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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"So, we've been taken away since forever": Indigenous Relative Caregivers' Experiences as a Framework for Uncovering Coloniality in the Child Welfare System

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Abstract
This study examines to the gravity of the ongoing removal and separation of Indigenous children from their families and nations, the reality of coloniality in the child welfare system, the glaring absence of Indigenous voices and their distinct experiences in the empirical child welfare literature, and dearth of studies that implement Indigenous methodologies. Grounded in Indigenous Storywork methodology, this qualitative study sought to understand (10) Indigenous relative caregivers' experiences with the child welfare system. Findings identified specific forms of colonial violence inflicted upon Indigenous children and families by the child welfare system, such as ongoing removal and separation, as vehicles for colonization and assimilation. Relative caregivers also exposed how the child welfare system continues to impose the modern colonial gender system, continuing a legacy of government sponsored civilizing educations programs to assimilate through racializing and genderizing Indigenous families to justify violence and maintain power and control. Relatives' lived experiences provide a framework for uncovering coloniality in child welfare in relation to continued control over family and gender.

Keywords Indian child welfare · ICWA · Indigenous child welfare · Child welfare disparities · Child welfare and racism · Child welfare and colonization · Child welfare and coloniality · Child welfare and decolonization

Introduction

For hundreds of years, settler governments have violently removed Indigenous people from our mothers. First, we were forced from our Mother Earth (lands), then we were abducted from the mothers who birthed us, forced into carceral boarding schools, and adopted far away from our homes (Adams, 1995; Balcom, 2007; Child, 1998; Fanshel, 1972; George, 1997; Jacobs, 2013; Lomawaima, 1994; Smith, 2004). This study addresses one of the most serious issues facing Indigenous people in the USA today: the ongoing removal and separation of Indigenous children from our families and nations by the child welfare system.[1] Child removal and separation are forms of colonial violence that remain within child welfare today (Sinclair, 2016), leaving Indigenous families in fear that their children will be removed just as they have been for centuries (Bussey & Lucero, 2013; Cross et al., 2010). This study examines the experiences of Indigenous relative caregivers with the child welfare system, the intractability of coloniality in the child welfare system, the near total absence of Indigenous voices and their distinct experiences in the child welfare literature, and the dearth of child welfare studies that implement Indigenous methodologies (Haight et al., 2018).

This paper was submitted a few weeks after the US Supreme Court upheld the Indian Child Welfare Act

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[1] This study focuses on Indigenous relatives' experiences within settler government child welfare systems; however, some relatives shared their experiences within tribally governed child welfare systems. Unless specified, "child welfare system/s" refers to settler government-run child welfare systems. Child welfare systems that are governed by sovereign tribal nations are referred to as "tribal child welfare" systems hereafter.

(ICWA). As ICWA was being contested, many tribes, our community members, and supporters were preparing for severe repercussions for the wellbeing of our children, families, communities, and tribal sovereignty, including assimilationist and genocidal intents through ongoing Indigenous child removal and separation (Linjean & Weaver, 2022). In 1978, ICWA was passed at the demand of sovereign tribal nations to halt the ongoing removal and separation of our children for the preservation of our cultures and future generations (Red Horse et al., 2000). Many states have passed laws and policies that expand and strengthen ICWA (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2023) . ICWA focuses on family and cultural preservation and is considered the "gold standard" of child welfare practice where active efforts, rather than reasonable efforts, must be taken before child removal (Red Horse et al., 2000).

Despite longstanding efforts by sovereign tribal nations and policies such as the federal Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA), Indigenous children continue to be removed and separated from their families and nations at higher rates than other racialized groups. The most recent national foster care data showed that American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children enter foster care at a rate 3 times that of white children (9.1 v. 3.1 per 1000; Children's Bureau, 2022). The figures are equally stark in Canada where Indigenous children represent 7.7% of the child population yet comprise 53.8% of the children in foster care (Government of Canada, 2023). In a scoping review of the Indigenous child welfare literature, Haight et al., (2018) found that the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care can be attributed to issues such as poverty, housing, mental health problems, single parenting, substance abuse, systemic racism, and intergenerational maltreatment.

Despite the scope and complexity of the problem, only recently have the knowledge and perspectives of Indigenous families and communities who encounter the child welfare system begun to be reflected in the literature (Haight et al., 2018). In their qualitative study, Navia et al., (2018) conducted interviews with (20) Indigenous youth in Canada. Youth revealed that settler colonialism continues to impact their lives as they experience child welfare systems. The child welfare system remains complicit with colonialism and perpetuates gendered violence (Haight et al., 2018). Robertson et al., (2022) explored the experiences of (12) Indigenous mothers in the Manitoba Child and Family Services system. Indigenous mothers described their experiences with colonial structures of oppression, power and control, intimidation, and judgment. In their study with American Indian grandparents (31), Cross et al., (2010) found that grandparents' decisions to care for their grandchildren were rooted in a history of Indigenous child removal and historical trauma. There is more to learn from those experiencing the child welfare system as efforts continue toward change. Truth-telling and learning from those with lived experiences within the child welfare system is critical for changing it (Crofoot & Harris, 2012; Tajima et al., 2022).

Colonization and historical trauma manifest today in many forms of oppression, violence, and structural racism, including in child welfare systems (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Crofoot & Harris, 2012). Several scholars have implicated historical trauma and colonization to explain myriad current disparities such as substance misuse (Gone, 2022; Ivanich et al., 2021), suicide (Elliott-Groves, 2017; Trout et al., 2018), and other health disparities (Smallwood et al., 2021). One notable area in which the issue of substance misuse feeds into and accelerates coloniality and governmental genocidal policies is through the continued separation and destruction of Indigenous families by child welfare systems (Haight et al., 2018). For example, Landers et al., (2022) qualitative study with birth mothers, in the context of their distinct experiences with historical loss and colonization, found that they experienced increased mental health and substance abuse issues after losing their child to adoption.

For these reasons, this study examines one central qualitative research question to explore the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous relative caregivers who have lived experiences within the child welfare system: How do Indigenous relative caregivers experience the child welfare system?

Coloniality and Decolonial Thinking, Delinking

The settler government's forced removal and separation of Indigenous children in an attempt to destroy and assimilate Indigenous families comprise a legacy of violence derived from the establishment of colonial power based on capitalism and racial and gender hierarchy. "In the nineteenth century, social scientists began applying Darwin's theories of evolutionary biology to human society, theorizing the emergence of modernity, or the "fittest" race" (Johnston-Goodstar, 2020, 378). These scholars argued that *races of people* were biologically distinct and on an evolutionary path to becoming modern man. Races were then categorized and placed into developmental levels: savage, barbarian, and civilized (Morgan, 1877). As Europe shifted into the Age of Enlightenment, so did its justification for extractive (capital, labor) and settler (land) colonial activity. Colonization, once founded on assumptions of religious supremacy was now justified by the science of racial development (Johnston-Goodstar, personal communication, 2021).

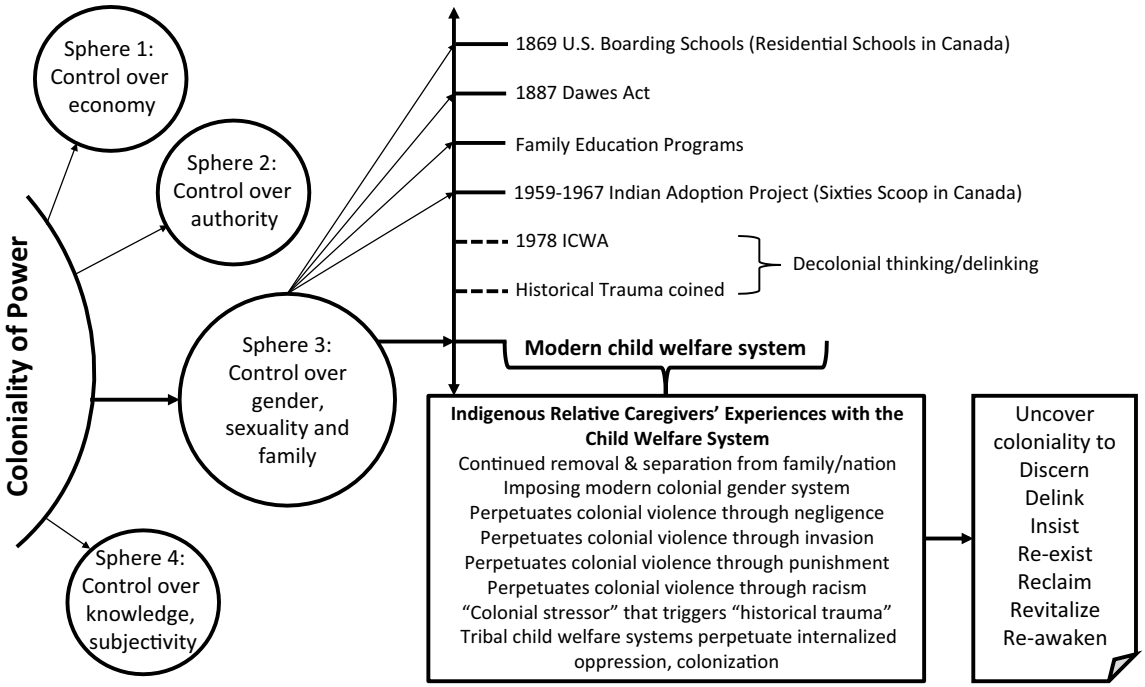

Fig. 1 Framework for uncovering coloniality in child welfare through the lived experiences of Indigenous relative caregivers

Hinged on two main axes, world capitalism and race, Quijano (2000) described the Coloniality of Power as a new exploitative power structure centered around racial hierarchy to control labor, land, and resources (Quijano, 2000). Lugones (2007) expanded Quijano's ideas to include the coloniality of gender and sexuality, or the modern colonial gender system, as a distinct categorical, dichotomous, and hierarchical logic separate from race, but equally imposed to justify power, control, and violence against the oppressed. Tlostanova and Mignolo's (2012) Colonial Matrix of Power draws upon Quijano (2000) and Lugones' (2007) work and explained that several global regions, while having their unique local histories, are located within a "universe" under a shared colonial matrix of power. Regions, including America, are linked by "Western hegemony by the logic of coloniality" (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 2). Coloniality suffuses society in culture, knowledge production, and all "other aspects of modern existence" (p. 2). The struggle and conflict for domination of one society over the other are employed through four spheres: economic control, control over authority, control over family, gender, and sexuality, and control over knowledge and subjectivity via education and colonizing existing knowledges.

According to Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012), decolonial thinking, or delinking, means to break free from knowing and being under the Colonial Matrix of Power and to "unlearn the thinking imposed upon us by education, cultural, and social environment" (p. 7). Indeed, Cavender Wilson (2004) explained that we must identify coloniality and discern what has been imposed upon our people so that we can decide what is useful and what we need to reclaim and revitalize. Lugones (2007) also proposed that we identify the systems that have been imposed upon us so that we may be compelled to reject those systems. Cavender Wilson (2004) asserted that to reclaim and revitalize who we are as Indigenous Peoples in every aspect of life is to uplift our own people from the ravages of colonization.

Indigenous Relatives' Experiences as a Framework for Uncovering Coloniality in the Child Welfare System

The Colonial Matrix of Power serves as an overarching frame for understanding the formation of coloniality and the justification of violence through the racialization and genderization of Indigenous people for violent pursuit of lands for capitalism. Sphere 3, control over gender, family, and sexuality, facilitates understanding of coloniality within the evolving federal oversight and control of Indigenous children and families from the boarding school era to the modern child welfare system and has been carried out across multiple U.S. civilizing projects. Stark evidence of this emerges in Indigenous relative caregivers' experiences with the child welfare system. Figure 1 provides a framework for understanding how these experiences uncover ongoing coloniality.

Uncovering Coloniality in Child Welfare

The control over gender, sexuality, and family was actualized through several assimilative federal projects and policies, such as boarding schools (residential schools in Canada), the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887,[2] Indian Adoption Project (Sixties Scoop in Canada), and family education programs. Indeed, Cahill (2011) illustrated how the Indian Service imposed "Anglo gender identity" through civilizing education projects for adults and children. Children were subjected to the "Indian School Service" in 1882 and removed far from home (Cahill, 2011). Cahill (2011) explained that adult education for males consisted of the Farmer Program to teach them how to take care of the newly allotted lands as a result of the Dawes Act in order to take care of their Western nuclear family. Indigenous women were subjected to training by field matrons to learn "appropriate household skills on their newly allotted lands," to transform land into "landscapes to fit their vision of an ideal home" (Cahill, 2011, p. 46).

Understanding this history reveals the current child welfare system as a mutation of past assimilative federal projects and policies and confronts its colonial complicity. Knowledge of past and present Indigenous child removal and separation, historical trauma, and coloniality is important in discerning what has been imposed upon our people so that we can protect our sovereignty, reject oppressive systems and practices, and reclaim, revitalize, and re-awaken our lifeways (Cavender Wilson, 2004). I also designate ICWA and the conceptualization of historical trauma as forms of decolonial thinking, or delinking from coloniality, that identifies our complex trauma and promotes healing for Indigenous people. Cavender Wilson (2004) asserted that we need to reclaim who we are as Indigenous Peoples in every aspect of life to uplift our own people from the ravages of colonization. In child welfare, reclaiming our kinship structures and connectedness remains priority for many Indigenous nations and communities (Chase & Ullrich, 2022; Ullrich, 2019). First, we need to recognize how coloniality is still affecting our people.

Methods

Approach

In the current study, I employed Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019) to guide my approach to gathering qualitative data to illuminate the knowledge and voices of Indigenous relative caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system. Indigenous Storywork is a "research process to make meaning through stories" (p. 4; Archibald, 2012). It is guided by principles such as respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy which serve as ethical guides for maintaining relational accountability to the stories and between the storyteller/knowledge holder (aka, participant) and listener (aka, researcher) (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). By embracing these principles, the researcher becomes "story ready" or ready to receive the storyteller's/knowledge holder's stories in a respectful and responsible manner (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 2). As Kovach (2010) states, diverse tribal nations hold certain values in common that are inherent in Indigenous methodologies such as Storywork, but they also hold values grounded in specific tribal knowledge that may lead to implementing certain aspects of Storywork differently depending on specific tribal knowledge, teachings, or ways of knowing, being, or relating. Throughout the Storywork process here, I relied on my own tribal knowledge, values, and teachings as guides for my interactions with participants and the treatment of their data (aka stories).

Site

Most of the research took place in Mni Sota Makoce (also known as Minnesota), the original, unceded homelands of the Dakota Nations. Mni Sota Makoce is the present home to 11 sovereign tribal nations—four Dakota and seven Ojibwe. The Dakota nations include the Upper Sioux (Dakota) Community, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux (Dakota) Community, Prairie Island Indian Community, and Lower Sioux Indian Community. These Dakota nations are the original peoples of the Mni Sota Makoce and today are located in the lower half of the state along the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. The Ojibwe nations include the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond Du Lac Reservation, Grand Portage Band of Chippewa Indians, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, and White Earth Reservation. The Ojibwe nations are located in the northern half of the state, many on large lakes including Lake Superior, Upper and Lower Red Lake, Lake Mille Lacs, Leech Lake, and Lake Vermillion. In addition to these 11 tribal nations, Mni Sota Makoce is home to many Indigenous people from tribal nations across the country, but especially from the Dakotas, Wisconsin, and Canada. The urban areas of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth are home to many Indigenous people and some tribal nations have banned offices in those cities to support their citizens. As a visitor to these lands, my respect for the tribal history

[2] The Dawes Act aimed to assimilate and civilize American Indians through replacing their relational connection to lands with individualistic notions of private property, making Indigenous notions of land "savage" (Adams, 2005; Deloria & Lytle, 1983; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The Dawes Allotment Act was devastating to Indigenous Peoples, reducing Indigenous territories from 138 million acres in 1887 to only 52 million in 1934 (Pommersheim, 1995).

and nations of Mni Sota Makoce was an important aspect of being "story ready."

Knowledge Holders

We use the terms Indigenous relative caregiver and knowledge holder interchangeably to refer to what Western research refers to as "participants." We believe these titles show respect for the legitimacy of the Indigenous knowledges each person shared through conversation and story. Referring to Indigenous Peoples in research as knowledge holders aligns with Lugones' (2007) beliefs that our people are "fully informed" and active resisters (p. 747–748), not merely passive participants.

Existing relationships with communities and individuals were essential for recruiting knowledge holders to participate in the current study. Since 2017, the lead author worked with colleagues at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities and the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies (aka, the Center) at the Duluth campus to build tribal community partnerships. Partnerships built through the lead author's involvment in an ethnographic research study with the Center (see Haight et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2020; Waubanascum et al., 2022) were particularly instrumental. Partners at the Center referred relative caregivers as prospective knowledge holder participants. As a tribal citizen and relative caregiver, the lead author also relied on her own network for recruitment of Indigenous relative caregivers with whom she shared experiences of caring for young relatives.

Inclusion criteria included the following: (1) membership with or descendancy from any tribe in Minnesota or Wisconsin and (2) being a primary caregiver for children of relatives or of other tribal/community members, another Indigenous relative caregiver, or a tribal community elder with knowledge of traditional kinship knowledge and practices, and (3) be able to freely choose to participate in the research on one's own. Individuals would be excluded from the study if they were unable to read or sign the informed consent form on their own.

Ten relative caregivers agreed to share their stories and knowledge. Knowledge holders included individuals in their mid-20 s though early 60 s, 2 of whom were from tribes in Wisconsin. Most knowledge holders ($n = 8$) had lived experiences as relative caregivers who encountered the child welfare system, a few ($n = 2$) had experienced the foster care or child welfare system themselves as a child, and one was a boarding school survivor. Most ($n = 9$) were professionals working in child welfare or tribal child welfare systems. Because we also defined "Indigenous relative caregiver" in decolonized terms as someone who is active in their community through advocacy, activism, systems change, education, or service (this is not an exhaustive list); some knowledge holders ($n = 8$) in this study identified as relative caregivers who dedicated their lives to changing child welfare and reclaiming our Indigenous kinship systems for our young relatives and future generations. Even though they were not taking care of children in their own households, their relationships extended to the community as many Indigenous communities believe we are all related. In many nations, our kinship transcends Western familial constraints that extend to the community. Therefore, relative caregiving could indicate caring or advocating for Indigenous children inside the home or in the community at large.

Procedures

A semi-structured interview guide was used to invite knowledge holders to share their experiences within child welfare systems. Prior to the interview, each knowledge holder was asked if they felt comfortable talking with me and a colleague together, or just me (the lead author) alone. We aimed to process and interpret the interviews from both insider and outsider perspectives as I share many characteristics with the knowledge holders as an Indigenous person and relative caregiver. Eight knowledge holders indicated comfort talking with me and a colleague while 2 preferred talking with me alone due to the established trust they had with me. Each conversation lasted approximately 1 h, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Upon analysis, knowledge holders were invited to approve and/or edit their contributions to the findings, as a form of member checking.

Interviews were conducted using the Conversational Method in Indigenous Research (Kovach, 2010) which supports the principles on Indigenous Storywork as described previously. The Conversational Method is decolonial, relational, and purposeful (Kovach, 2010) that allowed for informal, flexible, dialogic, and collaborative conversations that supports a respectful space for the storyteller to share their stories. The Conversational Method advises that a protocol determined by the epistemology and/or place where the conversations take place be included (Kovach, 2010). I drew on the protocol I had been taught for introducing myself to other Indigenous people and that is common among many Indigenous people. In conversations where I did not know the knowledge holder, introductions were important for sharing our tribal lineage and identifying people we knew in common. Sharing this information grounds Indigenous people to a particular place and helps build relationships, which are key to establishing trust.

Additional characteristics of the Conversational Method relate to respect and relationality (Kovach, 2010). During some of the interviews, I instinctively knew that I would have to balance deep listening and dialogue. In many Indigenous communities, including my own, it is disrespectful to interrupt people when they are sharing their story. In interviews with knowledge holders here, I used my

ancestral teachings to guide respectful conversations by not interrupting in the middle of their story. I employed "deep listening"—a process where the listener is physically, intellectually, and spiritually present and engaged in the storyteller's narrative and does not provide any verbal feedback or interruption but may provide eye contact or affirming body language (Umbreit, personal communication, 2021). And, at other times, I engaged in a collaborative dialogue—inserting myself as appropriate in the conversation and asking follow-up questions during natural breaks in the conversation/story.

Sampling, Setting, and Informed Consent

Both purposive and snowball sampling were used. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on their specific experiences or knowledge (Padgett, 2017) and was employed within my own network of Indigenous relative caregivers. Snowball sampling was used when knowledge holders were asked to refer interested persons who met the study's criteria. Prior to each conversation, each person read and signed an informed consent form, and I provided a description of my research and then asked if they wanted to contribute their knowledge and experiences to the study. Consent was also explained to potential knowledge holders during recruitment. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted through the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities to ensure protected, informed, and uncoerced consent. To minimize any emotional or spiritual risk to knowledge holders, they were assured participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue participation at any time without negative consequence. The main interviewer and secondary interviewer (as discussed above) are experienced social work professionals who are sensitive to any emotional reactions that could have arisen and prepared to respond appropriately with support. Conversations were conducted in locations chosen by each knowledge holder in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth, MN—for example, a library, coffee shop, restaurant, college campus, office, and by phone. Knowledge holders were compensated with a $25 gift card.

Data Analysis

Conversations were transcribed and uploaded into a secure drive on the University's computer. Transcriptions were coded for themes using NVIVO 12 for Mac (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2021) qualitative data analysis software.

Thematic Analysis Data analysis consisted of both Western Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) and Indigenous methods via Condensed Stories and some conversations (Kovach, 2009). I implemented thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to identify, analyze, and interpret themes and relationships across stories. Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study because it is "unbound by theoretical commitments" (p. 297), can be applied across research paradigms, and was developed for use within qualitative research. I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases for thematic analysis, which is an inductive approach to identify, analyze, and interpret themes consisting of the following steps: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, inducing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Condensed Stories After locating the relationships across stories with thematic analysis, I applied a customized version of Margaret Kovach's story method to uphold relational accountability. Modeled by Kovach (2009), the condensed story honors the knowledge holder's story in context and voice of the knowledge holder (Kovach, 2010). According to Kovach (2010, p. 116), a condensed story comprises the essence of the inquiry and stays "as true as possible to the voice, context, and their truth" (Kovach, 2009, p. 53). For this study, my customized version of condensed story includes some longer, contextualized exemplars of their uninterrupted stories. I also integrated condensed conversation where appropriate. These condensed conversations may include my dialogue in addition to the knowledge holder's expressions to signify my relationship to both the knowledge holder and topic.

In addition, Kovach explained that each story is "couched" between a brief introduction and a reflective commentary of the teachings most relevant to the writer (me), which are in the discussion. She clarified that readers will be able to make their own interpretations through their own lens as the conversation/story will remain in its context (Kovach, 2009). I included a brief introduction for each theme. I also wrote a deep and personal introduction of each knowledge holder as though I was introducing each person to my family or my community. I also described the reasons I asked them to contribute their knowledge to this study and how they are related to this topic.

Findings

"So, we've been taken away since forever": Experiences of Indigenous Relative Caregivers in the Child Welfare System

> And then because the colonizer controls the narrative, then we are never able to say, "Hey, guess what, there's nothing wrong with us, there's something wrong with

you." There's something wrong with the colonizer and until we have the space as Native people to carve that around our communities and around our children to say, "Hold up, we're going to try to stop this from happening in some little way," so like my little way was [child's name], right? I feel like I saved her from the system. We [Indigenous people] believe that you choose your parents, in the Spirit World, she chose them. And that's powerful. Who am I to disrupt that, you know what I mean? And who is the system to disrupt that? If you're constantly looking at our community that there's something wrong with us and never understanding and seeing into yourself, then this is never going to stop.

Waterlily's words represent a unifying theme expressed across knowledge holder stories that the child welfare system perpetuates coloniality and urges the need to shift the problem focus from individual to systemic. I met Waterlily at a community event that she organizes for Indigenous women's wellness. She is a leader within her community and welcomed me to many events when we lived in Minnesota. I learned that we share common values where we, according to Waterlily, "show up for our people," in a good way. Waterlily is also a community leader, organizer, educator, and a good relative. I asked her to share her knowledge because she is an auntie and cares for many young relatives in her community. Waterlily is also a professional and holds immense systemic knowledge. She is steadfast in recognizing and resisting racism and coloniality in the contemporary settler systems.

The following findings present the experiences of Indigenous relative caregivers who have encountered the child welfare system. While no direct prompts were provided to steer the conversation toward coloniality, knowledge holders consistently shared experiences that implicate the child welfare system as perpetuating ongoing colonial violence in various ways.

Theme 1: the Child Welfare System Perpetuates Coloniality by Forcefully Removing and Separating Indigenous Children

In the conversation below, Ande illustrated how the child welfare system is a continuation of forced government removal and separation practices. Ande is an Indigenous woman, leader in her community and profession, relative caregiver, mother, and auntie (among many other titles). She is a professional with experience working in county and tribal child welfare. She is also an educator and continues to fight coloniality in the child welfare system. I met her in 2017 when we were working on a research project in Minnesota. We met on several occasions and built a relationship based on our shared experiences and roles within our families and communities. I asked her to participate in this project because of her lived experience as a relative caregiver and child welfare social worker. Reminiscent of the boarding school era, the following condensed conversation between Ande and me illustrates how Indigenous child removal is ongoing in the child welfare system.

Ande: So back home in [home state], because I think of that as home too, not just [Tribe]. My brother's baby's mother takes care of her nieces and nephews because their Mom struggles with addiction. Those kids have been with different family members, they're really challenging kids. So, when it gets too difficult to manage, they go to the next family member, and unfortunately on Tuesday, they had to drop the kid off. They said, "We gave her to the state," and like, [Ande pauses and begins to silently cry]. You will think when people say that, that they think there's going to be help [but there was no help], and their heart was so heavy. They couldn't figure out what else to do. And the state would be like, "Oh well, give us your kid, we will help them," but they know that she's not going to get the help that she needs. And so, I could tell in her voice, I was like "Oh my gosh, what's wrong with you?" "Why are you so glum?" And she said, "We just gave her to the state," and I was just like, "Oh my god I'm so sorry." And I work for the state, not for the state of [home state], but that had to have been so hard. I was trying to tell her, "You guys really did try everything that you can, you know the stuff that she needs you guys don't have access to without the help of the state." They're from [home state], they gave her to the state of [home state], to be shipped off to a whole other state.
Cary: What?!
Ande: Yes. We met at the airport [when] she was being shipped off to [far away state].
Cary: With who?
Ande: With a psychiatric facility. So, in the end they said they can't have contact. She said, "I wanted to go hug her. Say goodbye, but the social worker said "No," only the mother, she's a young mother, and her baby could say bye to her and once she got on the plane, none of the family could have communication with her.
Cary: What? [in disbelief]
Ande: Yeah.
Cary: Sounds like the boarding school all over again. I'm taking your child. Wow! Wow It's amazing how many of us try to avoid [the system]. I've heard from a few other people who just take the kids and try to avoid the county or state and altogether.
Ande: "Yup!"

Like Ande, Cedar works alongside child welfare as a reunification case manager with her tribe's tribal child welfare system. I asked Cedar to share her knowledge because I value her perspective as an Indigenous relative caregiver. I met Cedar in the University setting and got to know her more when we became friends on social media. Cedar is active in decolonization by shifting from systemic reliance by immersing herself in building up her community. She is a fierce mother, advocate, activist, social worker, and relative (among many other roles). She has dedicated her life to ensure Indigenous children are safe from the child welfare system. Cedar described current fears of removal where child welfare and the medical systems intersect and the devastating intergenerational impacts of Indigenous child removal:

> I feel like it's legal kidnapping [emphasis added]. CPS [Child Protective Services] has tried to take my daughter away from me, and had I not known my rights they would have succeeded. I have had several doctors who I asked to look into the conditions that my daughter had that I felt were preventing her from thriving. Instead, the doctors told me that I was an overly concerned first time mother, and not to "worry so much." Only to find out later that they had called CPS due to the same concerns that I asked them to look into, stating that I was likely not feeding her. Within a couple of months, we fortunately found a doctor of culture who looked into my concerns, and they were able to get her on the right medications to ensure that she would thrive. It was a fight to keep her out of the [child welfare] system, and one that my own mother lost, and her mother lost because not only did they not know their rights, they did not even know that they had rights. My mother and I were taken from our homes, our families, and our communities to be raised by people who did not care to try and maintain those connections, nor do I believe they cared about us as both of us were removed from foster home after foster home following our removal from our birth parents and having most of our relatives severed from our lives prior to adulthood.

Theme 2: the Child Welfare System Perpetuates Coloniality by Imposing the "Modern Colonial Gender System"

A few relative caregivers had lived experience as children in the child welfare and foster care, and one was a boarding school survivor. They described how the system continued to impose what Lugones (2007) described as the modern colonial gender system, that is, the systematic gendering of Indigenous Peoples, creating a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority to justify violence and normative judgment.

I asked Kevin to share their knowledge for this project because they are a well-respected elder, leader, Two-Spirit relative, educator, and professional mental health clinician. Kevin is nationally known throughout Turtle Island (aka, North America) and has dedicated their life to protecting Native Two-Spirit LGBTQIA + (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual) youth from coloniality in child welfare and foster care system. Kevin strives to bring attention to the often-ignored issue of violence against Two Spirit, Native LGBTQIA +, and Native men and boys. Kevin uses their personal story to help others who are experiencing similar situations. While the following excerpt represents a traumatic event, it also represents how the child welfare system has inflicted trauma by imposing colonial gender norms onto our people. In Kevin's story, negligence through the suppression of their Two-Spirit identity was extremely traumatic for them. They also discussed an important intersection of boarding schools forcing colonial gender norms. Kevin described how their own involvement in the child welfare system inflicted emotional violence and trauma by forcing modern colonial gender norms through state sanctioned therapy. When asked about their specific experience with the child welfare system, Kevin described with their own experience as a Two-Spirit youth who experienced the foster care system:

> They [the child welfare system] will in turn create more mental health issues. They will then create their own internalized homophobia, in how they see themselves. Oftentimes, when a child is not feeling safe that's when they run to the streets and become a bigger target for sex and human trafficking. So, I don't believe that the system is doing enough for individuals who identify [as Two-Spirit, LGBTQIA+]. I also speak about the child welfare system failing me because they continued to keep putting me back into a home where more violence was perpetrated upon me. Sometimes, as an adult, I think about what I experienced, and I think they just put me in a place not even knowing the impact that it would have on me. At the age of ten when I was emancipated by the court system, I was forced to go to a boarding school and my experience in the boarding school was not good. I was severely abused, and my own social workers, my own child protection program, didn't know how to properly serve me. I was forced to see a psychologist and the psychologist was more interested in changing my identity rather than talking about the trauma that I experienced. I don't have really good things to say about the system today" [emphasis added].

From their professional experience, Kevin elaborated and described how they encounter similar failures for Two-Spirit youth in the child welfare system today:

> I will say that we are failing our Native youth by not teaching them about this identity, and I believe that it's our responsibility as Native people to teach them about how important their identity was before colonization. I had an opportunity to attend a panel of young people, and one of the individuals identified as Two-Spirit transgender male and he talked about his experience of being forced to go to church. He talked about getting no support about his identity. I went to the higher up people and said, "I'm really saddened because the system hasn't changed much." They looked at me and they said, "really?" And I said, "yes, because that child should not have to be put in a place where he's not being supported for who he is or even having workers who cannot find support for him.

Cedar had a similar experience from her lived experience with the child welfare and foster care system. This story revealed how the child welfare system and her foster parents imposed the modern colonial gender system upon her:

> I was taken away as a kid and put into foster care, and so was my Mom, and my Gramma was in a boarding school. So, we've been taken away since forever. I grew up in the system for most of my childhood. I was placed in 16 homes, and only one of them was an ICWA home. It really sucked. I mean I had to do a lot of things I didn't even recognize were because I didn't understand the concept of patriarchy. I think because as you get older, you learn more about the language that is used to describe these things as you get older, but then I didn't recognize what patriarchy was, or why Christianity was so important to my foster parents. I didn't recognize it because I came from a long line of matriarchs, and Christianity was not a big part of my childhood with my family. So, I didn't realize, things like the idea that you have to have food on my table at 5pm if you're a woman, and it can't be a minute late or a man's going to yell, or you have to go to church like, no if, ands, or buts, not even, you don't even get out of it when you're sick …. Like you have to go to church. I was forced to go to church in several of my foster homes and do a lot of different things I could not understand... you have to wear pants when men are in the house, and these are things I never understood. I never understood while I was in it. I didn't grow up with my family like that. And so, I got put into these places where like none of the things that I learned growing up with my biological family was, it was all different and I was so confused. And because I wouldn't conform to those ideas, I was not accepted. Now looking back on it I have I finally have the proper terminology to say what these things are. This is what I hope [to help people understand] that it changes kids, it changes you, it changes your adulthood, it changes your child rearing. It changes everything if you happen to buy into that and when you're a kid, you buy into a lot of what's fed to you. If that's what it is and that's what it is.

These experiences provide examples and evidence on how the child welfare system continues to perpetrate the modern colonial gender system as a form of ongoing colonial violence.

Theme 3: the Child Welfare System Perpetrates Colonial Violence through Negligence, Invasion, Punishment, and Racism

Knowledge holders described colonial violence from the child welfare system that has resulted in harm. The following experiences were due to what knowledge holders depicted as failures or negligence, invasion, punishment, and racism within the child welfare system.

Colonial Violence Through Negligence Negligence from the child welfare system can mean failure to implement laws such as the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), resulting in harm to the child, family, and community. Negligence can also occur in the form of failure to provide appropriate services, including culture-based services. Cedar shared how the child welfare system's failure to implement ICWA deprived her of her cultural identity and family:

> I was removed from my family when I was eight, and then we tried back and forth to you know they "tried" I'm air quoting this [tried]. They tried to reunify, and it was permanency when I was 12. We spent that long going back and forth. After talking to my mom later, she did not even understand what was happening and no one had given her a case plan. What was she supposed to work on without a plan?"… Then later in life I found out that's not how it should have been. Sometimes I was only in a home for a few days because they got rid of me, having to pack all of my belongings in black garbage bags and go to the next person who verbally said I was part of the family but only for a little while.

She also described how this negligence resulted in the loss of her Native identity:

> Even getting back into my culture and getting to know my relatives is hard because I was removed for so long.

> I realize now that was part of the plan [for removal]. I don't want that experience for anyone else because it's terrible. You lose your identity. Not only that but you actually lose real people in your life, but you lose some of yourself.

Finally, Cedar talked about the impact of culturally inappropriate services:

> You are forced to see a therapist for most foster homes and like all my therapists none of them were culturally appropriate [emphasis added]. So, I just sat in a room with a white lady across from me. Then I just sat there, staring, like "I'm not going to talk to you, I don't know you. You don't know my life. You don't understand the way that I live with my family lives like I'm not going to talk to you." I literally had a counselor for an entire year, and I just sat across the table from her. She would try to keep talking to me, and I would just look around for an hour, every week. There was no opportunity when I was a kid to go to ceremony, there wasn't an opportunity to learn my language, there wasn't an opportunity to even be with my family…. they would cut off visits and I wasn't allowed to be with my family at all for a pretty long period. No one tried to set up visits with my family members even knowing they are supposed to search for relatives right away. They didn't do that either. My only relative ICWA home was when I was 16. I had spent from age eight until 16 in a bunch of other homes that they didn't even look for an ICWA placement. I just happened to get my third social worker throughout that period, and she was brand new and just graduated college. I was her first case she got handed. She had just learned about ICWA, and so she immediately got on top of it and within a few months I was in that home. But until then, they didn't even really look into it.

Waterlily described a situation where her family experienced harm when the system neglected to communicate requirements with her cousin that she needed to complete in order to see her children. Waterlily discussed how she ultimately did the work the social worker should have done:

> When [Child's name] got placed with me, we had her birthday, and her mom was obviously still using. I went up to her and asked, "What are you doing? I guess I'm going to raise her if you don't get your shit together." And I said, "But what the hell, you need to step up for this girl, this baby." She replied, "oh my god Waterlily, I haven't seen her only but two or three times, I don't understand why I *can't* see her' and I'm like, "What?" – she told me, "I try to set up visits with the child protection worker and he didn't show up or the baby didn't show up" [emphasis added] There were misconnections, she said, "I don't understand what I have to do to see my baby." And I'm like, "hold up, let me figure it out." So, by this time, it's like two, three months later, and I finally see the child protection worker and the court case stuff is finally given to me and it literally says in there, no supervised visit or no visits until they go into treatment. So, I'm like it looks like you just got to go to treatment, so I don't even know the process because I don't do that in the community. So, I'm like what's the process and she's like, "I don't know, I think I just got to go to detox." So, I picked up my cousin and the dad [Child's dad]. First, I feed them then I drive them to detox. Then I'm like okay, what's the process? So, then I hit up the child protection worker who technically that would be his job, right?

Amber is a relative caregiver, an elder, and a child welfare professional from a tribe in Minnesota. I first met Amber in 2014 when I worked for a national tribal training and technical assistance organization. Amber served as a consultant and often trained tribal communities in tribal child welfare and justice system processes. Amber described how a lack of services in the system overwhelms families:

> I would like to see them follow the families as a whole for longer periods of time before they try to call them. What happens is the parents go to treatment. They're in treatment for 30, 60, 90 days. They come out of treatment and they're coming home to the same environment that they left. They're newly sober and really have good intentions, but their same old friends are calling them, their same old family is coming around. Then, they say, "Okay here's your kids, here's your five kids that you haven't seen for two years but you went to treatment, so, we're going to give them back to you." I keep saying that they're overwhelming these already vulnerable people when they're coming home from treatment [emphasis added]. It should be monitored longer. I think our expectations should be higher rather than thinking that this is the normal thing. I don't believe that we're supposed to accept things to be normal that shouldn't be.

These shared experiences of relative caregivers illustrate the traumatic impacts of child welfare system negligence. The next section discusses experiences of an invasive child welfare system with deeply embedded issues of power.

Colonial Violence Through Invasion Knowledge holders described their reactions to child welfare system interactions

that they deemed to be invasive. Lacy described an invasive situation that caused her stress as a relative caregiver:

> When we were involved in the system, I felt invaded at times because the worker had to come to my house and inspect my house. The parenting people came over and I felt invaded. Now, they were just there to spend time with my nephews, but I felt like it was an invasion of privacy. Now the government is involved and can enter my home at will and evaluate us. They had to inspect my house like I was the one who did something wrong. I get it, and I know they have to make sure that a kid is going into a safe house and family, but as a Native person, I have a different feeling about this type of invasion. That feeling that my ancestors had as our lands were invaded, and we still feel like we are being invaded when outsiders come into our homes, and they have control over our lives. It's stressful [emphasis added].

Joe was referred to me by an Indigenous colleague and community member. Joe is from a tribe in Minnesota, a community member and a long-time relative caregiver and foster care provider. Joe and his wife are known in the community for caring for many Native kids throughout the years as foster parents. Joe described how the *Indian child welfare workers* have been involved with his family and the kids they care for and if they have been supportive:

> Most are really good about helping you work with the system. There's been a couple we've had problems with, but the majority of them are just great and I'm glad they are there because somebody's got to watchdog the county because, you know, I don't trust the county [emphasis added].
>
> Cary: Can you give an example of one of the supports that were important for you from the Indian child welfare workers?
>
> Joe: Yeah, not all workers are culturally sensitive. Some have unrealistic expectations of this or that and, like I said, they got the power. They can write down in their case file and show the judge and they're more believed than us, I think in a lot of cases. So, we try to get a good relationship with somebody and there's always a team of people who does it. There are protection workers, sometimes there's probation. So, there's always a big team and of course everybody's got to watch us too as foster parents. Sometimes they seem like they're monitoring us more than the kid. So, we just try to keep them doing their job, which is not always easy to do because there's county workers that just want to do their time and not their job really. There's a lot of good county workers though. There's been just some we run into that, you know, are useless. So, it helps when there's somebody on that team that you can work with, and that's usually with Native workers.

Joe's experiences illustrate the importance of Native and culturally humble professionals who can provide the necessary support that families need.

Colonial Violence Through Punishment Knowledge holders described the child welfare system as a punitive structure that they feared and tried to avoid. Susie is a Native woman with a young daughter and nephew. Her mother often lives with her to help her take care of her household. We became close friends when we met at the University family housing complex where we bonded over our shared experiences of being Native women pursuing a doctoral degree and auntie caregiving (among other things). She recently graduated with a Doctoral degree and moved home to her tribal community. We would sometimes talk about our reasons for avoiding the child welfare system when we would meet to process our experiences taking care of multiple children while in rigorous programs. Susie explained that she tries to avoid the child welfare system because she feels like it would criminalize her sister:

> The formal system has so much power. Then you have to have certain paperwork for them. They're not sensitive to that openness with families. Like, okay, we don't agree with things my sister does, so [child's name] is here with me. This is a better situation for him, but they don't make it easy without criminalizing her [emphasis added]. I feel like my sister would be criminalized. I feel like women in general, if you don't have your kids, they are looked at like "what's wrong with you?" So, I feel like they do that a lot. Then they would be like, well, why does she have her younger one and not her older one? I just feel like they try to make it seem like there's something wrong with her even though it's just a better placement. I live in a better school district. Like if it was simple like that, but they really try to go hard – harder into it, I think. Or even if they don't, I feel like I have some weird subconscious thing where it's like, oh they might [get involved] and I don't even want them to.

Lacy shared how the punitive nature of the child welfare system negatively affected her family and their relationships. She was taking care of her nephews who had been placed

with her by the county child welfare system and how a no-contact order negatively affected her nephews:

So, I knew that they missed her, and they loved her. I would tell them I love her too because she is my sister. That was the sad thing about being in the system, that there were sometimes no-contact orders. My sister and her kids couldn't see each other until the parenting people could facilitate supervised visits. I know that those types of interventions are necessary in some serious situations. But in our situation, I could've handled supervised visits with my own sister. They didn't even consult with me about how I felt about it. I just remember my younger nephew would cry himself to sleep every night because he missed his mother so badly [emphasis added].

Lacy described that pursing kinship care monies from the county can be punitive:

> Receiving kinship care isn't going to impact my decision to take care of my nephews. I would take care of them either way. If I got it, great. I've gotten it before. I just let it go because it comes with strings attached because now the county is involved in my family and that's not worth it [emphasis added]. That's one of the reasons I take in my nephews to keep them out of the system. My Auntie [name] didn't get any kinship care for her grandchildren she cared for. She didn't push for any monetary assistance because she believed that the children's mother would take them back because the system would come after her for child support. That would have caused her more trouble, so that's why she avoided kinship care. Her grandchildren were loved and taken care of without it because that's just how we take care of each other in our family and community. We do it regardless of system involvement or money.

Colonial Violence Through Racism Knowledge holders described experiences of racism with their child welfare system interactions. Their experiences indicated race as being a major factor in some of the harm they experienced when encountering the child welfare system. When Ande was asked if she was involved in any investigation processes or court hearings as a relative caregiver, she described how the racist child welfare system incited fear:

> I did recently have a maltreatment report made against me by the police. Part of what makes my experience so complicated is that I work for this agency [child welfare], and I live within this county. So, the day I got the phone call from the police officer and explained what was happening, he said (he didn't know that I work here), "I do need to make a maltreatment report." And my heart just sank. I got so, so scared and I've had other instances where I've got the feeling that people were going to report me, and because I work for the system, I get so scared that they're going to remove my kids and the kids I care for. This police officer said he had to make a report. He was trying to explain why. And I said, "No, I understand." And I got really quiet, and I started crying. And he asked, "what's wrong with you? Are you okay?" I said, "you're about to make a report on me and I'm a person of color in this community. I know that the system doesn't treat us fairly. I'm scared." He said, "well you don't really have anything to be scared of. You know this, and this is what it is. What you said to me makes sense [about the report]. And I replied, "but you're white. Don't Tell me I don't have anything to be scared of." I said, "I work for this system." And he said, "well then you would know that you don't have anything to be scared of." And I said, "let me reiterate, I work for the system. I'm a person of color, I have every reason to be afraid [emphasis added].

Coloniality within the child welfare system can be deemed as negligence (failures), invasiveness, punishment, and racism. As such, relative caregivers continue to experience historical trauma triggers and ongoing trauma as they experience the child welfare system.

The Child Welfare System and the Threat of Removal are a "Colonial Stressor" that "Triggers Historical Trauma"

Coloniality and colonial violence perpetrated by the settler child welfare system, including forced removal and suppression of Indigenous lifeways, assimilation, negligence, invasion, punishment, and racism are evident in the shared experiences of relative caregivers. These conflicts can cause harm given the state child welfare system's power and control over Indigenous bodies. Results also revealed relative caregivers experienced historical trauma triggers because of their experiences, for example trauma was triggered by the threat of removal by child welfare case workers. When asked to respond to a question about her experiences with the child welfare system, Waterlily explained how the child welfare system "triggers" her historical trauma when she was helping a community member:

> My teenager [a teen she was caring for] got placed in an unsafe home, and any child protection worker just had to pull up the calls to know that there were sexual abuse allegations in that home. Then they would have never placed the child there. The community knows which houses are safe and unsafe. I heard a story from my community, where they had to go down to that

court and say you can't place that child in that house, he was my abuser to the judge in order to save that child from being placed in that unsafe house, right? I was door knocking at [Tribal Community] last summer and someone came out and said, "Waterlily, I need your help, one of my grandchildren are in foster care right now and I'm pretty sure they're being sexually abused by someone who's coming into the home." These things are really hard to unpack. I'm like, "Let me support you through this call, these are the things we need to as a community, call child protection," So, I'm coaching her through the call because this is what we would do as a community. We would say, how can I support you, how can I guide you to this process. Because when she calls, she gets all kinds of triggered. And by triggered, what I mean is that dealing with the system is a historical trauma trigger [emphasis added]. Because they used words like "removal," and they used tactics around fear. How are we supposed to engage in healing if we don't ever stop to think about how we're perpetuating these traumas over and over for Native people? So, even if they wanted to recruit me again as a foster parent, the system is traumatizing me and stirring up my historical trauma by using these words. Then I don't want to do this either. How am I supposed to care for this child? The system is so far from ever being able to do that because it's a system and the system is colonized, right?

Ande shared a historical trauma trigger that she both witnessed and experienced as a professional who works for the system:

Yeah, in their world in, their eyes that's so emotionally traumatizing for the kids. They need you to help them pack up, you need to help the kids transition into the car, and you're not only taking my kids, but you want me to help you. The faces of kids that you remove are absolutely heartbreaking. I hated that part of my job even when I did it and the parents knew, that didn't change the face. It didn't change the hurt. The parents hurt too. The kids aren't part of all those conversations about what's going on or where they are going. [As the social worker] I'm going to be forced to remove your kids, so the kids don't understand because they're not part of those conversations. All they know is that you've been showing up to their house a lot. And then one day you show up, and you take them. Just talk about triggering for all of the historical trauma [emphasis added], the blood memory from the boarding school [emphasis added]. You have just up and removed [the kids] and, oh, man, it's triggering.

Similarly, Waterlily described an invasive interaction with a foster licensing case worker who came to her house to complete paperwork. Waterlily explained how the case worker triggered an emotional response after she used the word "removal."

I'm not comfortable telling you this, I don't know who you are and you're in my house and I'm super uncomfortable and what's your bottom line? Why are you asking me this?" I grew up in [Tribal community] and I knew a lot of people who lived in [Tribal community] who didn't have jobs who did foster care. And I told her, "I don't understand what you're saying like how come you need to know all of this about me when I know you give licenses to people who don't have jobs." And she says, "We want to make sure you're not going to live off of this." And I was like, "Again, I'm pretty sure you give licenses to people who do not have jobs," and then I didn't understand the question. Then she said if I didn't sign the paperwork, she was going to remove [emphasis added] the child from my care, have the child removed from my care, removed. I said, "Let me tell you something about your use of the word removal in my house, you are triggering my trauma, do you understand what happened to our people in boarding schools?" [emphasis added]. I was like, "Are you coming into my house as a child protection worker or you're coming to my house as a licensing worker? Because I think you put on the wrong hat. And is this how you talk to white families?" She was interrogating me in a way that is making it seem like I'm only going to do this foster care for a check. I'm calling her out on it and I'm like, "I don't want you in my house." And she's like if you don't sign this… I can't even remember if I signed it, she completely triggered me and in a way that made me question if I can do this because I don't know if I could have these white social workers in my house. I got to work with them all day long, I don't want them in my house.

Waterlily went on to describe another traumatic situation involving her young relative whom she saved from being removed and placed on a 72-h hold. However, she experienced the threat of removal in the meantime due to barriers:

My family member's child was placed on a 72-hour hold, so I called the social worker, it's 4:00 o'clock and she told me, "I can't tell you if I have the child." I said, let me tell you right now, "I'm licensed to do foster care, I need to know the process because I do not want my relative to go to anybody else's house if she can come to my house," and they said, "Well, we need to have the Tribe," and now I have connections." I was like, who did they need to call at 5:00 o'clock now

> on a Wednesday? Because the system isn't viewing a 72-hour hold as a trauma and I'm like, what if someone came [and removed] your child for 72-hours and didn't tell you anything about where your kid was. And imagine being three years old and with strangers for 72 hours while you try to do this investigation [emphasis added]. When you had a relative calling you, saying "I am licensed," So she said the process then would be have my licensing worker who's also friendly [sarcasm], at 5:00 o'clock, call them and say that my house is fine, and she can come.

Finally, Lacy described a similar triggering experience with a social worker who threatened to remove her nephew from their family and place him into foster care.

> I recently had my nephew placed with me for a year by a county social worker. My teenage nephew, [child's name], had got into some trouble, so my sister and I agreed that he could stay at my house until my sister became more stable with her housing. Once my sister became stable, we had a conversation and agreed that [child] was ready to return home. When I told the social worker about our plans, he became upset and threatened to place him in foster care because he didn't feel like my sister was ready to bring [child] back home. I instantly felt a sinking feeling in my gut as though my blood was made of lighter fluid, and he threw a lighted match on me. I was livid. I'm a social worker and I know that is not how you treat people we work with. I let him have it. As my voice began to raise, I told him that he needed to check his power and learn what the word "removal" means to Native people [emphasis added]. He accused me of scolding him. I said if that's what he wants to call it. He was selfishly focused on his fragile feelings and was completely unaware of what us Natives have went through and continue to experience as far as colonization and trauma by the child welfare system.

These shared experiences of Indigenous relative caregivers demonstrate that coloniality and removal continues to trigger historical trauma responses and negatively impact overall trust of the child welfare system.

"We are Doing the Work of the Colonizer": Tribal Child Welfare Systems Perpetuate Internalized Oppression, Internalized Colonization

When asked to describe their experiences with tribal child welfare, knowledge holders talked about how our own tribal systems can become extensions of the settler state. Kevin described our own tribal communities have to do better with honoring and fully integrating education and services focused on Two-Spirit relatives in the child welfare system:

> So even I believed that our own systems shun Two-Spirit identity because the identity was lost because of colonization [emphasis added]. I've had conversations with individuals who know that their tribal communities aren't very welcoming to Two-Spirit people, so I do believe that our systems and tribal communities need to improve. I believe that we still need to continue to educate and bring awareness about the identity. When I do trainings, the first thing I always ask if they know the word in their language that would identify someone like me. The majority of time people don't know – and I had one elder stand up and she said, "I don't know the word in my language, this is the first time I've ever heard of the Two-Spirit term and lastly, I didn't know that there was that much violence within your community." So again, we're happy to educate and bring a lot of awareness of the impact from this community, that we are a forgotten, and that we are a severely underserved population. One of the questions I get as a clinician at trainings or community events is, "when do you know when a child is coming out?" And my response is that if a child is feeling unsafe, if they are living in a home where there's homophobia, if there's slurs, or if adults around them are speaking down about individuals who identify – the child won't come out.

Ande and Betty described instances where tribal child welfare systems are an extension of the state system. Ande discussed that her tribe had more stringent restrictions than the county. As a relative caregiver, she described how tribal child welfare seemed to be an "extension of the county" and not focused on her family, making it challenging to provide care for the children.

> This is hard because the tribal court system is involved as far as my family. So, I didn't know that this case was even open or anything and then the kids were placed with me. The women in our family are the leaders. They are the ones that make the decisions. So, when I took the kids, my Aunt is kind of like the go to. Since her grandma passed away, she's the one that's filled that role. She's been talking to me about what's been going on, and her frustration with the system. From her perspective, she really feels like [Tribe Name] is just an extension of the county [emphasis added], and that they're not really practicing child welfare.

Betty is an elder from a Tribe in Minnesota. I met her when we were working on child welfare projects in

Minnesota. She is a long-time social worker, educator, community leader, and has dedicated her life to the welfare of Indigenous children. Betty mentioned there is still some lingering distrust, even among tribal social workers, but she also expressed some hope:

> The families continue to be distrustful, and they watch the Indian social workers. If they do something that looks like unfairness, [the families] feel like they're becoming a county worker. I'm not sure if that's still going on. The young social workers now at [Tribe Name] are really good people, and I admire them. I've had a couple of them as my students.

Waterlily talked about her frustrations with how colonization has caused our own people to become dependent on the child welfare system. She compared our original ways of "showing up for relatives" versus solely relying on the colonized child welfare system to intervene with our families:

> Believing in who we fundamentally are as Indian people is definitely rooted and in an Anishinaabe world view that I believe that I still have even though I speak English and I wear white men clothes and live in white men houses. I fundamentally still feel super connected to other Native people and the land. I wrote this big 'ol [social media] post about taking [child's name] or [child's name] going home to her mom and I said this, "If we understand how we show up for each other as relatives, right? And this is what we're supposed to do for each other, but the system has made it so weird that I had a family where no one wanted to get involved because they were waiting for child protection to get involved because then they would get help for that child. So, I said, "Okay, so you're just going to watch the demise of that Mom in her drug use for two years, dragging her kids around from spot to spot to spot because you're waiting for the system to tell you it's okay to intervene?" We have this intact original way of knowing and how we show up for relatives, and then we also have the super fractured colonized viewpoint because our connection towards our spiritual source has been so fragmented [emphasis added], so broken that we are like, "Oh, it's not our problem until we get a check for it [from the child welfare system]. Because it does happen. And guess what, and it's not wrong to ask for a check because you're barely making it yourself.

These stories represent evidence of how the settler governments forced Indigenous Peoples into reliance on their punitive systems. It also illuminates examples of how we may be replicating settler systems and continuing to harm our own people.

Decolonial Thinking and Delinking

I end the findings with two examples of decolonial thinking and delinking as defined previously. This first one illustrates the difference between Indigenous and Western worldview in child welfare. The second example exemplifies decolonial child welfare broadly. Waterlily provided an example of decolonial thinking as she described a profound Anishinaabe-centered belief in the inherent connection between mother, child, auntie's, the spirits, and Creator:

> If we're truly going to look at the current system of child welfare and we're going to say, "Oh, how are we going to apply Indigenous – or a Native or Anishinaabe world view," to how we center around children, then we would put that child center, right? And then by that we're going to say, okay, not the child, [but] the mom and the baby. How would we center them because they can't exist without each other, right? So, removing babies and children from mothers, and then expecting the mothers to get healthy, separately, is opposite of what we know to be true [emphasis added]. We're further disconnecting them to the source so even thinking in terms of the umbilical cord. That umbilical cord connects them but, in some cases, if it is going to come to an actual removal, then there needs to be some sort of ceremony of passing over guardianship where we are letting the Spirits know that "now I'm the Mother." There should be like a better process for that but there isn't.

Indigenous practices and worldviews differ from those within the colonial child welfare system and may continue to cause harm (Weaver et al., 2021). Many knowledge holders talked about these differences, which led to discussions about decolonial child welfare for many. Cedar articulated her understanding and desire for decolonial child welfare:

> I feel like if I'm not trying to work myself out of a job, I'm not working ethically.
> So, Yeah, I'm definitely here for abolition of child welfare. We have and have had our own system, not child welfare, but our own system [emphasis added]. That's what I mean by going back to what we had we had our own system that I talked about earlier. There was no court, there were no white man's laws, there was community, and there was family, and we were free from colonial violence. Child protection started as a way to assimilate, and it started as a way to kill the Indians save the man. We already kept our kids safe, before settler colonialism; they're not safe now [emphasis added]. They're not that safe in the system. Right. Our culture is not safe in the system. Our language is nowhere to be found in the system,

> our concepts of family are nowhere to be found in the system, our ways of thinking are nowhere to be found in the system. Our system is written by colonizers to maintain control, plain and simple. When we write some of our paperwork for court, since we changed names, and we use the [Native name] for [my tribe] when we write memorandums to the courts. We put all the [Native] language in there because we are bringing it back, and we are putting some of ourselves and our language and culture into the system. That's a start too- it's a start because it's recorded, and it's a way to make it so they cannot continue to erase us, our people, and our language from the system.

Discussion

This study illuminated Indigenous relative caregiver experiences with the child welfare system. Their experiences revealed forms of ongoing coloniality and colonial violence rooted in a legacy of control over gender and family. Indigenous relatives' provided evidence that the child welfare system continues to practice forced removal and separation of children from their families and nations, imposes the modern colonial gender system, and perpetuates the colonial violence through negligence, invasion, punishment, and racism. They also described the child welfare system as a "colonial stressor" that "triggers historical trauma." Finally, they indicated that tribal child welfare systems perpetuate internalized oppression, colonization.

Consistent with Bussey and Lucero (2013) and Cross et al., (2010), Indigenous relative caregivers described experiences and lingering fears of historical forced removal and separation as main reasons for protecting children from the child welfare system. Relative caregivers also uncovered how the child welfare system continues to impose the modern colonial gender system, a continuation of government sponsored education programs to assimilate and genderize Indigenous families for control over Indigenous lands for capitalism (Cahill, 2011; Lugones, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). Indigenous relative caregivers, specifically those who had lived experience within the government foster care system as children, described that they were subjected to the modern colonial gender system via therapeutic services and non-Native foster home placements that imposed Christian normative gender roles.

An extension of policies and educational program to assimilate Indigenous people decades prior, relative caregivers described today's child welfare system as a "colonial stressor" that "triggers historical trauma" leading to fear and distrust (Horejsi et al., 1992; Sinclair, 2016). Some relatives described their reactions as "historical trauma triggers" to various forms of colonial violence by means of negligence, invasion, punishment, and racism. Their experiences align with Brave Heart et al., (2011) conceptualization of historical trauma, a "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma" (p. 283). Their current triggers can be associated with historical trauma response, that is, a "constellation of features associated with a reaction to massive group trauma" (Brave Heart et al., 2011, p. 283). These trauma triggers are deeply tied to those of our ancestors who were abducted and forced to attend boarding schools (USA) and residential schools (Canada) beginning in the late 1800s (Bombay et al., 2011, 2014, 2020) and those relatives who were stolen and adopted to white families during the Indian adoption era (Balcom, 2007; George, 1997; Johnston-Goodstar, 2013; Thibeault & Spencer, 2019). In addition, these findings represent a "colonial trauma response" (CTR), a term developed by Evans-Campbell and Walters (2006) that connects historical trauma to contemporary experiences of colonization. Colonial trauma responses are reactions to contemporary discriminatory events or microaggressions (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

Finally, some relative caregivers had experience with both county and tribal child welfare systems. One relative shared their concerns with the marginalization and erasure of Native Two-Spirit, LGBTQIA + relatives, while others were concerned with tribal child welfare programs becoming extensions of county systems (including Indigenous social workers), and that our tribal nations have been forced into dependence on child welfare system intervention (inability to use our Indigenous practices to intervene). Tribes can inadvertently contribute to the ongoing assimilation and colonization of our own people through the implementations of policies and practices defined, created, and codified by Western lawmakers and service providers (Johnston-Goodstar et al., 2022). As Indigenous child welfare professionals, we often carry out Western defined services and policies with our own people. Social work's history of missionary practices has forced Indigenous social workers to question if they have contributed to the ongoing colonization and assimilation of Indigenous Peoples (Hart, 2003). These experiences are consistent to what Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998), Poupart (2003), and Simard and Baker-Demaray (2014) described as "internalized oppression," defined as violence and oppression committed internally among one's own group, people, or community. Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) coined the term "historical unresolved grief" to explain the connection between societal ills such as internalized oppression, historical trauma, and "unresolved grief across generations" (p. 60).

Limitations and Further Research

This study does not address other forms of coloniality pertaining to the other spheres (control over economy, authority, and knowledge) within the child welfare context. The focus of this study was the experiences of a specific group of Indigenous relatives with lived experiences from a particular region and is not generalizable. However, my intent was not to generalize. My goal was to share and preserve our knowledges, experiences, and stories so that other relatives across Turtle Island may learn from them if they feel there is a connection and continue on this heavy journey of uncovering often hidden coloniality, healing from trauma and reclaiming our lifeways.

It is beyond the scope of this study to address several areas, but I will focus on the limitations involving Indigenous voices on this topic. This study does not include the voices of Indigenous birth parents, grandparents, extended kin, or other community knowledge holders who are deeply impacted by the child welfare system. In addition, examining how different tribal nations are decolonizing their child welfare programs by reclaiming kinship structures, integrating culture, language, and Indigenous lifeways into their programs would provide good models for other Tribes who are seeking to reclaim and revitalize their own traditional child welfare practices and systems. This study does not address those who are not protected by ICWA due to exclusionary blood quantum/tribal enrollment eligibility requirements. This study does not include the experiences and perspectives of children who experience the child welfare systems, who are removed from their homes and separated from their families and nations. Many Indigenous communities view children as leaders and knowledge holders, and this study did not seek their important perspectives.

Conclusion

The U.S. settler government's legacy of colonization and forcefully removing and severing Indigenous children from their families and nations for the pursuit of white civilization is unrelenting and ongoing (Beardall & Edwards, 2021; Cross, 2021; Meriam, 1928; Sinclair, 2016). The child welfare system continues to mirror other colonial systems which locate the problem within the Indigenous individual or community instead of colonization (Smith, 1999). The "Indian Problem" submerges explanatory colonial, social, political, and historical contexts (Tuck, 2009) and promotes interventions that focus on individual adaptions or assimilation to dominant society (Davis, 2014), resulting in what Eve Tuck (2009) deems damage centered research. It is important to recognize the beauty of Indigenous survivance, knowledge systems, and connection to our lands, among many other amazing strengths we embody. Yet, it is important to identify historical contexts to understand current issues and disparities (Grande, 2015, p. 32). Understanding the history of colonization and ongoing coloniality is key to understanding and changing current child welfare systems (Day et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2021).

This study identified and problematized the ways in which the child welfare system has perpetrated coloniality and colonial violence from the lived experiences of Indigenous relatives. For tribal nations, the excessive focus on the problem within exacerbates the harm of coloniality, including the continued erasure of Indigenous lifeways and amplifies current health disparities (Tuck, 2009). Coloniality, its harms and institutions must be identified as problematic. Uncovering and recognizing ongoing coloniality is vital in our pursuit to defend sovereignty, protect laws such as ICWA, and reclaim and revitalize our Indigenous lifeways (Cavender Wilson, 2004; Johnston-Goodstar, 2020).

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