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# Spiritual Needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Foster Parents

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## Abstract

Aboriginal children are overrepresented in foster care and more Aboriginal foster parents are needed. A randomized group of licensed First Nations, Métis and Inuit foster parents in a Canadian jurisdiction were asked about their spiritual needs to foster. In response to the question “what do you need spiritually to foster?” there were 55 unique responses that were grouped by participants into five concepts including: religion, practice, integration, sharing and contentment. These results were compared and contrasted with the existing fostering literature.

**Keywords**: Aboriginal; foster care; Canada; spirituality

## Introduction

Aboriginal peoples are a young, growing and mobile population who face greater challenges than the non-Aboriginal population in Canada. The Aboriginal population is an average of 13 years younger than the non-Aboriginal population, has a growth rate nearly 6x greater (Statistics Canada, 2012a) with significantly more frequent residential mobility (Statistics Canada, 2012b). However, life expectancy is at least three years lower and gaps in employment rates and labor force participation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples are increasing (Usalcas, 2011). The average income for Aboriginal peoples is about 2/3 of the average for non-Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2012c). In addition, housing quality is dramatically different between reserve and non-reserve communities in Canada, with rates of dwellings in need of major repairs over 6x greater (Statistics Canada, 2012d).

Aboriginal peoples, who are also referred to as First Peoples, include First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. Each has a different history, contemporary understanding and approach to spirituality. Aboriginal spirituality includes a range of views of the world and ways of making meaning of the unknown or unknowable that

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stem from both Indigenous and Indigenous-European ancestries. A description of "traditions, customs, ceremonies, rituals, and everyday life" (King & Trimble, 2013, p. 565) between nations and communities is a deep and complex undertaking when one considers the range of sizes, political structures, income and social conditions between as well as within groups, reserves and settlements in different urban and rural geographies throughout Canada (Voyageur & Calliou, 2000). To illustrate this diversity with the example of language, there are presently 11 language groups representing 65 different languages (Statistics Canada, 2012e).

European settlers' arrival on Turtle Island radically changed ways of life for First Peoples. Efforts to assimilate through forced relocations and confinement to reserves changed relationships with one another and the land. The banning of traditional spiritual practices such as ceremonies, feasts and (non-Christian) prayer drove them underground. As a result, cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices were either hidden or lost. Christian influence was strong and missionaries led many efforts including the first residential schools. Initial "child welfare" efforts on reserve were mass apprehensions of Aboriginal children who were adopted by non-Aboriginal families during the "60's Scoop" (Fournier & Crey, 1997).

Aboriginal child welfare agencies first began in the 1970's. However, contemporary child welfare for Aboriginal families is largely delivered by mainstream agencies, followed by delegated models that have specific mandates and functions as well as some self-government models (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2010). There remain significant challenges due to differences between child welfare funding on and off reserve because of jurisdictional disputes between federal and provincial governments (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012) that have left children's lives hanging in the balance (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, 2012) and continue to result in apprehensions from the impoverished communities, termed the "Millennium Scoop" (Beaucage, 2011).

Aboriginal child welfare has a significant literature base (e.g. Harris-Short, 2012). Decentralized and culturally based services for Aboriginal children, families and communities are emerging and becoming more prominent. There is also a revitalization of spiritual practices that have been suppressed (e.g. Indigenous healing in communities to address contemporary physical and mental as well as spiritual illnesses) (Robbins & Dewar, 2011). However, Aboriginal children remain highly overrepresented in child protection caseloads and Aboriginal foster parents underrepresented. There is a need for Aboriginal foster parents and little research on their experiences. Although there are different reasons why one would foster, the purpose of the present study was to explore, from the perspectives of Aboriginal foster parents, their spiritual needs to foster.

## Literature Review

While there is some research on religion and spirituality in the fostering literature, there is very little on Aboriginal foster parents and none, that we could locate, on spirituality among Aboriginal foster parents. The literature on fostering, spirituality and religion was reviewed.

Issues reported in this literature include clarity, comfort, communication and coping. Recent literature utilizing concept mapping is also reviewed.

## *Clarity*

Religious or spiritual beliefs provided clarity to foster parents regarding their roles in the lives of foster children as well as the roles of agencies in the lives of birth and foster families. In the immediate foster family, these beliefs helped them put into perspective the challenges faced (Berney, 2009) as well as encouraging them to put efforts into the spiritual lives of foster children (Cole, 2005). Their beliefs also provided those who shared them, a common understanding of their role (Frazer & Selwyn, 2005) as well as confidence in their purpose to be caregivers to children (Jackson et al., 2010). While there was attention to the importance of faith-based organizations, both child welfare (Garland & Chamiec-Case, 2005) and non-child welfare (Singleton & Roseman, 2004), in the lives of foster families, differences in their interactions with faith-based and non faith-based agencies concerned not the types of services, but rather philosophy and approach to service delivery (Reilly & Platz, 2004).

## *Comfort*

There were references to research on spirituality or faith associated with greater certainty and comfort among foster parents. Greater emphasis on personal faith was related to lower stress and better health (Belanger, Copeland, & Cheung, 2008) including wellness practices found in western medicine as well as other approaches (Dell, Vaughan, & Kratochvil, 2008). Foster parents with a commitment to spiritual beliefs and practices (Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002) were also likely to foster children who embraced spirituality (Haight, Finet, Bamba, & Helton, 2009).

## *Communication*

Spirituality was researched as a way of making meaning within the foster family as well as with workers, staff and birth families. Foster children's spiritual beliefs (Gillum & O'Brien, 2010) helped them make meaning when faced with difficult issues, such as loss (Coholic, 2011). Foster parents used the created meaning to talk with foster children and workers (Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004) in a way that was similar to how they might talk about it with their birth families (Duvdevany, Azaiza, & Rbach, 2012).

## *Coping*

Spirituality as coping was also described. It was noted that spiritual support through services from spiritual leaders or knowledge holders (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007) was helpful. This support was found to promote resilience in foster children (Seyfried, Birgen, & Mann, 2007). In addition, it assisted foster youth (Edmond, Auslander, Elze, & Bowland, 2006) during adolescence in particular, when risk taking became more likely and potentially harmful (Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008), for example, in relation to substance use (Scott, Munson, McMillen, & Ollie, 2006). The spiritual support was also especially helpful for working through grief (Rogers, 2003).

## *Concept Mapping*

Concept mapping is a quantitative approach to the analysis of qualitative data. Although initially developed for program development and evaluation (Meagher-Stewart et al., 2012), concept mapping has been applied in human services research on a variety of topics and with a range of participants for different purposes. A recent review of concept mapping studies noted found evidence in support of the reliability and validity of the approach (Rosas & Kane, 2012), which includes participation of multiple stakeholders in the analysis of qualitative data (Leyshon & Shaw, 2012). Participants are asked to respond in phrases that may, because of length, minimize the amount of context that can be included. However, this context is constructed collectively, through the process of grouping responses by participants. Concept mapping has been used for substance abuse treatment program development with counselors (Trudeau, Ainscough, & Charity, 2012), with patients and health professionals to identify desirable Parkinson's treatment outcomes (Hammarlund, Nilsson, & Hagell, 2012), as well as children and adolescents' perceptions of self-regulation (Crăciun, Tăut, & Băban, 2012). Concept maps have been used to describe women's educational needs (Trudeau, Ainscough, Trant, Starker, & Cousineau, 2011), women's experiences seeking help from community resources after intimate partner violence (Simmons, Farrar, Frazer, & Thompson, 2011), as well as South Asian immigrant women regarding medical testing (Ahmad, Mahmood, Pietkiewicz, McDonald, & Ginsburg, 2012) and alternative school students' perceptions of needs for success (Streeter, Franklin, Kim, & Tripod, 2011). In addition, the concept mapping method has been used to identify factors associated with the return to work after absence due to depression (de Vries, Koeter, Nabitz, Hees, & Schene, 2012).

# Methodology

The data collection and analysis followed Trochim's (1989) procedure including the generation of responses, organization of responses, analysis of response groupings by participants and representation of response groupings across participants. In the generation of responses, participants were asked the focal question for this study. In the organization of responses, researchers reviewed all responses and organized for clarity and to remove redundancies. In the analysis of response groupings participants were asked to individually group together all responses made by participants and these groupings were analyzed. The representation of the groupings by participants was done through the construction of a concept map.

## *Generation of Responses*

Foster homes licensed to provide care in a central Canadian province (N=1362) were contacted in random order by researchers. Potential participants were provided with a description of the study and what their involvement would include, in accordance with the research protocol that was approved by the university ethics board. Each was asked if she or he identified as an Aboriginal person and if so was asked to respond to a series of questions, which included the question "What do you need spiritually to be a good foster parent?" At the conclusion of the interview each was asked if she or he would be willing to participate in the second phase of the study that was to group all responses together. A list of those who were interested was kept.

The 82 participants included Métis (53), First Nation (25) and Inuit (4) foster parents who together cared for 169 foster children at the time of interview. Over three quarters (63) were female and 19 were male. They ranged in age from 28 to 76 years with an average age of 51 and had been fostering for an average of 13 years.

## *Organization of Responses*

Each response was reviewed independently by three different authors to identify those that were redundant or unclear. If two authors identified a particular response as redundant or unclear it was discussed by all three authors and a decision was made for removal (in the case of redundant responses) or editing (in the case of unclear responses). Fifty five unique responses remained for the analysis.

## *Analysis of Response Groupings*

Participants who had expressed interest in participating in the second phase of the study at the time of interview were contacted in random order by telephone and invited to participate. Twelve participants agreed to group responses and packages of information including instructions to group all responses into as many groups as desired and in whatever way made sense to them. To make the task easier, each response was printed on a separate slip of paper so they could be spread out and moved around into groups by participants. Nine participants returned their groupings to the researchers for analysis.

These groupings were analyzed by the Concept System (1987) software that applied multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis to the data. Multidimensional scaling used the groupings provided by participants to organize responses on a two-dimensional space with distances between them indicating the frequencies with which they were grouped together by participants. Responses further from one another were grouped together less frequently by participants than responses close to one another. A bridging index value, based on the multidimensional scaling analysis and ranging between 0.00 and 1.00, indicated the frequency with which participants grouped a particular response with only those near to it or both those near to it and far from it. The largest bridging index values (greater than 0.75) were found among responses that were grouped with other responses nearby as well as those farthest away. Smallest bridging index values (less than 0.25) were found among responses that were grouped only with other responses nearby.

Cluster analysis used the multidimensional scaling results to organize the responses into clusters. The analysis started with each response as its own cluster and at each step combined two clusters until all responses were together in one cluster.

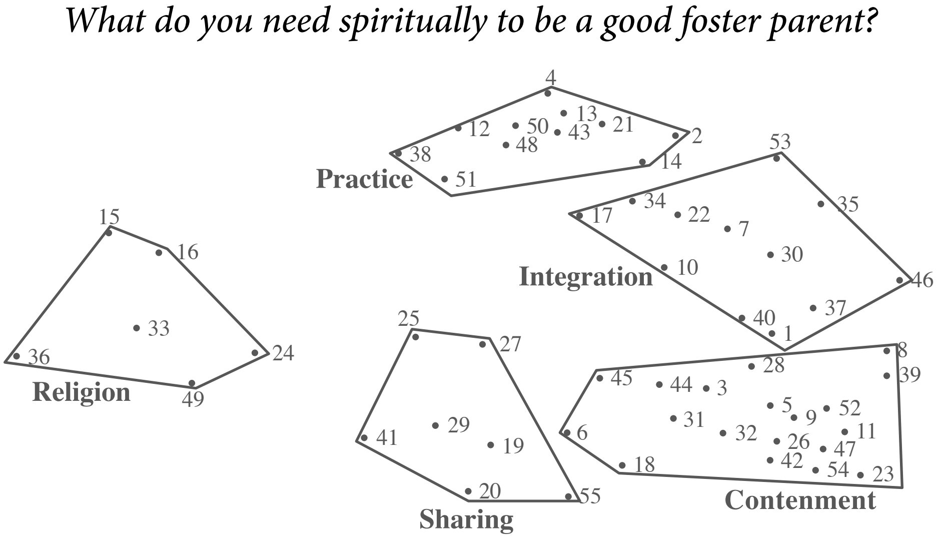
## *Representation of Groupings*

Researchers reviewed results of the cluster analysis for 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 cluster solutions to identify the most appropriate number of clusters for the final concept map. The smallest number of clusters reviewed – 3 and 4 – appeared to overgeneralize the results and the largest cluster results – 6, 7 and 8 – appeared to make distinctions that were difficult to explain. The most interpretable was the 5-cluster solution. Labels for the concepts in the final map were applied by the researchers using the most central (i.e. lowest individual bridging indices) responses within each cluster and suggestions by participants for guidance.

# Results

The concept map and responses with bridging indices are listed in Figure 1 and Table 1 respectively. Numbered responses on the map are described on the corresponding table.

Figure 1: Concept Map


What do you need spiritually to be a good foster parent?
Practice
4
12
50
13
43
21
2
48
38
51
14
53
Integration
17
34
22
7
35
30
10
46
40
37
1
15
16
33
36
24
Religion
49
25
27
29
41
19
20
55
Sharing
8
28
39
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3
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9
52
31
32
11
6
26
47
42
18
54
23
Contenment

# Discussion

The existing foster parent literature was compared and contrasted with the responses of Aboriginal foster parents in the present study.

## *Integration*

Responses in this concept referred to integration of beliefs and practice that together embodied a way of living their spirituality. Foster parents noted that it was important to have "a belief system" that recognized a "higher power" and being "open minded about your spiritual beliefs". They described the need to "be cultural" through "medicine wheel" teachings, combined with "faith in the Creator", "prayer", "cleansing" and "meditation" in their lives. They also referred to the need for "bravery" to "walk the Red Road" and seek the guidance of "spiritual advisors".

There was some consistency between existing fostering literature and the experiences of Aboriginal foster parents in this concept. Both sources referred to the importance of cultural beliefs and practices to give a basis for communicating about challenging life events (Gillum & O'Brien, 2010; Coholic, 2011; Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004; Duvdevany, Azaiza, & Rbach, 2012). However, the participants in the present study were more specific about the culturally based spirituality they practiced, including reference to Medicine Wheel teachings, which are based on holistic worldview of interconnected parts (e.g. spiritual, mental, physical, emotional wellness) within which balance is sought (Dapice, 2006). In addition, participants specifically spoke to the importance of walking the Red Road, or an Aboriginal path through life (Thin Elk, 1993).

Table 1: Cluster Items and Bridging Values

| Cluster and Response | | Bridging Index |
|---|---|---|
| **Cluster #1 - Integration** | | 0.27 |
| 1. | a belief system | 0.16 |
| 40. | prayer | 0.18 |
| 37. | open minded about your spiritual beliefs | 0.19 |
| 34. | faith in the Creator | 0.26 |
| 10. | medicine wheel | 0.26 |
| 7. | bravery | 0.27 |
| 30. | be cultural | 0.27 |
| 17. | higher power | 0.28 |
| 35. | cleansing | 0.29 |
| 53. | meditation | 0.34 |
| 46. | walk the Red Road | 0.34 |
| 46. | spiritual advisors | 0.42 |
| **Cluster #2 - Practice** | | 0.19 |
| 4. | attend pow-wows | 0.04 |
| 43. | sage | 0.04 |
| 48. | sun dance | 0.04 |
| 13. | ceremonies | 0.06 |
| 31. | Elders | 0.06 |
| 50. | sweetgrass | 0.16 |
| 2. | Aboriginal teachings | 0.19 |
| 14. | children involved in their culture | 0.23 |
| 12. | cedar | 0.31 |
| 51. | tradition | 0.43 |
| .28 | places were they can jib | 0.48 |
| **Cluster #3 - Religion** | | 0.85 |
| 24. | God at the centre of your family | 0.73 |
| 16. | church | 0.78 |
| 49. | Sunday school | 0.80 |
| 15. | Christianity | 0.83 |
| 36. | Mennonite schools | 0.95 |
| 33. | make our mark while we were here | 1.00 |
| **Cluster #4 - Contentment** | | 0.19 |
| 5. | balance | 0.00 |
| 52. | trust | 0.00 |
| 9. | being positive | 0.01 |
| 23. | forgiveness | 0.01 |
| 42. | respect | 0.04 |
| 32. | love | 0.06 |
| 3. | acceptance | 0.07 |
| 44. | See everyday as a fresh day | 0.07 |
| 11. | caring | 0.07 |
| 26. | grounded | 0.10 |
| 47. | stability | 0.10 |
| 28. | Have it in your heart | 0.12 |
| 31. | Live by your values | 0.16 |
| 54. | Your own peace | 0.19 |
| 18. | Connection | 0.21 |
| 6. | Be at peace | 0.22 |
| 9. | Being positive | 0.22 |
| 45. | See the good in things | 0.24 |
| 8. | Be good within yourself | 0.26 |
| **Cluster #5 - Sharing** | | 0.44 |
| 19. | Desire to give back | 0.32 |
| 27. | Guidance | 0.33 |
| 55. | Yourself | 0.42 |
| 29. | Help out | 0.45 |
| 20. | Do the right thing | 0.45 |
| 25. | Grateful to have the opportunity to help | 0.50 |
| 41. | Recognition that everything has life | 0.58 |

## *Practice*

Participants described a range of ways of practicing their spirituality. They spoke about the need to have “children involved in their culture” and practiced in “Aboriginal teachings” based on “tradition”. They described the importance of traditional medicines, including “sage”, “sweetgrass” and “cedar”, as well as “ceremonies” such as the “sun dance”. In addition, participants described the importance of “Elders” in their spiritual practice, and opportunities to “attend pow-wows” as well as “places where they can jig”.

The experiences described by Aboriginal foster parents in this concept were not apparent in the fostering literature. Participants identified several important parts of their spiritual practice, including the place of ceremonies and medicines, as well as the role of Elders as leaders and teachers (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006). There was also reference to a Métis dance, known as the Red River Jig, a blend of European and Aboriginal influence, with its own style and history (Lukens, 1997).

## Religion

In addition to traditional Aboriginal spirituality, there were responses concerning the role of European-introduced religion. Participants described the place of “Christianity”, and having “God at the centre of your family”. The importance of attending “Sunday school” at “church”, as well as faith-based schools, such as “Mennonite schools” were also stressed. Participants described the need to have an influence on foster children and “make our mark while we were here” in their lives.

References in the fostering literature concerning religion and faith-based services for families were very similar to the responses in this concept. Both foster parents in the present study and existing literature referred to Christian institutions and agencies (Garland & Chamiec-Case, 2005; Singleton & Roseman, 2004; Reilly & Platz, 2004). There was also an emphasis on teaching the foster children their beliefs (Haight, Finet, Bamba, & Helton, 2009) and having expectations in line with religious understandings held by foster parents (Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002) in order to have an impact on the children who would otherwise be at risk for significant problems (Seyfried, Birgen, & Mann, 2007; Edmond, Auslander, Elze, & Bowland, 2006; Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008; Scott, Munson, McMillen, & Ollie, 2006; Rogers, 2003).

## Contentment

Responses centered on spiritual values and beliefs around “being positive” and to “be at peace”. Foster parents described the importance to “have it in your heart”, the characteristics of “trust” and “stability”, “respect” and “caring” as well as “love” and “forgiveness”. It was important to “see the good in things” and to “be good within yourself” to allow one to “live by your values” and “see everyday as a fresh day”. They referred to the benefit of being “grounded” and having “your own peace”. This was achieved through “connection” and “balance” as well as “acceptance”.

There was some similarity between this concept and the existing literature. Previous fostering research noted reduced stress, improved happiness and health associated with spiritual clarity and practice (Belanger, Copeland, & Cheung, 2008; Dell, Vaughan, & Kratochvil, 2008). However, Aboriginal foster parents described these as central (i.e. to have it in your heart) and integrated (i.e. having your own peace) than previous research which has tended to compartmentalize these features as personality characteristics.

## Sharing

Participants identified, through responses in this concept, the need to share “yourself” with other families. Foster parents noted that they were “grateful to have the opportunity to help” and “do the right thing”. They were motivated to “help out” by a “desire to give back” through “guidance” to children and families. The importance of sharing was extended beyond other children, to families and communities through a spiritual “recognition that everything has life”.

There were similarities between the concept of sharing and results from previous studies with foster parents. There is considerable evidence in the literature about the faith-based motives of foster parents to help others (Cole, 2005; Frazer & Selwyn, 2005; Jackson et al., 2010) and to use that knowledge to keep perspective when challenges arise in the care of children in their home (Berney, 2009). However, Aboriginal foster parents in the present study did it not just as a moral imperative, but more deeply, based out of a recognition of the interconnectedness of all things and people and the necessity to care for one another for all to benefit.

## Conclusion

There were many similarities between the experiences of participants in this study and the available literature. The results suggest that the ways spirituality have been described in the fostering research overlap with experiences of Aboriginal foster parents in several important ways. The role of cultural practices – including beliefs, values and ways of communicating about them and living them daily – are needed by foster parents to care for foster children, and to foster parents themselves, for their personal health and wellness as well as success in fostering.

Focusing more specifically on the role of religion, previous studies of foster parents who identified with a Christian worldview and practices shared the desire to have those embodied in institutions and churches as well as codified into practices that agencies and foster parents would employ with foster children. A significant goal for teaching children these practices was to prevent them from experiencing anticipated challenges in life. In addition, these Christian religious beliefs and practices were seen to provide foster children with a better life if they adopted those ways. Foster parents were motivated to share their religion with the children they fostered.

Where there was a significant departure from the existing fostering literature by the foster parents in the current study resulting from the absense of culturally specific Aboriginal or Native American or Indigenous “spiritual” needs in the literature. Foster parents in the present study described more specific ways their spirituality was understood and lived, based on traditional Indigenous ways of being. These traditional ways included participation in ceremonies and working closely with Elders who had Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Participants also described the centrality of spirituality as fundamental to all life, and that the Red Road could be difficult to follow when they experiencd pressure to follow a non-Indigenous path. Underneath the traditional ways expressed by Aboriginal foster parents, there was a depth of respect for all life and all lives and understanding that their place was to give of themselves because that was how it is supposed to be.

While it seems that spirituality is important to fostering, not only from the perspectives of foster parents in the existing literature but from the Aboriginal foster parents in the present study, the ways it is understood and expressed may range considerably. Given the colonial history with the importation of Christianity and ties to residential schooling and suppression of traditional Indigenous practices, there would be reason for it to be rejected, as is has been among many Aboriginal peoples in Canada. However, there is also evidence from the present study of a diversity of experience and understanding of spirituality that includes Christian religion, knowledge and practices. There is support from the findings herein to suggest that both traditional Indigenous and Western Christian ways are understood and practiced among Aboriginal foster parents. It would seem important to understand the ways these worldviews are distinct and blended in the lives of Aboriginal communities, foster parents and foster children so that appropriate policy and practices can take place.

### *Limitations*

Although the sample was random, imperfect response rate for participation in the interviews and again at the sorting task make it difficult to generalize these spiritual needs to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. We have however, attempted to clarify spiritual practices more commonly held by First Nations, Métis and Inuit as much as possible throughout.

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