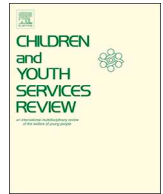




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Does reunification matter? Differences in the social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment of American Indian fostered and adopted adults

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ABSTRACT

Studies of American Indian adults who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption are emerging. This study fills a gap within the literature by exploring differences in social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment among reunified and non-reunified American Indian adults ($n = 129$). Grounded in identity theory, this study utilized data from the *Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project*. Social connection to tribe was significantly higher for those who reunified ($M = 70.0$) than for those who had not ($M = 42.0$) ($U = 689.50, p < .001$). The overall ordinary least squares regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.150, F(7,121) = 3.05, p < .01$) and reunification was a statistically significant factor associated with social connection to tribe ($\beta = 0.28, p < .01$). The chi-square test revealed the relationship between reunification and tribal enrollment was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n = 129) = 14.01, p < .001$. Reunified participants were more likely to be enrolled. The overall logistic regression model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(7) = 19.97, p < .01$) and reunified participants were 8 times more likely to be enrolled ($OR = 8.73, 95\% CI = 2.51, 30.35$). Reunification remains a pressing priority, as fostered and adopted individuals are “welcomed home” across tribal communities.

1. Introduction

Reunification is defined as “the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their families of origin” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011, p. 2). Reunification is the preferred permanency path as children formally exit the United States (U.S.) child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). In addition, reunification is considered the most common outcome for children exiting child welfare (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2017a; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2017b). Although most reunification research has focused on discharge from child welfare, it is not the only context within which reunification can occur. For example, reunification can occur following separation as a result of incarceration, immigration, relocation, deployment, adoption, and even after aging out of care. Reunification can occur later in life (e.g., among formerly fostered and adopted youth and adults) or following child welfare case closure (e.g., among youth who have aged out of foster care) (Landers & Danes, 2016; Landers, Danes, & White Hawk, 2015). In these broader contexts,

reunification refers to the process wherein a separated child or family member reconnects, rejoins, and reunites with their family of origin following separation (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers et al., 2015).

While reunification is important across many disproportionately represented minority groups in child welfare, reunification is a particularly salient issue in American Indian communities for a number of reasons. First, reunification is a value across American Indian cultural and tribal communities. It is echoed across tribal communities in the saying, “generation after generation we are coming home” (White Hawk, 2018). Reunification is consistent with American Indian collectivist cultural values wherein an individual is not seen as separate, but as part of the greater whole (Red Horse et al., 2000). Second, reunification is a culturally congruent practice employed to counteract the historical waves of intergenerational separation experienced by American Indian families at the hands of the U.S. government. American Indian families have been subject to disproportionate experiences of systematic child removal (Crofoot & Harris, 2012; Cross, 2008).

Throughout U.S. history, generation after generation, American Indian families have been separated by forced acts of relocation, boarding schools, adoption practices, and disproportionate child welfare removal (Atwood, 2008; Red Horse et al., 2000). It is estimated that by 1977, “a minimum of 25 percent of all Indian children” were

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placed in foster or adoptive homes and that such acts were “against the best interests of families and Indian communities” (*Indian Child Welfare Act of 1977*, p. 1). The drastic rates of child removal documented across tribal communities resulted in the enactment of the *Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978*, which remains in effect to date.

In the wake of intergenerational separation and systematic child removal, many American Indian adults “who were separated from their families of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption” are finding their way home (Harness, 2006; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017, p. 360). The phrase “*finding their way home*” has been used within the American Indian community because fostered and adopted American Indian persons have not only a family to reunify with, but also a “*homeland*” to return to (i.e., ancestral land and tribal community) (Landers et al., 2015). Reunification tends to occur not just with family of origin, but with the person’s tribal community (Landers & Danes, 2016). In American Indian culture, formerly separated individuals are seen as part of the larger collective American Indian community (Red Horse et al., 2000).

1.1. The current study

Studies of American Indian adults who experienced foster care and/or adoption during childhood are emerging (Landers et al., 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, Ingalls-Maloney, & White Hawk, 2017). Many American Indian individuals reunify with their family of origin during adulthood (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). Factors associated with the reunification of formerly separated American Indian adults have been explored. Such findings suggest that older participants, those who experienced foster care (i.e., lived in foster care with non-relatives), and those with greater experiences of victimization (i.e., the combination of multiple types of abuse including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse) in their foster and adoptive homes are more likely to reunify than those who never experienced foster care and those who experienced less victimization (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). In contrast, individuals who live below poverty level have decreased odds of reunification (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). In addition, many American Indian adults report satisfactory reunification experiences depending on with whom they reunify – those who reunified with their birthmothers report less satisfaction with reunification than those who reunified with another member of their family (e.g., father, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle).

Overall, less is known about the social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment of American Indian fostered and adopted individuals. This study addresses that gap by using data collected from the *Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project* (Landers et al., 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, Ingalls-Maloney, & White Hawk, 2017). This study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) to explore if those who reunify differ from those who do not reunify in terms of social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment; and (2) to examine the factors (including reunification) that contribute to greater social connection to tribe and increased likelihood of tribal enrollment among American Indian adults who were separated from their family of origin during childhood by foster care and/or adoption.

1.2. Guiding theoretical framework

This study is grounded in identity theory (Pratt, 2003), which provides a foundation for understanding the factors that contribute to social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment. In accordance with identity theory, reunification is seen as a reflective period during which a fostered or adopted individual’s identity takes shape (Landers et al., 2015; Pratt, 2003). Reunification invites the fostered or adopted person to consider, who am I (personally)? And, who am I in relation to my family of origin? For American Indian persons, this process involves a greater collective – who am I in relation to my tribe (socially)? When a

fostered or adopted person reunifies with their family of origin, the experience of reunification shapes how they think and feel about their family of origin, which in turn shapes the way they think and feel about themselves.

Following reunification, the fostered or adopted person may begin to see themselves to a greater extent as American Indian. With the affirmation of finding their family, they may be more likely to pursue tribal enrollment as an additional layer of acknowledgment of their identity. In American Indian communities, family and tribe are not seen as separate, but rather they are regarded as one and the same (Red Horse et al., 2000). The more salient a particular facet of one’s identity is, the more likely that it tends to be exhibited across varying situations (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). In this regard, tribal enrollment may be sought in an effort to affirm the fostered or adopted person’s American Indian identity. Fostered or adopted American Indian persons who have reunified with their family of origin may also begin to grow closer to their tribal community. In essence, reunification is regarded as a precursor to becoming more socially connected to tribe and pursuing tribal enrollment.

1.3. Literature review

A number of studies focus on American Indian and First Nations fostered or adopted individuals (Becker-Green, 2009; Carriere, 2007; Carriere, 2005; Harness, 2006; Hussong, 1978; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, Ingalls-Maloney, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, & White Hawk, 2015; Peterson, 2002; Sindelar, 2004). Far fewer focus specifically on the reunification of American Indian fostered or adopted individuals (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, & White Hawk, 2015). Such studies suggest that high numbers of American Indian adults reunify with their family of origin during adulthood (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). Studies of First Nations adopted persons suggest that separation from and loss of cultural identity contributes to impairments in mental, physical, and spiritual health (Carriere, 2007). Since spirituality is interwoven into personal health (Limb & Hodge, 2008), connection to birth family, tribal community, and ancestral knowledge are important for the health of First Nations adopted individuals (Carriere, 2005). Many First Nations adopted persons report the common reason behind reconnecting with family and tribal community is to be recognized as Native (Carriere, 2007). What remains unknown is if the fostered or adopted persons are later recognized as an enrolled member of their reclaimed tribal community.

Social connection to tribe is important for many American Indian fostered and adopted individuals. Attending pow wows and interacting with other American Indian individuals, families, and tribal elders, plays an important role in integrating American Indian cultural heritage into the adopted person’s personal identity (Peterson, 2002). An adopted individual’s level of social connection to their tribe is different than tribal enrollment. While some adopted adults identify as American Indian, and may be highly connected to their tribe, they may not have sufficient documentation of their American Indian ancestry or blood quantum to pursue tribal enrollment (Peterson, 2002). Other American Indian fostered and adopted persons gain access to enroll. Tribal Nations have varying approaches to enrollment (e.g., blood quantum, lineage descent) (Fletcher, 2012; Miller, 2014). Federal law recognizes that tribes have the right to define their own membership as they see fit (Fletcher, 2012).

2. Method

2.1. Sampling procedures

The data utilized in this study originated from a community-based participatory research project, called the *Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals Project* ($N = 336$) (as described in Landers, Danes, &

White Hawk, 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). A collaboration was established between First Nations Repatriation Institute (FNRI), Adoptees Have Answers (AHA), and researchers across varying disciplines at the University of Minnesota. This original study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Minnesota (IRB Approval #1202S10147) and the secondary data analyses conducted in this study received IRB approval from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (IRB #17–849). Data were collected via an anonymous survey intended to provide broad exploratory information about the needs and experiences of adopted/fostered adults.

Using targeted purposive sampling, participants were recruited through FNRI and AHA listservs, print and media advertisements (e.g., adoption websites, adoption facebook pages, tribal facebook pages, newsletters), and flyers distributed at the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) conference (Landers et al., 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). Targeted adults identified themselves as having experienced foster care and/or adoption during childhood (Landers et al., 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). In order to participate, the respondents had to either have been adopted or spent time in foster care during childhood or adolescence. Participants were invited to take the survey to inform people (e.g., professionals, family members, general public) about how adoption and foster care shape the lives of adopted/fostered persons. The participants were not compensated for their participation and the survey took approximately 45–75 min. to complete (Landers et al., 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, Ingalls-Maloney, & White Hawk, 2017).

2.2. Sample description

The current study utilized a subsample of 129 American Indian participants who experienced foster care and/or adoption during childhood. Foster care and/or adoption subsequently separated them from their families of origin (Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017). Participants were asked to respond to two questions regarding their racial identity. To begin, participants were asked, “Are you an American Indian/Native American?” Item response options were as follows (No, I suspect so, Not sure, Yes). Participants who answered “no” to this question were excluded from the analyses of this particular study. Next, participants were asked an open-ended question, “What race(s) do you consider yourself to be?” A dichotomous variable was created wherein participants who identified themselves as American Indian (or any variation of language – Native American, Indigenous, First Nations, Native) were coded as a “1” and all other responses were coded as “0”. The majority of respondents (89.1%) had a salient identity wherein they answered “yes” to “Are you an American Indian/Native American?” and indicated they were American Indian in the open-ended race question. Unfortunately, there is less agreement on how to define and measure American Indian identity (Weaver, 2001). Similar to racial self-identification approaches employed in the U.S. 1990 Census, American Indian respondents did not have to provide any documentation to substantiate their race (Passel, 1997).

The majority of the participants experienced foster care (i.e., they experienced foster care prior to their adoption or only foster care) (63.6%). Of those that experienced foster care, the majority (75.4%) went into foster care prior to the age of one. And, the majority of the participants (87.6%) were adopted (i.e., they either experienced foster care and adoption or just adoption). Of those that were adopted, 64.5% were adopted before the age of one. While 12.4% of participants experienced only foster care, 36.4% only experienced adoption, and the remaining 51.2% experienced both foster care and adoption. Most participants (74.3%) described their adoption as transracial. Only 2.7% of the sample indicated their adoptive parents were of the same race, while 27.4% indicated there was some overlap in races, but not a complete match, 2.7% reported being unsure, and 67.3% indicated

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics ($n = 129$).

	<i>n</i>	Percent or Mean	<i>SD</i>
Age (21–71)		49.87	9.72
Gender			
Male	30	23.30	
Female	99	76.70	
College education or higher ^a	49	38.00	
Poverty ^a	20	15.50	
Foster care ^a	82	63.60	
Poly-victimization		2.43	1.51
Physical abuse ^a	93	72.10	
Sexual abuse ^a	51	39.50	
Emotional abuse ^a	94	72.90	
Spiritual abuse ^a	76	58.90	
Reunification	106	82.20	

^a 1 = “yes”, 0 = “no”.

their adoptive parents were of a different race.

The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The mean age of the participants was 49.87 years ($SD = 9.72$, range 21–71). More females participated (76.7%) than males. Over one-third had at least a college education (38%), while fewer had a personal income below the individual poverty level (15.5%). (See Table 1).

2.3. Missing data

Multiple imputation (MI) was used to address missing data in this study. When tested using simulation studies, MI typically outperforms other more-dated approaches (e.g., deletion, mean substitution) to handling missing data (Croy & Novins, 2005). No significant differences were found with regard to age, gender, education, or income between participants with and without missing data.

3. Measures

3.1. Dependent variables

3.1.1. Social connection to tribe

Social connection to tribe was defined as the degree to which individuals felt socially connected to their tribal community. Social connection can be facilitated through communication, acceptance, and interaction. It may also include engaging in social contact with members of one's tribal community, as well as attending pow wows and other cultural events. Social connection to tribe was measured using a likert-scale response to a single item indicating the fostered and adopted individual's self-identified degree of connection to their tribe. Participants were asked, “How socially connected do you feel you are with your tribe?” Response options were on a five-point scale (1 = Not Connected, 5 = Very Connected) with higher scores representing greater social connection to tribe ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.37$).

3.1.2. Tribal enrollment

Participants were asked, “Are you enrolled in a tribe?” The response options were (No, Not Sure, Yes). A dichotomous variable was created wherein all participants who said “yes” were coded as a “1”, and all other responses were “0”. Over half of the participants (52.7%) were enrolled in their tribe. Of those who said they had met their tribe; the majority met their tribe as adults (83.6%).

3.2. Independent variables

3.2.1. Reunification

Reunification was defined as having reunited with the family of origin. It was a dichotomous variable with two levels (0 = Not reunified, 1 = Reunified) and 82.2% of the sample reunified. The

Table 2
Correlations Matrix (n = 129).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Enrollment	–								
2. Tribe connection	0.23	**	–						
3. Reunification	0.33	***	0.29	***	–				
4. Age	0.03		0.05	–0.08	–				
5. Gender	–0.12		–0.10	–0.02	–0.05	–			
6. Education	–0.03		0.14	–0.01	0.05	0.13	–		
7. Poverty	–0.02		–0.13	–0.25	*	–0.10	0.08	–0.12	–
8. Foster care	0.12		–0.03	0.11	–0.16	0.12	–0.17	0.15	–
9. Poly-victimization	–0.02		0.15	0.03	–0.06	–0.08	–0.08	0.13	0.11

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01 ***p < .001.

majority of participants reunified as adults (88.3%). Of those who reunified as children, the majority reunified after the age of 10 (66.7%).

3.2.2. Age

Participants were asked to provide their year of birth. Birth year was then used to calculate the participant's age at the time of data collection.

3.2.3. Gender

The following question was asked of the participants, “What is your gender?” Response options included male (0) and female (1).

3.2.4. Education

Participants were asked, “What is your highest level of education or grade completed?” Response options included (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). A dichotomous variable was created to reflect whether the participant had a college education or higher (0 = no, 1 = yes).

3.2.5. Income/poverty

The participants were asked about their “approximate personal annual income from all sources.” Response options included less than \$10,000 (1), \$10,000–\$34,999 (2), \$35,000–\$54,999 (3), and \$55,000 or more (4). A dichotomized variable was created to represent if the participant's personal income was below poverty level (no = 0, yes = 1). Poverty was considered as having an individual annual income of less than \$10,000.

3.2.6. Foster care

The participants were asked if they “ever lived in foster care with non-relatives.” Participant's responses were dichotomous (no = 0, yes = 1).

3.2.7. Poly-victimization

Poly-victimization was defined as exposure to multiple types of abuse (e.g., physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual abuse) by the adoptive and/or foster caregiver. Definitions of the primary types of abuse (i.e., physical, emotional, sexual) were drawn from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. Spiritual abuse was also included because in American Indian communities, spirituality (i.e., the connection to earth) cannot be separated from physical and emotional aspects of being (Giago, 1997). Spiritual abuse is often referred to as “cultural abuse” and can include acts such as racial slurs, as well as denial or rejection of spiritual practices by preventing an individual from participating in ceremonies and pow wows (StrongHearts Native Helpline, 2017). Participants were asked about exposure to each type of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual) (no = 0, yes = 1). A sum total variable of poly-victimization was created (where in 0 = none, 1 = one type of abuse, 2 = two types of abuse, 3 = three types of abuse,

4 = four types of abuse) (M = 2.43, SD = 1.51, range 0 to 4) (similar to poly-victimization as defined by Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007).

3.3. Analytical procedures

All of the analyses were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24. The bivariate correlations of all variables of interest are presented in Table 2. First, differences in social connection to tribe between reunified and non-reunified American Indian fostered and adopted individuals were explored using a Mann-Whitney U test, which was the appropriate test because social connection was an ordinal variable and the grouping variable of reunification had unequal group sizes (Mann & Whitney, 1947). Second, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis was used to examine the factors that contributed to greater social connection to tribe including reunification. Third, differences in tribal enrollment were explored using a chi-square test. Fourth, logistic regression analysis was used to examine the factors that contributed to tribal enrollment. Two contributing factors were considered (e.g., reunification, poly-victimization) in addition to other important covariates (e.g., age, gender, education, income, experiencing foster care) across both regression analyses. With statistical power at 0.80, our sample size was considered large enough to detect an effect of medium size (p = .05 significance level) (Cohen, 1992).

4. Results

4.1. Differences in social connection to tribe and enrollment by reunification

The majority of participants (82.2%) reunified with their family of origin and 67% reported moderate levels of social connection to tribe (scores 3 and above). Only 10.9% reported high levels of social connection to tribe (scores of 5). Over half of the participants (52.7%) were enrolled in their tribe. The Mann-Whitney U Test revealed that social connection to tribe was significantly higher for those who reunified (M = 70.0) than for those who had not reunified (M = 42.0) (U = 689.50, p < .001). The chi-square test revealed the relationship

Table 3
OLS Regression of Factors Associated with Social Connection to Tribe (n = 129).

Variable	Social Connection to Tribe			
	B	SE B	β	
Reunification	1.01	0.31	0.28	**
Age	0.01	0.01	0.06	
Gender	–0.31	0.28	–0.10	
Education	0.45	0.24	0.16	
Poverty	–0.18	0.34	–0.05	
Foster care	–0.07	0.25	–0.02	
Poly-victimization	0.15	0.08	0.16	
R ²			0.15	
F			3.05**	

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 4
Logistic Regression of Factors Associated with Tribal Enrollment ($n = 129$).

Variable	Tribal Enrollment			
	B	SE B	OR	
Reunification	2.17	***	0.64	8.73
Age	0.02		0.02	1.02
Gender	-7.48		0.49	0.47
Education	0.06		0.41	1.06
Poverty	0.52		0.60	1.68
Foster care	0.54		0.42	1.72
Abuse	-0.09		0.13	0.92
Constant	-2.28			
χ^2		19.97**		
df		7		

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

between reunification and tribal enrollment was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n = 129) = 14.01, p < .001$. Reunified participants were more likely to be enrolled.

4.2. Factors associated with social connection to tribe and enrollment

First, the overall OLS regression model was statistically significant, explaining 16.1% of the total variance of social connection to tribe ($R^2 = 0.15, F(7,121) = 3.05, p < .01$) (Table 3). Reunification was a statistically significant factor associated with social connection to tribe ($\beta = 0.28, p < .01$). Reunified participants reported greater social connection to tribe. Second, the overall logistic regression model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(7) = 19.97, p < .01$) (Table 4). Reunified participants had 8 times the odds of being enrolled in their tribe ($OR = 8.73, 95\% CI = 2.51, 30.35$).

5. Discussion

Studies of American Indian fostered and adopted individuals are emerging (Landers et al., 2015; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017; Landers, Danes, Ingalls-Maloney, & White Hawk, 2017). While factors associated with reunification have been explored for American Indian fostered and adopted individuals, far less is known about their social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment. This study explored differences in social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment. The results of this study reveal a number of important findings. The first main finding of this study is that the majority of participants reported moderate levels of social connection to their tribe and over half (52.7%) of the participants were tribally enrolled.

This finding can be interpreted in a number of different ways. On one hand, this finding suggests that a substantial number of American Indian fostered and adopted individuals are being recognized as members of their tribal communities. This finding is congruent with the actions documented across tribal communities wherein fostered and adopted individuals are formally welcomed home through the use of traditional cultural practices (Landers et al., 2015). On another hand, this finding suggests that an alarming number of fostered and adopted individuals are still not enrolled in their tribe, illuminating the continued work that needs to be done across tribal communities to facilitate the reception of American Indian fostered and adopted individuals.

The finding that just under half of the participants in this sample are not enrolled may be related to barriers to tribal enrollment that fostered and adopted individuals experience, rather than an individual's lack of desire to become enrolled. While barriers to tribal enrollment remain relatively unexplored for American Indian fostered and adopted individuals, such factors may include uncertainty about or difficulty documenting tribal lineage or blood quantum.

Another major finding of this study is that across each of the

analyses, reunification was significantly associated with both greater social connection to tribe and increased likelihood of tribal enrollment. It is interesting to note that none of the other variables are significant in either model; rather reunification alone accounts for all of the variance in both regression models. While factors such as age, poverty, and poly-victimization in the foster or adoptive home impact reunification, such variables do not impact social connection to tribe or tribal enrollment. Such a finding is intriguing, as it underscores the significant relationship between reunification, social connection to tribe, and tribal enrollment. Given that reunification and enrollment are connected, targeted efforts on behalf of tribal communities may be implemented to assist in the reunification process, which we hypothesize may subsequently lead to enrollment. Reunification and repatriation are part of the foundational work being done by FNRI to “welcome home” fostered and adopted individuals. While tribal communities are already implementing welcoming home songs and ceremonies, research lags behind the traditional healing practices being implemented in American Indian communities to date.

While our data do not completely disentangle the complicated relationship between reunification, social connection to tribe, and enrollment, one possible explanation for our findings is that when fostered and adopted American Indian individuals reunify with their family of origin, they establish important connections that affirm their American Indian identity. In other words, during the reunification process, the fostered or adopted individual's tribe mirrors back to them a piece of their identity by acknowledging them as American Indian. In turn, the reunified individual may grow more socially connected to their tribe and eventually enroll. In this sense, enrollment may be seen as an affirmation of their American Indian identity. We must caution that this explanation is speculative at best, as our statistical models were not conducted using longitudinal data. However, this speculation is theoretically consistent with identity theory, which suggests that reunification provides the context in which a person's American Indian identity is affirmed and solidified in relationship to and with their tribe.

While many fostered and adopted persons were reunified in our sample, far fewer were tribally enrolled. These findings suggest that reunifying with family of origin does not always lead to enrollment. This may be because tribal enrollment is a complex phenomenon based on ancestry, kinship, blood quantum, and other factors that vary across tribes (Fletcher, 2012; Miller, 2014). And, while policies surrounding tribal enrollment have both a complex history and tendency to prioritize cultural preservation, some adopted individuals may simply not be eligible for enrollment. It is not uncommon for fostered and adopted individuals to experience difficulty accessing their birth records and the necessary documentation to pursue enrollment. Furthermore, at times when records are sealed, this adds an additional layer of complexity to achieving reunification and enrollment.

This study offers various contributions. First, it fills a gap within the literature by exploring the social connection to tribe and enrollment of American Indian fostered and adopted individuals. Second, this study builds upon the growing body of literature using identity theory to examine the intersection of American Indian identity and reunification (Landers et al., 2015). Third, this study highlights the important relationship between reunification and social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment. Just as reunification is of particular importance in American Indian communities (Landers et al., 2015), so too is the fostered and adopted individual's sense of social connection to their tribe and tribal enrollment. The reunification of formerly fostered and/or adopted American Indian individuals, their social connection to tribe community, and enrollment all play an important role in cultural preservation.

While this study offers important contributions to the literature, limitations need to be acknowledged. First, given the exploratory nature of this study and the use of purposeful sampling, our results may not generalize to all American Indian fostered and adopted individuals. While the survey included a diverse sample of individuals within a wide

range of ages (21–71), and individuals with tribal affiliations spanning across multiple tribal communities (Ojibwe, Lakota, Dakota, Omaha, Cree, Cherokee, Ho-Chunk, Chickasaw, and Navajo Nations) in multiple states in the U.S., our findings may not be representative of all American Indian fostered and adopted individuals. Furthermore, the participants in our survey may have opted to participate in the survey based on their interest in foster care and/or adoption and may differ from those who chose not to participate. And, while the majority of the participants (74.3%) described theirs as a transracial adoption (i.e., meaning they were not raised by an American Indian family), a question about the urbanicity of the participants was not included in the survey. In addition, our findings are confined to the variables explored within our models. While we were purposeful in our inclusion of variables such as reunification and poly-victimization, other factors could, in theory, contribute to greater social connection and increased likelihood of tribal enrollment. For instance, how satisfactory the reunification experience was from the adopted person's perspective could influence their future desires to become more involved with their tribe. Given that this study was exploratory in nature, future research should consider additional variables that may prove influential (e.g., how satisfied the fostered/adopted individual and their birth family members were with the reunification, how close the adopted individual lives in relationship to their tribal community, the types of documents that the adopted person needed to secure in order to become enrolled, etc.).

Overall, future research is needed to afford a more conclusive interpretation of the complicated relationship between reunification, social connection to tribe, and tribal enrollment. This would be best achieved using longitudinal data. For some, reunification is a precursor to social connection to tribe and enrollment (i.e., some fostered and adopted individuals find their family then their tribe). In contrast, some fostered and adopted individuals grow closer to their tribal community and enroll prior to reconnecting with their family of origin. In the absence of longitudinal data, definite conclusions regarding the nature and direction of these relationships is difficult to ascertain.

In addition, future studies may explore the complex relationship between reunification, social connection to tribe, and enrollment across the lifespan. Perhaps some of our participants did not feel ready to connect to a greater extent with their tribe or were not ready to pursue enrollment. However, this may change over time. For some, when the reunification process is more challenging, they may be less likely to draw closer to tribe or enroll. In such instances, personal hesitations versus systemic barriers to enrollment should also be explored. In other words, while our findings deepen the understanding of the relationship between reunification, social connection to tribe, and tribal enrollment, future research is also needed to shed light on the potential reasons why American Indian fostered and adopted individuals are not enrolled. American Indian fostered and adopted individuals who lack interest in enrolling may differ significantly from those that are interested, but have been unable to enroll due to systemic barriers (e.g., insufficient evidence of lineage, inability to access records/documentation, blood quantum).

6. Conclusion

Studies that explore social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment for American Indian fostered and adopted individuals have not been conducted. Previous studies are limited to those exploring reunification (Hussong, 1978; Landers, Danes, Harstad, & White Hawk, 2017), factors that enhance the reunification experience (Landers et al., 2015), and how fostered and adopted individuals fair in terms of their health and well-being (Carriere, 2005; Hussong, 1978; Landers, Danes, Ingalls-Maloney, & White Hawk, 2017). Given the literature gap related to understanding social connection to tribe and tribal enrollment, this study examined the relationship between reunification and these outcomes. The findings from this study suggest that reunification with family of origin is significantly associated with social connection to

tribe and the tribal enrollment of American Indian fostered and adopted individuals. Future research is needed to explore the potential barriers to tribal enrollment (e.g., personal vs. systemic barriers) for American Indian fostered and adopted individuals.

Declarations of interest

None.

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