (1968) described a spiraling process of development which aimed toward self actualization and searching for the true self through goals, values, and beliefs. Marcia (2004) expanded these theories by broadening the terminology for identity, describing it as "a person's sense of continuity with the past that constitutes the foundation for a meaningful, personal and social present which, in turn, suggestions directions for their future" (p. 7159). Marcia suggests that identity "is formed during adolescence and is indicated by self and environmental exploration and eventual commitment in significant life areas" (p. 7160). Waterman (2004) developed a theory which he refers to as a "eudemonistic" identity theory and proposes that "an individual begins to recognize elements of his true self including interests, talents and abilities through participation in personally salient identity related activities" (p. 209). Critics of these theorists include Branch, Tayal, and Triplett (2000), who claim that historical views on identity largely ignore the importance of ethnic identity. They propose that "ethnic identity refers to the application and connectedness to a place of origin and history associated with it" (p. 778). This view is certainly consistent with what has been written about Indigenous identity formation, particularly as it applies to Indigenous children involved in the child welfare system. The cultural identity argument has haunted decision making for these children since the 1960s, and it leaves practitioners pondering the nurture versus nature argument.

How do Indigenous peoples address identity? Identity formation from a tribal perspective includes providing experiences that will inform the child's spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical self. The recognition of one's identity can be a lifelong process, one in which events and ecological influences engage the learner in a process of self discovery through relatives, friends, community, geography, language, and other social factors (Hart, 2002). This is a critical point to acknowledge in addressing some of the impasses that have occurred in discussions around Indigenous children in care. For example, the importance of tribal identity must be understood in order to recognize the impact of separation or disconnection from tribal knowledge and connection for First Nation children. Cajete (2000, p. 86) explains that:

> Relationship is the cornerstone of tribal community, and the nature and expression of community is the foundation of tribal identity. Through community,

> Indian people come to understand their "personhood" and their connection to the communal soul of their people.

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Bockern (1990, p. 37) discussed "the spirit of belonging" in which Indigenous children develop an identity that encourages them to see themselves as related to everyone in the community as well as in nature. Yeo (2003, p. 294) states that "spirituality is the cornerstone of identity" for Aboriginal children. She adds that to be an Aboriginal person is to live the culture through interactions with one's community and to learn about what it is to be Aboriginal (Yeo, 2003, p. 294). Anderson (2000) illustrates her search for her identity as an Aboriginal woman who grew up away from her family and community. She describes how she struggled with increased knowledge about Aboriginal people, especially while taking university classes and examining issues from the voices and writings of others. Anderson proposes a theory of identity formation for Aboriginal people that includes four steps: (1) resisting definitions of being, or rejecting negative stereotypes; (2) reclaiming Aboriginal tradition; (3) constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; and (4) acting (e.g., using one's voice) on a new positive identity (2000, p. 229).

Kral (2003) discusses identity in his study on meanings of well-being in Inuit communities. He notes that Aboriginal people have *collective selves* and that "collective selves see group membership as central to their identity whereas individualistic selves are more autonomous from any particular group and may value individualism quite highly" (2003, p. 8). This collective worldview values kinship as the foundation of social life. Kral proposes that in Inuit communities, kinship is viewed as an important area of traditional knowledge. The importance of family and kinship was the most prominent theme across Kral's 90 interviews with Inuit people, who explained that this connection was a determinant of well-being and prevention.

Richardson (2004, p. 44) states that Métis people "travel in and out of a given cultural 'no man's land' by situation or by choice, looking for somewhere to belong to." Richardson concludes that respectful practice with Métis children and families takes place when a practitioner respects the differences in Métis children, becomes knowledgeable about Métis history and culture, and takes responsibility for ways to better serve Métis children and families (p. 44).

This collective view of identity is linked to the traditional view of children. When children are viewed as gifts from the Creator, their identity is

recognized as having a critical place in the family and community they are from. Elders play a critical role in the identity formation of Indigenous children. Elders have been teachers in our communities since time immemorial. They have had instrumental roles in teaching our young people the skills they need to be a strong community member and relative. Elizabeth Larkin (2006), in *Echoing of the Elders: Teachings for Coast Salish Youth*, reminds us that "the elders and leaders recognize the challenges faced by youth in today's society and they urge the younger generation to ask for help if they need it instead of giving up in despair" (p. 149). She cites Elders Agnes Pierre and Dr. Samuel Sam, who warn that they are the "last generation that could provide teachings about traditional ways" (Larkin, 2006, p. 150). Graveline (1998, p. 64) states that "the Elders' stories are our identity statements." Hart (2002, p. 20) concurs by sharing his belief that "our Elders, particularly those following our traditional ways, hold the deepest understanding of our cultures." David Peat (1994), who studied Indigenous science, tells us that "although traditional ways may appear to be lost, some Elders are confident that when the time is right this knowledge will come back" (p. 68). Peat encourages us to reflect on Indigenous ways of knowing and being in our everyday life as Indigenous people. He reminds us that our relational worldview is what will help our children to become balanced and adds that "Native science could also play an important role in recreating cultural connectedness across the globe" (Peat, 1994, p. 311).

Gardner (2000, p. 7) states that the Western worldview "sees the essential and primary interactions as being those between human beings." McCormick (1997), however, encourages us to expand on this notion for Indigenous youth by exposing them to experiences and ceremonies that assist youth in care to explore their relationship with ancestors, land, and ceremony. He encourages the use of traditional ceremonies, such as a vision quest, to encourage young people to attach themselves to nature and to a higher power such as the Great Spirit (p. 6). Restoule (2005) states that, for social scientists, discussing cultural identity assumes sameness in shared norms, traits, and habits and so to discuss Aboriginal identity assumes "sameness and continuity that belies the fluidity and change that Aboriginal people experience and demonstrate" (p. 102). These assumptions are not helpful in designing a system that is culturally responsive to Indigenous children in order to preserve what Thomson (2005) refers to as "cultural security." Thomson describes cultural security as "a commitment to the principle that the construct and provision of services offered by the health system (or child welfare system) will not compromise

the legitimate cultural rights, values or expectations of Aboriginal people" (p. 4). Thomson also refers to the term "cultural safety," which was first suggested by the Maori people in New Zealand as a response that is much stronger than cultural awareness or culturally sensitive practice. The implications for cultural safety are broad in terms of a child welfare system, including policies and practice that will not stray from the critical importance of culture as a determinant of resilience for Indigenous children.

RESILIENCY AND INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

> The days of my infanthood and childhood were spent in surroundings of love and care…. Treating others as related was a powerful social value that transformed human relationships. Drawing them into one's circle motivated one to show respect and concern, and live with a minimum of friction and good will. (Standing Bear, cited in Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Bockern, 1990)

The term resiliency has been used to describe "the process by which people manage not only to endure hardships but also to create and sustain lives that have meaning and contribute to those around them" (Van Hook, 2008, p. 3). This definition entices us to examine resilience from an Indigenous perspective. What words would we, as Indigenous people, use to describe this way of being? How can we preserve this resiliency in child caring systems such as adoption?

   If resiliency also means to face adversity and survive, I question who in Canada or other countries has faced this challenge more than Indigenous peoples. Without describing colonial history in its entirety, we know that colonialism, residential schools, and the child welfare system have been systemic assaults that imposed adversity in our lives. The subtext to these events are the daily challenges that have become reality for Indigenous children in Canada and around the world. Racism and poverty are among a number of factors that our children must face every day. However, within this uneven playing field, our people have survived, and we are still here to share our stories today. Unfortunately our stories are not reflected appropriately in the school systems where our children attend. Marie Battiste (2000) describes the impact of a foreign school system on Aboriginal children as "cognitive imperialism" and states that this has become a systemic form of cultural genocide. This system rendered Aboriginal peoples invisible and has "degraded and demoralized cultural minority students, assigned them to transitional classes, failed them, and then accused them of lacking motivation, atten-

tion or spirit" (p. 198). Given these challenges, we must become involved in our children's education by providing a consciousness and embodiment of Aboriginal peoples' lives and stories.

One story that needs to be told and retold is the importance of Aboriginal mothering to maintain the resilience of our children. Bedard (2007) discusses the words of her Elders, who teach that there is "a basis of an Anishinaabe ideology on mothering and motherhood, which is grounded in spiritual and cultural rights" which, according to Bedard, are "to raise up and nurture the next generation" (p. 66).

Thobani (2007) states that the "residential school system institutionalized the idea that Aboriginal families were incommensurable with the national ideal and that the welfare of Aboriginal children was in conflict with that of their families and communities, including that of their mothers" (p. 119). Although the rest of Canadian children were viewed as being dependent upon their families, Aboriginal children were denied this right through residential schools and the child welfare system, which "pathologized individual Aboriginal mothers and their families as deficient, further enhancing personalized definitions of this lack" (Thobani, 2007, p. 123). Greenwood and de Leeuw (2007) argue that "through fostering Indigeneity in Aboriginal mothers, there exists the potential to counteract the state's ongoing child welfare intervention into Aboriginal mothers' families" (p. 180). The authors propose that supporting Aboriginal mothers will produce outcomes such as healthier Aboriginal children. Leanne Simpson (2007) emphasizes that, as mothers, "we are our child's first environment … we are responsible for bringing these new spirits through the doorway into the world" (p. 32). These authors tell the story of Aboriginal mothering as a means to maintain child resiliency. Graveline (1998) encourages us to engage in "spiritual resistance" through "treasuring our children and honouring the visions and words of our Ancestors" which is partly achieved through recognizing the political role of grandmothers and mothers in the home (p. 45). How does resiliency play out in the interruptions created by foster care or adoption?

Sinclair (2007) states that resiliency amongst adoptees "is an area that beckons inquiry. The influence of repatriation to birth culture is another that needs exploration. It appears that many adoptees, at some point along their journey, found a level of truth and certainty within Aboriginal culture that provided a critical source of healing and renewal" (p. 75).

What seems apparent in the literature and through observations in my practice is that a number of Indigenous children removed from their families

have reached toward this intrinsic knowledge that connection to family and community is an essential component to survival. A number of adoptees from "the sixties scoop" have struggled to "find their way home" (Sinclair, 2007). During the last decade in particular, we have witnessed a resurgence toward the revitalization of traditional child caring systems. These include kinship care and First Nati on open customary adoption programs such as the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency Open Custom Adoption program in Alberta and, more recently, the Lu Lum Utul Spanem adoption program on Vancouver Island. These programs are ensuring that family kinship ties are preserved for children in adoptive or foster care placements.

As a Métis social worker, however, I am still worried about Métis children in child welfare services. We have a prevalent issue of identification, for instance, where we are unsure of the exact numbers of Métis children in the child welfare system across Canada. We are making progress; for example, we have a Métis Child and Family Services Authority in Manitoba and a regional Métis authority in Alberta. These two jurisdictions have the legislative mandate and ability to serve Métis children and families. Gauthier and Parenteau (2007, p. 125) report that in their regional Métis Child and Family Authority,

> Métis traditions are valued and an important focus has been to keep local language and culture intact through activities and forums that promote a Métis lifestyle for children and youth who might not normally have had an opportunity to be engaged in their Métis culture. (p. 125)

This is critical as Métis children are Canada's fastest growing population and need to receive services that recognize their heritage and maintain their identity. The findings of my PhD study emphasized loss of identity as a major factor for First Nation adoptees. I believe this easily translates into a Métis context for adoption.

Our reality as Métis people is that we have some issues with identification and membership at the political level for Métis adults in our nation, so how can we be confident that the needs of Métis children are being met in such a complex environment as the child welfare system? As Leclair, Nicholson, and Hartley (2003) point out, "our stories and our differences are deeply embedded in the stories of those who wrote our histories," and further, "some of our attempts to expand and displace these histories have failed because we place too much reliance on what has been written about Métis" (p. 61).

How will the resilience of Métis children be addressed if we don't even know who they are? Before we get too comfortable in the knowledge that

things are improving for Indigenous children, let's reflect on some gaps that remain unaddressed. Unfortunately, Métis children fall into this category. Although identity is a complex issue for Métis children, I propose that kinship, homeland, culture, language, and history are all components that will assist in connecting Métis children to their ancestral ties. These connections will enhance their resilience within a model of adoption and substitute care that is governed by relational principles.

Soul Work: A Resiliency-based Approach within a Circle of Caring

Van Hook (2008) proposes that resiliency-based practice with Indigenous families is the relational model; she states that the strength of this model is that it "emphasizes balance so that interventions are organized in terms of establishing or restoring balance" (p. 39). Van Hook describes a model for working with families that is based on four domains of mind, body, spirit, and emotion; the model provides several ways in which resilience can be supported. Van Hook emphasizes that with this model, "Elders with knowledge of the cultural traditions play important roles in the healing process and are acknowledged as such in community efforts"; furthermore, workers can assist in this process "by participating with clients in traditional activities" (p. 41). Ungar (2007) argues that resilience is dependent on culture and context and that it can be challenging for Aboriginal children who are placed in various settings. He warns that "understanding resilience as an outcome demands attending carefully to the specific setting in which behaviour is manifested" (p. 20). Addressing resilience in the soul work of adoption therefore requires a careful analysis of the context and culture from which a child has come and in which the child is being raised. For example, with an older child, previous contextual and cultural experiences require attention in designing cultural plans to support the child's experience with adoption.

I am currently involved in research addressing cultural plans and Aboriginal children who have been adopted in non-Aboriginal families. These families often struggle with cultural planning and what this might look like. In 2006, I developed a resource sheet for the Aboriginal Children's Circle of Early Learning. I have adapted the model for this article, as follows. It appears to fit with both traditional Indigenous views and contemporary work on resilience. I propose that this model can be applied to preserve the identity of Aboriginal children within adoption.

The Circle of Connectedness for Aboriginal Children

Spiritual Development

Spiritual development is delicate and complex, and it can be supported by appropriate engagement in practice settings. Working with respected local Elders is one way to help identity formation. Often the process of developing, with Elders, a basic understanding of protocols and ways of being remains a lifelong and cherished learning. Whether it is through storytelling, picking medicines, or sitting in ceremony, children can gain much knowledge and comfort from knowing that Elders are in the background of their lives to assist in their spiritual development. Through these relationships, children can also learn how their creation links them to ancestral knowledge and kinship ties. This work can be facilitated by workers who make connections for children with Elders from the child's community and kinship circle.

Mental Development

Interaction and communication are mechanisms to encourage identity development. Educational tools such as books, games, drama, dance, sports activities, and audiovisual educational resources can be used. Caregivers and adoptive parents can engage in this process by networking with Aboriginal agencies and organizations as important sources of information. Subscribing to newsletters and other forms of Aboriginal media is a helpful tool in gaining this information. Participating in community groups or volunteering for community events is a means to demonstrate the value that caregivers place on maintaining their child's Aboriginal identity.

Emotional Development

Identity confusion may be a strain on the emotional self for the Aboriginal child. It is important to prevent confusion by engaging children in activities where they can explore their family and community. Examples of exercises include artwork, family collages, scavenger hunts, and visits to community events and facilities. Regular contact with a child's birth family and community will help alleviate fears about the unknown family and lessen identity confusion.

Physical Self

Engaging children in physical activity enhances their wellness and directly contributes to mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It is important to

acknowledge that not all children have the ability to be the next star hockey player, but they can be engaged in movement in activities such as dance or nature walks to learn about their ancestors' traditional medicines. Learning traditional tribal games from their nation is another example of learning through the physical self. An exploration of self through activity is a powerful experience.

It Takes a Community …

How often have we heard this in different circles? It is, however, the core of Aboriginal child development and identity. We know that connection to community and family is a means to develop our sense of self. As adults we often reach back to our community of origin to keep us grounded and to remind us of who we are and where we come from. For the children in our care who may not know how to reach out, it is important that we, as adult members of their communities, reach out to them.

We know that identity is a process of development over time. For Indigenous children who are adopted or who age out of a child welfare system, this part of their development can be arrested or thwarted. As Indigenous peoples, we had systems in place through our Elders, ceremonies, and kinship supports to ensure that the identity and wellness of our children was intact. Through colonization and the residual effects of residential schools, we have a child welfare system in Canada that continues to damage Aboriginal children. This is a difficult reality, and as Blackstock (2005, p. 20) states, "the concept that we can do harm or even do evil rarely appears on the optical radar screen of professional training, legislation or practice in anything other than a tangential way through procedural mechanisms such as codes of ethics."

No one in our professional circles likes this notion; we can become offended by the mere suggestion that as human service professionals we allow this onslaught to human dignity to continue. If it is not our responsibility, whose is it? We can point fingers at politicians, policymakers, management, and supervisors. We can tuck ourselves into bed at night and take pride that today we found a great foster home or we approved a wonderful adoptive family for a child. Can we afford to sleep, however, knowing that this family's love may not be enough to conquer the damage of a fractured identity? It does not have to remain this way. As Blackstock (2005) concludes, to make changes means "understanding the harm from those who experienced it, it means setting aside the instinct to rationalize it or to turn away from it because it is too difficult to hear" (p. 46).

Conclusion

I know that it sometimes takes a whole lifetime to get to the point of knowing that we must work together on behalf of our children. To cross the abyss between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is essential in this work, but can we as Aboriginal peoples forgive Canada for its ongoing removal of our children from our families and communities? Will all Canadians ever know the reality of Canada's attempts at cultural genocide for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children? For me these questions run deep as I witness the wounding in the souls of our communities. I can only ascertain that through my work, I conclude that the soul work of adoption for Aboriginal children is to be raised in an environment of love where they have pride in who they are as tribal beings. This will continue to be my personal passion.

All my relations.

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