



## Finding their way home: Factors associated with reunification for American Indian and White adults



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### ABSTRACT

Although reunification studies are abundant, those inclusive of American Indians are limited. Literature findings have indicated that minority children and their families tend to experience poor outcomes in child welfare. This study fills the literature gap by exploring the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification for American Indian and White adults who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption. The study was grounded in Patterson's Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response theory. Data from the *Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project* was utilized to examine a sample ( $n = 295$ ) of American Indian and White adults. Logistic regression analysis was used to explore the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification. Contrary to prior research, race was not a significant factor for reunification. Rather, the odds of reunification increased with age, having traveled through foster care, and having experienced poly-victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home and decreased for those living in poverty.

### 1. Introduction

Reunification has most often been conceptualized as the return of a child in out-of-home placement to their family of origin (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Children's Bureau, 2010). Reunification has been defined as the process wherein a separated child or family member reunites, reconnects, and rejoins with their family of origin (Landers, Danes, & White Hawk, 2015). Studies examining factors associated with or predictive of reunification for children exiting child welfare are abundant (see Akin, 2011; Hines, Lee, Osterling, & Drabble, 2007; López, Del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013; Maluccio, Fein, & Davis, 1994; Wulczyn, 2004). Across a number of studies, race has been found to be an important factor that influences the likelihood of reunification for children exiting foster care (Goerge, 1990; Harris & Courtney, 2003; McMurtry & Lie, 1992).

Although racial differences in reunification outcomes have been found, less is known about the reunification of American Indian families in child welfare (Landers & Danes, 2016). Although American Indian children and their families are overrepresented in various aspects of the child welfare system (e.g., child welfare referrals, out-of-home placement), they often lack appropriate representation in child welfare

research (Landers & Danes, 2016). Reunification is particularly important for American Indian families who historically experienced systematic efforts of child removal. From forced relocations, to boarding schools to child welfare removal practices, American Indian families have experienced the systemic impact of separation (Red Horse et al., 2000). Drastic rates of American Indian child removal contributed to the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (Red Horse et al., 2000). The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requires child welfare caseworkers to take particular considerations into account when handling ICWA cases (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2017). For example, active efforts are required to prevent child removal and assist in rehabilitation toward the safe return of a removed American Indian child (Edwards, 2015). Notifications and efforts to involve the child's tribe and parent(s) are required to be considered under ICWA (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2017).

Given the high rates of removal of American Indian children, reunification is a critical component to the cultural preservation of American Indian families and their communities. Furthermore, for American Indians, reunification extends beyond the child-caregiver relationship to other important caregivers (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents), siblings, extended family members, ancestral land, and a

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tribal community. In essence, tribe is family in American Indian culture. And, reunification can occur across the family, tribe, and community level (Landers & Danes, 2016).

Although most of what is known about reunification is based on a child welfare context, it is not the only context within which reunification can occur. For example, adults who exited the child welfare system via adoption or aged out of long-term foster care may later reunify with their family of origin. In other words, “some children exit child welfare via adoption only to reunify in adulthood” (Landers et al., 2015, p. 19). Reunification can occur post-child welfare case closure or even years after separation. Reunification can also occur for persons who never traveled through the child welfare system, but experienced separation by adoption as infants. Few studies have begun to explore reunification outside of the formal child welfare context (Landers et al., 2015).

### 1.1. The present study

Given this gap within reunification literature, this study sought to understand the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification for American Indian and White adults who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption. This study explored the role of race (being American Indian in comparison to White), age, gender, education, poverty status, traveling through foster care, and poly-victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home to the prediction of reunification. It was hypothesized that each of these variables would be significantly associated with the probability of reunification based on previous research. American Indian adults were compared to their White counterparts for a number of reasons. First, both American Indian and White racial groups are easily identifiable and distinct. Second, Whites are considered the dominant culture in the United States and have been found to have favorable outcomes in previous child welfare studies.

## 2. Guiding theoretical framework

Some scholars (for example, Thyer, 2001) have suggested that theory is not essential for social work research. However, as authors, we believe that the integration of theory advances our understanding of phenomena (Sztompka, 1974). In the absence of theory, research often lacks a cohesive conceptual orientation, making it more difficult to draw conclusions across studies (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). Therefore, Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) theory provided the theoretical thinking behind this study. The theory emphasizes the active processes that families and their individual members engage in to balance demands with capabilities as they interact with meanings to arrive at a level of adaptation that creates productive and healthy outcomes (Patterson, 2002b).

Based on this theory, reunification is a family-level outcome reflecting individual member and family adaptation. FAAR conceptually defines adaptation as a process of restoring balance between capabilities and demands within family members and the family unit (Patterson, 2002a). However, when investigating reunification within a population such as the study sample, one must be cognizant of the two family types that create meanings which are the foundation of the motivations and behaviors that lead to reunification. Those two family types are the family of origin and the substitute family (foster and/or adoptive).

Reunification is about reconnecting with the family of origin, the primary social context in which the need for connection is enacted. Motivating conditions contributing to the probability of reunification considered in this study were the respondent capabilities and demands and the indicators of the meaning-making process the respondent experienced. Meanings can be constructed through three lenses (Patterson, 2002b): (a) their view of the world (represented by their racial, gender, and socioeconomic lens), (b) their construction of

personal and social identity (represented by their participation in the foster or adoption system), and (c) their experiences emanating out of their stressful situations that they experienced while in the foster or adoption system (represented by their experiences of poly-victimization from their caregiver).

To be more specific, we hypothesize that living in poverty is a deterrent against reunification (a demand per FAAR theory). Fostered or adopted individuals living in poverty have a smaller resource base to search for their family of origin or to travel to meet them. In contrast, traveling through the foster care system is conceptualized and hypothesized as an incentive or motivator for reunification. Individuals who experienced foster care likely knew their family of origin and already felt a connection with them before they were removed, whereas those who were adopted as infants likely never experienced who their family was. FAAR theory indicates that a personal identity may have been established that creates a potential pull toward the family of origin that acts like the forces of a magnet (Patterson, 2002b). That lingering memory of connection with the family of origin creates a hope for the re-establishment of that connection; that may distinguish those who travel through foster care from those who do not.

In FAAR theory, meaning-making when having to do with the lens of stressful situations depends on the primary appraisal of the person experiencing the stress; this subjective appraisal depends on the severity of the stress (Patterson, 2002a). This study measures the accumulation of multiple types of abuse experienced within the interpersonal relationship of the adoptive and/or foster caregiver. These subjective appraisals influence behavior (Patterson, 2002a; Patterson, 2002b) and, thus, the motivation to seek the adaptation of reunification (Patterson, 2002a). Multiple experiences of victimization (poly-victimization) may communicate to the fostered and/or adopted individual that they are not-worthy of family connection. These disenfranchising experiences then motivate them to search for the family of origin in hopes they may still be able to experience the family connection that they crave. Building on the integration of FAAR theory, an expanded literature review is offered below.

## 3. Literature review

Reunification is considered both the preferred permanency exit and the most frequent outcome for children following out-of-home placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Historically, minority children and their families have experienced poor outcomes in child welfare in comparison to their White counterparts (Courtney, Barth, Berrick, & Brooks, 1996). Race appears to play a central role in predicting child welfare outcomes, particularly reunification (Needell et al., 2014; Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005). Yet, reunification studies inclusive of American Indian children and their families in child welfare are few and far between (Landers & Danes, 2016). Such studies suggest that American Indian children are less likely to reunify compared to children of other races (Farmer, Southerland, Mustillo, & Burns, 2009; Webster et al., 2005).

Age is a variable found to influence reunification across studies pertaining to adults who were separated from their families of origin by foster care and/or adoption, as well as, in child welfare reunification outcome research. For instance, Landers et al. (2015) found that older adults experienced greater satisfaction with their reunification experiences. A number of researchers (Akin, 2011; Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Malm & Zielewski, 2009) have found that older children were more likely to reunify than younger children. In contrast, Farmer et al. (2009) found that older children were no more or less likely to reunify than their younger counterparts. In addition to age, gender and income also appear to play a role in predicting reunification. Girls in out-of-home placement are less likely to be reunified (Farmer et al., 2009) and parents with greater income are more likely to be reunified with their children (Powell, Stevens, Dolce, Sinclair, & Swenson-Smith, 2012).

**Table 1**  
Demographic Characteristics (n = 295).

	Total Sample		American Indian (n = 129)		White (n = 166)	
	Mean	SD	Percent or mean	SD	Percent or mean	SD
Age (21–75)	48.18	10.58	49.82	9.67	47.45	11.16
Poly-victimization	1.66	1.22	1.86	1.16	1.50	1.25

  

	Total Sample		American Indian (n = 129)		White (n = 166)	
	n	Percent	n	Percent	n	Percent
Gender						
Male	57	19.30	30	23.30	27	16.30
Female	238	80.70	99	76.70	139	83.70
Education						
Less than high school	5	1.70	04	3.10	1	0.60
High school diploma or GED	25	8.50	09	7.00	16	9.60
Associates degree or other two year degree or certificate	44	14.90	23	17.80	21	12.70
Some college, no degree	78	26.40	44	34.10	34	20.50
Bachelor's degree	65	22.00	22	17.10	43	25.90
More than a bachelor's degree	78	26.40	27	20.90	51	30.70
College education or higher*	143	48.50	49	38.00	94	56.60
Income						
Less than \$10,000	36	12.30	20	15.50	16	9.60
\$10,000–\$34,999	86	29.10	44	34.10	43	25.90
\$35,000–\$54,999	68	22.60	33	25.60	34	20.50
\$55,000 or more	105	36.00	32	24.80	73	44.00
Poverty*	36	12.20	20	15.50	16	9.60
Foster care*	181	61.40	82	63.60	99	59.60

Note. \* 1 = “yes”, 0 = “no”.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Sample description

The data for this study originated from the *Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project* (N = 336). The sample utilized in this study was reduced from 336 to 295, by dropping the 41 participants who identified as African American, Latino, Asian American, Biracial, or did not provide their race or answered inconsistently across the two race questions. The final sample only included participants who consistently identified themselves as American Indian (n = 129) or White (n = 166).

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of our sample. The mean age of the participants was 48.48 years (SD = 10.58, range 21–75). The majority of participants were female (80.7%), while the remainder identified as male. The predominance of female participants in this study is consistent with previous adoption research (Müller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2004; Müller & Perry, 2001). The largest category of participants had a college degree (48.5%). Few participants had income below poverty (12.2%). The majority of participants experienced foster care (whether it was only foster care or foster care experienced prior to their adoption) (61.4%), while the remaining only experienced adoption.

### 4.2. Sampling procedures

Data for this study originated from a community-based

participatory research project conducted by the First Nations Repatriation Institute (FNRI), Adoptees Have Answers (AHA), and the University of Minnesota. Data were collected from adults who identified themselves as experiencing foster care and/or adoption during childhood. The data were collected using targeted purposive sampling methods. Participants were recruited through community agencies known to be serving adoptees (i.e., FNRI, AHA), online listserv distribution, and advertising (e.g., Facebook adoptee page, National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) Facebook page, two tribal Facebook pages, Adoption Today, Evan B. Donelson enews, American Adoption Congress enews, Adopt Source enews, and the enews of local native newspapers). Both paper-pencil and online versions of the survey were made available. Participants provided informed consent and the survey took 45–75 min to complete.

### 4.3. Missing data

Missing data were addressed through multiple imputation, which tends to outperform other approaches in simulation studies (i.e., list-wise deletion, mean substitution) (Croy & Novins, 2005). We compared participants with no missing data to those missing on any variable through a series of *t*-tests and chi-squared tests. There were no significant differences between participants with complete data and those with missing data with regard to age, gender, education or income.

### 4.4. Measures

#### 4.4.1. Reunification

The dependent variable of reunification was operationalized as the reuniting of an adopted and/or fostered person with their family of origin. Reunification was a dichotomous variable with two levels (0 = *Not reunified*, 1 = *Reunified*).

#### 4.4.2. Race

The final sample only included participants who identified themselves as American Indian (n = 129) or White (n = 166) consistently across two questions. Participants were asked, “Are you an American Indian/Native American?” followed by an open-ended race question. The two questions were used together to determine race status as a validity check. Approximately one-third of the American Indian sample came from Ojibwe, Lakota and Dakota Nations. The remainder were Omaha, Cree, Cherokee, Ho-Chunk, Chickasaw and Navajo.

#### 4.4.3. Age

Participants were asked, “In what year were you born?” Birth year was used to calculate the participant's age at the time of survey completion.

#### 4.4.4. Gender

Participants were asked, “What is your gender?” The response options were as follows: (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*).

#### 4.4.5. Education

Participants were asked, “What is your highest level of education or grade completed?” The response options were (1 = *less than high school*, 2 = *high school diploma or GED*, 3 = *associates degree or other two year degree or certificate*, 4 = *some college, no degree*, 5 = *bachelors degree*, and 6 = *more than a bachelors degree*). Education was dichotomized to reflect if the participant had completed a college degree or higher (0 = no, 1 = yes).

#### 4.4.6. Income/poverty

Participants were asked, “What is your approximate personal annual income from all sources?” The response options were (1 = *less than \$10,000*, 2 = *\$10,000–\$34,999*, 3 = *\$35,000–\$54,999*, and 4 = *\$55,000 or more*). Income was dichotomized to reflect if the

respondent's income was below the poverty level (0 = no, 1 = yes). Less than \$10,000 cut off was used to identify participants below the poverty line for a single person.

4.4.7. Foster care

Participants were asked, "Have you ever lived in foster care with non-relatives?" The response options were (0 = no, 1 = yes).

4.4.8. Poly-victimization

Poly-victimization was operationalized as the accumulation of multiple types of abuse (e.g., physical, sexual, emotional) that occurred within the interpersonal relationship with the adoptive and/or foster caregiver. Definitions of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse came from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Initially, participants were asked if they had experienced each type of abuse in the foster or adoptive home. The response options were as follows: none, single incident, several times, long-term. A variable was created representing the sum total experience of victimization (0 = none, 1 = one type of abuse, 2 = two types of abuse, 3 = three types of abuse) (M = 1.66, SD = 1.22, range 0 to 3) (consistent with Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007).

4.5. Analytical procedures

Analyses for this study were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24. Logistic regression was the appropriate analytic procedure because our dependent variable (reunification) was dichotomous. Statistical power was set at 0.80 and our sample size was large enough to detect a medium size effect (p = 0.05) (Cohen, 1992).

5. Results

The majority of adults in our sample reunified with their family of origin (79.7%) including 129 of the 166 White participants (77.7%) and 106 of the 129 American Indian participants (82.2%). The bivariate correlations of all variables included in the logistic regression model are presented in Table 2. Table 3 summarizes the multivariate logistic regression analysis performed to predict reunification.

The logistic model with all predictors variables (race, age, gender, college degree, poverty status, foster care status, poly-victimization) was found to be statistically significant,  $X^2 = 29.487$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $N = 295$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The older the participant, the more likely the participant would reunify. Being American Indian, being female, and having a college education were not significant. Participants who experienced foster care had more than two times the odds of reunifying (OR = 2.477; 95% CI = 1.327, 4.624). Participants who experienced greater poly-victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home had more than one times the odds of reunifying (OR = 1.508, 95% CI = 1.168,

Table 2  
Bivariate Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Reunification	1.000							
2. American Indian	0.055	1.000						
3. Age	0.114*	0.111	1.000					
4. Gender	0.012	-0.090	-0.014	1.000				
5. College Education	-0.015	-0.185***	-0.004	0.129*	1.000			
6. Poverty	-0.146*	0.089	-0.086	0.078	-0.072	1.000		
7. Foster care	0.152**	0.040	-0.066	0.086	-0.122*	0.126*	1.000	
8. Poly-victimization	0.177**	0.144*	-0.014	0.025	-0.103	0.138*	0.111	1.000

Note. \*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001.

Table 3  
Logistic Regression of Factors Associated with Reunification (n = 295).

Contributing factor	B	SE B	Odds ratio
American Indian race (White comparison group)	0.122	0.327	1.130
Age	0.028*	0.015	1.028
Gender (0 Male comparison group)	0.037	0.389	1.038
College education	0.036	0.315	1.037
Poverty	-1.393***	0.428	0.248
Foster care	0.907**	0.318	2.477
Poly-victimization	0.411**	0.131	1.508
Constant	-0.957	0.819	0.384

Note. \*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001.

1.948). Those participants who were living in poverty were less likely to reunify.

6. Discussion

Studies exploring reunification are plentiful. However, far fewer studies are inclusive of American Indian families (Landers & Danes, 2016). This study offered a comparison of American Indian and White adults who were separated from their family of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption. Racial comparisons, such as the one in this study, allow us to disentangle the effects that are unique to racial groups and effects that they share in common (e.g., if both American Indian and White adoptees are exposed to greater poly-victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home).

The findings of this study reveal a number of contributing factors to the probability of reunification. First, participants who traveled through the foster care system were more likely to reunify. This finding underscores the importance of foster care (and the substitute/foster care family) in shaping the former foster child's pursuit of reunification. This finding makes sense when considered contextually. Individuals who traveled through foster care may have had more information about their family of origin and may have already established connection with them before their removal. In contrast, individuals who never experienced foster care and were likely adopted as infants may have had very little information about their family of origin and would, in turn, likely have less of a lingering connection with them. We hypothesize that this lingering memory of connection with the family of origin gives the individual hope for re-establishing connection with their family of origin. This finding emphasizes the FAAR theory premise that family is the primary context in which the need for connection is enacted. Second, participants who experienced higher poly-victimization were more likely to reunify. This finding reveals the important role of

experiences in the substitute (foster and/or adoptive) family. It appears that greater experiences of victimization in the foster and/or adoptive home serve as a motivator for pursuing reunification with the family of origin. Third, participants in poverty were less likely to reunify. Fostered or adopted individuals living in poverty would appear to have a smaller resource base to search for and then reunify with their family of origin.

A major finding of this study is that regardless of race, the majority of participants (79.7%) reunified with their family of origin. It is difficult to compare this finding to previous research because although similar samples can be found, none are exactly like the sample utilized in this study. However, in comparison to studies that have explored the living situations of former foster youth, our finding of 79.7% is high. As previous research suggests that somewhere between 26% to 46% of formerly fostered individuals reside with relatives following foster care discharge (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, & Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, A., 2001; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; McMillen & Tucker, 1999). This difference in our findings may be because the outcome variable of interest in our study is reunification, rather than living situation or transition to independence. It could be that greater numbers of adults who were separated from their families in childhood by foster care and/or adoption reconnect or reunify with their family of origin, but do not necessarily reside with them.

Drawing on previous reunification literature, it appears that most of what is known about reunification is based on a child's formal exit from a child welfare context. However, child welfare exit is not the only context within which reunification can occur. Some children age out of foster care or exit the child welfare system via adoption and later reunify with their family of origin as adults. This study expands upon the developing body of literature on adults who were separated from their families during childhood by foster care and/or adoption (Landers et al., 2015) by offering evidence that reunification can occur in adulthood and in contexts outside of the child welfare system.

This study offers a number of other contributions. First, it expands upon previous atheoretical reunification research through integration of Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) theory. Second, this study took particular focus on American Indian persons and their White counterparts. This inclusion of and explicit focus on American Indian persons fills a gap within reunification literature (as highlighted by Landers & Danes, 2016). Studying reunification for American Indian families is of pressing importance because reunification is an essential component to cultural preservation (Landers & Danes, 2016). Without family preservation and reunification efforts being employed in response to higher rates of American Indian child removal, American Indian families may eventually cease to exist.

Although this study offered a number of contributions as outlined above, it is not without its limitations. First, this study is limited by the use of the concept of race. The concept of race differs from other common constructs such as ethnicity and culture. Race refers to a group of people's shared genetic heritage, whereas ethnicity refers to common beliefs and practices derived from nationality and ancestry (Hill, Murry, & Anderson, 2005). Unfortunately, relying on the construct of race does not allow for the exploration of culture variables, which play a role in predicting the probability of reunification. Future studies should begin to explore constructs beyond race, particularly cultural variables. For American Indian families, any number of variables could be explored including participation in cultural gatherings, tribal affiliation and involvement, enrollment, urban versus rural dwelling, and on versus off reservation status.

Culture is particularly important to consider for American Indian families. Definitions of family are broader in American Indian communities than they are in mainstream culture. Tribe is family. Collectivistic caregiving practices are embedded within the culture. Caregivers may include aunts, uncles, grandparents, not just parents. In a similar sense, reunification for American Indians may extend beyond

the parent-child relationship to other caregivers (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, etc.), siblings, and even extended family members. Reunification for American Indian persons can also include reunifying with tribe and ancestral land.

Future studies explicitly exploring the contributing factors of reunification for American Indians would allow for the inclusion of these potentially influential cultural variables. Honoring the unique historical and political context of American Indian children and their families, future research should continue to explore both the role of race as a potential predictor of reunification, but also the other types of cultural variables, which may place American Indian children and their families at increased or decreased odds for reunification.

Findings from this study underscore the importance of targeted efforts to support individuals in the process of reunification. When a child in out-of-home placement reunifies, services and supports may be made available to them to assist in the process of reunification. However, such resources are not necessarily made available to adults who age out of the foster care system or are adopted. Armed with the knowledge that persons separated from their family during childhood by foster care and/or adoption may later seek contact and/or reunify, post-foster care and post-adoption services could prove beneficial. Greater resources are needed for families to assist in the process of reunification and the post-reunification time period. Child welfare practitioners and policymakers may be in a unique position to support formerly separated individuals (children or adults) in maintaining or reestablishing familial connections. For American Indian persons, this moves beyond the parent-child relationship to other important relationships (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, extended family), ancestral land, and even tribal community. Even when parental rights are terminated, American Indian children have the right to continue to access their cultural community and identity.

## 7. Conclusion

Studies of reunification inclusive of American Indian families are limited. Previous studies suggest that minority children and their families experience poor outcomes in child welfare. Given this gap within the literature, this study explored the factors that contribute to the probability of reunification for American Indian and White adults who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption. Findings from this study suggest race is not a significant contributing factor for reunification, but rather the odds of reunification increase with age, having traveled through foster care, and having experienced poly-victimization. Those in poverty are less likely to reunify. Future research studies would benefit from continuing to tease out the role of race versus cultural factors (e.g., ethnicity, culture, tribal affiliation or involvement) that may contribute to increased odds for reunification.

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