

First Nations Orphan Association Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Forums

Responses to a New Approach

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Responses to a New Approach

Summary:

American Indian adoption in the US has had a lasting and painful effect on adoptees and their tribal communities. Adoption policy was initially structured so that Indian children were adopted into white homes; the assumption was that a mainstream upbringing would afford them greater opportunities for success. However, a significant population of adoptees struggled with identity and cultural belonging. Some experienced physical and emotional abuse. These problems were legally recognized after a decade of routine out-adoption and the policy was changed so that children up for adoption, whenever possible, remained in their communities. There still remains, however, a population of Native adoptees who grapple with the pain of their adoptions. First Nations Orphans Association is an organization dedicated to serving this group of people. Through the use of Forums, the organization gives adoptees a chance to be heard and to hear others. This process fosters identity reclamation, as well as community, forgiveness and understanding.

The Roots of Native Out-Adoption

Policy Roots

In 1958 the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) responded to widespread poverty and child abuse on Indian reservations by developing the Indian Adoption Project (IAP), a policy that separated children from their families and cultural heritage, often permanently. The policy of out-adoption intentionally placed Indian children with white families, with the assumption that they would have a better chance at succeeding if they were separated from the unfortunate conditions of reservations. This practice differed entirely from all other adoption policy at the time, which favored “matching” children with adoptive families who shared similar traits, especially race or religion. Indian children, it was

A note on terminology

An American Indian person who has been adopted by a non-American Indian family is said to have been “adopted out.”

The policy or practice of causing individuals to be adopted out is termed “out-adoption.”

presumed, were in special need of being “saved” from their roots.

While the CWLA adoption program is perhaps the best known, it is important to note that it was one of many. Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, and other groups were involved with the out-adoption of Native children as well. Examining any one of such organizations might suggest that rates of adoption were not extreme, so it is essential to recognize that multiple social welfare groups took children from Indian families. For instance, a 1978 study found that American Indian children were adopted at a rate twenty times higher than the US average (Simon and Hernandez, 2008: 1). Such an inflated rate of adoption shows how pervasive and

methodical out-adoption was before steps were taken to prevent it. Out-adoption and placement into white families was the preferred practice until the late 1970s when congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), an act intended to protect Native culture and communities by keeping families intact.

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) was also established at this time to serve Indian children and their communities. This organization developed ICWA, which acknowledged that the Indian Adoption Project, along with other organized adoption efforts, were damaging for Native communities and adoptees. In fact, for years tribes and activists had regarded the practice as an extension of assimilation. NICWA attempted to counteract and correct past mistakes by working *with* tribes, instead of outside and apart from them. The new legislation made it so that when an Indian child was up for adoption, preference was given first to family members, then to other members of the child's immediate community, and finally to other Indian families. Essentially, ICWA made it difficult for a non-Indian to adopt an Indian child. NICWA serves American Indian families by focusing on preventing and correcting child abuse and neglect within communities, rather than removing the child from the community entirely. The importance of this decision should not be understated. Children are perhaps the most important assets to Indian communities; without them the community cannot persist.

Effects on Individuals

The generation of children lost to their Native communities during this period of out-adoption experienced emotional and often physical abuse rooted in racism, as well as lost identity and feelings of not belonging (Harness, 2008: 7-8). During the years when the IAP was in effect it was commonly accepted that adoption offered a clean slate. Presumably,

the child would be completely free of whatever situation they were born into and learn to identify solely with their adoptive culture. In reality, Indian children often did not find a satisfactory place for themselves within mainstream, white American society (Harness, 2008: 63-65, 68). For adoptees, the United States' colonialist history often meant dealing with racism that they were not equipped to handle in both their homes and in public places. For example, during school their peers might ask them about being Indian, but they would have no way of answering such questions.

Many American Indian adoptees are likely to interpret their adoption as inhibiting and oppressing toward their personal and cultural identity. Unable to find a place for themselves within their adoptive culture or their culture of birth, many adoptees are living with fractured definitions of themselves and where they fit in the world. Indian adoptees who had negative experiences with adoption suffer from high rates of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and aggressive behaviors. These are often symptoms of the disconnection they feel from both of their worlds: the world they were born into and the world they are being raised in (Harness, 2008: 64-65). It is important to note that even in healthy, loving homes adoptees have a tendency to recognize this disconnection and long for contact with their Native communities (Simon and Hernandez, 2008:358). When a person reclaims his or her Indian identity, that person is likely to move away from destructive behaviors and experience an improvement in their general well-being (Harness,

First Nations Orphan Association

FNOA was born out a grassroots effort to bring awareness and healing to Indian communities impacted by adoption and foster care. After several years it became apparent that there needed to be a more formalized approach.

First Nations Repatriation Institute (FNRI) will pick up and expand the original work of FNOA. It will be a resource to adoptees connecting them other adoptees and resources. The goals are focused in Education, Scholarship and Advocacy.

2008: 64-65). Adoptees who are able to successfully reconnect with their families and communities find purpose and a sense of self.

NICWA, though an important step in the right direction, is not set up to facilitate reconnection. The organization and accompanying policy substantially slowed Indian out-adoption, but it did nothing to address the troubles so many adoptees grappled with. Consequently, a significant population of adult Indian adoptees has never had the opportunity to confront and share their concerns, nor have many of them had a chance to connect with their heritage. First Nations Orphans Association facilitates reconnection and understanding.

First Nations Orphans Association

After seeking and claiming her own Native identity, FNOA founder Sandra White Hawk recognized the importance of open communication and information for adoptees trying to reclaim their identities and deepen their understanding of where they come from. The organization brings together a number of people involved with or impacted by adoption: adoptees, adoptive parents, biological families, tribes, social workers, fostered individuals, foster parents, and community members. By bringing this diverse group of people together, FNOA hopes to foster communication and understanding, which it believes are important components of reconciliation. The organization also endeavors to help adoptees find information on tribal enrollment, adoption records, and psychological



Sandy White Hawk, Director of FNOA

support. FNOA hopes to expand its reach nationally and internationally.

The primary function of FNOA has been to host Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation Forums throughout the country. These Forums intend to accomplish several goals: to connect adoptees with other adoptees, to give family members and social service professionals a chance to hear first-hand accounts of how adoption impacts families and communities, to allow adoptee voices to be heard, and, perhaps most crucially, to cultivate reconnection and reincorporation between adoptees and their tribes. FNOA believes that, in order to live a healthy and positive life, everyone needs answers to these key questions: “Who am I?” and, “Where do I come from?” (White Hawk 2005: 2). The Forums began as tools for helping adoptees find their answers to those questions by telling their stories and hearing others'. It is FNOA's hope that this honest communication will also give social service professionals insight into the importance of keeping Native families intact.

Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation Forums

When attending an FNOA Forum for the first time, many people are unsure of what to expect; the fliers advertising the event do not give much information beyond who the Forum is for. Despite not having a clear picture of what the eight-hour day will entail, the



The Center

FNOA Forums are never lacking in participants. Communities, it seems, want the silence associated with Indian out-adoption to be broken.

The Forums begin with a Pipe Ceremony and the Mde Water Ceremony and then move on to community building. FNOA stresses, perhaps above all else, the importance of giving free voice to adoptees and fostered individuals. The Forums offer a semi-structured, safe space for adoptees to tell their stories and know they are not alone. White Hawk invokes this space first by telling her own story and then by encouraging adoptees, fosterees, and family members to tell their stories to other participants in breakout groups. Participants find this seemingly simple act refreshingly therapeutic; as the day goes on people talk openly and honestly with each other. The day ends with a traditional healing Lakota song written specifically for adoptees.

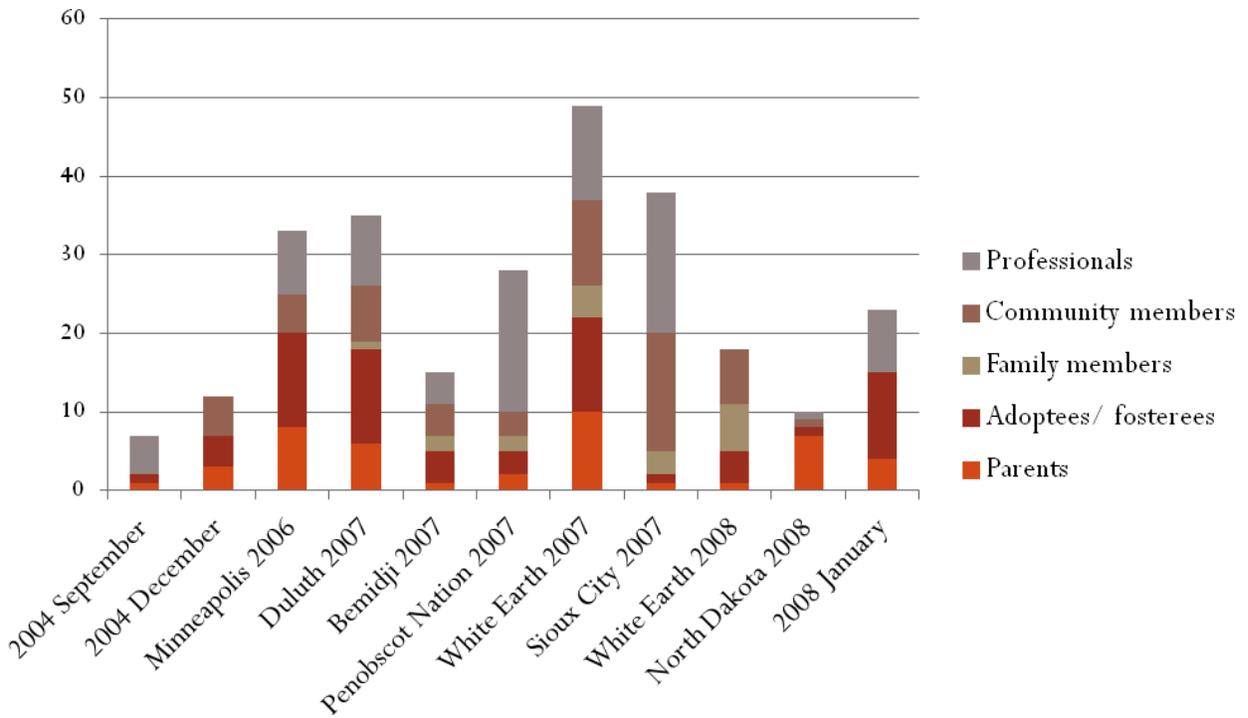
Song for Adoptees

**Wablenica ki blihic'i ya po
Lakol wicoh'an ki anagoptan po wowas'ake lo
hoka hoka he cancega ta ho ki nayah'un pelo**

*Orphans / adoptees find your strength / be strong
Lakota ways / teaching, listen to them, they are strong / way of life
Energize, energize, get well, the voice of the drum you hear*

<http://www.aha.mn/about/a-gift-to-adoptees/>

Forum Attendance 2004-2008



Forum Participants, 2011

Participant Response

Before leaving at the end of the day participants complete short post-forum evaluations. They are asked the following questions: What was most helpful about this event? What was least helpful about this event? What would you like to see happen next? What other thoughts would you like to share? It should be noted that demographic information is not collected on the evaluation surveys; the only identifying information available is the individual's relationship to the adoption process (adoptee, adoptive parent, community member, etc.).

Adoptee and Fosteree Response

Overall, adoptees feel their voices are being heard and find the process of sharing beneficial. One adoptee said, “I was able to walk out of here knowing I do have family.” This is significant because, as discussed earlier, adoptees often feel that they do not have a place. When adoptees are put in contact with each other many seem to find reconnection and belonging, or at least feel they are on that path. The Forums seem to be a helpful and much needed conversation starter; many adoptees expressed gratitude to FNOA for putting together the Forum and giving them an opportunity to connect and share. However, there are some noteworthy topics adoptees would like to see given more weight in the future.

Thoughts

“I learned about my culture. I didn't know anything before”

“This thing should have happened a long time ago.”

“I'm like everyone.”

“Don't let it stop...I will help!”

“I am a survivor.”

“The love and acceptance I experienced made the weekend very memorable for me.”

The most common requests are for more cultural information, assistance with tribal enrollment, and help finding lost biological parents and siblings. One adoptee said that although she learned that she will "never be alone," she still feels "lost." Understandably, a lifetime of confusion and pain cannot be undone in one day. Projects such as locating lost family members require specific attention that is beyond the scope of a single Forum. FNOA has recognized these recurring requests and plans to provide more comprehensive and far-reaching services in the future under the name First Nations Repatriation Institute.

Suggestions

"More networking and services that help find siblings."

"How community, families and social workers can work together to change laws."

"Topics on how to relearn traditions, culture, and language."

Parent Response

The parents who attended the Forums had similarly positive experiences and had specific requests and suggestions for future Forums. Many were grateful for the opportunity to learn more about their adoptive child's roots. One adoptive parent wrote that the Forum gave her the "ability to expose [her] children to Native culture, and show support and appreciation for it." Others simply wrote thank-you notes or asked about future Forums.

Thoughts

"I will continue to help my daughter connect with her birth family."

"I was reminded of the true value of family."

The responses from adoptive parents give merit to FNOA's claim that the simple sharing of stories and experiences promotes empathy and understanding. The Forums helped them achieve a deeper and clearer understanding of Native adoption and many of them expressed interest in attending future Forums.

One of the most common requests from adoptive parents was for a bigger event; they felt the Forums were helpful and

wanted more people to attend. One person said, "I felt the attendance could have been better. I feel the conference wasn't advertised enough." Another felt that the Forum would grow on its own: "I think these attendees will spread the word and each year it will grow." Whatever the advice, the respondents made it clear that they wanted to see more involvement. While this is not a request that FNOA can easily respond to, it speaks to their desire for community, increased understanding, and a support system for their children. Adoptive parents also made requests for more information on culture and history, ways to stay connected to the people they met during the Forum, and additional things they could do to help and support FNOA.

Suggestions

“Names and phone numbers of adoptees to connect again and again.”

“Focus on Native history and how it impacts adoption issues.”

“[Discuss] the complex issues involved when adoptees and adoptive families meet birth families.”

Community Response

The community response is from people who are not immediately linked to the adoption process. These include elders, members of the tribal community, and family or friends of adoptees. Their response is quite similar to the parents' response in that they are mostly enthusiastic and positive, but they do not have the detailed requests and suggestions of the parents. Presumably, their lives are less directly impacted, but they still feel the pain of broken communities and recognize the importance of adoptee communication. They still feel the historical trauma of out-adoption, they seek understanding, and they want adoptees to find solace.

Thoughts

“This program was very beautiful. I felt loved and part of the tribe.”

“Our people – they all care and love.”

“Great to see the young people interacting with adults and smiling – that's healing in itself.”

Community members often spoke of empathy, the impact of adoptees' stories, and the importance of connecting with others. One respondent said that it was "helpful to communicate and know [that] it's okay to share feelings with each other." Another said that they learned "how to open up and be a part of something bigger than myself." Their responses, like the responses of the parents and adoptees, show a desire to cultivate connection and gain understanding; the Forums, it seems, give them a way to do so.

When asked what they would like to see in future Forums, community members often said they wanted the Forum to happen again or to be a yearly event. Like the parents, they want the Forums to be advertised more so that more adoptees and fosterees will attend. Community members also requested services on behalf of adoptees and fosterees that would be beyond the scope of a single event, such as tribal enrollment assistance and help finding family members.

Suggestions

"I pray that we have this event every year, and more adoptees will be found and able to attend these events."

"Have more adoptees that aren't found [yet] – more advertising."

Social Service Professional Response

Social workers and other professionals involved in Native out-adoption are invited and encouraged to attend FNOA Forums. During the Forum the professionals are supposed to stay relatively quiet; they come to listen and learn from people who would otherwise be listening to them. For the most part, this appears to be effective. Their responses to the post-forum evaluation provide an important outsider's perspective because, although they are involved with adoption, they are not emotionally impacted in the way that community members, parents, and adoptees are.

Thoughts

“We need to work together to make a better community.”

“[I] realized what foster care means to families and to avoid it at all costs.”

“It not only made the message clear of the importance of maintaining cultural bonds, it also touched my center deeply.”

“[I learned that] I have been less than responsive to ICWA expectations.”

Responses from professionals suggest that the Forums helped them understand aspects of adoption and Native communities that had previously escaped them. One respondent enthusiastically answered that she or he left with "a more complete understanding of why families must stay intact!" Another came to understand the "hardship of growing up in foster homes that are probably more abusive than the ones they came from." These responses show that professionals who attend the Forums often come to new conclusions about how adoptions and foster care impact lives.

The first question on evaluation forms asks if the Forum met the respondent's expectations. The majority of professionals said that their expectations were met. Those professionals who answered that they were not met had more specific suggestions or points to make than any other group of participants. One of the most common requests was for more concrete information. They appreciated and learned from the Forum's focus on community and understanding, but they wanted additional information on adoption and tribal laws, specific ways to help adoptees find birth parents, and specialized assistance for adolescents. As one social worker put it, “it isn’t easy for state workers to take the kids knowing what they are really facing.” The Forums inspired empathy and understanding, but they still need to do their jobs; many of them feel they need additional resources to best serve their communities.

Suggestions

“Successful strategies for connecting with families and tribes.”

“A discussion of how to practice values.”

“More individualized

Conclusion

FNOA's Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Forums grew out of Sandra White Hawk's personal adoption experience and her realization that there were no organized support systems for people who, like her, were taken from their communities in childhood. Native out-adoption is an issue that has received little attention over the years. Forum participation reveals a long-hidden population of adoptees and families who are in need of community support. FNOA began with the simple idea that talking and sharing with people who understand (or want to understand) can heal wounds and give closure, and four years of participant responses clearly show that FNOA has impacted and touched many lives.

FNOA has been successful in bringing adoptees together, fostering reconnection, and providing a space for voices to be heard. Despite these accomplishments, Forum participants often have requests for additional services and support. They write that although the Forums gave them hope and community, they still need help with such things as finding family members and opening their adoption records. Gaining access to records is near impossible as all but 10 states adoption records are sealed. There is a need for additional resources.

Nevertheless, the process of sharing stories alone has proven to be so powerful for adoptees and fostered that many truly go home feeling connected, optimistic, more sure of themselves, and brave. The Forums help people recognize that they are not alone in their struggles, and that they have the support of a caring and attentive community. Additionally, the Forums have helped social workers and other social service professionals understand the importance of keeping families and communities intact and maintaining cultural ties. FNOA is not only a support system for Native communities, but also a way to promote greater understanding on the part of professionals who work in or with those communities. Overall, Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation Forums have been an effective way to bring people together and give caring attention to a long ignored problem.

Works Cited

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Resources for further information

First Nations Repatriation Institute: <http://wearecominghome.com/>

Sandy White Hawk: sandywhitehawk@gmail.com ~ 651.442.4872

National Indian Child Welfare Association: <http://www.nicwa.org/>