

**FAMILY STRUCTURE AND VALUE ORIENTATION
IN AMERICAN INDIANS**

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The family is a recognized cornerstone of American Indian society. It serves as a repository for value orientation that guides human behavior, as a transactional milieu for life span socialization, and as a catalyst for cultural revitalization.

This article discusses family issues critical to human services planning and delivery for American Indian communities. Two basic assumptions prevail: A grounded understanding of characteristic structures among American Indian extended family systems is a prerequisite for human services planning. And, family and culture are inseparably linked to individual mental health in that a sense of selfhood is derived from an historic culture as transmitted through family systems.⁴³

The discussion serves to inform human service professionals who are in contact with American Indian communities. A life-span conceptual framework appraises the impact that human relationships and physical environments have on individual progress through the stages of life. This framework serves as a model from which to track value orientations and behavior as self-revitalizing forces. Normal and purposeful behavior within a structural fabric of extended family systems is highlighted to provide foundation knowledge under an assumption that normative conditions, rather than stress situations, represent basic guides for human service systems:

Three critical perspectives guide the discussion. The author will identify and articulate family circumstance and structure, analyze family value orientations and purposeful behavior, and assess the implications for the professions.

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⁴³ Irving M. Levine. "Ethnicity and Mental Health: A Social Conservation Approach." Paper presented at the White House Conference on Ethnicity and Mental Health. Washington, D.C. June 1976.

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Family Structure Patterns

Extended family systems that are characteristic among American Indians are often misunderstood with the human service professions. This stems from experience and training that highlight nuclear family models with occasional exposure to extended family models, for example, a family of three generations within a single household. As household units, both the nuclear and the extended family models can be found in American Indian family systems. They do not, however, represent limiting parameters. Indian family systems are extended networks which characteristically include several households. An Indian family, therefore, is an active kinship system inclusive of parents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

The feature of lateral extension into multiple households is accompanied by an additional bonding feature of incorporation by which significant non-kin become family members. This is initiated through formal and informal processes. An individual, for example, may become a namesake for a child through formal ritual. This individual then assumes family obligations and responsibilities for child rearing and role modeling.

SMALL RESERVATION COMMUNITIES

Family structural patterns vary with geographic and tribal circumstances. Structural complexity is most readily understood in remote areas of tribal homogeneity. Family structure patterns in a small reservation community assume a village-type configuration with several households in close geographic proximity. This pattern points out how family truly represents the foundation of community.

INTERSTATE STRUCTURE

Many family systems extend over broad geographic regions and assume interstate dimensions. In many cases, this structural pattern has been influenced by historical tribal mobility. In others, it has been influenced through the force of American policy. Regardless of etiology, this family structural pattern, several households in each of several states, is representative of an interstate family structure. This relationship may present difficulties for some observers because interstate linkages are not always readily understood and many human

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service professionals mistakenly presume that sinews of affective bonding are absent. Relational bonds vary among families and individuals, of course, but normative family behavior facilitates affective bonding and means of re-entry subsequent to long-term absence.

COMMUNITIES IN URBAN AREAS

Urban circumstances have provided different environmental impacts on American Indian family systems. Environmental forces, however, have not profoundly influenced family structural patterns or behavior commensurate therein. Family features of multiple households as a transactional field for socialization, incorporation of non-kin, preferential ethnic relational patterns remain as constants. For example, family members in a medium-sized urban community, located within five hundred miles of the family's reservation, had voluntarily relocated to the urban area and independently established households in close proximity to other family members. This family structure truly represents a community within a community.

COMMUNITIES IN METROPOLITAN AREAS

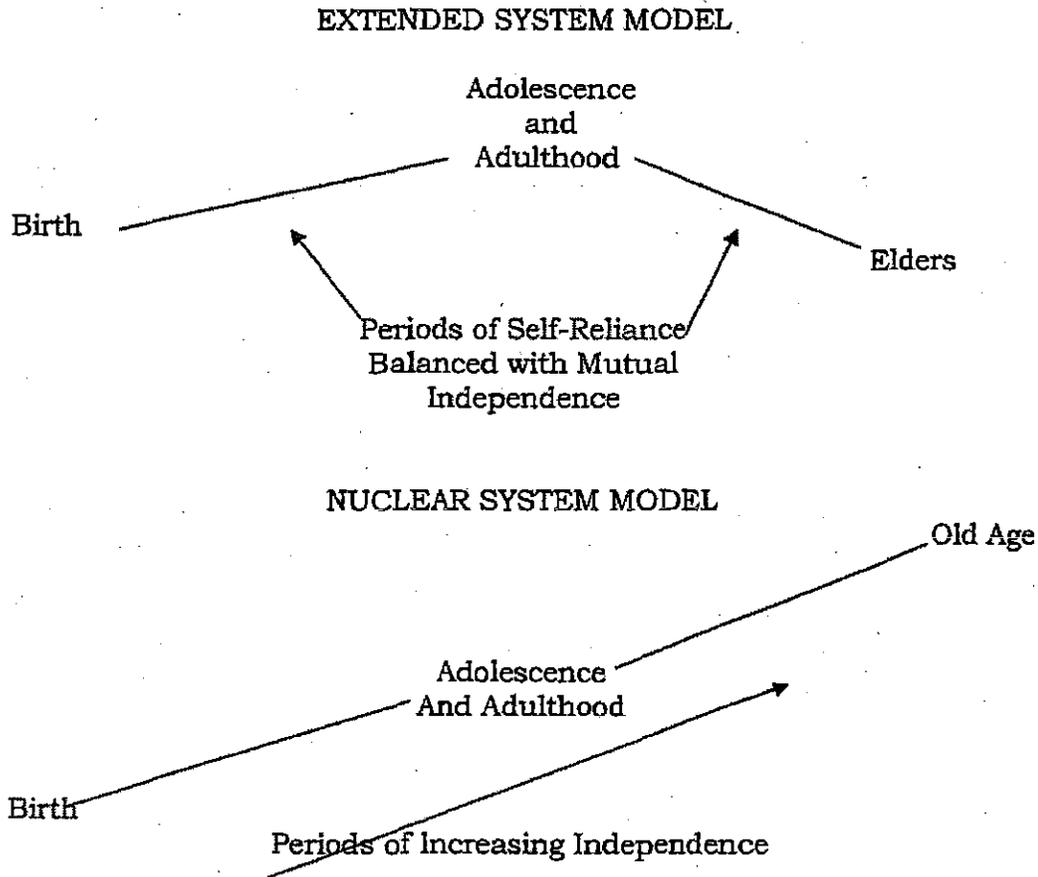
Family structure is also replicated in large metropolitan areas often located long distances from family reservations. This situation represents considerable difficulty for workers because family structural patterns appear similar to interstate family systems. Family households are often spread, for example, among several communities or cities of a metropolitan area. Therefore, they are not readily explicable. Indian families in large metropolitan areas also appear highly influenced through informal incorporation of non-kin whose "family roles" are alien and incomprehensible to human service professionals unaware of incorporation phenomena.

SUMMARY

This brief overview introduces the structural fabric characteristics of American Indian extended family systems. The feature of lateral extension incorporating several households affects life-long socialization and represents a transactional field that markedly contrasts from that of nuclear family systems common to American culture. Startling contrasts occur in extended family milieu with regard to affective bonding, parental attachment, and independence training. These are critical areas of purposeful behavior guided by value orientations designed to revitalize cultural ways.

Value Orientation and Purposeful Behavior

American Indian value orientation and cultural behavior have remained reasonably constant.⁴⁴ Indian family systems self-revitalize through field-sensitive behavior designed to enhance mutual obligation. The figure below contrasts cultural life span maps between American Indian extended family systems and nuclear family systems. The curvilinear path of the Indian family cultural life span captures the family role of pattern maintenance.



Comparative cultural life span maps explicating the curvilinear pattern of the nuclear system.

⁴⁴ John G. Red Horse, "American Indian Families: Perspectives on the Helping Process," in *We Can Help*, ed. Laurence S. Hughes (Evanston, Ill.: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1979), pp. 9-11. See also D'Arcy McNickle, *Native American Tribalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

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Value orientations among Indian families command lateral-group relational behavior, rather than autonomy and independence. Extended family systems foster interdependence. Identifying movement at distinct stages of the life span to identify increasing self-competence, independence, and autonomy becomes problematic with extended family life span models. Competence is indeed a feature in Indian family development, but self-reliance is immersed in a complex web of interdependent, field-sensitive, relational behavior. Field-sensitive behavior stresses collateral relationships in which family involvement, approval, and pride are highlighted. This contrasts individualism as a central theme in life.

Development of an Extended Family

Indian family development is readily captured through explication of purposefully ordered relational behavior. This may be visualized in three major life span phases: (1) being cared for; (2) preparing to care for; and (3) assuming care for. Life span phases are not necessarily controlled according to age, but according to family or cultural role. For example, traditional medicine men, with spirit power, may at times be very young, yet they "assume care for" others in a family, clan, or Tribe.

Moreover, "care," as a continuing thread, denotes cultural and spiritual maintenance as well as physical and emotional needs satisfaction. As an operative term, therefore, "care" identifies comprehensive family strengthening roles throughout the life span. Comparatively, ego identity in nuclear family models is satisfied through independence accomplished by what one does and achieves in life. Eventual retirement, with self-responsibility apart from the mainstream of family, serves as a life goal in a nuclear model. Ego identity in extended family models, however, is satisfied through interdependent roles enacted in a family context. Proactive roles as an elder with family responsibilities to transmit a world view derivative from a wisdom of years serves as a life goal in the extended family.

Life span development, as process, is readily captured through explication of how relationships are formally organized and acted out in a selected tribal family system. This serves to identify primacy of family roles through behavioral activity of each phase.

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BEING CARED FOR

Phase one, "being cared for," is best illustrated through naming ceremonies. The timing of this ritual varies; some Tribes perform the ceremony shortly after birth; other Tribes perform the ritual when the child is several years old. In either case, this ritual is illustrative of formal kinship obligation.

A name forms a cultural map. It sets a path from which one's life shall proceed.⁴⁵ Moreover, a name may provide spiritual sustenance; without a name, one's spirit may never come to rest in the afterworld.⁴⁶ Structurally, naming ceremonies organize an obligatory, supportive network for children. Family members, such as uncles, aunts, or grandparents, are most often selected as namesakes. Highly trusted and reliable non-kin who have been incorporated into the family system may also serve as namesakes. Naming ceremonies, therefore, revitalize an extended family system through organizing a proactive social and spiritual fabric around those being care for.

Namesakes assume major child-rearing responsibilities. Personal contact between namesakes and children is expected to occur on a regular basis. As such, namesakes act as role models. This responsibility requires high personal standards of conduct; immoral or bizarre behavior by a namesake may harm the developmental pattern of the child. Child-rearing roles include an obligation to care for the child should hard times or illness befall the parents. This represents an unconditional, nonjudgmental social insurance that does not undermine the sanctity of parenthood.

Again, the naming ceremony activates field-sensitive behavior through an ordering of relational bonds. Relationships are culturally revitalizing and interdependent. Extended family is designed as a social and transactional milieu for future passages in life.

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⁴⁵ N. Scott Monaday, *The Names* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁴⁶ Ed Bearheart, "Religion as a Variable in Family Practice." Paper presented at the Minneapolis Indian Alcohol Counselor Workshop, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Spring 1976. The tribal religion cited here is conservative and strict rules are observed. Only Indians are permitted to attend sacred ceremonies or rituals, and these are the necessary paths to spiritual completeness. Moreover, they believe that not all Indians can enjoy a happy afterlife—this requires an Indian name and knowledge of the tribal language.

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PREPARING TO CARE FOR

Phase two, "preparing to care for," is best illustrated through explication of adolescent behavior. This phase truly captures the essence of the curvilinear relationship between age and independence. It represents a period of sorting out mutuality of family relationships during a time of life when such activity is not considered a primary task by human services professionals. A confusing and oftentimes misunderstood growth and development phenomenon of family dependence occurs. Actually, this is a period of life which introduces considerable self-reliance and personal decision-making. These features, however, simply accompany family relational obligations. For example, Helen was a twenty-three-year-old Chippewa mother with three children. Helen left high school following pregnancy at sixteen. She was bright and motivated and eventually earned a high school diploma through a Graduate Equivalency Diploma program.

Helen had drifted into several household situations following the birth of her first child. Initially, she lived with her mother. She then established a household with a boyfriend and had two more children. She later lived with a sister, then a cousin on her home reservation, and then back with her mother.

During this seven-year period, Helen always contributed as a family member. She had been gainfully employed since leaving high school. She simply indicated a preference to be close to her mother's home, or in it. She sensed a responsibility to maintain relationships with kin and to be available for family duties.

One day Helen shared the news of her independence from her mother with a human service professional. Helen had rented an apartment and was going to live away from her mother permanently. The professional inquired of Helen where the new apartment was located. Helen beamed brightly and said, "Next door to my mother's." During subsequent visits, the professional always saw mother and daughter visiting each other's home. Helen's mother continued to care for the grandchildren daily.

Helen's definition of independence is refreshing. Her behavior typifies self-reliance guided by family interdependence. Close proximity encourages frequent contact among family households.

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Strengthening mutual interdependence through relational bonding remains an overt life-long task. Distance is even overcome as a potential barrier to family obligation. Urban communities that are three to five hundred miles from reservation families experience the phenomenon of reciprocal migration as family members routinely visit each other with semimonthly to monthly frequency. Reciprocal migration appears as a "phenomenon" simply through definition by human service professionals. It is, however, an historically constant behavior feature among numerous Indian family systems. On a less frequent, although routine, basis, contemporary households trek great distances to attend ceremonials and revitalize family relationships.

ASSUMING CARE FOR

This phase captures the essence of respect and wisdom. Elders are important and provide a continuity of world view; they also lend wisdom to daily life and bring order to chaos. Elders are reminders of heritage and survival and strength.

An elder's role "to assume care for" often goes beyond the natural family to include a broader community. Obligations of such magnitude have been sorted out through years of relational bonding. Elders are responsive to community situations. Young children are often observed "adopting grandparents" simply through attachment and relational behavior. A children's program in one community was required to provide a regular budget allowance for food to an elderly couple so that they could feed seven children who enacted a "grandparent" bonding.

Family role among elders suggests phenomenal strength of Indian families. An urban project serving elders in St. Paul, Minnesota, studied frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren. Seventy percent of the population studied maintained daily contact and assumed an active family role. An interesting note is that 92 percent of the elders lived in private houses or apartments.⁴⁷ This is characteristic of an Indian extended family.

⁴⁷ John Red Horse, John Ledingham, and James T. Decker, "American Indian Elders: Perspectives on Cultural Behavior and Needs." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Boston, Massachusetts, Summer, 1979.

Implications for Professionals

The integration of life span value orientations, relational bonding, and structural characteristics of the American Indian extended family system introduces the dynamic features of rational behavior designed to build mutual obligation in family development. It also challenges human service professionals to develop appropriate knowledge sources and subsequent programs.

This effort, however, must respect contemporary tribal and situational variations among American Indian family systems. Cultural investigations have identified numerous family types including traditional, transitional, bicultural, and pan-traditional. These, however, do not appear to measure "Indianness," but to capture differential transactional styles among Indian families. Many cultural features remain constant: family structure, incorporation and relational bonding, and Indian preferences in social behavior.⁴⁸

The national mood reflecting the sanctity of Indian family systems is exemplified through the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which received overwhelming endorsement from tribal membership.⁴⁹ The legislation seeks to reaffirm the cultural and structural integrity of Indian family systems.

Family reaffirmation is encouraging. Family function, however, should not be taken for granted. Many family systems no longer conduct naming ceremonies; however, this has not appeared to alter behavior around relational bonding. Affective bonding, however, requires emotional discovery and approachability. Not all Indian family systems experience these at equal levels. Human service workers should explore network delivery models that facilitate reentry whenever dislocation prevails. Without cultural network models designed to recapture distinctive tribal value orientations, affirmative efforts, like child welfare legislation, remain empty thoughts that take family reentry for granted.

⁴⁸ John G. Red Horse et al., "Family Behavior of Urban American Indians," *Social Casework* 59 (February 1978): 67-72.

⁴⁹ P. L. 95-608.

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Mediating structures should serve as family support systems. These should be designed to adjust secondary institutions to the life space of Indian family systems. Such capacity building, which reaffirms family integrity, requires tribal sovereignty. Tribes and correlating urban Indian organizations should assume the responsibility for explicating community standards of family conduct within the context of tribal value orientations.

Finally, a dramatic revision of scholarship surrounding Indian family behavior is required to guide capacity building efforts. An American Indian family science is necessary to introduce innovations to knowledge building. This offers a vehicle to identify differential roles and integrative features among family systems, mediating structures, and American institutions. A planned desideratum would be that American Indian family systems would be assured their culturally unique past, present, and future.