



Finding their way home: Factors associated with reunification for American Indian and White adults



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ABSTRACT

Although reunification studies are abundant, those inclusive of American Indians are limited. Literature findings have indicated that minority children and their families tend to experience poor outcomes in child welfare. This study fills the literature gap by exploring the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification for American Indian and White adults who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption. The study was grounded in Patterson's Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response theory. Data from the *Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project* was utilized to examine a sample ($n = 295$) of American Indian and White adults. Logistic regression analysis was used to explore the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification. Contrary to prior research, race was not a significant factor for reunification. Rather, the odds of reunification increased with age, having traveled through foster care, and having experienced poly-victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home and decreased for those living in poverty.

1. Introduction

Reunification has most often been conceptualized as the return of a child in out-of-home placement to their family of origin (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Children's Bureau, 2010). Reunification has been defined as the process wherein a separated child or family member reunites, reconnects, and rejoins with their family of origin (Landers, Danes, & White Hawk, 2015). Studies examining factors associated with or predictive of reunification for children exiting child welfare are abundant (see Akin, 2011; Hines, Lee, Osterling, & Drabble, 2007; López, Del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013; Maluccio, Fein, & Davis, 1994; Wulczyn, 2004). Across a number of studies, race has been found to be an important factor that influences the likelihood of reunification for children exiting foster care (Goerge, 1990; Harris & Courtney, 2003; McMurtry & Lie, 1992).

Although racial differences in reunification outcomes have been found, less is known about the reunification of American Indian families in child welfare (Landers & Danes, 2016). Although American Indian children and their families are overrepresented in various aspects of the child welfare system (e.g., child welfare referrals, out-of-home placement), they often lack appropriate representation in child welfare

research (Landers & Danes, 2016). Reunification is particularly important for American Indian families who historically experienced systematic efforts of child removal. From forced relocations, to boarding schools to child welfare removal practices, American Indian families have experienced the systemic impact of separation (Red Horse et al., 2000). Drastic rates of American Indian child removal contributed to the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (Red Horse et al., 2000). The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requires child welfare caseworkers to take particular considerations into account when handling ICWA cases (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2017). For example, active efforts are required to prevent child removal and assist in rehabilitation toward the safe return of a removed American Indian child (Edwards, 2015). Notifications and efforts to involve the child's tribe and parent(s) are required to be considered under ICWA (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2017).

Given the high rates of removal of American Indian children, reunification is a critical component to the cultural preservation of American Indian families and their communities. Furthermore, for American Indians, reunification extends beyond the child-caregiver relationship to other important caregivers (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents), siblings, extended family members, ancestral land, and a

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tribal community. In essence, tribe is family in American Indian culture. And, reunification can occur across the family, tribe, and community level (Landers & Danes, 2016).

Although most of what is known about reunification is based on a child welfare context, it is not the only context within which reunification can occur. For example, adults who exited the child welfare system via adoption or aged out of long-term foster care may later reunify with their family of origin. In other words, “some children exit child welfare via adoption only to reunify in adulthood” (Landers et al., 2015, p. 19). Reunification can occur post-child welfare case closure or even years after separation. Reunification can also occur for persons who never traveled through the child welfare system, but experienced separation by adoption as infants. Few studies have begun to explore reunification outside of the formal child welfare context (Landers et al., 2015).

1.1. The present study

Given this gap within reunification literature, this study sought to understand the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification for American Indian and White adults who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption. This study explored the role of race (being American Indian in comparison to White), age, gender, education, poverty status, traveling through foster care, and poly-victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home to the prediction of reunification. It was hypothesized that each of these variables would be significantly associated with the probability of reunification based on previous research. American Indian adults were compared to their White counterparts for a number of reasons. First, both American Indian and White racial groups are easily identifiable and distinct. Second, Whites are considered the dominant culture in the United States and have been found to have favorable outcomes in previous child welfare studies.

2. Guiding theoretical framework

Some scholars (for example, Thyer, 2001) have suggested that theory is not essential for social work research. However, as authors, we believe that the integration of theory advances our understanding of phenomena (Sztompka, 1974). In the absence of theory, research often lacks a cohesive conceptual orientation, making it more difficult to draw conclusions across studies (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). Therefore, Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) theory provided the theoretical thinking behind this study. The theory emphasizes the active processes that families and their individual members engage in to balance demands with capabilities as they interact with meanings to arrive at a level of adaptation that creates productive and healthy outcomes (Patterson, 2002b).

Based on this theory, reunification is a family-level outcome reflecting individual member and family adaptation. FAAR conceptually defines adaptation as a process of restoring balance between capabilities and demands within family members and the family unit (Patterson, 2002a). However, when investigating reunification within a population such as the study sample, one must be cognizant of the two family types that create meanings which are the foundation of the motivations and behaviors that lead to reunification. Those two family types are the family of origin and the substitute family (foster and/or adoptive).

Reunification is about reconnecting with the family of origin, the primary social context in which the need for connection is enacted. Motivating conditions contributing to the probability of reunification considered in this study were the respondent capabilities and demands and the indicators of the meaning-making process the respondent experienced. Meanings can be constructed through three lenses (Patterson, 2002b): (a) their view of the world (represented by their racial, gender, and socioeconomic lens), (b) their construction of

personal and social identity (represented by their participation in the foster or adoption system), and (c) their experiences emanating out of their stressful situations that they experienced while in the foster or adoption system (represented by their experiences of poly-victimization from their caregiver).

To be more specific, we hypothesize that living in poverty is a deterrent against reunification (a demand per FAAR theory). Fostered or adopted individuals living in poverty have a smaller resource base to search for their family of origin or to travel to meet them. In contrast, traveling through the foster care system is conceptualized and hypothesized as an incentive or motivator for reunification. Individuals who experienced foster care likely knew their family of origin and already felt a connection with them before they were removed, whereas those who were adopted as infants likely never experienced who their family was. FAAR theory indicates that a personal identity may have been established that creates a potential pull toward the family of origin that acts like the forces of a magnet (Patterson, 2002b). That lingering memory of connection with the family of origin creates a hope for the re-establishment of that connection; that may distinguish those who travel through foster care from those who do not.

In FAAR theory, meaning-making when having to do with the lens of stressful situations depends on the primary appraisal of the person experiencing the stress; this subjective appraisal depends on the severity of the stress (Patterson, 2002a). This study measures the accumulation of multiple types of abuse experienced within the interpersonal relationship of the adoptive and/or foster caregiver. These subjective appraisals influence behavior (Patterson, 2002a; Patterson, 2002b) and, thus, the motivation to seek the adaptation of reunification (Patterson, 2002a). Multiple experiences of victimization (poly-victimization) may communicate to the fostered and/or adopted individual that they are not-worthy of family connection. These disenfranchising experiences then motivate them to search for the family of origin in hopes they may still be able to experience the family connection that they crave. Building on the integration of FAAR theory, an expanded literature review is offered below.

3. Literature review

Reunification is considered both the preferred permanency exit and the most frequent outcome for children following out-of-home placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Historically, minority children and their families have experienced poor outcomes in child welfare in comparison to their White counterparts (Courtney, Barth, Berrick, & Brooks, 1996). Race appears to play a central role in predicting child welfare outcomes, particularly reunification (Needell et al., 2014; Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005). Yet, reunification studies inclusive of American Indian children and their families in child welfare are few and far between (Landers & Danes, 2016). Such studies suggest that American Indian children are less likely to reunify compared to children of other races (Farmer, Southerland, Mustillo, & Burns, 2009; Webster et al., 2005).

Age is a variable found to influence reunification across studies pertaining to adults who were separated from their families of origin by foster care and/or adoption, as well as, in child welfare reunification outcome research. For instance, Landers et al. (2015) found that older adults experienced greater satisfaction with their reunification experiences. A number of researchers (Akin, 2011; Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Malm & Zielewski, 2009) have found that older children were more likely to reunify than younger children. In contrast, Farmer et al. (2009) found that older children were no more or less likely to reunify than their younger counterparts. In addition to age, gender and income also appear to play a role in predicting reunification. Girls in out-of-home placement are less likely to be reunified (Farmer et al., 2009) and parents with greater income are more likely to be reunified with their children (Powell, Stevens, Dolce, Sinclair, & Swenson-Smith, 2012).

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