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NATIVE CHILD WELFARE: THE DEVASTATION AND REBUILDING OF A CULTURE

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In my capacity as a foster parent for a young Native girl and as a child care counselor, I witnessed, firsthand, many of the issues and problems confronted by Native people in Canada. The position presented here — native people need to become more involved in child welfare matters — is based on my experiences and formal study in psychology at Simon Fraser University.

Introduction

There are no simple solutions to the multifaceted problem of Native child welfare. Most of the Native youth I have come in contact with in urban settings are out of touch with their cultural heritage and they are suffering greatly. The overall social inequality they experience is a result of deep-rooted prejudicial attitudes. As Leonard George, coordinator of the Indian Center of Society in Vancouver and son of the late Chief Dan George of Burrard Band, feels, "The real enemy today is the extreme attitudes of both the rednecks and the whitehaters. If all children are to attain the right to benefit from the advancement of society, they must come together down the middle of the road to affect positive legislative change."

In preparing this paper, several people who are involved in developing programs to help Native youth were interviewed. While most of them reported that they felt they were making headway, they also indicated that success is a "war of inches." I believe, as do most others who are close to the problems, that the pace can be quickened by expanding programs which extend services to the entire family. However, I am also aware that this can only happen if Natives take a more active role in child welfare matters. Following is a summary of the Native child welfare history in Canada, discussions with individuals knowledgeable in Native affairs, and the experiences which have led me to this conclusion.

Precontact

The important role Indian children held in perpetuating cultural ways was honored in traditional times. The distinct customs and beliefs of each tribe revealed their spiritual and philosophical differences. The common philosophy among most tribes taught "that the very young and the very old are safe within the universe and are carefully watched by the Great Spirit" (Fisher, 1980, p. 87). Understanding that children were the future and that they lived what they learned, a reciprocal reverence existed between the elders and the children of each community. Extended families and a sense of community cooperation existed. It was not unusual for a child to have several 'grandparents' (aunts, uncles, and cousins), all of whom contributed to the process of nurturance and growth. Children learned the ways of the world through the actions of others around them. They were often given the independence to determine the values of 'right' and 'wrong' on their own and the use of corporal punishment was virtually nonexistent.

Contact

With the coming of the European settlers and their preconceived notions of a despicable and dangerous people, this respect for

the young was, at best, misconstrued and, at worst, obliterated by the subsequent laws to control and change Native people. European settlers brought to Canada the concepts of individualism, competitive standards of achievement, and the hierarchical structure of the nuclear family. The clash in values was an obvious one, as Native people had been living with the fundamental principles of cooperation and sharing. However, the Europeans saw themselves as superior and felt obliged to show Indians a more sophisticated way of life. Some of these people operated from strict religious context, and so their intentions were not often formed from ill intent. But many others were not so concerned about the process of acculturation. "It was widely held, both in Britain and North America, that the colonization, by definition, involved the extermination of the inferior indigenous people" (Fisher, 1980, p. 86). The establishment of the British North America Act in 1867 as law in Canada allowed for prejudicial sentiments to be translated into discriminatory laws. From this piece of legislation was born the Indian Act of Canada in 1876, and with it the concept of 'reserves.' The Native people at first thought that the reserves would be a place where their children could grow up in the traditional Indian lifestyle. The government, however, continually repressed their particular lifetyle and demanded assimilation through forceful means. Officials showed no intention of allowing Native nations the right to preserve their systems of political sovereignty, nor their familiar means of livelihood. Indians were caught in a double bind. On the one hand, to remain as registered status Indians, their lives were controlled by the federal government under the Indian Act. Thus, when supplies on the reserves became inadequate due to laws restricting hunting and fishing, they had to rely on the government for rations; when no employment could be found, they had to rely on welfare checks. On the other hand, the option they had was to relinquish their status (i.e., to be bought off with cash, the entitlements granted with status citizenship), and thus lose their identity as Indians. But how would it be possible for an Indian to deny his/her Indianness and not stifle his/her growth as a whole person? What would the probability be, in terms of a successful assimilation into the dominant society, if they did, in fact, 'give up' their Indianness? History has revealed that the cost of such a move to the personal well-being of Natives has been extremely high and the success rate extremely low. This was due, in part, to the fact that no serious attempts had been made to teach Indians the skills necessary to become contributing members to the world around them. It was also due to the existing prejudicial attitudes which made them automatic outcasts. As Leonard George explains, "Throughout the educational system, from kindergarten on, the literature is all a negative depiction of Native people. Combine that with the Hollywood image of the 'savage' Indian and you have a Canadian population forced to fear and loathe Indian people." So, at a glance, it may appear that Native people remained dependent by choice, but a closer investigation reveals that an alternative was not realistically feasible. This dilemma has had a great impact on Native people, which has led to a buildup of fear and anger towards the dominant culture which is still being felt today. It is no wonder, particularly when 1978 statistics show that 41% of all Indian families live on welfare compared to 3.7% for the total Canadian population, thus constituting the most economically disadvantaged group in Canada (Brooks, 1978, p. 56). The clash of cultural values has been very costly to Native people.

Residential Schools

In order to get the process of 'civilizing' under way, the missionaries decided to start schools to 'educate' Native children and, when possible, as far away from the negative influence of the family as possible. When

the missionary and residential schools were first established in the late 1920's, their isolation deprived the children of contact from either culture. The primary goal of these schools was to 'process good little Christians.' Education, as such, was of secondary importance. The focus was on conformity and the structure was authoritarian. Many are the horror stories of those who suffered the humiliation of residential schools. They were ridiculed for their mistakes and beaten when they protested. Native people interviewed for this paper emphasized the devastating blow these schools dealt to the self-esteem of the individual and the negative effect it had on the culture as a whole. As Richard Vedan, a Native college teacher in Vancouver stressed, "We ask how important language is to a culture. I believe in the case of Native Indians we have a clear cut example of the destruction of culture which originated with the residential schools that literally 'beat' the language out of them."

Since these children spent their formative years away from their families, they had no opportunity to learn Native values and customs. They lost their potential training as parents. In many cases, the treatment allotted these children was horrendous and they ran away from school at the first opportunity, virtually uneducated and culturally confused. These schools replaced dignity with humiliation and forced them to be ashamed of their Indianness. Some returned to their reserves, but found that they felt displaced and dispirited. Some attempted to fit into the white culture, only to find discrimination a powerful opponent. Their cultural lifestyle had been discouraged and disparaged, yet there was nothing to take its place. Those who survived the residential schools were caught between two lifestyles: a traditional one that was downgraded and a modern technological one that seemed out of reach. Two generations of people suffered greatly due to this system and its religious philosophy bent on 'civilizing the savages.' These are grandparents and parents of children today.

Child Welfare Legislation

In historically examining the jurisdiction over Native child welfare policies, what unfolds is a battle between the federal and provincial governments over who will have to take responsibility for Native children. Under Section 91, Head 24, of the British North America Act, it states that Parliament has exclusive jurisdiction over "Indians and lands reserved for Indians." Through the federal Department of Indian Affairs, status Indians living on reserves were to have their needs attended to. (This legislation does not serve the 750,000 Metis and non-status Indians living in Canada.) This all-encompassing jurisdiction was viewed by the provinces as including the problems of Indian children. The federal government argued this, stating that *all* child welfare matters were handled separately under provincial jurisdiction. This 'Mexican standoff' ensued until the federal government amended the Indian Act in 1951, thus handing over authority to the provinces with respect to Indian children living on reserves. This transfer of authority to provide services did not include funds to defray the additional cost to the provincial budgets. The inevitable outcome was that these services were of a limited nature. For instance, in British Columbia, the agreement for provision of child care services took place in 1962 (the west was behind the east), with the province to administer the services and the federal Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), agreeing to assume 100% of the cost. This agreement did not extend to pre-protection areas such as day-care, family counseling, lifeskills training, and so forth. Lack of dollars, and the lack of concern it represented, were the deterrents to prevention programs that would have in turn reduced the number of Native children being taken into the care of the provincial departments of the Ministry of Human Resources.

The operational definition of Welfare Services in the Field Manual of the Department of Indian Affairs states, "The policy of the

Welfare System is to assist Indians in every way possible to take their places as fully responsible, self-reliant members of the Canadian community" (Department of Indian & Northern Affairs). In September, 1956, the Director of Indian Affairs met with the heads of the federal and provincial governments to inform them of the inadequate and appalling conditions of Native families on the reserves. Despite this awareness, few changes were introduced over the following quarter century. A 1980 meeting of child welfare experts from across Canada referred to the plight of Native children as a "national tragedy" (Johnston, 1980, p. 65). The obstinateness, on the part of both governments, in providing support to improve social conditions deprived many Native children of the right to a happy, fulfilled upbringing. Decades of political, economical and social deprivation played a significant role in the deterioration of Native families. This state of affairs thus justified to welfare authorities the necessity for apprehension of these poor Native children. Poverty is sometimes used as a correlate for child abuse, with the attitude being that poor people make poor parents. This reflects the reciprocal relationship of love and money in our culture. Considering that the Native population has doubled between 1944 and 1973, creating overcrowded conditions on many reserves, and given that more Native people suffer extreme poverty than any other group of Canadians, there is no doubt that Indian families often do not meet the standards of middle-class society. Compounding this problem was the fact that the social work programs (even today) contain little, if any, Native content in the curriculum. The distinctiveness of Native culture is not taught to those who will inevitably have contact with and decision-making power over many Native children. Social workers are trained in a particular set of standards and then apply these standards to people with a different set of norms. Consequently, those who determined that Native children were in need of protection, because they were without adequate care or supervision or without proper or competent supervision, made these judgments without sound, prior knowledge. The welfare system rarely reached out to the Native community to discover the meaning of extended families or to understand the different ways in which they raised their children. The Anglo system could not accept that there was 'no fault' in the Aboriginal system, and often genuinely believed the Native children would be better off if raised in white, structured, middle-class homes. The laws from which the child welfare system operated never met the needs of Indian people and removing their children from their cultural environment was an inappropriate solution. Today, it is a well recognized fact that the impact of child welfare services to Native people on reserves had devastating consequences because they were provided in isolation and focused exclusively on apprehension.

Services need to be extended to include the entire family and must deal with the learned helplessness suffered by Native parents. (Learned helplessness is a psychological condition which includes an ingrained sense of hopelessness and a negative self-concept developed after numerous unsuccessful attempts to rectify one's problems.) Services must be directed to teaching positive parenting techniques and self-confidence; for, no matter how neglectful or abusive parents are, it is true that all children experience negative psychological effects when separated from home. Children have little understanding of the dynamics of abuse and, if they are removed from the home, it confirms any existing fears that they are responsible. They dislike themselves for causing trouble and, eventually, the dislike turns into self-hatred. If Native children grow up in white homes and no attempts are made to recognize and honor the children as Indian, the hatred is compounded by feelings of confusion and a sense of worthlessness in themselves, and Indians in general. This may explain the direct link between those children who grow up in the child welfare system and those

who end up in penitentiaries. It may also explain the high incidence of alcoholism and suicide.

Children in Care

There are 300,000 registered status Indians in Canada (1.5% of the total population), yet in some provinces the proportion of children in care is as high as 36%. Many Native people today believe that the mass placement of their children by the provincial authorities can be viewed as an act of genocide. Using the United Nations definition to support their argument, it states that one form of genocide includes forcibly transferring the children of one group to another group, with the key being that these transfers are done with the intention of destroying a culture. In 1955, of the total 3,433 children in care throughout Canada, only 29 were Indian children. As Table 1 reveals, the numbers increased in leaps and bounds over the next two decades.

Table 1
Number of Native Children in Care

Year	Number (status) and non-status)	Percent (where available)
1955	29	.84
1960	847	—
1962	1000	—
1964	1446	34.2
1968	2324	38.2
1978	3276	—
1979	2980	39.3

The 1960's was the decade when removals became alarmingly numerous. It is what Patrick Johnston refers to as the 'sixties scoop.' In many instances, social workers felt they were doing the right thing by removing these children from their impoverished environments and placing them in more 'well-to-do' homes. These good intentions had disastrous effects on the Native children. Had the increasing number of removals been followed through with an equal increase in the recruitment of suitable Native foster homes, the long-term effect would not have been so serious and the intentions of the authorities would not be questionable.

In British Columbia, 36% of the children in the care of the Ministry of Human Resources are Native. Yet, there are few Native people employed in the ranks of this Ministry. Social service cutbacks are increasing in this province. All family support worker positions have been eliminated. Positions once held to recruit foster parents are now defunct. This is a serious situation, as in some cases Native people are unaware of how the system operates, and that they can assist by becoming foster parents. Others are skeptical that they will not meet the middle-class criteria in the foster parent mandate and fear they will be reproached for trying. In yet other cases, Native children who are taken in by a member of the extended family will not be recognized by the Ministry as legitimate foster children. Therefore, no financial assistance will be afforded the family, who, although they have room in their hearts, have no extra money in their pockets.

Native Involvement

It is promising to see that the recent trend seems to be reversing. For British Columbia, the figures for Native children in care were unofficially provided by Patsy George, the Regional Coordinator of Child and Family Services, Ministry of Human Resources, Vancouver, B.C., 1983. They are as follows:

Table 2
Number of Native Children in Care

Year	Number
1979	1,068
1980-81	1,016 (39%)
1982	964 (36%)

An increase in the awareness and involvement of Native communities in child welfare

matters is a contributing factor. It is apparent that such things as legislative change will only be truly effective if accompanied by an inner change in Native People. The 'glorifying of the noble savage' is a romantic image of the past. Culture, by definition, implies transformation over time. Indian people becoming self-reliant will not mean a return to the old ways. Nor will it mean accepting inferior status. For many years the choice was rarely considered that Indians could function within the larger society and still retain their identity as Native people. To bridge the gap, more Indian people must investigate their heritage to know why there is pride in being Native Indian. Richard Veden, a Native college instructor and active organizer of Native programs, explained that it was the elders who long ago taught that by running from a fear, the energy spent in running away serves only to make that fear more powerful. The problems facing Native people must be met head on and overcome. It is possible, as each Indian person is his/her own culture because, as Leonard George discovered through personal experience, "the answer is in the philosophy, in the mind and in the heart, because once it's in there, you take it everywhere you go — the identity — then you know who you are."

Alongside the Native involvement there is also a growing number of non-Native people within the government services who are trying to make gains, who are open to listening and who are genuinely working on lessening tensions between Native people and white workers. There are many front line workers who are becoming increasingly sensitive to the special needs of Native children and who are getting together for training workshops in order to reevaluate their attitudes. It is, in fact, the opinion of many Native people that due to the historical mistreatment of their race, the larger society has this moral obligation to help reconstruct their culture. The combined efforts of both sides can only help expediate solutions. First and foremost, the responsibility lies with the government to encourage and open avenues for Native people to become involved with assisting their own people. Opportunities must be provided to Native people who wish to seek higher education levels and skills training in professional fields so as to provide positive role models for their children to aspire to. This applies particularly to the field of child welfare, as the accrued mistrust of the white society will present problems for a while, regardless of the good intentions of individual workers. The movement towards a rebuilding of the Native culture appears to be in motion, but attitudes must be constantly challenged and the efforts towards improvement must be equally encouraged for both non-Native and Native individuals.

The following examples provide an indication of the successful programs which have been instigated in the recent years. When programs are initiated at the Band or Village level, the advantage arises from the fact that workers live on the reserves. They are familiar with their clients and know their daily routines. They are in a better position to assess whether a case of child neglect is an isolated incident or a developing pattern. Such Indian Welfare committees act with empathy for all family members and work to see a better life for their own people. As the number of such committees increases, so the number of removals decreases, as the role of the extended family is once more fulfilled.

Although Bands are taking the responsibility of child welfare more seriously (at present, there are 114 Native persons in B.C. employed, full- or part-time at the Band or Village level), their authority is often limited by overriding provincial laws. In contrast to the United States, where the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 recognized both the need and the capability to carry out separate legislation, Canada has not been so progressive. Problems face Native people, from the lack of human and financial support, and often the federal and provincial governments are less than eager to support their endeavors. Some of these problems could be less-

ened if social service training were made more available (and affordable) to Native people on reserves.

Nonetheless, the road to progress is being paved, as in the case of the Stoney Creek Reserve near Vanderhoof, B.C. Within a year of establishing their own child welfare committee, the rate of apprehension on the reserve decreased by 50% (Johnston, 1980, p. 100). The Spallumcheen Band in the interior of British Columbia adopted a by-law on April 22, 1980 entitled, "For the Care of Our Indian Children." This by-law gives the Band exclusive jurisdiction over any child custody proceeding involving members of their Band, both on and off reserves. In Ontario and Manitoba, Indian nations have declared exclusive rights to child welfare policies. For example, in southern Manitoba, the Dakota-Ojibway Child and Family Services is a community-based operation providing a full range of child care services, from daycare to homemaking to counseling. This program developed from the awareness of a desperate situation on the reserve and a need to know why the cost of Indian child welfare seemed so out of proportion to quality of services being provided. They have documented their transition on film.

In Vancouver, the Indian Centre Society now employs 55 Native people and offers a wide range of services, from daycare to education programs. The Downtown Family Centre was established to work with the entire family as an alternative to apprehending children. Six apartments were rented to accommodate six families for a six-month program. Basic lifeskills, nutrition awareness and child development were taught, while providing ongoing counseling and close supervision of the children in a supportive environment.

In the past few years, the number of Native children being apprehended in the downtown Vancouver area became too numerous to ignore. This area has a large concentration of Native people, many of whom are recent arrivals to the city and lack any kind of support systems. In response to this problem, two programs were developed. Native Indian Child Welfare Advisory Committee (N.I.C.W.A.C.) was formed in July, 1981. The committee consists of 30 members of professional and lay status, all of whom are screened by Native people. Although this body has no decision-making power, it recognizes the need for Native consultation with respect to the future of Native children as part of the urban community. The second program is the "Crisis Nursery," which is funded by the Ministry of Human Resources and operated by an all-Native staff. This resource offers overnight child care to Native mothers who have no other contacts and need a break from parenting. A recent investigation of its operation by the Ministry revealed that, contrary to some skepticism, no families were abusing its privileges. This is truly a progressive, preventative program which is a model for all communities. This type of service is successful in eliminating the need to apprehend children due to isolated incidents of parental neglect.

In conclusion, this paper has illustrated how the child welfare system has not operated in the best interests of Native children, their families and their communities. However, what is evident today is an awareness that cultural recognition and a sense of Native identity is a must for Indian people. The new direction in child welfare includes a network of services involving Native organizers, advisors and interested laypersons. Although the contribution of dedicated non-Native individuals is necessary and welcome, it is also essential that Native people fill leadership positions in order to provide good role models for their children. Judy Weiser, a local psychologist, who works closely with Native families, believes they also need the protection of laws that will recognize and respect alternative ways of child rearing. The laws need to change at the level that gives Native people the right to have jurisdiction over things that are different in their own world.

Many Native communities and other interested individuals are fighting the destructive and disrespectful attitude towards

Native people. As John Turvey, a dedicated Native youth care worker in the heart of Vancouver's Skid Row 'ghetto,' declares: "We must all work to stop the destruction of the land, the robbing of resources, the degrading of folklore, art forms and concepts of community life. We, in the dominant culture, must allow for Native people to teach us what is useful in their culture." In order that all children benefit from the advancement of society, we must come together down the middle of the road to effect positive and meaningful change.

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