

**A Journey of the Spirit: The Effect that Cultural Reintegration has on
American Indian and First Nations Adults**

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Introduction to Research Topic and Overview of Project

For this research topic, the experiences of Native American and Canadian First Nations adult adoptees reintegrating into their families and/or cultures of origin will be explored. There is a wealth of literature that discusses the negative effects that adoption into non-Indian homes had on Indian children, but very little information about what occurs within an individual who decides to make the journey back home, whether “home” is to a specific reservation, family of origin, or cultural practice.

It is proposed that four American Indian/First Nations adoptees who have begun the journey back to their original cultures and families will be interviewed for this study. This will be done in a culturally specific manner; therefore this study may not fit well within specific research guidelines or look like other studies do. This study will be qualitative in nature, with themes emerging as it progresses. The purpose of this study is not only to contribute to the social work profession, but also to give a voice and a name to a story that is occurring every day within Indian communities. It is an important story. Those in the helping professions working with Indian families should have at least a beginning level understanding of this process.

Literature Review

In surveying available literature, there is a vast amount of literature that discusses the negative effects of foster care and adoption into non-Indian homes, both on Indian children and on Indian communities as a whole. However, very little deals specifically with what is proposed in this study, which is the process and effect that reintegration has on Indian people, both the individuals who are reintegrating and also on their families and communities. Cultural reintegration, for the intention of this study, is defined as the return to one's Native family, community, or heritage ("one" being an American Indian or First Nations adult who did not grow up in their culture due to being placed up for adoption or foster care).

To date, only one study, known as the "Split Feathers Study" (Locust, 2000) deals with this specific issue. The majority of this study discusses the negative effects of adoption through interviews of 20 American Indian adults. There are, however, a few paragraphs that discuss the effect that reintegration had on the respondents. They were quoted as saying, "The weight of hurting, loneliness, anger, and sorrow I carried all those years was dropped, and my soul could soar" (Locust, 2000). The study also discussed common feelings that the "Split Feathers" experienced when returning home to their cultures, such as decreases in alcohol and drug abuse, decreased feelings of depression, and increases in spiritual activities (Locust, 2000).

Because of the gap in available literature that deals specifically with the effects of cultural reintegration, this literature review will therefore provide a framework of

understanding for why this study is necessary. This will be done by briefly discussing the history of the removal of Indian children from their families and communities, the negative impacts of their removal, the fact mainstream clinical intervention has not worked well with Indian clients, the remaining strength and resources available in Indian communities, and the process and importance of cultural reintegration.

Historical Overview. Beginning from the time of first European contact on this continent, Indian families, communities, and culture was seen as inferior by the then-developing federal government. Because of the dual need to acquire land mass and power, the federal government integrated specific policies that were designed to eat away at every aspect of Indian tribal and cultural existence, from their land mass to the very threads of Indian family life.

One of the early policies can be traced back to the boarding school era. This was an educational system that was designed by the federal government and carried out through various charitable organizations. The goal of this policy was to take Indian children out of their homes and far away from their families and culture, assimilating them into mainstream American society. It should be noted that these policies were based on the assumption that Indian families and culture was inferior. The acting Commissioner of Indian affairs at that time stated that, “[w]hen a white youth goes away to school to college, his moral character and habits are already formed and well defined . . . With the Indian youth it is quite different. Born a savage and raised in an atmosphere of superstition and ignorance, he lacks at the outset those advantages that are inherited by his white brother and enjoyed from the cradle” (cited in Prucha, 1990, p. 201). Richard

Henry Pratt, who designed the Carlisle Indian School, stated that the very intent of his school was to “kill the Indian and save the man” (Iverson, 1998, p. 21).

From the boarding school system came the continuance of the notion that Indian children were vastly better off away from their parents, communities, and extended families. Redhorse, et al, (2000) stated that “while the boarding school system, with its attendant philosophical and scientific tenets, failed to achieve its objective to completely restructure Indian families, it was successful in institutionalizing the dominance of nuclear family structures as the model in nearly every aspect of social policy (p. 19).”

This is an important factor in why Indian children moved out of the boarding school era and into the foster care and adoption era. With the assumption that Indian families were inferior, it became the policy of the federal government to take Indian children out of their homes and place them in either foster care or adoptive homes. This policy was termed the “Indian Adoption Project” and took effect in 1957.

By the mid 1970’s, the success of the Indian Adoption Project was apparent: In 1974, approximately 25 to 35% of all Indian children were separated, either through adoption or foster care, from their families. In Minnesota, almost one in four Indian children under the age of one were placed for adoption (George, 1992, p. 12).

The effects of the adoption period have continued into the present day, even with the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare act in 1978. Much progress has been made, but many child welfare agencies still view the idea of “family” from a Western based perspective. Redhorse et al (2000) affirmed this when he stated:

“Indian familial systems are based on extended family and clans, and Indian tribes traditionally have a host of support systems other than adoption for their children.

Yet, mainstream social services continue to deny the existence of such tribal customary supports and invoke adoption as the only legitimate option” (p. 15).

Negative Impacts of Removal. As was mentioned, the effects of the alienation that generations of Indian children experienced from their families, communities, and cultures are extensively documented in available literature. Because of the systematic damage that was done to Indian children, families and nations, some have suggested that a clinical type of trauma response has taken place within Indian communities. This response to trauma has been passed on for generations, similar to the historical trauma response that has been commonly applied to the experience of Jews during the Holocaust. A study by Felson (1998) stated that clinical reports “suggest special characteristics of children of survivors, and particular problems in the relationships between children and parents in survivor families, supporting the hypothesis of intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma” (p. 43).

This phenomenon in Indian communities has been characterized by Duran and Duran (1995) as the “soul wound”, which notes that past oppression that was experienced in Indian families is passed onto future generations. Continued federal policies of forced removal from ancestral lands, forced relocation onto reservations in unfamiliar areas, forced assimilation through boarding schools, foster care, and adoption into non-Indian families certainly speaks to the trauma experienced by Indian people since the time of European contact. This occurred simultaneously for the First Nations peoples in Canada, as well.

Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1999) speaks of the collective response to historical trauma by Indian people by saying,

“An important element of the theory of the historical trauma response is its intergenerational transmission. The psychological transfer of a trauma response across generations has been explained by theories of (a) transposition where descendants not only identify with ancestral history but emotionally live in the past and the present, (b) loyalty to the deceased and identification with their suffering which necessitates perpetuation in one’s own life, and (c) memorial candles where descendants assume a family role of identifying with ancestral trauma” (pp 111-112).

Duran and Duran (1995) also mention that the negative effects of cumulative federal policy are no secret in Indian country. They speak directly about the anger and rage experienced by many Indian people that manifests itself through elevated incidences of alcoholism and suicide. They stated that for Native Americans,

“[s]uicide rates have been the highest of any ethnic group for decades. In order for the anger to be held in some sort of abeyance, the individual requires an anesthesia. The incidence of alcoholism among Native Americans over the last two hundred years shows the extent to which alcohol has served as a medicine that keeps this rage within some type of boundary” (p. 37).

Within the context of historical trauma response and the soul wound, if one looks at some Indian communities they will observe a collective “depression and self-destructive behavior, substance abuse, identification with the ancestral pain, fixation to trauma, somatic symptoms, anxiety, guilt, and chronic bereavement” (Brave Heart, 1999, p.111).

These are responses and reactions that have taken place in Indian communities and are continuing to take place now.

Failure of Mainstream Clinical Approaches Toward Indian Clients. It has been well documented that mainstream psychology and social work practice does not work as well with Indian clients because of the difference in worldview. Many western practices focus on the aspect of the mind being separate from the body or spirit, which goes in direct contrast to many fundamental native beliefs. This holds true whether the Native client grew up in their culture or not. When seeing this from the aspect of the Native American soul wound, it follows naturally that non-Western based therapy approaches will work more effectively for Native clients.

Duran and Duran (1995) summed it up well by stating:

“Another crucial worldview difference in which the Western therapist must be cognizant is that of noncompartmentalization of experience. In Western experience it is common to separate the mind from the body and spirit and the spirit from mind and body. Within the Native American worldview this is a foreign idea. . . thus the Native American worldview is one in which the individual is a part of all creation, living life as one system and not in separate units that are objectively relating with each other. The idea of the world or creation existing for the purpose of a human domination and exploitation—the core of most Western ideology—is a notion that is absent in Native American thinking” (p. 15).

However, the focus of this study will not be on Native or non-Native therapy approach; this information is provided for background purposes only. Many Indian people who are returning home, as was mentioned in reference to the Split Feathers (Locust, 2000) study, are experiencing integration between their minds and spirits for the first time. Many Indian people are now getting the help they need to resolve issues such as alcoholism and suicide from a Native point of view. This is being accomplished by both returning to their native communities and cultures and also through the utilization of Native-based therapy approaches.

Remaining Resources in Indian Communities. As has been shown, the effect of federal policy against Indian people is well documented and supported in the literature. But it is here where the focus of this review of the literature must shift, for this is not the point nor is it the focus of the research that will be conducted. While it is true that these atrocities took place and a gaping hole was left behind, Indian communities did not bend to the will of the federal government. In spite of all the suffering, there are many Indian communities that are and always have been intact and also continuing to grow in cultural strength and identity.

In spite of all that was done in an attempt to destroy Indian communities, language was maintained along with value systems, extended family systems, and spiritual practices. These are the foundations that are providing a space for adoptees to return to.

There is also a growing phenomenon in Indian country where adult adoptees are being supported in their return home. Sandy Whitehawk, from the Rosebud Reservation and also an adult adoptee, has started the First Nations Orphan Association, which deals

specifically with assisting adult adoptees on their journey back home to their families and communities. This is a place where adoptees can go for spiritual and emotional support, along with assistance in finding their families of origin.

Significance of Reintegration. What this study aims to show is that through the process of returning home to one's own culture and community, healing that was otherwise not possible can and does take place. This is true whether one seeks help through culturally specific therapy or solely through the spiritual process of reclaiming one's own Indian identity through cultural and spiritual reintegration.

The aim of this study is to attempt to fill the gap that exists in the current available literature. Its intent is to be from a strengths-based perspective, being fundamentally cognizant of the damage that has been done but not focusing on that reality. The focus of this study will be what is occurring on many reservations and within many Indian communities . . . the coming home of the children who were lost and the otherwise impossible healing that is taking place for countless Indian people. There is strength and wisdom that has endured in Indian country and it is from that place of wisdom where the reintegration and healing-- on a soul level-- is taking place.

Significance to the Social Work Profession

This study will be quite significant to the social work profession for several reasons. First, as was previously mentioned, there is a gap in the available literature that discusses this phenomenon. In the years before ICWA, the loss of Indian children into non-Indian

adoptive homes had a devastating effect on Indian families and communities. This information is a very important aspect of life in Indian communities that social workers and others in helping professions need to not only be aware of, but also have an understanding about.

But there is a reality that lies beyond that. The suffering that has taken place should not be diminished; however, that will not be the focus of this study. It is simply to take one step beyond that and allow the primary focus to be on the journey home. It is important for those in the helping professions to know that there is a vast amount of healing that is occurring within Indian communities.

Having this knowledge may assist social workers in becoming able to better advocate for their Native clients. Perhaps by knowing that this is a common experience happening in Indian country, social workers could find a way to connect with people in the Indian communities they are serving, striving to build stronger support systems for their clients, and ultimately, for their communities and nations.

It is also significant to focus on a phenomenon that is occurring within Indian communities in a positive, strengths-based manner. Much has been written about the horrors that have occurred and while these are most definitely valid and important, this study focuses primarily on the healing that is occurring for many American Indian and First Nations adults. Consequently, this healing is also occurring in many communities, as more families become reunited and empowered by their experiences. This study will provide social workers and others in the helping professions another facet in their understanding of the populations they serve. It is for these reasons that this study will prove to be very significant to the social work profession.

Research Question

How has cultural reintegration affected American Indian and First Nations adult adoptees?

Methods

Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of American Indian and First Nations adults who, as a result of either being placed in foster care or adoption, did not grow up in their families and cultures of origin, but returned to it as an adult. The sample was therefore four people who fit that criteria and were willing to share their experience. There were three female respondents and one male. One was Anishinaabe from Minnesota, two were First Nations Anishinaabe from Canada, and one person was Dakota. The age range was from 35 to 62 years of age.

Respondents were limited to the American Indian and First Nations adults living in upper Minnesota and Wisconsin. However, it is highly likely that other respondents from other areas will tell the same or similar story.

The sampling technique used to gather respondents consisted largely of “snowball sampling.” As this study has been conceptualized, those in conversations have either offered to tell their own stories or referred the writer to many who would also appreciate the opportunity to contribute. Snowball sampling continued until four respondents were attained.

Research Design

As follows is the basic design that was followed throughout the study:

1. The “snowball” and referral process continued until four persons agreed to be interviewed.
2. An informal tool was developed to assist in the interview process. (See Appendix A).
3. Interview times were set up and interviewees agreed to the Consent Form. (See Appendix B).
4. Interviews were conducted in a culturally specific manner; therefore respondents were given tobacco and a small gift.
5. Upon completion of the project, a talking circle with spiritual advisors present will take place to assist those who took part in the study, giving them an opportunity to process anything they may need to. This will be voluntary.
6. Data was typed out, interpreted, written, and presented, thus concluding the study.

Operational Definitions

While some individuals prefer one way or the other, for the purposes of this study the words “Indian,” “American Indian” and “Native American” were used interchangeably, depending on how each respondent referred to himself or herself. These two terms refer to indigenous peoples from North America, from which there are over 500 federally recognized tribes. This also includes Canadian First Nations people. Again, this refers to members of indigenous groups from that continental region.

Where applicable, respondents will be referred to by what tribe or nation they identify themselves as being a member of.

Both “returning home” and “cultural reintegration” refer to the process of each adoptee as they made contact with their family of origin, community, clan, tribe, or overall culture and spiritual belief system. Any or all of these criteria may be a part of each person’s individual experience. For the purposes of this study, respondents who are well into this process were interviewed (as compared to people who have just begun to make contacts) in order to get a more comprehensive picture.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis included transcribing person-to-person interviews into typewritten data, which was then examined and interpreted. As common themes emerged from the data, it was noted and recorded. Data was then placed into a comprehensive format and the findings of the research were presented.

Results

The individual stories of those interviewed were as follows: Three respondents were adopted into non-Indian homes as small children and one was in and out of foster care until they were placed into permanent placement as a teenager. One respondent out of the four interviewed described her childhood as “normal.” Another respondent was raised by a single mother in a working class neighborhood and described her childhood as “secure.”

The other two respondents had more painful experiences with adoption and foster care. One spent time in and out of different foster homes and even spent a period of time in an orphanage until they were permanently adopted. Their orphanage experience was described as, “Not good. Not good at all. There was lots of abuse... physical, sexual, and spiritual.”

Two of the respondents did not know that they were Indian at all. One was told that she was Greek as an explanation for her complexion. Regarding her ethnicity, another was frequently asked by her schoolmates and neighborhood children, “What are you?” She did not know. She, along with every other respondent, grew up with the feeling of knowing they were different from other kids, but they didn’t know how. Every respondent described having feelings or an awareness of “this is not who I am” or “who am I?” as very small children.

Three of the respondents also described having very strong visions and dreams even as children but not having any frame of reference to understand what they were experiencing. One respondent stated it well when she said, “I grew up just knowing that there was *more*. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew it was there and I knew it was true.”

There were many commonalities as well as differences in each respondent’s childhood experience. As was mentioned, all respondents stated feelings of being “different” or out of place somehow as children. Each respondent described feelings of alienation, especially the person who ended up in an orphanage. This person stated that all there is to say about the placement of Indian children into non-Indian foster and adoptive homes was this: “You take a beautiful child and make everything wrong in his life.”

However, one respondent described her childhood as “totally normal,” even stating that she was “spoiled rotten” by her adoptive parents. They told her that she was Indian and tried to support her by bringing her to an occasional powwow as a child. But she also grew up learning to fear being sent back to her reserve. She stated that she always had this feeling that “if I wasn’t good, they would give me back.”

She was also not allowed to date Indian boys in high school, even though she was Indian. The inconsistencies that her parents manifested; both seeming to accept her as a native person but also somehow giving the message that she was a “bad girl” and not wanting her to associate with other Native people confused her. However, she still describes her relationship with her adoptive parents as “very good” and feels clear that her adoptive mom “will always be my real mom.”

The collective story of those interviewed speaks to the process of reintegration as being a life changing, deeply internal, and healing spiritual process. As each respondent told their story, several strong themes began to unfold.

As previously mentioned, each person described intense feelings of knowing there was “more” to who they were, even as very small children. Unanimously, each respondent recalled not feeling truly a part of their surroundings, whether it was in their immediate family or among their friends at school.

Another theme that emerged was that the use of alcohol and drugs became a way to cope with feelings of isolation, anger, and longing. This certainly does not mean that all Indian adoptees have had or will have these experiences, but it speaks strongly that fully _ of those interviewed had this experience. Three of those interviewed stated that they are in active recovery.

Powerful testimony was given around this topic, both from an active using and from a recovery point of view. When speaking about her active heroin addiction, one respondent described the intense self-hatred she experienced while using. As she saw it, this self-hatred was a direct result of not knowing who she was or where her real home was. She said, “Every time I pulled back the syringe, I drew it up and into me with nothing but hatred. I imagined all that hatred filling my veins and going into my body.” Another respondent saw that using alcohol and drugs was a way to experience the “euphoric recall of feeling connected to Spirit and to God” that they recalled experiencing as a child in their quiet times.

Another strong theme that emerged was that every respondent, whether in recovery or not, spoke to the intensely powerful *spiritual* healing that they had and were continuing to experience. This truly was the meat and potatoes of each person’s process, and it is in this realm where each respondent had the most to say. According to the data received, this journey, the journey back home to one’s true place of belonging not only does, but *must* occur on a spiritual level.

One respondent had significant medical issues as a young person. They described being healed in the “white man’s way, which is only physical. My other healing, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally, was all ignored.” The same respondent went on to say, “true power must be equal at all levels . . . mental, spiritual, and physical.” Without that, there continues to be an imbalance and it is from that place of imbalance where the troubles lie. Spiritual power was likened to a great and powerful tree. The strength of the tree lays in its roots . . . the part we cannot see. This is true with the human being. That which cannot be seen gives us the most strength.

Each person stated that they had now come to a place where they saw that their experience, however painful, was now the source of their greatest strength. It is from this place of pain where strength emerges to pass on validation to others. As she was telling her story, one woman stated, “Now I am emotional. I never was before. I tell people that if I cry while I am telling my story, do not give me kleenex. These tears have to flow. They are mine. Do not rob me of them.”

Speaking on the same thing, another respondent said, “What I thought was bad, I now see as an asset. This is all possible through healing. Healing provides validation.” It is through this validation that this process continues.

Another key theme that emerged was that along with the intensely personal, soul-level healing that each respondent experienced, came a *responsibility* to pass their own healing process along to others. One respondent said, “We must acknowledge and honor the healing capabilities of our people. Through the healing of others, I heal. When we allow ourselves to heal and walk through whatever arises, others are healed by that process as well.”

There is a critical mass, as it were, that appears to be developing and strengthening as this healing process occurs in Indian country. Two of those interviewed spoke directly about prophecies that were given by elders years ago about the generations of those who would return home. One woman said that as she spoke to people about her own process of returning home, she was told that Black Elk prophesized that those who had been taken would return through this generation and that they would bring something very significant back to Indian country. She said, “that is something I have always held in my heart.”

One interviewee stated directly, “We are born now in the time of prophecies. Our responsibility is to heal ourselves so the next 7 generations can be healed through our healing.” It is a continuous cycle. Another stated, “I’ve come to understand that the whole purpose of going to ceremonies and receiving that healing is to go through again and again to help other people heal.”

A strong theme that also emerged was that through this process of returning home, going to ceremonies, and receiving these teachings, an entire shift in identity occurs. Each person stated that they now have a sense of who they really are and where they truly belong, all of which is being experienced for the first time in their lives. One woman stated that she has absolute certainty that this identity shift “changed the course of my life.”

When asked if she would discuss the process of her journey back home and what that was like, another person responded simply by crying for several moments. This spoke volumes.

Another theme that emerged throughout the interview process was that each person was surrounded by the guidance and wisdom of elders, and that continues to be so for each person. One woman referred to those who mentored, guided and supported her as she navigated through her process of reintegration as “the gatekeepers.” Many stories were recounted that spoke to the quiet wisdom that each adoptee was exposed to, from the first faltering steps back home, through the ceremonies, and throughout the life change that each person experienced.

One woman told a story about a very difficult time in her life. She was in prison and an elder Indian woman used to come and do pipe ceremonies for the Native women in the

facility. The respondent spoke about how awkward she felt, as she had never been exposed to such a thing being raised “non-Indian.” She simply did what the other women did and hoped that nobody would notice. Afterwards, the elder came to her and said that she “had a bright light behind her.” The elder woman also told her, “You are not yet ready but one day you will be.” The respondent said that she would never forget those moments. In the meantime she has indeed become ready and her entire life has changed.

Another respondent spoke about her first sober winter back on the reservation. It was a very dark time for her and she had no idea how she would possibly make it through. She even had a couple of relapses and instead of reacting in a negative way, elders came to her and showed her nothing but love and acceptance. One elder in particular simply told her, “The spirits tell me I should be helping you.” This woman sat with the respondent, played scrabble by the fire, and listened. Then a day came where the elder said, “It’s time.” She handed over a package of tobacco and directed this woman into a car. She was brought further out into the bush, to the home of another old woman. This woman looked at the respondent and said, “My girl, it’s good to see you.” She was a long lost relative.

Yet another strong theme that emerged was that in Indian country, definitions of family are much different than what the federal government defines as family. Second and third cousins, aunties, and uncles are all seen as immediate family. One respondent had very few surviving members of her immediate family. This made no difference to the people who surrounded her on her journey. They knew who she was and where she was from and that was enough.

Another comment was made regarding the ways of familial systems, whether they are “by blood” or not. It was said, “Our ways. . . we made adoptions. We create family where there is non. Customary adoption. All this I have been taught since I’ve returned.”

Another very strong statement that was told was one respondent’s journey with claiming her native identity. She is Dakota and also of mixed heritage. She spoke about the issues surrounding blood quantum and enrollment in tribes, clearly stating: “Enrollment is NOT your identity. That is something that was put upon us by the federal government. Traditionally, belonging to a tribe or nation was based on three things: Birth, adoption, or marriage. NOT blood quantum.” She said that if *one* of those gatekeepers would have looked at her and said, “You’re not Indian enough. You don’t belong here,” her path would have been so much different.

This also ties in to the theme regarding the responsibility that comes with claiming one’s own heritage and living from that central place within. Certainly, that is not always an easy process. One respondent experienced some dissonance on her journey because she is of mixed heritage. She witnessed the manifestation of internalized oppression that can sometimes arise within native communities around blood quantum. She stated clearly:

“That is the problem. Nobody feels like they are Indian enough. Nobody feels like they know enough. This is a direct result of the oppression that has taken place now for centuries. Part of the responsibility we have when we come to a place where we claim our native identity and heritage is that we have to be willing to stand up and talk about what we *do* know. If we do not, we just add to the oppression.”

As the data shows, the journey that Native adoptees make when they return home to their extended families, culture, and traditions is a deeply spiritual and life-changing process. This journey begins from the inside and moves outward. The spirit, the mind, and the emotions are transformed.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

The data gathered for the purposes of this study is strongly aligned with what the available literature indicates about the process of returning home to one's Native culture. The Split Feathers Study (2000) reported a decrease in depression, alcohol and drug use and an increase in spiritual activities, all of which were reaffirmed by the gathered data. All of the respondents in this study reported decreases in feelings of isolation and depression, decreased or discontinued alcohol and drug use, and unanimously an increase in spiritual activities. Every person interviewed spoke about the importance of attending ceremonies, especially sweats. One person interviewed referred to going into a sweat as "entering the womb for healing." This was obviously a very important aspect of each respondent's healing process.

As was mentioned in the literature review, very little existing data actually speaks to the process of returning home. The other literature that was referred to dealt more directly with the historical context of what has taken place in Indian country since European contact and the impending results on Indian people. Each respondent

experienced intense feelings of grief, trauma, isolation, and a feeling of separateness from their true self.

Limitations

While this study did cover very important material regarding the process that adult adoptees go through while making the journey back home, it had its limitations.

First, it was limited by available funds and time; therefore the focus was narrowed to the Duluth geographic area. There are many people who have had this experience who would make a valuable contribution to this paper, but they simply cannot all be utilized at this time. This small sample is merely a tiny thread of a tapestry that exists and continues to unfold in Indian country today.

Another limitation is that this study only focused on one specific aspect of the experience of American Indian and First Nations adult adoptees. There are many other stories to be told, some of which may include adoptees having no desire to return to their families and cultures of origin. They may have many reasons for not choosing to find their birth families or communities. That is their individual decision not to do so, however that is not the focus of this particular study.

It is also important to acknowledge that the author of this study may or may not have her own personal biases and experiences that contributed to its outcome. Certain beliefs and experiences were undoubtedly reflected during the interviewing process and this affected the depth to which the participants were willing to share.

This also falls under the auspices of cultural context. The interviewer provided a safe and supportive environment for the respondents to share what they chose to share. This study began with the assumption that “returning home” is and has been an overall

positive experience for the respondents, even though it has likely been painful at times. There are adoptees that may deem their homecoming experiences as being a negative or harmful experience for them, but again, that is not the focus of this particular study.

Lastly and most importantly, the majority of this process is vastly spiritual and emotional in nature. Therefore it is much more challenging to navigate through and maintain a point of view from which to conduct scholarly research. Throughout the interview process, it was evident that those interviewed were not speaking from a cognitive level about abstract ideas and experiences. They were speaking from their hearts and reliving the most painful and meaningful experiences of their lives. Therefore, the researcher is limited to a one-dimensional way of presenting multidimensional and ineffable emotions, healing experiences, and awakenings. The most meaningful moments that took place throughout the interview process were not moments that could possibly be succinctly put into words. For example, when asked the fundamental research question for this project, one respondent simply cried for a few moments.

Some things cannot be said.

Ideas for Future Research

The first and most obvious idea for further researching this topic would be to have a much larger sample from diverse locations, such as Eastern, Southwestern, and Western tribes. It would be fascinating to see if the same themes continued to emerge. It would also be very powerful to have even more stories to add to the ones in this study.

It would also be highly interesting to include more First Nations people from all across Canada, as well. Though their standing with their government is different and the

history may have some variation, it could be assumed that many First Nations people have had the same or similar experience with this process.

Continuing on, future research could expand even further into other indigenous cultures and communities throughout the world, such as the aboriginal peoples of Australia and New Zealand. It would be both disturbing and fascinating to research the common perils and victories of having survived such events in their communities, along with the reclaiming of aboriginal ways and how that is affecting their people as well.

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Appendix A

Informal Interview Tool

The following questions will be asked during the interview process in order to being the process of attaining information. However, because of the sensitivity of the topic and out of respect for the respondents, these questions may or may not be asked in the order or exact way that they are written.

Question 1:

How did you decide to make the journey back home to your family and culture? What event/s let to this decision?

Question 2:

Can you describe what the process of returning home was like? (Spiritually, mentally, physically, or emotionally.)

Question 3:

How do you experience your life now that you have made this journey home? How has this journey affected your path or your daily life?

Appendix B

A Journey of the Spirit: The Effect that Cultural Reintegration has on American Indian Adults

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in this study because you grew up in a non-Indian home due to foster care or adoption and returned to your native culture as an adult. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Brenda Eliason, MSW student at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to gather information about the effect that returning to one's native culture has had on American Indian adults who grew up in non-Indian families. It is hoped that this information will contribute to the knowledge base of the social work profession and assist those who work within or for American Indian communities in their understanding of this process.

Procedures:

The interviewers will ask you to simply tell your story. A second interview will then be scheduled approximately two weeks after the first to allow process time and another opportunity to share. At the conclusion of the study we will schedule an optional feast and talking circle, providing an opportunity for all participants to meet other people with similar experiences. There will be an American Indian spiritual advisor present at the feast.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The risk of participating in this study is that it may cause emotional and/or psychological discomfort, given the sensitivity of the topic. You may either take a break or discontinue at any time.

The benefits to participation are: N/A

You will be given tobacco and a small gift for participating in this study. When applicable, gas money to and from the interview will also be provided.

Compensation:

N/A

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that may be published, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records and taped interviews will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. All records will be erased or destroyed at the completion of the study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Brenda Eliason. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you may contact me at:

Brenda Eliason: 218-727-4089. Email: brendabree@hotmail.com

You may also contact the faculty advisor of this project:

Denny Falk (218) 726-8661

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, contact Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware Street Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55455; telephone (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____