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Contemporary Practice of Traditional Aboriginal Child Rearing: A Review

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Abstract

There is a dearth of literature available on traditional Aboriginal child rearing. This review paper explores Aboriginal child rearing to determine if traditional practices are still in use, how these may differ from mainstream child rearing and may have been modified by mainstream influences and colonialism. Traditional Aboriginal parenting is discussed in the context of colonialism and historic trauma, with a focus on child autonomy, extended family, fatherhood, attachment, developmental milestones, discipline, language, and ceremony and spirituality. This review was completed using the ancestral method, i.e., using the reference list of articles to find other relevant articles and more structured literature searches. In light of the high number of Aboriginal children in foster care, this research may serve to highlight the role that historical issues and misinterpretation of traditional child rearing practices play in the apprehension of Aboriginal children. It may also assist non-Aboriginal professionals when working with Aboriginal children and their families.

Keywords: Aboriginal, child rearing, residential schools, parenting

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Introduction

The quality of parenting has a significant effect on the physical and emotional health of children throughout their development. When inadequate parenting results in unhealthy family relationships, and deteriorates to the point where it is neglectful or abusive, children in Canada are generally placed into the care of child welfare agencies. The National Household Survey (NHS) of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada found that, in 2011, while Aboriginal people represented 4.3% of the total population of Canada, almost half (48.1%) of the 30,000 children in foster care in Canada were Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2011). In 2011, 3.6% of Aboriginal children were in foster care in contrast to 0.3% of non-Aboriginal children. Trocme, Knoke, and Blackstock (2004) noted that Aboriginal families are led by significantly younger parents who have experienced more maltreatment when they themselves were children. These parents' histories of abuse, especially the abuses experienced in residential schools, may have negatively affected their capacity to parent and are likely responsible for overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the foster care system in Canada (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). Historical trauma and, possibly, significant misinterpretations of traditional Aboriginal ways of parenting may play a role in these apprehensions.

Cheah and Chirkov (2008) noted that there is little research on Aboriginal parenting and Aboriginal child development. Much of the scant past research on Aboriginal families has focused on the "deficient," non-mainstream parenting which was practiced by Aboriginal parents (Red Horse, 1997), while espousing a kind of pan-Aboriginalism or over-generalizations about Aboriginal people. Loppie (2007) stated that there is no universal Aboriginal paradigm, but does concede that despite geographical, language, and social structure differences, there are shared values that are philosophically different from Euro-North American cultural norms. Thus, while researchers must be careful in making generalizations about Aboriginal child rearing, they should also understand cultural literacy pertaining to Aboriginal practices is essential for professionals who work with Aboriginal families.

Colonialism, historical and intergenerational trauma as inflicted by the residential school system, has doubtlessly affected traditional child rearing techniques. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Interim report (2012), noted that residential school survivors specifically asked for support to both regain and teach traditional parenting values and practices as a means of improving their parenting skills. Thus, it would be useful to look at how colonialism has affected Aboriginal parenting and to examine any available scholarly information relating to Aboriginal ways of parenting in order to better understand, and potentially remedy, the significant overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in foster care. In this paper, historical factors are examined to provide a background to contemporary Aboriginal child rearing and to highlight how traditional practices may have been altered. Child autonomy, extended family, and Aboriginal fatherhood in particular characterize the parenting of Aboriginal children. In addition, distinct ways of addressing attachment, developmental milestones, discipline, language, and finally spirituality and ceremony will be discussed, as these are facets of Aboriginal parenting that may have been or continue to be misinterpreted by mainstream professionals.

Method

The literature on Aboriginal ways of parenting is relatively scant, but what little exists covers a broad range of Aboriginal cultures, most notably: Australian communities, the Sami,² and many nations from the United States and Canada. The existing research is grounded in diverse disciplines including sociology, nursing, anthropology, social work, psychology, and occupational therapy. The current literature review was done using both key word searches (e.g., Aboriginal, child rearing) in many different scholarly areas and using the ancestral method, i.e., using the reference list of articles to find other relevant articles and more structured literature searches. The reviewed articles span 19 years from 1993 to 2012.

Historical Factors

Colonialism and its impact on parenting

Aboriginal cultures around the world share a history of colonialism which has likely had a significant effect on parenting practices. In Canada, colonialism, through an insidious assimilation process, has gradually pared away the identity of Aboriginal children and youth who subsequently became parents themselves (Simard & Blight, 2011). Colonialism regarding the Inuit in Canada, for example, caused profound changes in the former's lives due to language suppression, residential school enrolment, and loss of self-determinism (McShane, Hastings, Smylie, Prince & The Tungasuvvingat Inuit Resource Centre, 2009).

Critical examination of the effects of colonialism on current Aboriginal child rearing practices is important, as colonialism has brought with it dysfunctional behaviors, beliefs, and values (Dorion, 2010). Dysfunctional values have come to be part of modern child rearing in many Aboriginal communities both on- and off-reserve (Dorion, 2010). For example, colonialism may have caused traumatic bonding and/or the inability to express love (Chansonneuve, 2005). Colonialism, residential schools, racism, and poverty have marked family relationships in a multitude of destructive ways that are only beginning to be understood (Neckoway, Brownlee, & Castellan, 2007). Thus normative, unidimensional ways of assessing the quality of parenting may be quite inadequate in these contexts, and may need to be replaced by a more multi-dimensional and ecologically-oriented approach.

Intergenerational transmission of trauma

The social-historical context created by colonialism includes both acute and chronic stressors, resulting in symptoms related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Evans-Campbell, 2008). However Evans-Campbell contended that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder classification is of limited use to Aboriginal people because it does not address intergenerational trauma, the compounding effect of multiple stressors, only focuses on the individual (and not the family), and its definition does not incorporate the ways historical and present-day traumas interact or are interpreted. Historical trauma is collective, compounding, and although the abuses of colonialism were perpetrated over many years and generations, these abuses still continue to impact individuals, families, mental health, and cultural identity (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

² The Sami are internationally recognized as an Indigenous peoples residing in present-day Norway.

Aboriginal children have inherited the significant traumas that their ancestors were forced to endure. These traumas were caused by government policies purposefully designed to disrupt cultural practices and family relationships (Sarche & Whitesell, 2012). Brave Heart (1999) has written extensively on historical trauma in the Lakota people in the United States and noted that the impairment of traditional parenting styles was one of the intergenerational effects of this trauma. Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) wrote that historical trauma caused symptoms such as domestic violence because historical trauma corrupts adaptive social and cultural patterns. The maladaptive behaviours, in turn, may be passed on to the next generation as socially learned patterns of conduct which children internalize. It is important for researchers in the areas of child development and parenting to understand these historical effects of trauma, which may directly affect risk for both psychopathology and negative health outcomes (Galliher, Tsethlikai, & Stolle, 2012), and, by extension, parenting.

Residential schools

One of the most devastating components of colonialism, and one that caused extensive trauma, was the residential school system. In the late 19th century in Canada, the government instituted Sections 113 to 122 of the Indian Act, which legally took away the rights of Aboriginal parents to their children and instead gave the government control (Chansonneuve, 2005). Taking Aboriginal children away from their families and enrolling them into residential schools was encouraged by the government whose stated purpose was to assimilate Aboriginal children (Lafrance & Collins, 2003). Approximately 130 residential schools were run jointly by Christian churches and the federal government from 1892 to 1996, and 30% of Canadian Aboriginal children spent the majority of their childhoods in those institutions during that period (Chansonneuve, 2005). As just one example of the suffering these children experienced, Fournier and Crey (1997) reported that deaths in Residential schools in the early 1900s ranged from 11% (Alberni School, British Columbia) to 69% (File Hills in Saskatchewan) mostly due to tuberculosis. One-third of Aboriginal children lost the experience of traditional family life, many attained adulthood not having had any model of parenting (Lafrance & Collins, 2003), and many experienced much trauma.

Boarding schools (as residential schools were called in the United States) separated children from their community's social structures (Fitzgerald & Farrell, 2012) including family. Within the Lakota nation, children who were sent to boarding schools only learned punitive discipline as a means to parent, and were thus put at risk of becoming a generation of uninvolved, non-nurturing parents (Brave Heart, 1999). They learnt how to parent primarily in the way that they themselves were parented (Lafrance & Collins, 2003). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2012) reported that clearly, the greatest impact of the residential schools was the breakdown of family relationships because these children were denied parenting knowledge and skill transmission. Lisa, an Aboriginal parent in Canada, who confessed to abusing her children, noted that she "never learned any parenting skills, not at residential school, not with the childhood [she] had" (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 131). Anecdotal stories from residential schools survivors showed that residential schools impacted generations of their families in very significant ways, resulting in the inability to express love or nurturance, a loss of communication, emotional abuse and traumatic bonding, and having children taken into foster care (Chansonneuve, 2005). It was not just the children who attended residential schools who were affected. Descendants of children raised in boarding schools recounted experiencing childhood neglect and abuse themselves and, when they became parents, had feelings of parental inadequacy and feeling confusion about how to

parent in healthy ways (Lafrance & Collins, 2003). Residential schools interrupted and corrupted traditional child rearing by separating Aboriginal children from their parents, extended family, and culture, and by raising them instead within punitive and often abusive institutions.

Traditional Aboriginal Child Rearing: Is it Still Practiced?

Aboriginal child rearing has ostensibly been significantly disrupted by colonialism. One question that arises is why some aspects of traditional Aboriginal parenting are still being practiced while other aspects have disappeared. Few studies have examined this query (Javo, Alapack, Heyerdahl, & Ronning, 2003). Cheah and Chirkov's (2008) research, established that present-day Aboriginal mothers still emphasized the importance of family, respect for Elders, and maintained cultural values significantly more than European-Canadian mothers. As well, Javo, Ronning, and Heyerdahl's (2004) study showed that Indigenous Sami child rearing practices differ from the dominant Norwegian culture even following a long period of assimilation. Ryan (2011) asserted that many studies from contemporary Australian Aboriginal urban, regional, and remote communities suggest that Aboriginal parents have retained unique traditional child rearing behaviors, expressions of sensitivity, sociability, emotional self-regulation, self-expression, and competence. Likewise, van de Sande and Menzies' (2003) evaluation of Ojibway parenting programs proposed that there continues to be significant distinctiveness in ideas on how to raise Ojibway children, in spite of generations of influence by the mainstream culture. Many explanations have been offered as to why so many Aboriginal cultures are still thriving in spite of government policies designed to systematically eradicate them. A spiritual and genetic explanation was provided by Simard and Blight (2011) who maintained that cultural memory is carried inside Aboriginal DNA and has waited to be awakened to inspire connection to the spirit. Simard and Blight contended that the rich cultural makeup and knowledge systems of Aboriginal peoples in Canada have survived over 500 years of colonialism. Another way that traditional child rearing practices were maintained is that not all Aboriginal children went to residential schools as some parents resisted this. Although these children stayed with their family, other forms of colonization still likely affected the transmission of child rearing practices. It does appear that traditional child rearing methods, although perhaps altered by colonialism and trauma, are still being widely practiced and transmitted by Aboriginal peoples.

Traditional Child Rearing in Contemporary Practice

Child autonomy

Research showed that Aboriginal communities continue to exhibit many distinctive values related to child rearing. One such value is respect for the child. Aboriginal children are openly recognized and respected as persons and are thus encouraged to make their own decisions about how they wish to explore their environment (McPherson & Rabb, 2001 as cited in Neckoway et al., 2007). The concept of child autonomy implies allowing children the freedom to make their own decisions which leads to independence (Javo et al., 2003). This is a quality that the Sami also saw as essential for survival and hardship endurance (Javo et al., 2003). Indeed, in order to encourage independence, Sami parents nurtured exploration and risk taking in their children despite the possibility of danger (Javo et al., 2003). The Sami balanced this independence with emotional responsiveness and affection; it seems that the more Sami parents valued independence and autonomy, the more affectionate and physically close they became with their children (Javo et al., 2003). Further, Javo et al. (2003) found the western value of time

organized around a clock was recognized by the Sami, but that they still tried to adhere to their cultural value of allowing their children to eat and sleep, to decide when and what they eat and when, how long and with which family member to sleep according to the child's own rhythm (Javo et al., 2003; Javo et al., 2004). The modern Sami still value child autonomy although they also recognize and made concessions to western values, such as time.

The concept of autonomy was honoured by Aboriginal people from Canada, Australia, and the United States as well. Sheperd (2008) found that Aboriginal parents from Canada more often than Euro-Canadian mothers, allowed their children to decide how much to explore their environment. The Inuit in Canada also viewed autonomy and independence as vital to parent and child interactions and as such, Inuit parents looked for indications from their children to guide their own responses (McShane et al., 2009). Australian Aboriginal children also traditionally self-directed their skill development, including relatively dangerous activities like knife handling and climbing trees (Kruske, Belton, Wardaguga, & Narjic, 2012) and this early independence was encouraged for children by setting few limits (Nelson & Allison, 2000). Allowing children to make their own decisions may not, in itself, be an indication of neglect, as often perceived by non-Aboriginal people (Ryan, 2011). Similar to the Sami, in Australian Aboriginal remote communities, children were not expected to follow routines and were allowed to eat when hungry and to sleep when tired (Kruske et al., 2012). The Alaskan Yup'ik allowed their children the freedom to move around the home before coming back to the mother to eat the bites of food that were offered (MacDonald-Clark & Boffman, 1995). The Yup'ik had no fixed feeding schedule for their children but instead, fed the children when they were hungry (MacDonald-Clark & Boffman, 1995). Furthermore, McShane and Hastings (2004) commented that Indigenous children in the United States are raised in a world that is more adult-centred than that of other Americans, and were thus more encouraged to develop adult skills such as showing responsibility for self-care to ensure survival. The prevalent focus on child autonomy was tied in with the Aboriginal preference for non-interference which can be expressed by Aboriginal people through a resistance to giving instruction, correcting, coercing, or trying to persuade another to do something (Neckoway, 2010). In many Aboriginal cultures, autonomy is an ideal based on independence (and thus survival) but is counterbalanced by strong affection for the child.

Extended family

Even though risk-taking and independence were encouraged, extended family was traditionally greatly involved with Aboriginal children. Australian Aboriginal children, for example, were highly regarded and valued members of their extended family network (Kruske et al., 2012). Inuit children were also given much affection, attention, and tenderness and seen as the centre of attention for their immediate and extended family (McShane et al., 2009). The Navajo culture was both matrilineal and matrilineal and as such, maternal grandmothers and aunts were very involved with young children as are other family members (Hossain et al., 1999). In Anishnaabe (Ojibway) communities, family included the nuclear family, the extended family, the community family (connected by a treaty), a Nationhood family (all Anishnaabe people, regardless of province or country), clan family (such as Deer or Turtle Clan: a spiritual aspect of family), and a cultural family (linked to Anishnaabe ceremonial practices) (Simard & Blight, 2011). There are many levels of family in Anishnaabe cultures. A fundamental and traditional value of Aboriginal peoples is that of kin, the interconnection of family and non-family community members who were involved in children's socialization (McShane & Hastings, 2004). In the research, Aboriginal extended families were highly valued, interconnected and structured.

Neckoway et al. (2007) noted that bonds between an Aboriginal child and adults (including many caregivers) in these extended families were multi-layered and not dyadic (between two people only). Aboriginal parents from Australia commented that in an Aboriginal family, siblings and extended family members had a designated role in raising the children (Nelson & Allison, 2000). Furthermore, Koorie women from Australia, who were not the biological mother to the child, actively mothered; this concept of allomothering set the Koorie apart from mainstream child rearing (Atkinson & Swain, 1999). In many Indigenous nations in the United States, grandparents have historically played an important role in socializing, providing physical care, and training for their grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson, 2005). In this context of allomothering, the mother could afford to be less vigilant because she knew that others in her extended family and community were also attending to the child (Neckoway et al., 2007). Extended family can have extensive roles in child rearing in some Aboriginal cultures. This is important to acknowledge when professionals are working with and assessing Aboriginal families. Professionals should ask families which individuals interact and care for the child and never assume that it would only be the mother.

Aboriginal fatherhood

One area that has received very little attention in the literature is traditional Aboriginal fathering. Javo et al. (2004) studied gender differences in Sami parenting, specifically the similarities in patterns of response in Sami mothers and fathers. In Ryan's (2011) study of urban Nunga and Koorie mothers in Australia, the researcher observed that men's roles in their children's lives was missing. Similarly to many other Aboriginal communities, because of policies introduced by the state, Koorie men's supportive family roles changed as they were offered only menial and erratic jobs which ultimately resulted in prolonged absences and shortened life spans (Atkinson & Swain, 1999). Ball (2009) remarked that by 2020, if no effective interventions take place, half of the rapidly growing population of Aboriginal children will still be growing up without a father. In Ball's study of Aboriginal fathers from Canada, many men acknowledged that they did not know how many biological children they had, while several admitted that they had at least one child that they were not, nor had not, ever been involved with. This was a familiar pattern for many men who had grown up either without a father, or with an abusive father or father figure, including, in some cases, abusive priests in residential schools. Many men in Ball's study reported that actively parenting their own children brought up painful childhood memories of abuse or family violence, a parent's death, being taken away to residential school, or going into foster care. Eighty-six percent of the men in Ball's study talked about their experiences of what Ball themed a disruption in the transmission of intergenerational fathering. Aboriginal fathers may not be involved in parenting because of historical trauma and government policies resulting from colonialism.

Other issues affected research on Aboriginal fathers. Hossain (2001) considered off-reservation Navajo fathers to be a hard to reach sample because they were scattered over the southwest region of the United States and also, because traditionally, Navajo did not encourage outsiders to research their family patterns. Hossain's 2001 study and Hossain et al.'s 1999 study both used western assessment tools which were not validated for use with Aboriginal peoples, and samples that included only Navajo fathers who were not living on-reservation. Nonetheless, both studies showed that Navajo men had higher levels of family involvement compared to other cultures and spent more time with infant caregiving, with fathers spending 60% of the time the mothers did. Aboriginal fathers may also be understudied because of cultural values. Fathering in Aboriginal communities remains an under-researched area with much diversity and numerous interesting questions remaining to be answered.

Attachment

Mainstream Attachment Theory posits that how sensitively parents respond to their child when the child is distressed will likely affect the child's expectations for subsequent relationships, world view, and ultimately social and emotional health (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). However, there is diversity in the manifestations of attachment behaviours across cultures and Aboriginal cultures are no exception. Carriere and Richardson (2009) commented that "connectedness" may be a better description of Aboriginal attachment as it looks more broadly to an individual's total environment and not just to one or two central caregivers. Attachment in Aboriginal cultures may present somewhat differently from the mainstream in the areas of extended family response, secure base, and distress response.

When looking at extended family response, Kruske et al. (2012) looked at 15 northern Australian Aboriginal families' experiences with their infants in the first year of life. These researchers found that all participating family members felt an obligation to respond when an infant cried or whimpered and that not to respond and letting a baby cry was considered cruel and was frowned upon (Kruske et al., 2012). If another family member responded, this might be interpreted, within traditional Attachment Theory, as insensitivity by the mother because it might signal that the mother-infant dyad was not synchronous (Neckoway et al., 2007). Neckoway et al. (2007) commented that, when assessments were conducted with tools based in western Attachment Theory, it may appear that Aboriginal mothers were less sensitive and that the child may not have a healthy attachment to her mother. As well, the dynamic between child and adults may move in both directions. Extended family may respond to an infant but also, the infant or toddler may seek out alternative caregivers (even for breastfeeding) or peers (Ryan, 2011). This dynamic might be misunderstood as an indiscriminate attachment by western-trained researchers (Ryan, 2011).

Other attachment concepts, such as security, may also look different in Aboriginal cultures. Bowlby's concept of secure base in attachment stated that an infant will use one or two primary caregivers as a safe place to explore from and retreat to (Waters, Crowell, Elliot, Corcoran, & Treboux, 2002). In Aboriginal cultures, the circle of caregivers may go well beyond one or two individuals. In the central and western desert regions of Australia for example, older children were encouraged to look out for other children and siblings (Ryan, 2011). Aboriginal children may seek other caregivers, have other caregivers respond to them, may be routinely cared for by an older sibling or peer, and thus, may have many caregivers providing them with a secure base.

One assessment tool that is commonly used to assess parental sensitivity in the parent-child interaction is the Nursing Child Assessment Screening Tests (NCAST) (Barnard, 1986). The Feeding Scale (for birth to 12 months) and the Teaching Scale (for birth to 36 months) of the NCAST both assess the primary caregiver's sensitivity to cues, response to stress, both social-emotional and cognitive growth fostering, the clarity of cues, and the infant's responsiveness to the parent (MacDonald-Clarke & Boffman, 1995). The scales have been normed on non-Aboriginal, African American, and Hispanic populations. MacDonald-Clarke and Boffman (1995) used the NCAST to study the interaction between mother and infant (93% of the dyads were mother-infant) in Alaskan Yup'ik. Generally, the Yup'ik had similar overall scores on both the Feeding and Teaching scales as other groups, but some subscale scores differed. In both the Feeding and Teaching scales (with different aged infants/toddlers), the Yup'ik scored significantly higher than the norm in parental sensitivity to child cues. As a result, 93% of the infants/toddlers in this study did not ever become distressed (MacDonald-Clarke and Boffman, 1995). It

would have been interesting had the researchers also assessed another adult or sibling who also cared for the infant to see if high sensitivity was also shown by other caregivers. Another researcher, Ryan (2011), found that minimization of distress was a cultural norm in Aboriginal peoples from northern Australia who appear to address distress in infants before it happens. One has to wonder whether a faulty interpretation of minimizing, if not fully understood in its cultural context, may result in inaccurate assessments of attachment when evaluating a caregiver's response to distress (Ryan 2011).

Another cultural norm for select Australian Aboriginal peoples is the discouragement of negative emotion as the latter may be seen as disrespectful of Elders (Ryan, 2011). Ryan noted that this squelching of negative emotion could be construed by non-Aboriginals as promoting avoidant attachment, i.e., resulting in the child's not being responsive to the mother when the mother is present, and not showing distress when the mother leaves and a stranger is present (Berk & Roberts, 2009). The child may be repressing distress signals because this is what they have been taught and if this occurred during an assessment such as the NCAST, the results might be confusing.

Aboriginal connectedness may thus differ from mainstream attachment manifestations in the areas of extended family response, the notion of secure base, and distress. Thus, mainstream Attachment Theory may not fully reflect an Aboriginal infant's socialization experience, which is embedded in the parenting practices shared by many Aboriginal communities (Neckoway et al., 2007).

Developmental milestones

Aboriginal cultures may understand developmental milestones differently than other groups. For instance, the Inuit looked at each child individually and then tailored their approach to developing autonomy and respecting the distinct ability of that child, instead of assuming identical levels of development for all children of the same age (McShane et al., 2009). In Kruske et al.'s (2012) study, Aboriginal parents from Australia did not attribute as much importance to the age of their infants as mainstream Australian families did. These researchers inferred that because there are differences in exposure to skill development and parental cues and encouragement, that children from remote Aboriginal communities may meet developmental milestones at different ages than mainstream children. Within Inuit and Aboriginal families from Australia, children were not compared to other children the same age; rather, they were allowed to have their own path for development of milestones. When western assessment tools are used to assess Aboriginal children, these children may appear to be delayed in their skill development because the yardstick used to measure Aboriginal child development is mainstream western child development and thus, Aboriginal children are deemed to fall short. This in turn may be a contributing factor when children are placed in foster care.

Discipline

Discipline was another family value that has been studied in the context of Aboriginal versus mainstream parenting. In many Aboriginal communities, it appeared that parents did not readily use physical punishment with their children. In a study of Indigenous children from two southern California counties, Dionne, Davis, Sheeber, and Madrigal (2009) found that the disciplining of children was used cautiously with forethought and patience. Strict discipline was seen as very strong "medicine," whereas positive play, affection and praise, or "good medicine" might be used more frequently so as to strengthen the child. In Cheah and Sheperd's (2011) study, Aboriginal mothers were less likely than European-

Canadian mothers to force the child to behave appropriately, threaten with negative consequences, or use punishment when responding to proactive aggression in their children. The Aboriginal mothers in that study were more likely to respond to aggression in their children with goals that teach values, societal rules, or important life lessons which could benefit the child (Cheah & Sheperd, 2011). One Indigenous culture that reported the use of physical discipline was the Sami, where mothers described more slapping and use of threats than mainstream Norwegian mothers (Javo et al., 2004). Sami mothers also used more threatening with supernatural beings, tricking, and teasing of the child than did mainstream families (Javo et al., 2004). Interestingly, the Inuit used interpersonal games (which may be perceived by outsiders as teasing) but this type of “teasing” was used to provide practice for the children in how to use appropriate emotions in specific interpersonal situations (McShane et al., 2009). Thus Indigenous parents seemed to focus more on each child’s individual abilities and to generally use much less physical discipline.

Language

How children are spoken to and expected to speak may be another feature of parenting that differs from Aboriginal to mainstream cultures. There are prevailing misconceptions about culture and language differences among Aboriginal peoples that can at times be perceived to be deficits in both communication and parenting (Ball, 2009). Adolescent Aboriginal mothers who identified with their Aboriginal culture were found to have low verbal initiation, low responsiveness, and low spontaneous conversations with their children (McDonald Culp & McCarthick, 1997). In a study of Alaskan Yup’ik, it was found that Yup’ik parents scored lowest on engaging in social play and praising the child or making positive comments about the child (MacDonald-Clark & Boffman, 1995). These researchers did note that the communication between Yup’ik mother and child depended largely on nonverbal cues which the mother-child dyad handled very well. Although Aboriginal adults may speak less to their children, there is evidence that there is more unspoken body language being used between child and adults.

Crago, Annahatak, and Ingiurwik’s (1993) study of Inuit language socialization was a two-year long ethnographic study which looked at the language patterns of two older Inuit mothers (who had been born in igloos, never gone to school, and only spoke Inuktitut) and two younger Inuit mothers (who had only ever lived in houses) and also interviews with another 20 Inuit women (both older and younger) in northern Quebec. What these researchers found were three cultural language practices called *aqausiit* (traditionally sung or chanted rhythmical verses sung in a parent-child dyad with each dyad having a unique song), *nilliujuusiq* (a form of affectionate talk that the women used with their children which sometimes included a string of nonsense syllables) and *piarujuusit* (a specialized, consistent across households, vocabulary of “baby words” which have phonologically simpler roots used both to and by the children). *Aqausiit*, at the time of the study, was only used by a few of the younger and older women while *nilliujuusiq* seemed to be used more extensively. The majority of older women in one of the communities commented that they knew a child had learned language not by the child’s speaking ability, but rather, by the child’s understanding of directives. The study also revealed that an Inuit child’s ability to understand and to follow directions is a culturally valued behaviour. One major difference between the older and younger Inuit women is how they valued silence in children. The younger Inuit women did speak more to their children and tried to elicit language from them and explained that they did this because this was valued by non-Aboriginal people and in schools. On the other hand, the older Inuit women commented

that the younger women did not seem to know how to eat silently with their children. Traditionally, children were often ignored when they asked questions because Inuit children were not encouraged to have conversations with adults. This study gives the kind of background cultural information on parenting values that allows professionals and non-Aboriginal people to understand why language may be less central in the interactions between Aboriginal children and their parents. The latter study also shows how traditional values are changing and what may be causing these changes. Having an understanding that more non-verbal language may be used and also understanding different cultural values (e.g., not encouraging questioning from children) need to be understood by professionals who may view the lack of verbal language as a deficit in Aboriginal parents.

Spirituality and ceremony

There is mention of Aboriginal spirituality and its connection to child rearing in the literature, although it is somewhat sparse. Red Horse (1997) noted that naming ceremonies organized kinship obligations in terms of meeting the child's physical and emotional needs. As the children got older, there were more ceremonies which increased their spiritual and community responsibilities. Simard and Blight (2011) noted that Spirit is the foundation from which all other developmental areas (spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical realms) stemmed, providing the child's cultural identity. The fact that in Aboriginal theories of child development, such importance is attributed to the Spirit is another difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches to child rearing.

Discussion

While Aboriginal child rearing practices may have been modified because of historical events such as colonialism, residential schools, and foster care – and traditional parenting may have been corrupted by this history – many aspects of traditional Aboriginal child rearing continue to be apparent in the ways in which Aboriginal families organize their family life. Thus, it is important to consider the cultural, social, and historical realms of Aboriginal communities when assessing Aboriginal children, especially in the context of child protection, as identifiable differences may exist between the parenting norms in Aboriginal communities and those of mainstream groups. A better understanding of these differences is hampered by the dearth of research on Aboriginal child rearing, especially when considering the diversity of Aboriginal cultures. Thus, it is imperative that more comprehensive examinations of parenting and child development in diverse Aboriginal cultures be undertaken, so as to more usefully inform decisions made by professionals in the areas of child welfare and child and family mental health. When professionals have a better understanding of the cultural differences in child rearing that can occur in Aboriginal families, they will be better equipped to make decisions to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child, and to tend to the cultural needs of not only the youth, but their families and communities.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this review is the lack of nation-specific research. Another research gap exists around Aboriginal fatherhood and extended family. A future research consideration would be to look at whether differences exist when assessing attachment with Aboriginal mothers and then with the infant's other caregivers. Other future research endeavors could be to begin documenting traditional Aboriginal child rearing practices from Elders and Grandmothers.

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