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The Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare: Reducing disparities through Indigenous social work education

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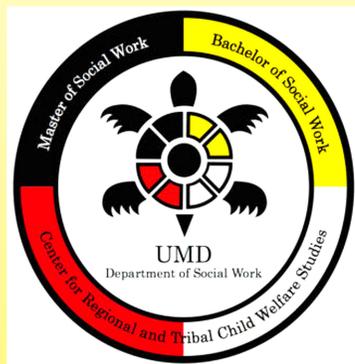
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Introduction

The Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies (the Center) at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, School of Social Work addresses one of the most pressing and controversial issues facing child welfare policymakers and practitioners today: the dramatic over-representation of Indigenous families in the U.S. public child welfare systems. In Minnesota, Indigenous children are 5.4 times more likely than white children to be subjects of an allegation of maltreatment in a Child Protective Services accepted report (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015). These disparities in child welfare persist 40 years after the passage of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978 (U. S. Public Law 95-608).

The Center addresses these challenges through effective, culturally-informed Indigenous social work education. The Center educates Indigenous and non-Indigenous MSW students and professionals and partners with local, county, and state agencies to enhance practice and child welfare policy with Indigenous families and tribal communities. The Center serves as a model of how Indigenous knowledge suffuses Western social work education to effectively work with Indigenous families and communities. The Center also addresses system barriers to culturally responsive practice with Indigenous families and communities developing extensive collaborations at the tribal, county, state, and national levels. They have collaborated with universities and states across the U. S. and Canada to strengthen tribal partnerships. For over a decade, the Center has been committed to diversifying the child welfare workforce by creating an educational pathway for Indigenous social work students and to strengthening the cultural understandings of non-Indigenous students and professionals.



Conceptual Perspectives

We are sensitized by Indigenous social work:

- Honors the foundational Indigenous worldviews and practices and joins them with Western social work for culturally responsive social work practice and policy
- Requires deep understanding of Indigenous worldviews including beliefs and practices related to helping relationships that have existed for over thousands of years
- Develops relevant, community-guided, community-centered social work curricula and interventions (Greenwood & Palmantier, 2003).

Also sensitized by developmental cultural psychology, we focus on the Center's worldview or "cultural model" (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1996) of Indigenous child welfare education, and how it guides educational practices for shaping the emerging and changing participation of students and professionals in child welfare work. Basic premises include:

- Development occurs in transaction with cultural contexts (e.g., Miller, 1997a, 1997b; Shweder et al., 2006; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990).
- Effective Indigenous education builds upon these cultural foundations of Indigenous students and professionals, and expands upon those of non-Indigenous students and professionals.
- Approaches are holistic

Approach & Research Questions

Consistent with a holistic perspective of Indigenous social work and developmental cultural psychology, we approach these questions through ethnographic methods.

The specific research questions are:

1. What is the Center's underlying educational worldview?
2. How is this educational worldview put into practice?



Procedures

Interviews consisted of 13, in-depth, semi-structured, audio recorded interviews lasting from one to two hours at sites chosen by the participants. Participants included tribal elders, Center administrators, educators, researchers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous former MSW students and a judge presiding over the ICWA court. Participants were invited to tell their own stories regarding their involvement with the Center and provide member checks.

Participant observations were conducted during two of the Center's premiere continuing education events: the Winter and Summer Institutes on Indigenous Child Welfare, a tribal college, a private college and a county social services center, and the Center.

Document review included a series of booklets published by the Center on "Raising healthy American Indian children," educational materials used in continuing education trainings, the Center's website, and tribal college publications, and documents from the Institutes.

Analysis - Interviews were transcribed verbatim and paralinguistic cues affecting meaning (e.g., joyful or reserved tone) or intensity of emotion (e.g., crying) were noted. Using analytic induction techniques (Schwandt, 2014), Indigenous and non-Indigenous University-based members of the research team read and re-read transcripts to develop a preliminary conceptual framework describing participants' perspectives. Documents and fieldnotes were used to triangulate, contextualize and interpret interviews. A coding system was finalized through discussion with Center-based members of the research team. University-based team members then applied this coding system to interview transcripts resolving any disagreements through discussion.

Results

A strengths-based Indigenous worldview suffuses social work education at the Center

Dr. Day, a Leech Lake elder, former director of the Center and semi-retired professor, responded to an e-mail from Wendy: "Lots of programs do training about diversity. What makes us unique is that we focus on American Indian culture and approach the process of training from that lens." During her interview, Dr. Day described her strong desire for "supporting and helping to sustain ages-old [American Indian] wisdom to be used in the current world."

Designing the Indigenous curriculum: Ongoing partnerships with tribal communities and respected elders

Dr. Day underscored the importance of involving tribal communities in designing and delivering the curriculum:

I think one of the things that I really wanted us to do was to go out into the tribal community and say, "What do you think is important for students to know?" "What are the issues that we are struggling with in our communities?" "How, really, can the University be of service?" And I think you are aware of the history of boarding schools and the history of education and the devastating impact it had in tribal communities. So, I expected to be met with a lot of distrust and was kind of blown away at how gracious people were and how they thanked us for asking them what they wanted.

Approaching students, colleagues and clients as relatives with positive intentions

"Good day my relatives. I greet you with a good heart." These words, uttered by a respected elder, opened the 2018, Winter Institute on Indigenous Child Welfare attended by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous child welfare professionals and Center students. They exemplify a central characteristic of the Center's treatment of learners: responding to others as human beings and relatives, first. Throughout the training, elders instructed and interacted with learners, inviting reflection, responding to questions and comments with strength and clarity and showing patience, compassion and respect for the learner.

Educating the head and heart

Experiential learning – engaging heart and head – is a cornerstone of how the Center's educational worldview is put into practice. Beth valued the traditional teachings she received from an elder:

He said, "The purpose - trying to live in a good way and do things in a good way - is to get us out of our heads and down into our hearts." The way that everything is kind of structured right now is we are just supposed to be up here all the time [touching head]. Always worried. Always planning. Always stuck in time. And he said, "The point of those [traditional] teachings is to get us from up here [touching her head] down into our heart [teaching her chest]. And he said, "When you're living and when you're seeing things from your heart, [you] create energy. And if you're looking at things from down here [touching chest], whatever they do, you can hold it in a way and understand it in a different way than if you just look at it up here [touching head]."

Discussion

In this ethnography, we deliberately sought to create the "creative tension" referenced by Deloria (2001) to understand a successful Indigenous model of inclusive education in relation to challenges within mainstream social work education and Indigenous child welfare disparities. Effective, inclusive education is one necessary component to reduce child welfare disparities. Yet educating white social work students and professionals to practice in culturally responsive ways, as well as attracting students from various cultural communities to the field, are ongoing challenges.

Limitations

Articulation of the Center's Indigenous educational worldview relied primarily on aspects of which insiders were able to articulate. This ethnography focused on the Center, which is influenced by the Anishinaabe worldviews of northern Minnesota, however, diverse Indigenous cultures exist that vary from one another and within each culture. We recognize that within group variation is essential for fuller understanding of cultural context, but such variation was beyond the scope of our study. We focused on beliefs and practices shared across participants. We also understand that education, while foundational, is not sufficient to bring about change to child welfare systems in the face of limited resources and political opposition. Strengthening tribal capacity, developing collaborations between tribal communities and county/state child welfare systems, and removing system barriers to effective child welfare practice are other areas addressed by the Center, but not described in this ethnography.

Implications

Education

The Center fuses Indigenous worldviews and practices with Western social work. Western hegemony of social work education undermines efforts to diversify the child welfare workforce and may lead to distorted perceptions and practice with Indigenous peoples (Tamburro, 2013). "Decolonizing" social work requires both the disruption of Eurocentric worldview and inclusion of other ways of understanding social challenges and helping, including Indigenous social work (Tamburro, 2013; Dumbrell & Green, 2008; Greenwood & Palmantier, 2003). The Center provides a pathway to "decolonizing" social work education by honoring and integrating Indigenous knowledge into social work education to support culturally responsive child welfare.

Scholarship

The Center functions within a Western university through a negotiated fusion of Indigenous and Western worldviews and practices. Taking the Center as a model, our child welfare scholarship is sensitized by a deliberate integration of worldviews. Culturally responsive, child welfare scholarship, then, requires conceptual frameworks grounded in an understanding of specific cultures, not those simply "parachuted" in from outsiders. For some team members, the ideas from developmental cultural psychology that a fundamental role of scholarship is to illuminate cultural blind spots by bringing attention to diverse cultural cases may lead to more adequate child welfare scholarship, practice and policy. For other team members, the Indigenous worldview underscored the role of the spiritual and communal well-being of children, families and tribes, revealing blind spots in Western frameworks.

Practice

Dave, a white social worker, remembered the negative reactions of many Indigenous families to white child welfare workers, and the defensive reaction of some workers. For Indigenous families, non-Indigenous workers may represent a long history of genocide, including forced child removal. Non-Indigenous workers may engage better with Indigenous families if they can hear the anger without defensiveness, acknowledge this history as well as the strong, nurturing Indigenous parenting which the tribes have wrapped around their communities for millennia.

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