



Tribal Marital Systems

Research Brief

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Background: Tribal Marital Systems

There are 4.3 million Native Americans in the United States. They represent 562 different tribes and speak 292 different languages. Yet, they make up only 1.5% of the total U.S. population and are the second smallest ethnic group in the U.S.ⁱ

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Native American culture (referred to interchangeably with American Indian throughout the text) and family structure cannot be described in broad strokes. There is great diversity in the language, customs, family structure, economic systems and spiritual beliefs across tribes. There are various definitions of marriage throughout Tribes and such definitions are not always consistent with the U.S. state definitions. Many Native Americans have differing histories as to how they sustained themselves and interacted with white society (for purposes of this paper, the term “whites” was selected to refer to all non-Hispanic people who are of European descent). Scholars agree (see references throughout document) that these histories have helped shape their tribal identity today. What almost all Native American tribes share is a common experience of losing their land to whites and being forced, by a variety of means, to assimilate into Western culture, an experience that has colored their family relationships to this day.

This Research Brief is designed to offer an overview of the health and socioeconomic status of Native Americans, to describe varying definitions of family across tribes, and to discuss various aspects of historical trauma and how this trauma has affected the overall well-being of most tribes and their family systems. Finally, this brief will discuss what marriage educators and/or family preservation program providers should keep in mind when serving the Native American population.

Research and Trends

Geographic Location

Most American Indians live in Western States, including California, Arizona, New Mexico, South Dakota, Alaska, and Montana, with 42% residing in rural areas compared to 23% of whites.ⁱⁱ The number of American Indians who live on reservations and trust lands (areas with boundaries established by treaty, statute and executive or court order) has decreased substantially in the past few decades. Today, only 1 in 5 American Indians live in these areas and more than half live in urban, suburban or rural non-reservation areas.ⁱⁱⁱ



Economic Status

Native Americans experience a severe lack of employment opportunities and earn low wages in comparison to other Americans. Consequently, they are twice as likely as all other race/ethnic groups to live in poverty. In fact, the median household income of Native Americans is 70% that of all other races or ethnic groups in the U.S.^{iv} The 2000 U.S. Census found that the poorest communities in the United States were Native American reservations, and certain reservations reported that more than 90% of all money circulating in their communities comes from a variety of federal social, educational, and health programs.^v Native American children are twice as likely to live in poverty as their non-Native peers and are almost twice as likely to live in a home in which neither parent is employed.^{vi}

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Health Status

Native American families and marriages also must be considered in the context of their health status. Alcoholism, diabetes, and suicide are the top causes of mortality among Native Americans.^{vii} According to the Indian Health Service, alcoholism is 740% higher and suicide 190% higher among Native Americans than the general population. Chronic illnesses, such as tuberculosis and diabetes, are respectively 500% and 390% higher than the general population. Native Americans are also twice as likely as non-Native Americans to suffer from a serious mental illness.^{viii} Native American youth engage in more risky and delinquent behavior than non-Native Americans.^{ix}

Given these health disparities, the fact that Native Americans are less likely to have health insurance than their non-Native counterparts presents an especially concerning situation. Almost 40% of Native Americans lack health insurance compared to about 16% of the general population.^x

Family Structure

On the whole, Native Americans maintain a large household.^{xi} They have a birth rate that is one-sixth greater than that of the U.S. population. A higher share of Native American births is to a never-married mother (58.4% compared to 33.2% for the U.S. as a whole).^{xii} However, these statistics are not clear on the way marriage is defined. For example, what some Native communities recognize as marriage is not necessarily recognized as marriage in US culture. Native American children are 50% more likely than white children to live in a single-parent household (nearly 43%).^{xiii} In addition, Native American teens have a birthrate nearly 50% greater than that of their non-Native peers.

According to the 2007 American Community Survey published by the U.S. Census Bureau,^{xiv} approximately 39% of the American Indian/Alaska Native population is currently married (excluding couples who are separated). The same percentage has never been married, and approximately 13% are divorced. More than half (56%) of Native Americans are married to individuals from other racial or ethnic groups.^{xv}

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Cultural Family Norms

Historically, there has, and continues to be, much variety among tribes in defining concepts of marriage and family, although over the last 200 years assimilation and a significantly smaller population have reduced such variations.^{xvi} Practices such as bride price, dowry, arranged marriage, social marriage, bride abduction, polygamy, patrilineality, matrilineality, and bilineality could at one time be found among Native Americans. In many tribes divorce and nonmarried births had a low stigma attached to them, compared to the negative stigma associated with these issues in Western society.

Additionally, in many tribes the power balance between men and women was more or less equal. For example, in the Hopi tribe, husbands joined their wives' households after marriage and among the Pueblo, women built and owned the houses. Children frequently took mothers' last names and sons were part of mothers' clans.

Today, diversity in defining family norms among tribes still exists. For example, the Navajo Nation have strong extended families where grandparents play central roles and where "brother" and "sister" are terms that extend to clan relationships. Among the Brothertown Indians, aunts play a pivotal role in raising children.^{xvii} Additionally, many tribes actively support nuclear families in childrearing. Some generalizations, however, can be made. In Native American culture, a married couple is not seen as separate or distinct from the extended family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are often just as emotionally close to children as are parents and siblings. In fact, at some time in their lives many

Native American children live in the same household with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Roles and relationships within among tribal members can also be interchangeable. For example, it is common to describe some family members as parents even if they are older sisters or aunts by marriage.^{xviii}

Impact of Historical Trauma on Marriage and Family Formation

In order to place health disparities, poverty, and family structure issues into context, it is imperative to understand the history of Native Americans in the

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U.S. over the past several hundred years. It is one marked by profound loss. From the period between the mid 1550s until the 20th century, disease brought by Europeans, warfare, hunger and massacre had reduced their population from an estimated 7-10 million to 250,000. They had also lost more than 90% of their land to whites—and with it, their means of economic survival-- through a mix of warfare, broken treaties and forced relocation.^{xix}

Starting in the 1880s a string of government policies designed to accumulate land and assimilate Native Americans had a devastating impact on their culture. Extended families and tribes were fractured through laws that placed individual families on small allotments of land and confiscated tribal lands. Thousands of Native American children were taken from their families and placed in boarding schools where they were given Western names, and were forbid-

den to speak their native languages or engage in any cultural practices. Laws passed during that time also restricted religious practices and traditional burials on reservations, which had a significant impact given the strong role that traditional spirituality within tribes plays in fostering self esteem and self-efficacy.^{xx} Decades of disempowerment have left many Native communities impoverished and dependent on federal programs to support their families.

These practices are no longer ongoing, and in fact in the 1970s a number of federal laws were instituted to return governing powers to tribes. But the cumulative impact of these experiences has been classified by historians and sociologists as “historical trauma,” which is defined as a collective and compounding emotional and psychic wounding—both over the lifespan and across generations.^{xxi} Historical trauma tends to manifest in low self-esteem, cultural shame, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction and internalized oppression. These factors have an inescapable impact on family and marital functioning.

An effective way to counteract cultural degradation and shame is through the reinstatement of cultural sovereignty, native language, religion and other practices.

Implications for Program Providers

The following are recommendations from Native American cultural experts for developing and operating family strengthening and marriage education programs that are culturally relevant for Native Americans.

Programs should be developed by the tribal community

Cultural experts find that for institutions, policies, and programs to improve the lives of Native American children and families, they must have *legitimacy*, and in order to have legitimacy, they must match the individual cultural practices of Native American communities. Therefore, successful programs are those “conceived of, implemented by, and generally, in part, funded by tribal communities”.^{xxiii} This requires support from tribal elders in addition to implementing various tribal practices that reflect each clan’s diversity.

A 2004 report on Native American families released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that because definitions of family are also culturally specific, it is even more important that Native communities decide for themselves what strategies to employ when it comes to creating meaningful family strengthening programs. Similarly, definitions of marriage are culturally specific, and strategies to strengthen marriage in the Native American population should accommodate each tribe’s definition of marriage.

Incorporate cultural concepts and practices

An effective way to counteract cultural degradation and shame is through the reinstatement of cultural sovereignty, native language, religion and other practices. Over the past few decades many tribes have resumed such cultural practices to instill a sense of identity and pride among their people. Native American practitioners concur that traditional ceremonies and other practices of spirituality should be incorporated into family strengthening programs to make them more relevant to participants.^{xxiv} One report by the American Indian Policy Institute suggests that while differences among tribes exist, Native American values and beliefs can

still be effectively incorporated into programs through universal Native American practices such as oral teachings and learning by observing and through experience.^{xxv}

Acknowledge historical trauma

Experts contend that the historical trauma experienced by Native Americans and its effect on family functioning must be acknowledged. Creating an atmosphere of awareness by identifying the impact of multigenerational trauma on the individual, family and community can offer a healing experience. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, in her research with the Lakota tribe, states that education about historical trauma leads to an increased awareness about trauma. In addition, she suggests that sharing and mourning help the healing process. Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart has implemented these practices into a Lakota parenting curriculum designed to improve parenting – the possibilities for featuring this practice in marital interventions are promising.

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Acknowledge cultural differences

Interracial and inter-tribal marriages are complex in that they often incorporate differing views of child-rearing and family relations. It is important for couples to explicitly acknowledge these differences, and it is helpful to do so within the context of a family strengthening or marriage education program. Conflicts occur when those differences have not been effectively communicated.

The role of others in the couple's life

Overall, traditional Native American culture does not erect barriers between a married couple and their extended family or others in the community. The Native American systems of care define key people in the marital life. They can be friends, teachers, elders, siblings, traditional healers, and professional providers. Practitioners working with a Native American couple should be aware of who in the pair's life make up this system of care and what type of influence they have in the couple's life.

The need for more research

Additional research is needed on the dynamics of Native American marriages and family structures and how they may differ by tribe. There is a need to further explore the best ways to incorporate traditional Native American ceremonies and beliefs into marriage education and family preservation programs. This may be a particular challenge for programs serving Native American communities off-reservation, where participants may represent numerous tribal cultures.

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Additional Resources

www.doi.gov/bia/ia_tribal_directory.html for a list of tribes

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ana/> to learn about the Administration for Native Americans

- ⁱ National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. (2006). Research-based answers to frequently asked questions about: Native Americans and marriage.
- ⁱⁱ Rural Policy Research Institute, 1999
- ⁱⁱⁱ Report of the Surgeon General, US Department of Health and Human Services , available at <http://www.nativewellness.com/programs/relationships.html>
- ^{iv} The Harvard Project on Native American Economic Development for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2004, August). *The context and meaning of family strengthening in Indian America*. From the Annie E. Casey Foundation Web site: http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/fs_indian_america.pdf
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