Finding their way home: The reunification of First Nations adoptees

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Abstract

Entire generations of First Nations people have been separated from their birth families and tribes by historical acts of relocation, boarding schools, and the adoption era. Reunification is an essential component to rebuilding the First Nations population. It is echoed across tribes captured by the phrase, "generation after generation we are coming home" (White Hawk, 2014). The purpose of this study was to investigate personal and social identity indicators that contribute to a satisfactory reunification for 95 First Nations adult adoptees who were separated from their birth families during childhood by foster-care and/or adoption. Retrospective survey data originated from the Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project. The overall model of satisfactory reunification was statistically significant, and explained 16.6% of the total variance. The study's findings revealed two social identity variables were statistically significant in relation to the reunification experience – high social connection to tribe (positive relationship) and reunification with the birthmother (negative relationship). First Nations adoptees have not only a biological/birth family to return to, but also a tribe, and ancestral land. Components of social identity are particularly important for the reunification process of First Nations adoptees. Reconnection with extended family and social connection to tribe play a critical role in bettering the reunification experience from the adoptee's perspective.

Introduction

Prior to the United States' (U.S.) Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978, thousands of First Nations children were removed from their families and placed into non-First Nations foster and adoptive homes (Crofoot & Harris, 2012; Palmiste, 2011). U.S. data suggests 25-35% of First Nations children were placed in foster or adoptive homes at that time (Jacobs, 2013). Although these statistics exist, little is known about First Nations people who have chosen to reconnect with their birth families. First Nations children who were removed from their families during the 1960s-1980s and placed in non-native homes have grown into adults (ages 40s to 60s) with this traumatic experience fused into their memories. They are the focus of this study.

Although much research exists on search and reunion of adoptees with birth families (Howe &

Feast, 2001; Petta & Steed, 2005), few studies focus on First Nations adoptee reunification. "Reunion" refers to the initial contact between an adoptee and birth family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011b), whereas "reunification" is a process where separated individuals reconnect and rejoin their birth family. Reunification encompasses experiences towards reconnecting (e.g., reclaiming one's place in the circle, ceremony, tribal enrollment) and satisfactory perceptions. Reunification goes beyond meeting with birth family to assuming one's role within birth family, returning home to one's ancestral land, and being acknowledged as a First Nations family member. This study addresses the literature gap by investigating satisfactory reunification among First Nations adoptees. Historically, First Nations adoption research has focused on pre-adolescence and relied on parent or professional report with few studies integrating adoptees' voices (Carriere, 2005; Peterson, 2002). This study explores contributions of personal and social identity to an adoptee's reunification using their voice.

Reunification

Most frequently, research has approached reunification as a permanency path exit from the child welfare system. However, recent literature has re-conceptualized reunification as a process which includes efforts and plans toward the return of children to their birth families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011a). The former approach fails to capture the full picture of reunification, as some children exit child welfare via adoption only to reunify in adulthood. The exploration of reunification as a process is essential as scholars move to identify components constituting a satisfactory reunification process. Previous literature has not captured the complexities of reunification in that it only examined whether reunification was achieved, failing to explore contributing factors of a satisfactory reunification experience.

The study's contributions are multiple. First, it conceptualizes reunification as a process and explores components contributing to the achievement of a satisfactory reunification. Second, it explores the contributing factors from the perceptions of the individuals who experienced it. Third, it expands on previous atheoretical reunification literature through the integration of identity theory. Doing so places the removed child within their social context indicative of the First Nations cultural collectivistic underpinnings.

Guiding theoretical framework

Since the core of the reunification process is returning children to their birth families, issues of identity arise; thus, this study was grounded in identity theory. According to identity theory, significant events that trigger self-reflection (such as reunification) are critical times when the concept of identity is challenged (Pratt, 2003). Reunification is a time when an adoptee attributes changes in one's sense of self to newfound membership within the birth family. The adoptee's thoughts and feelings about the birth family affect the way the adoptee views oneself.

Theory suggests that identity is about sense making, and although identity is self-referential (i.e., how adoptees refer to themselves), an individual's identity is composed of personal (i.e., who am I?) and social components (i.e., who am I in relation to others?) of the self (Pratt, 2003). The personal component is inherently retrospective. That retrospection includes how they were treated as a child in their adoptive and/or foster homes. Experiencing abuse while a child may create a feeling that they may not be welcomed home to tribe because they feel no longer worthy. Multiple experiences of varied types of abuse,

poly-victimization, then might color their First Nations identity as a result.

Adoptees may hold multiple identities throughout their lifetime. The more salient a particular identity is, the more likely it will be exhibited across situations (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Adoptees who label themselves as First Nations consistently across contexts appear to have greater ethnic identity salience. An assumption of identity theory is that identity is socially constructed (Pratt, 2003). The social component of identity is composed of shared similarities with certain members of social categories (i.e., "we"). First Nations adoptive identity cannot be established in its own right; it needs to be recognized by family. An adoptee cannot be an adoptee without family; and an adoptee cannot be First Nations without tribal community. During the reunification process, the more socially connected to tribe, the more the adoptee sees themselves as tribe. In First Nations communities, family and tribe are not separate, but are regarded as one (Red Horse et al., 2000).

In dominant white culture, birth parents are central. However, for First Nations people the collective whole is emphasized over individual relationships. The reunification process moves beyond a parent-child dyad because the process is often described as an experience of being "called" or welcomed home by tribe (White Hawk, 2014). Reunification is a social process, which encompasses reconnection to immediate family, extended family, and tribe. Achieving a satisfactory reunification is affected by the person with whom the adoptee reunifies and how socially connected they are with their tribe. The reunification experience is composed of social interactions (e.g., acceptance, rejection, disappointment). Thus, it is critical to identify the conditions under which satisfactory reunification exists in order to inform reunification practices.

Literature review

The distinction between searching for birth family, reunion with birth family, and reunifying with birth family is not clear in the literature (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011b). While some researchers focus on search and/or contact with birth family (Farr, Grant-Marsney & Grotevant, 2014; Müller & Perry, 2001a; 2001b), others focus on reunion (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; March, 1995). Adoption searching is an adoptee's attempt to obtain information and/or locate birth family. Reunion is initial contact between an adoptee and birth family (e.g., letters, phone calls, actual meeting) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011b). Although reunion and reunification represent distinct experiences, this study draws upon reunion research as the nearest body of literature.

Within that literature, many adoptees have reported having "no regrets" about being reunited with their birthmothers (Sachdev, 1992). However, such literature has relied on reunions with dominant culture birthmothers who voluntarily consented to the adoption, many of whom expressed that adoption was in the best interest of the child (March, 1997). First Nations birthmothers differ greatly from dominant culture birthmothers, as they experienced the systematic removal of their children and/or were coerced into adoption. Furthermore, First Nations adoptees differ from other transracial adoptees based on their unique historical and political context. Acts of First Nations adoption occurred within their own homeland under the pressing force of colonialism (Harness, 2006).

Few studies illuminate the complexity of reunion for First Nations adoptees (Becker-Green, 2009; Carriere, 2005). Such studies reveal the search for birth parents is motivated by a desire to know more about their First Nations heritage (Harness, 2006; Hussong, 1978; Peterson, 2002). Overall, studies

suggest First Nations adoptees have been satisfied with reunion experiences, although they describe having been nervous and excited. Some First Nations adoptees felt their birthmothers were happy about the reunion despite it eliciting feelings of guilt (Hussong, 1978), while others described feeling accepted or rejected by the birth family (Harness, 2006). Reconnecting with family provided many with a sense of belonging but reunion is not always a positive experience for adoptees, as some learn dysfunctional aspects of their birth family, which can be painful (Carriere, 2007).

Research to-date has provided an interesting glimpse into satisfactory reunions for adoptees, but left much to be explored about First Nations adoptees as a unique population of focus. Studies of reunion have focused on the adoptee-birthmother relationship (March, 1997) and appear to have neglected the importance of the extended family, which is core to First Nations culture. As more adoptees search for their birth families, additional research is needed to understand the motivating factors of reunions and how, in turn, reunions affect adoptive identity. Motivating factors might include the search for their First Nations identity, the desire to have their identity mirrored back to them, the need to be informed about their genetic inheritance of particular diseases, the need to know one's origin to "feel complete", or the enactment of the principle of the "right to know."

Methods

Sampling procedures

The study data originated from the Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project (N = 336) by First Nations Repatriation Institute (FNRI). Adoptees Have Answers collaborated in data collection. The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved of all study procedures. Target respondents were adults who experienced adoption and/or foster-care during childhood. Respondents were contacted through two community agency subscription lists explaining the purpose of the survey, inviting their participation, and providing the hyperlink. Respondents were allowed to purposefully pass along surveys because this is a hard-to-reach and understudied population. The survey was retrospective and was made available online and in paper-pencil version. The survey was advertised on the FNRI website, Facebook Adoptee Page, National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) Facebook page, and the Facebook pages associated with two tribes. Fliers were placed in 600 conference packets at the annual NICWA conference in 2013. Informed consent was obtained prior to survey completion and respondents were told the survey would take 45-75 minutes.

Sample description

A subsample of the original data set was obtained. Respondents who had not reunified with their birth families, as well as those who did not identify as First Nations were excluded resulting in a final sample of 95 respondents. The term First Nations is used throughout this study to refer to the indigenous people of North America, as this term is increasingly recognized in the literature, although the U.S. Census does not yet utilize it. And, although other descriptive labels are used (e.g., American Indian, Native American), no label is universally accepted. The majority (61.1%) experienced foster-care and adoption. Half (50.5%) were adopted before the age of one. The mean age of respondents was 50.41 years old (SD = 9.10) and 80% were female. It is significant to note that the predominance of females in the study is consistent with previous research (Müller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2004; Müller & Perry, 2001a). Half of

the respondents (50.5%) were married or cohabitating. Personal annual incomes from all sources ranged from less than $10,000 to $55,000 or more (median fell within the $35,000-54,999 category). Slightly more than 10% (10.5%) met the U.S. criteria for living in poverty. The range of the respondents' highest completed education ranged from less than high school to more than a bachelor's degree, with 45.3% of respondents holding a college degree.

Measures

Satisfactory reunification

Reunification, the dependent variable, was operationalized as the reuniting of an adopted and/or fostered person with birth family. The measure was a three-item index (α = .670) developed from the following items, "I felt rejected by my birth relatives during the reunification process," "I was disappointed by what I learned about my birth family," and "I have trouble feeling like part of my birth family." Items were scored on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All items were reverse coded and summed (M = 10.74, SD = 3.34, range = 3 to 15).

Different family race

Respondents answered two questions about the race of their adoptive/foster families. First, they were asked, "What were the races of the foster family that you lived with for the longest time?" Second, "What were the races of people in your adoptive family?" Item response options were as follows: (Different from my own, I am not sure, Some overlap in races, but not a complete match, The same as my own). Items were dichotomized to represent whether the respondent had adoptive and/or foster parents of a different race (0 = Not different than my own, 1 = Different than my own). They were considered to have adoptive/foster parents of a different race if they answered "different from my own" to either or both questions. The majority (52.6%) had adoptive/foster parents of a different race.

Poly-victimization

Based on high rates of First Nations child maltreatment and victimization, poly-victimization was included. Poly-victimization represents an accumulation of multiple abuse types. Of central concern was whether abuse occurred within the interpersonal relationship with the adoptive/foster caregiver. Definitions of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse were drawn from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). First, respondents were asked, "Did you experience abuse in any foster home?" For each type of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual), response options were: none, single incident, several times, long-term. Next, respondents were asked about their experience of abuse in their adoptive home. It was asked and computed in the same way as foster care abuse. The dichotomized variables were then summed representing the total experience of victimization (M = 2.49, SD = 1.60, range = 0 to 4) (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007).

High social connection to tribe

The response to a single item was used as an indicator of the adoptee's level of social connection to tribe: "How socially connected do you feel you are with your tribe?" The item was scored on a five point

scale where higher scores represent higher social connection (1 = Not Connected, 5 = Very Connected). The item was dichotomized to create a dummy variable representing whether or not respondents had a high social connection to tribe. If the respondent reported a high connection to tribe (scores of 4 or 5), then the dummy variable was 1; with any report other than 4 or 5, the dummy variable was coded as 0. One-fourth of respondents (24.2%) had a high social connection to tribe.

Identity salience

Respondents responded to two questions regarding their ethnic identity. First, respondents were asked, "Are you an American Indian/Native American?" Item response options were as follows (I suspect so, Not sure, Yes). A dichotomous variable was developed where respondents answering "yes" were coded as 1 meaning they considered themselves First Nations; all other responses were coded as 0. For the second question, the question was coded in the same manner. The identity salience variable was derived from a comparison of these two items. Respondents were considered to have a salient identity if they were coded as a "1" for both questions. If they had a "0" for either question, they were coded as a "0" for identity salience. The majority of respondents (75.8%) had a salient identity. Over half (56.5%) of the respondents who were unclear about their identity, indicated they were Caucasian in the second question.

Reunification with birthmother

Respondents were asked if they reunified with their birthmother using this question: "With whom have you reunited? Someone in your immediate birth family (parent or sibling); someone in your extended birth family (cousin, grandparent, aunt, uncle, etc.)?" The item was coded as 0 = Reunified with someone other than birthmother and 1 = Reunified with birthmother. Less than half (45.3%) reunified with their birthmother.

Data analysis

Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22. Multiple OLS regression was the appropriate analysis procedure. The plan for statistical power was .80 and our sample size of 95 was large enough to detect a medium size effect (p = .05) (Cohen, 1992). Independent variables selected for entry into the regression equation were those that were statistically related to the dependent variable within the bivariate correlation analysis and were not highly correlated with a number of other independent variables in the correlation matrix.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the sample are depicted in Table 1. Bivariate correlations among variables considered in the model are depicted in Table 2. These bivariate correlations provide an initial indication of the relationships between variables, but do not control for the effect of other variables. Those participants who were older and who were more socially connected with tribe experienced a more satisfactory reunification while those reunifying with their birth mother experienced less satisfaction. More identity salience was felt when participants were unmarried, had less than a college degree, were the same race as their adoptive/foster family, and who were more connected with tribe.

Results of the regression model are depicted in Table 3. The overall model was statistically

significant, explaining 16.6% of the total variance of a satisfactory reunification (adjusted R^2 = .166, F(3,91) = 7.257, p < .01); that level of explanation of variance is high for social science research. The two social identity variables explained about the same amount of variance in satisfaction received through reunification, but their effects were opposite. When participants reunified with their birthmothers, they experienced less satisfaction with their reunification. When they had a high social connection with tribe, they experienced a more satisfactory reunification. These results suggest that adoptees that reunify with other family members than the birthmother have a more satisfactory reunification experience. Age was significantly associated with a satisfactory reunification; older participants experienced a more satisfactory reunification.

Table 1
Sample Demographic Characteristics (n = 95)

	Percent (%)	Mean	SD
Age in years (25-68)		50.41	9.10
Gender			
Male	20.00		
Female	80.00		
Education			
College Degree	45.30		
Income			
Poverty	10.50		
Marital Status			
Married/Cohabitating	50.50		

Table 2
Correlation Matrix for Variables Considered in the Regression Model (n = 95)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Satisfactory reunification	-										
2. Age	0.268 **	-									
3. Gender	-0.010	-0.081	-								
4. Married/Cohabitating	-0.172	0.099	0.084	-							
5. College degree	0.130	0.019	0.032	0.096	-						
6. Poverty	0.004	-0.099	0.086	#####	-0.105	-					
7. Different race than adoptive/foster family	0.181	0.228 *	-0.053	#####	-0.154	0.051	-				
8. Poly-victimization	-0.081	-0.024	0.007	0.030	-0.096	0.152	-0.023	-			
9. Reunification with birth mother	-0.308 **	-0.210 *	0.137	0.054	0.065	0.102	-0.069	-0.043	-		
10. Social connection to tribe	0.223 *	0.185	-0.067	#####	0.092	-0.021	0.131	0.096	-0.227 *	-	
11. Identity salience	0.118	0.036	-0.037	##### **	-0.227 *	0.034	0.448 **	-0.102	-0.029	0.271 **	-

Note. *Significant at the *p* <.05 level. **Significant at the *p* <.01 level

Table 3

Multiple Regression Model Predicting a Satisfactory Reunification (n = 95)

	B	SEB	β	
Age	0.070	1.898	0.190	*
Reunification with birth mother	-1.519	0.650	-0.228	*
High social connection to tribe	1.855	0.744	0.239	*
R^2		0.193		
Adjusted R^2		0.166		
F		7.257	**	

Note. * Significant at the $p<.05$ level. ** Significant at the $p<.001$ level.

Discussion

This study offers a number of key contributions. First, this study expanded previous reunion research by investigating components of a satisfactory reunification. Although recent literature recognizes that reunification is a process, this study explored the contribution of personal and social identity to a satisfactory reunification experience. Second, this study offered a deeper look into the factors contributing to a satisfactory reunification experience for First Nations adoptees who were separated from their birth families during childhood by foster-care and/or adoption. Third, this study added to the First Nations adoptee-centered research studies by integrating the voices of adoptees rather than relying on parent or professional report.

Social identity is particularly important for First Nations people. This study's findings revealed two social identity variables were significantly related to the reunification experience – high social connection to tribe and reunification with the birthmother. As an adoptee reunifies with their birth family, they begin to adopt certain values and beliefs of the birth family. They come to define themselves in relation to their birth family (extended kin) and in doing so, they develop social identity, which is part of their individual self-concept, but defined by birth family beliefs (Pratt, 2003). Adoptees search for their birth family because they are looking to fulfill the social dimension of their identity – to find a parent, and possibly even enroll in their parent's tribe. Enrollment is an outcome of the social dimension of individual identity.

Adoptees with high social connection to their tribe experienced a greater satisfactory reunification compared to adoptees with low social connection to tribe. These findings suggest the importance of extended family and tribal relationships beyond the birthparent. Just as the individual cannot be separated from the collective (Red Horse et al., 2000), reunification cannot be separated from extended family and tribe. Within First Nations collectivist culture, social identity and an adoptee's broader social relationships are more central to the reunification experience than personal identity components.

The reunification process encompasses more than merely the adoptee-birthmother relationship.

Although reunification with the birthmother may be of primary focus for adoptees initially, there are broader social relationships that influence reunification. An adoptee's initial search is usually focused on the birthmother (Müller & Perry, 2001b), but later they may seek their birth fathers, siblings, or other birth relatives (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011b). In First Nations culture, these relationships may be of equal or even greater importance than reunifying with the birthmother. As March (1997) states, "to focus only on adoptee-birthmother contact is an injustice too often evident in the current adoption literature" (p. 104).

In considering why First Nations adoptees that reunify with their birthmothers might have a less satisfactory reunification experience than those that reunify with someone else in their family, extended family or tribe, any number of considerations may offer explanation to such a finding. Often adoptees have hopes and dreams attached to the image of their birthmothers. As such, adoptees may also attach their own hopes and dreams to the possibility of having a relationship with their birthmother – the expectations of which realistically may not be met.

It could also be related to the residual effects of adoption exhibited by birthmothers throughout the years and even decades following the adoption. Birthmothers can display continued anxiety about their children's fate for years (Weinreb & Murphy, 1988 as cited in March, 1997), and such anxiety may only be exacerbated by the circumstances surrounding First Nations adoption. If anxiety is found in birthmothers who report voluntarily consenting to their child's adoption, might anxiety be even worse in First Nations birthmothers who experienced the coercion or forced removal of a child? This anxiety is echoed across First Nations communities through the use of the phrase "stolen children" which is used to refer to First Nations children removed during the adoption era.

Furthermore, although contact between an adoptee and dominant culture birthmother may alleviate anxiety on behalf of the birthmother by affirming that adoption was in the best interests of the child (Silverman et al., 1988), the reunification of an First Nations adoptee may serve as a trauma-reminder, triggering unresolved grief and pain for the First Nations birthmother. In the reunification process, the return of a First Nations adoptee mirrors back the pain of the child's removal, which may elicit feelings of guilt, shame, and/or disappointment on behalf of birthmothers (White Hawk, 2014). It could be that reunification surfaces old hurt in the birthmother, but when they reunify with others, the experience is more positive for any number of reasons, such as: (1) the tribe is seen as family within First Nations culture, (2) the "coming home" movement being organized within First Nations communities and its recognition of what was done to their people, (3) those family members are better positioned to welcome the adoptee (e.g., the adoptee does not serve as a personal trauma reminder).

Although this research illuminated the perspective of the adoptee, it leaves many questions unanswered regarding birth parents and other family members who are also involved in the reunification experience. Limited literature, to our knowledge, has explored the experiences of First Nations birthmothers and their perceptions of forced removal and reunification. It is critical that research begins to focus on First Nations birthmothers, particularly studies that can inform therapists. First Nations birthmothers who lost their children by forced removal are stuck; they may love their children, but may be unable to accept them because of the traumatic experience of loss. It is essential that therapists understand how to help First Nations birthmothers prepare for reunification. The perspective of First Nations birthmothers is needed, as their voice is underrepresented in the literature. In the context,

studies focusing on experiences of reunification at the individual, family, and tribal level are needed in order to better understand the greater systemic components to the reunification process. Although efforts within First Nations tribal communities have already begun to participate in the reunification process (e.g., welcoming home songs and ceremonies, formal tribal enrollment, etc.), little research has been done to document such experiences. This begs the question, what contributes to satisfactory reunification experiences at the tribal level? How can tribes position themselves in practices that offer support to the reunification process? Just as birthmothers would benefit from preparation for reunification, so too would tribes. A wealth of knowledge could be rendered from the tribes, such as the White Earth Tribe of Ojibwe in Minnesota and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, who are already leading the movement toward reunification and repatriation, to serve as an example for other tribes.

Conclusions

First Nations adoptees are searching for their families to find themselves. Birth parents may still be wondering what happened to those children (e.g., ambiguous loss). Residual effects of the adoption era continue to manifest in the lives of birth families and adopted individuals. Future qualitative research is needed with this population that can give us an in-depth experience with the key constructs, such as high social connection to tribe and reunification with the birthmother, which were proposed throughout this study.

Social identity plays an important role in the reunification process in First Nations communities where individuals are not seen as separate from the collective (Red Horse et al., 2000). Extended family member involvement and strong connection to tribe shape reunification from the adoptee's perspective. Therapists working with First Nations adoptees and their families are uniquely positioned to support reconnection across multiple relationships. Therapists need to know the importance of social identity for First Nations adoptees; this will shape how they help people navigate the reunification process. For instance, supporting the adoptee's claims of First Nations identity, participating in song, ceremony, dance, drumming, and other community events.

The tribes need to know how critical their role is in facilitating the reunification process (e.g., honoring and accepting adoptees into the circle through the adoptee song and ceremony). Work needs to be done to prepare family members to receive First Nations adoptees, such as extended family members who may be better positioned to receive the adoptee (e.g., in comparison to those for whom the mere face of the adoptee is a trauma reminder of loss).

Although this study offered strength by focusing specifically on First Nations adoptees, it is not without limitations. Caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions from the findings. Given this is one of the few studies to attempt to sample this population; no claims to generalizability can be made. Findings may be specific to this particular sample and may not represent the experiences of the broader First Nations adoptees. In future studies, more targeted sampling would be helpful, as well as the inclusion of adoptees that attempted but were unable to achieve reunification.

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