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Defining Permanency for Aboriginal Youth in Care

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Article abstract

Poor outcomes associated with youth aging out of care are well documented. In recent years creative permanency planning projects have been heralded as promising alternatives to transition to adulthood programs with the aim of addressing this concern. In order to make permanency possible for youth the concept must be defined in a way that reflects the needs of those within this developmental stage. Researchers and youth have collaborated to create such definitions. However, few have considered a cultural element and none speak to specific populations, such as Aboriginal youth. There are significant differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews, which, in turn, influence the permanency, need for children and youth. In Alberta, Canada, Aboriginal children and youth are vastly overrepresented in out-of-home care. Addressing the needs of Aboriginal youth in a culturally appropriate manner is critical. Cultural considerations include ideals of collectivism versus individualism, identity formation, and community healing. Yet, there is a deficit of literature related to the specific permanency needs of Aboriginal youth in out-of-home care. The Ecological theory informed by the Anishinabe medicine wheel framework provides a structure from which to discuss permanency planning for this population group. Further research exploring the views of Aboriginal youth in care on permanency and the utility of these models on this population is necessary.

An Interdisciplinary Journal

Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

Defining Permanency for Aboriginal Youth in Care

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Abstract

Poor outcomes associated with youth aging out of care are well documented. In recent years creative permanency planning projects have been heralded as promising alternatives to transition to adulthood programs with the aim of addressing this concern. In order to make permanency possible for youth the concept must be defined in a way that reflects the needs of those within this developmental stage. Researchers and youth have collaborated to create such definitions. However, few have considered a cultural element and none speak to specific populations, such as Aboriginal youth. There are significant differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews, which, in turn, influence the permanency, need for children and youth. In Alberta, Canada, Aboriginal children and youth are vastly overrepresented in out-of-home care. Addressing the needs of Aboriginal youth in a culturally appropriate manner is critical. Cultural considerations include ideals of collectivism versus individualism, identity formation, and community healing. Yet, there is a deficit of literature related to the specific permanency needs of Aboriginal youth in out-of-home care. The Ecological theory informed by the Anishinabe medicine wheel framework provides a structure from which to discuss permanency planning for this population group. Further research exploring the views of Aboriginal youth in care on permanency and the utility of these models on this population is necessary.

Eminent psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner suggested, “every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her” (as cited in Brendtro, 2006, p. 163). Unfortunately children and youth who grow up in out-of-home care too often enter adulthood without the ongoing support of a caring adult. Permanency, premised on the conviction that all children need permanent, loving and secure relationships in order to become well-adjusted adults, means that children will leave government care to be a part of a family who is committed to provide for their care into adulthood (North Central Alberta Child and Family Services, 2007). For each developmental stage, from infancy to adolescence, and cultural group the meaning of permanency must be re-evaluated. Two groups for whom the meaning of permanency has generated considerable passionate discourse are youth in out-of-home care, and Aboriginal children and youth (Samuels, 2009; Smith, 2009).

Permanency planning is the process of finding committed families for children whose parent’s guardianship rights have been terminated (North Central Alberta Child and Family Services, 2007). Until

recently permanency planning for youth in out-of-home care has received insufficient attention from the child welfare community (Avery, 2009). Conventional work with these youth has focused on transition to adulthood services. However, a growing body of literature is documenting new programs, which strive to connect youth with permanent, loving families (North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2009). Discussions regarding youth permanency are gaining momentum and are taking place across Canada. For example, at a recent conference in Calgary, Dr. Denise Goodman (2011) advocated that permanency for youth is both necessary and achievable. The following article will use the province of Alberta, Canada as an illustrative example

Debates regarding culturally appropriate practices for permanency for Aboriginal children and youth are ongoing. The construct of a nuclear family, an ideal in permanency planning, is decidedly Eurocentric (Fournier & Crey, 1997). In contrast, Indigenous academic Gregory Cajete (2000) describes a network of extended family and community members who create a web of relationship around a child and guide them into adulthood. Thus, permanency for Aboriginal youth may need to be constructed in an entirely different way than for non-Aboriginal youth.

Achieving permanency for all children is a matter of social justice. The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) clearly states that every child has the right to a family, identity and culture according to articles 8, 20, 21 and 30. State Parties that have ratified the convention, including Canada, are obliged to ensure that the best interests of the child are of primary consideration. In the case that a child cannot be returned to their biological family, this usually means finding alternative permanent caregivers and maintaining cultural connections (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). Every child deserves to have a sense of belonging, regardless of her/his age or ethnicity. The following literature review outlines the problem of youth impermanence, current research on youth meanings of permanency and relevant cultural issues which noting the lack of research regarding Aboriginal youth in care. Ecological theory is examined to determine its applicability in providing a theoretical framework to outline the importance of permanency.

Youth and Permanency

Aging Out

When a youth is discharged from the province's child welfare system at the age of 18 years without permanency it is often referred to as aging out (Avery, 2010; Walters, 2011). In this process youth leave government care without the support of a committed adult in their life and as a consequence face serious challenges in adulthood. Adam Pertman, Executive Director of the Adoption Institute, an American non-profit based in Massachusetts, outlines the problem that the child welfare system is facing across North America:

We remove thousands of children from their original homes each year because of abuse or neglect, with the implicit promise that we'll keep them safe and give them better lives. Unfortunately, a growing number are aging out without any connections to adults, so they too often wind up pregnant, on the streets, in jail or in poverty. Simply put, as a society, we are failing them. (Howard & Berzin, 2011, para. 3)

In Canada there are an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 children in out-of-home care each year are awaiting adoption and, on average, only 7% of these children will find permanency through adoption (Canadian

Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). There are no statistics available on how many youths age out of care each year in Canada, however one study estimates that 680 children aged out of care in 2006 in British Columbia alone (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007). The lack of readily available statistics may indicate that this problem is not well recognized at this time.

Youth who age out of the child welfare system without permanency face poor outcomes in adulthood. Research demonstrating this problem was conducted initially in the United States and dates back to the late 1980s (Barth, 1986; Barth, 1990). The research consistently shows a strong correlation between those affected by a lack of permanency and poor outcomes in adulthood. Some of outcomes include an increased risk of poverty, homelessness, incarceration, unplanned pregnancies and unemployment (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Davis, 2009; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009). More recent Canadian studies echo these findings. A three year longitudinal study from Victoria, British Columbia, for example, found high rates of homelessness, poverty, unplanned pregnancies, criminal activity and drug use among former foster youth (n=37) relative to youth who had not lived in care (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007). In Ontario a study on homeless Aboriginal youth (n=24) revealed a strong link between homelessness and a history of child welfare involvement (Baskin, 2007). Raising the Roof (2009), a charity dedicated to youth homelessness, found that 43% of homeless youth (n=689) in Calgary, Toronto and St. John's had previous child welfare involvement. In his overview of Aboriginal youth gang violence in Canada, Totten (2009) points to a lack of permanency as one of the major pathways to gang violence involvement. He explains that life in care can lead to attachment problems, instability and associating with negative peers within group home settings.

Present research tells us that youth are taking much longer to transition to adulthood, relying heavily upon social supports principally from family (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Tabler, 1994). Avery (2010) has demonstrated that youth leaving government care are even more in need of supports as they transition to adulthood and also lack the developmental maturity to succeed independently. Youth in care need options for permanency that allow them to accomplish the tasks of this developmental stage including exploration, instability, self focus and living within the transition in which they are neither an adolescent nor an adult.

Youth Permanency

The importance of timely permanency planning for children in care has been well accepted. In fact, the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (2000) in Alberta was created with permanency goals in mind. This legislation places limits on cumulative time in care for the purposes of timely permanency. Legal permanency through private guardianship or adoption is intended to provide children with a stable, committed family to support them into adulthood and facilitate healthy identity formation (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). The notion of permanency is founded on the premise that the need for a loving and supportive adult does not end when a child becomes a teenager.

Ecological theory holds that an individual's development is influenced by the environmental systems that surround them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This theory suggests that young adults need a supportive network in order to succeed (Gitterman, 2011). As outlined previously, youth aging out of care without permanency are at heightened risk for poor outcomes in adulthood. Many youth in out-of-home care have only paid staff to provide support; this lack of foundation makes it difficult for youth to focus on other goals such as

education or employment (Collins & Clay, 2009; Jarboe & Agosti, 2011). Additionally, youth are left without supports as they navigate the challenges of adulthood including pursuing education and employment as well as parenting.

Many practitioners and researchers believe that finding permanency for youth in care will improve outcomes for this group (North American Council on Adoptable Children [NACAC], 2009). This belief is supported by literature that demonstrates that adopted children fare better academically, socially and emotionally than their peers in who are in foster care (Erich & Leung, 1998; Triseliotis, 2002), as well as research which indicates that the presence of at least one committed, caring adult is a protective factor for youth aging out of care (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008; Jacobs & Everall, 2009).

Adoption is also cost effective. The province of Ontario estimates that it costs \$44,820 per year to care for a child or youth in foster care for one year, not including administration costs (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). A U. S. study indicates that governments spend approximately half as much to support a child who has been adopted from foster care as they do to support a similar child who is raised in foster care (Barth, Lee, Wildfire, & Guo, 2006). Barth et al. (2006) explain that the costs of adoption subsidies are less than foster care payments. In addition, children who remain in foster care frequently end up transitioned to more expensive placements such as group care (Barth et al., 2006).

There is a misconception that permanency is not achievable for the youth population due to their age and developmental stage (Louisell, 2009). While traditional approaches may not always be a good fit for this group, permanency is certainly attainable. Creative projects across the United States and Canada are successfully finding permanent connections for youth through adoption, child focused recruitment, family finding programs and reunification (NACAC, 2009). Without diluting the objective of providing youth with permanent, supportive adults in their lives, the term permanency must be defined in a manner that fits for this age group (Walters, 2011).

Defining Permanency

Several qualitative studies have explored definitions of permanency. Freundlich, Avery, Muson and Gerstenzang (2006), for example, interviewed multiple stakeholders and demonstrated that the term permanency is not clearly understood by biological parents (n=20) or youth (n=30) involved with child welfare. Child welfare professionals (n=38) in this study agreed that clear, simplified and well-explained terminology is essential in order for clear communication between stakeholders. In a study on youth transitions to adulthood, Collins and Clay (2009) reported that key stakeholders (n=34) took a broad view of permanency, pointing out the need for a strong emotional support and flexible, specialized permanency planning individualized for each youth. Samuels (2009) completed a qualitative study with foster youth (n=29), focusing on their experiences in care. She found that their definitions of permanency were tied to a desire to find something they had lost in childhood, a family and a home.

The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) has led initiatives on creating a youth led definition of permanency. On behalf of CPYP, Sanchez (2004) asked youth to speak to three forms of permanence: relational/emotional, physical and legal. They defined relational permanence as an emotional connection; physical permanence was related to having a stable living environment, and legal permanence was interpreted as guardianship or adoption. Results of the individual and focus group interviews found that youth value permanency. The youth identified relational permanence as the most important type of

permanency and viewed physical permanence as necessary for creating a firm foundation for their futures. The importance of legal permanence was contested by youth, with some seeing it as essential, and others distrusting the legal system. An often-repeated theme in literature on youth permanency is the need for youth voice in the process. Youth must define what permanency means for them and engage in the permanency planning process in order to find success (CPYP, 2005; Jarboe & Agosti, 2011; Jones & Kruk, 2005). While the study by Sanchez (2004) succeeded in giving voice to youth, it neglected to acknowledge a cultural dimension of permanency.

Frey, Greenblatt and Brown (2005) provide a definition of permanency, which includes a cultural dimension:

Achieving “permanency” means having an enduring family relationship that: is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family members; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being; and assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion and language. (p. 3)

National convenings on youth permanency held in the U. S. from 2002 to 2008 involved multiple stakeholders, including current and former foster youth (CPYC, 2005). Early meetings inspired people to believe that permanence was possible for youth; later convenings offered peer learning opportunities and action planning teams. More recent reports highlight the necessity of youth engagement and cultural sensitivity in permanency planning (Casey Family Services, 2008). Representatives of five Tribal Nations took part in the 2008 conference and emphasized the need to support cultural involvement and connections to a child’s home community (Casey Family Services, 2008). As conversations regarding permanency for Aboriginal youth take place it is necessary that all stakeholders are invited to meaningfully participate.

Culture and Permanency

Defining Terms

The term Aboriginal refers to the original peoples of North America and their descendants (Aboriginal Peoples and Communities, 2010). The terms First Nations, Métis and Inuit refer to specific populations of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal communities are far from homogenous; every community is unique and must be recognized as such (Voyageur & Caillou, 2001). As Klamn (2009) eloquently articulates, “[t]here is no universal depiction of any culture, or of any people. Therein is our challenge as humans as we try to interact with each other” (p. 11).

Cultural Context

Aboriginal children and youth are greatly overrepresented in the Canadian child welfare system, making up 48.1% of those in care while comprising only 7.0% of this population (Statistics Canada, 2011). In Alberta the numbers are even more dramatic. According to the Children and Youth Services Business Plan (2010), Aboriginal children comprise 64% of the child intervention caseload in Alberta, while representing only 9% of the total child population in the province (Statistics Canada, 2011). This Business Plan identifies that this overrepresentation is a serious concern and calls for well informed strategies as

crucial to improving this situation. Historic policies of aggressive assimilation failed at eradicating Aboriginal culture, but have had a devastating effect upon Aboriginal people in Canada (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). It is important to have a sufficient understanding of this colonial history and ongoing oppressive practices in order to inform future research and practice.

Historical Context

Canada's colonial history, including the legacy of residential schools and the sixties scoop, has resulted in devastating consequences for Aboriginal communities, including generations of Aboriginal children and youth facing impermanency. Aboriginal people were originally viewed by the British as uncivilized and in need of assimilation and thus they created legislation to accomplish this end. The Bagot Commission Report of 1844 described reserves as operating in a "half civilized state" and the Davin Report of 1879 recommended "aggressive civilization" (as cited in Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003). The Indian Act, implemented in 1876, defines Aboriginal people as Crown wards for whom the state is responsible (as cited in Kirmayer et al., 2003). Initially Europeans used land to control Aboriginal people, and soon after began using Aboriginal children to exercise authority and influence (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). Beginning in the mid 1800s, residential schools explicitly sought to assimilate children by removing them from their communities and banning all forms of Aboriginal culture (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005; Johnston, 1988). These schools, operated by the churches, have left a devastating legacy in Canada. Narratives and life stories recount horrific memories of abuse and forced assimilation, which are, linked to the current economic, social and mental health problems of this population (Johnston, 1988; Milloy, 1999).

In 1951 the Indian Act was revised to make provincial laws applicable to First Nations people living on reserve (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). As a consequence, child protection became the responsibility of the provinces. By the 1960s child welfare interventions became the preferred approach over residential school placement (Armitage, 1995). This period, beginning in the 1960s and stretching into the 1970s, has been called the 'sixties scoop' which refers to the high numbers of Aboriginal children placed in care and typically with non-Aboriginal families (Kirmayer et al., 2003). This practice was based on a belief that Aboriginal parents could not provide suitable homes due to the struggling reserve communities (Fournier & Crey, 1997). In non-Aboriginal homes children were disconnected from their culture and, by adolescence, many youth were as a consequence running away or turning to drugs and alcohol (Teichroeb, 1997). Further, the mass removal of children was devastating for family systems and communities and continues to have an impact (Teichroeb, 1997). New tragedies associated with the residential schools, such as the medical experiments performed on students, continue to emerge (Porter, 2013).

Transgenerational effects of residential schools and the sixties scoop are apparent in the functioning of many Aboriginal communities currently. Kirmayer et al. (2003) lists the effects of a history of cultural oppression which includes the disruption of families and communities, punitive parenting taught through institutional settings, mental health problems, lack of warmth and intimacy in childhood, physical and sexual abuse, loss of knowledge, language, tradition, Aboriginal identity, loss of individual and collective self-esteem and individual and collective disempowerment.

Alberta Context

Provinces and territories vary with respect to the relative overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system, the legislation, service delivery models and funding (Sinha & Kozłowski, 2013). The degree of Aboriginal management within child welfare system also differs, ranging from no Aboriginal child welfare agencies to 31 agencies in British Columbia, with a move towards greater Aboriginal control over the provision of these services. In this paper the province of Alberta, Canada is used as an illustrative example as it, along with the other Prairie Provinces, has a dramatic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (Sinha & Kozłowski, 2013).

In recognition of the unique needs of Aboriginal people the provincial government of Alberta delegated child protection services to Aboriginal communities. Alberta has ten Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) that provide child intervention services. Additionally there are 18 Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs), making Alberta the province or territory with the second highest number of Aboriginal child welfare agencies in Canada (Sinha & Kozłowski, 2013). These DFNAs serve 40 of the 45 First Nations communities in the province (Children and Youth Services Annual Report, 2011). The remaining five First Nations communities work closely with their local CFSAs to ensure culturally appropriate service delivery. Additionally, one CFSAs is dedicated to serving the eight Métis communities in Alberta.

The Alberta the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (2000) dictates that “the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture, heritage, spirituality and traditions should be respected and consideration should be given to the importance of preserving the child’s cultural identity” (p. 14). The Enhancement Policy Manual (2011) requires that a First Nations designate be consulted whenever a temporary or permanent guardianship application is made for an Aboriginal child. The intention is for this designate to assist in maintaining ties to a child’s community and culture. Additionally, any application for an adoption order for an Aboriginal child must be accompanied by a cultural connections plan. Legislation and policy place a high importance on ensuring Aboriginal children are involved with their culture, spirituality, language and tradition.

Permanency and Culture

Frey et al. (2005) defines permanency to include a cultural dimension, which involves maintaining ties to tradition, ethnicity, language and religion. Aboriginal youth have cultural needs that must be addressed in the permanency planning process. Although there is not yet a specific conversation in the literature regarding Aboriginal youth permanency in relationship to culture, there have been many discussions regarding adoption and Aboriginal children (Bertsch, 2010; Carrier, 2008; Klamm, 2009). Two themes that have been identified in the literature that are relevant to youth permanency include the contrast between collectivism and individualism, and identity developmental for Aboriginal young people.

Collectivism versus Individualism

Historically, western society has tended to be individualistic and viewed individuals and families as autonomous; the concept of a nuclear family continues to be a pervasive normative ideal that dominates public policy and legislation (Saggers & Sims, 2005). Based on this perspective permanency planning is the process of finding a nuclear family for a child. However the concept of a nuclear family is foreign to

traditional Aboriginal child rearing practices (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Aboriginal communities historically operated as collectivist societies (Goforth, 2007; Mussell, Cardiff, & White, 2004) within which parents, grandparents and community members all had a role in providing care for the children and teaching them to become contributing members of their community (Cajete, 2000). As Cajete (2000) explains:

The network of extended family and clan provided a web of relationship that profoundly affected perception. Children learned early the significance of family, responsibility, respect, and the foundations of relationship and kinship. Father, mother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, each in their turn and special way, influenced and formed children. Older children learned to care for younger ones. Through such experience they learned to share, nurture, and support others. (p. 96)

Historically, if primary caregivers were unable to care for children, someone else in the community would take that responsibility (Miller, 1996). Contact would also remain open between all members of the adoption triad and the biological family would be honoured rather than ignored (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996).

In many Aboriginal communities children continue to be viewed as communal resources and a child's best interest is seen as inseparable from the best interest of the entire community (Klamn, 2009; Walmsley, 2005). Ideas about custom adoption have challenged mainstream permanency planning practices for Aboriginal children (Bertsch, 2010). In the same way, permanency planning with Aboriginal youth must consider the unique cultural needs of this population. Collectivist values may influence how these practices are shaped. Questions arise regarding assigning one youth to one family should be held as the ideal permanency plan, and what role a youth's community can play in this process.

Identity Formation

According to Erikson's (1968) theories on development, identity formation is the primary developmental task of adolescence (as cited in Phinney, 1993). Arnett (2004) suggests that identity formation remains the focus of development through emerging adulthood. Research indicates that identity formation is especially challenging for members of an ethnic minority (Phinney, 1993). Phinney (1993) outlines a three-stage model of ethnic identity development, which includes unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, and ethnic identity achievement. He outlines the challenges that ethnic adolescents face in navigating this process in a Eurocentric environment. Anderson (2000) explains that Aboriginal identity is passed through generations and shared experiences, inseparable from the collective identity of Aboriginal people. Thus, according to this theory an Aboriginal youth disconnected from her or his cultural group will struggle to form a healthy identity.

Kirmayer et al. (2003) also points out that, "[t]he cumulative effects of internal colonialism on cultural identity and continuing tensions between the values of Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society complicate the efforts of Aboriginal youth to forge their identities and find their way in the world" (p. 20). Aboriginal youth raised by non-Aboriginal caregivers appear to struggle with impaired physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health (Carriere, 2008; Park, 2003). In contrast, Filbert and Flynn's (2010) study of First Nations youth in care in Ontario found that a higher level of cultural assets was significantly predictive of more resilient outcomes in the case of behavioral difficulties. With identity formation as such an important task for this developmental phase and cultural group, it must be at the forefront of

considerations in permanency planning.

Community Healing

It is important to have the conversation regarding permanency planning for Aboriginal children and youth in the context of the wider situation in Canada. Actively working to reconnect children and youth with their cultures is only a small part of a larger process of healing for Aboriginal people in Canada. As Kirmayer et al. (2003) explain:

Through individual and community-based initiatives as well as larger political and cultural processes, Aboriginal peoples in Canada are involved in healing their own traditions, repairing the ruptures and discontinuity in the transmission of traditional knowledge and values, and asserting their collective identity and power. (2003, p. 15)

Moving forward, dialogue must continue between people with an interest in finding the best ways to work with Aboriginal children and youth to ensure their needs for cultural continuity, stability and safety are met. As Kirmayer et al. (2003) suggests, “[o]nly collaborative approaches that focus on the transfer of knowledge, skills, power and authority can hope to get past the backdrop of structural violence, racism and marginalization” (p. 22). Policies must be developed within an Aboriginal context, looking beyond Western models (Baskin, 2007). In the introduction of Walmsley’s (2005) book, “Protecting Aboriginal children”, Bill Simon advises social workers to stop telling Aboriginal people what is best for them and start listening to them. In the same way it is critical that we consult Aboriginal youths in care about their perspectives on permanency and use these insights to inform practice.

The Indigenous people of Canada are heterogeneous with multiple diversities, as Voyageur and Calliou explain, they:

... have distinctive identities with vibrant cultures and varying traditions that are as different from each other as French society is from British. Although there are many commonalities and beliefs held by indigenous people, there are also many differences. These differences are not only geographical (some living in the high Arctic while others reside on the plains) and linguistic but also legal, cultural, and social. (p. 19)

Although Aboriginal peoples continue to be distinct and separate from mainstream society, Aboriginal cultures are not stagnant and have changed drastically since colonization to fit with current realities. (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). As a part of this, the role of children and youth in Aboriginal communities has become increasingly difficult to define. Traditionally young people played an important role in family and community life (Jenness, 1977), participating in daily activities of adults, learning valuable skills, through an informal, experiential process (Lafrance, 2000). Currently there exists less clarity about what a youth’s role and purpose is within a community. In order for youth to succeed they need a strong sense of cultural identity and to take an active role in their community (Kirmayer et al., 2003).

Ecological Theory

Theoretical models provide a means of identifying the necessary factors to attain permanency for Aboriginal youth. Currently ecological theory forms a foundation for youth permanency work. This

theory, originally shaped by Bronfenbrenner (1994) links an individual's developmental outcomes to the contexts to which they are exposed in their lifetime. The reciprocity of relationships is emphasized, both with other people and with the environment (Gitterman, 2011). Based on this theory one could assume that a strong, stable ecological system surrounding a youth would be predictive of future success. Gitterman (2011) explains that ecological theory, "offers a dual, simultaneous focus on people and environments" (p. 279). Social networks are an essential part of a person's environment, providing resources, emotional support and information. People who lack viable social networks lose these important supports. Gitterman (2011) uses the examples of widowers or those who suffer from chronic mental illness. One could contend that youth aging out of care also face a deficiency of social networks. Forming strong relationships around a youth, as they become young adults is particularly vital (Harris et al., 2009).

Ecological theory may parallel some Aboriginal beliefs. Cajete (2000) explains that Aboriginal people define individuals by their web of relationships including extended family, community members, spirits and ancestors. According to Cajete (2000):

Relationship is the cornerstone of tribal community, and the nature and expression of community is the foundation of tribal identity. Through community, Indian people come to understand their "personhood" and their connection to the communal soul of their people. (p. 86)

Additionally, Cajete (2000) speaks to the importance of a strong connection with one's environment, an important aspect of ecological theory (Gitterman, 2011).

Longclaws (1994) contrasts ecological theory with the Anishinabe medicine wheel framework, which comes from the teachings of Anishinabe Elders in

Waywayseecappo First Nations community in Manitoba. In this framework, Elders defined their worldview as interconnectedness between all beings and forces in the physical and spiritual worlds. The interdependence between a person and their environment is of the utmost importance. However, unlike ecological theory, Anishinabe healing principles emphasize spirituality and focus on centering oneself, acknowledging self as the principal resource. Longclaws (1994) asserts that the Anishinabe medicine wheel is not a theoretical model, but he challenges social workers to apply its teachings to practice. He stresses the importance of including Elders, ceremonies, spirituality and family in the ecological system of Aboriginal clients. He sees participation in one's culture as the primary way of restoring balance and harmony of the person and environment (Longclaws, 1994).

Conclusion

There are strong implications for permanency planning based on ecological theory and the Anishinabe medicine wheel framework. These ideas challenge social workers to consider permanency planning beyond connecting a child or youth to a singular family. Viewing Aboriginal youth as interdependent members of their communities, rather than individuals in need of one or two parents, could impact how permanency is conceptualized and in turn operationalized. Atwood (2008) states that, "[t]he goal of achieving permanent, stable placements for children in the child welfare system is an over-arching objective, but 'permanency' is a chameleon term in the child welfare world whose meaning varies from

context to context and culture to culture” (p. 239). The significant differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews influences the permanency need for Aboriginal children and youth. As demonstrated, researchers have not yet explored the meaning of permanency for particular cultural groups. Further, it is imperative that Aboriginal youths in care be consulted about their definitions of and needs for permanency in order to provide practitioners with the foundational knowledge necessary to develop and evaluate specific permanency models for Aboriginal youths.

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