Parenting in Two Cultural Worlds in the Presence of One Dominant Worldview: The American Indian Experience

Betsy Davis, Renda Dionne, and Michelle Fortin

Pre-colonization Parenting Context

"Start at the beginning." These words have been heard many times from elders when we approached them with questions about why so many American Indian parents and children continue to suffer today and why we feel that there is something bigger we are missing when attempting to strengthen these families. From these elders, we found that we must not only explore the beginning of the indigenous peoples, but also the beginning of the colonizing peoples that came to this land and, in the process of building a nation, sought to subjugate indigenous families and the communities within which they lived.

Our exploration arrived at the importance of first understanding worldviews. Worldviews act as: (a) the lens through which we see and accept what is proper in the world; (b) unseen foundations from which we operate within the world based on our definitions of what is right; and (c) internal maps and guides to the actions we display and words we use to reflect both our own world and the definition of what is right (Goheen 2002). The worldview that is shared among a group of people is said to have its etiology in a common creation story (Patterson 2002). These stories are typically religious and define for humans their relations to their chosen creator, the earth upon which they live, and one another.

Worldviews stemming from creation stories are also said to guide the social construction of a society (Schlitz et al. 2010). Through societal interactions with those of similar worldviews, internal constructs or mental representations are

B. Davis (✉)
Oregon Research Institute, Eugene, OR, USA
e-mail: betsy@ori.org

R. Dionne
Indian Child and Family Services, Temecula, CA, USA

M. Fortin
Watari Youth, Community and Family Services, Vancouver, BC, Canada

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formed that help members to define what is good or. bad, right or wrong, or effective or ineffective (Berger and Luckmann 1966). These types of social constructs are those that help to guide families within a society in how best to live and parent their children.

In pre-Columbian North America, millions of indigenous people resided in tribal groups, nations or bands. Across these different societal groupings, thousands of different languages were spoken, different customs and traditions were adhered to, and different matriarchal and patriarchal societal structures were formed. However, even though tribally diverse in many ways, common American Indian values have been identified across tribal groups (Axelson 1985; Brown 1991; DuBray 1985). These tribal commonalities perhaps stem from a common worldview whose foundation derives from each tribe or nation's story of creation.

Wherever a tribe or nation was located, its creation story was based upon that piece of earth from which they and all else in the world sprang forth. Indigenous creation stories are primarily animistic, wherein humans, as with all other animals, plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, and every entity in the natural environment, are imbued with a soul or spirit, birthed from the same mother, Earth, and thereby seen as equal (Bird-David 1991). All in nature is to be respected and each individual is seen as having a responsibility for the care of all spiritual entities, as brothers and sisters, upon the earth.

Though creation stories differ across tribes and account for great diversity in customs, traditions, and beliefs, the animistic foundation for all stories can be seen as the underpinning of commonalities across tribes relative to "oneness" in an indigenous worldview that guides values regarding humanness on this earth (Hart 2010). These commonalities derive from the importance of kinship between the human world, the spirit, and inanimate entities as well as the responsibilities we have for one another. This worldview can be seen as underlying the commonly identified indigenous social constructs of interconnectedness, which holds that the human self is integrated and connected to the total workings of the world, and interdependency, which holds that among all in nature there is equal relation (Hart 2010).

For indigenous humans, this interconnectedness and interdependency is reflected in the importance placed on extended kinship and family obligation as well as community mindedness and the values of sharing, cooperation, and consensus decision-making (Gone and Alcantara 2010; Weaver and White 1997; Wise and Miller 1983). In the indigenous view, family is a much broader concept. Family members can include both blood relatives and non-blood relatives who are close to the family but all are connected and interdependent on one another (Manson et al. 1996; Wise and Miller 1983).

Connection and responsibility are not only for those humans walking the earth, but also for generations past and future (Weaver and White 1995). Within this generational view, children within families are regarded as gifts from the Creator and are seen and respected as both the future and survival of the peoples (Greenwood 2004). Elders are respected within the family and community as

they are viewed as the ones who hold the wisdom of the ancestors. They pass down to the next generation the tribal values and ways of being to children and youth to ensure continued beliefs, and traditions (Greenwood 2004). Within this generational transmission of knowledge, parents also learn the ways of protecting and raising their children to be proud and productive members of the tribal community.

Traditionally tribes had systems of protecting children and families (Cross 1986). The tribal model was one of circles of care; the family who supports the child, is, in turn, supported by the clan who is supported by the entire community. American Indian culture's strong sense of communalism, with children as the focal point, stems from the importance placed on extended family, relationships within the clan, as well as the positive value placed on children (Brave Heart 1999). Historically, learning by children within tribal communities was through direct experience and natural consequence. Children were allowed to roam and learn protected and watched over by all. This experiential learning fostered in children a sense of independence in decision-making, but this independence was also balanced with interdependency and responsibility to family and community. A cornerstone of American Indian childrearing was allowing children to make their own decisions; this was their right as unique persons (Witt 1980).

The importance of the parent–child relationship within tribal communities can be seen relative to discipline. When a child was in need of discipline, many times these actions were undertaken by extended family members (Sizemore and Langenbrunner 1996). As described by Witt (1980), discipline of a younger child who was misbehaving often was quiet and involved shunning or ignoring the child. Many American Indian adults today who have experienced shunning describe this as a mother or grandmother "looking right through them as if they weren't there". Within the traditional home, rarely would a young child be directly told not to do something; removing or distracting a child from something they should not be doing was not done as punishment. It was believed that this behavior simply indicated a lack of self-control in the child that would naturally come in time.

For older children, traditionally, ridicule was used to shape behavior. However, as explained by many American Indians today, this ridicule was done with humor, with the goal of teaching. It was very important for older children to learn how to live within the tribal community's beliefs, values, and rules because it was their responsibility to tend to and lead the younger children. It was believed that this responsibility instilled interdependency and interconnection between tribal children of all ages and genders.

Prior to colonization, though diverse in creation stories, traditions, and beliefs, American Indian tribal communities were universally strong in ancestral respect for elders, organized around families and children, governed by protective ways of raising children, and always focused on the strength and survival of future generations through interdependence, interconnectedness, and the passing down of wisdom and knowledge.

Colonization's Disruption of Families and Traditional Parenting

From the 1492 arrival of European explorers to America, onward in time as more immigrants came to form their own nation, these explorers and colonists encountered groups of Indigenous peoples who carried within them a different way of viewing the world. For the Europeans who came to this land, their creation story stemmed primarily from the Judeo-Christian story in which man is created in God's image and therefore given divine permission to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing (Genesis 1:27–28). This worldview was far from the interconnectedness and interdependency of the American Indians to their mother, Earth, and to all brothers and sisters who live with their mother.

What the colonialists saw was too different and therefore not understandable. The dominion-based worldview allowed colonizers to believe they had the right, given by God, to define the indigenous peoples they encountered as savage, thereby allowing them to either tame, civilize or kill these people who were getting in the way of their God-given right to own land, build upon that land, and live as they desired (Patterson 2002).

In viewing the development of this nation, the policies and laws undertaken by the forming government were purposeful in intent relative to disrupting American Indian communities, breaking apart families, and separating children from parents. Colonizers were consistent in their removal of American Indians from their lands of creation, as reflected in the nineteenth century congressional act of territorial expansion known as Manifest Destiny.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny paralleled other governmental attempts at cultural elimination. Many great grandparents and grandparents today were taken away from their families, becoming wards of the state and being placed in government-run boarding schools. The tenet upon which the boarding school system was built is reflected in a report by Capt. Richard H. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle school that served as the model for all boarding schools in the nation. In his report on Indian education to the government, he said, "Kill the Indian, and save the man" (Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction 1892; 46–59). In essence, removal of the indigenous culture, their languages, names, and ways, was the only way to create acceptable American citizens.

Forced attendance in boarding schools and mission programs sadly introduced corporal punishment and insensitivity, as well as authoritarian behaviors to many American Indian children. These behaviors were in contrast to the strong ancestral ways for raising and teaching children. Instead, many of these children grew up to become parents themselves who transferred these boarding school practices into the parenting of their own children (Brave Heart 1999; Duran et al. 1998; Evans-Campbell 2008; Hull 1982; Morrisette 1994). This transfer continues the hurtful ways of history within some American Indian families today.

The mid-twentieth century also brought forth governmental policies aimed at increasing American Indian assimilation through relocation efforts geared towards bringing American Indians into mainstream society. Many American Indian parents

left their tribal communities and relocated to urban areas driven by the promised hope of employment, reaching for this promise in order to provide support for their families. For many relocation did not bring about the desired outcome; employment was not forthcoming and more was lost than gained. By leaving reservation land, traditional rights to health, education and welfare were relinquished along with the communal bonds that could serve as protective factors for families (Barter and Barter 1974). Much as with boarding schools that began almost a century earlier, government policies that thought that these efforts would be beneficial ended badly for American Indian families.

Colonization Trauma Through the Generations

Writings on colonization have the highlighted historical trauma that affects American Indians today (Brave Heart 1999, 2000; Clarke 2002; Evans-Campbell 2008; Walters et al. 2002; Whitbeck et al. 2004). In our own work, in order to focus the field of research on the importance of acknowledging history as the etiology of difficulties for American Indian families today, we developed models of colonization's effects through the generations. Our models are predicated on the indigenous value of seven generations (Sotero 2006). The seven generations belief holds that the actions and decisions made today will affect the next seven generations. Given the trauma of colonization and its devastating effects on families and communities, seven generations holds that increased colonization experiences for one parental generation would increase the probability of this trauma affecting parents in the next generation thereby continuing its effect for the next seven generations (See Fig. 1). Our models correspond to Evans-Campbell's (2008) discussion of family level effects of historical trauma and the indirect path of intergenerational transmission through parenting.

In two studies with a total of 175 parents of American Indian children ages 5–7 years old, living in Southern California and representing over 60 tribal affiliations, we found that the number of colonization trauma events occurring in ancestral generations (G5, G4, & G3), including boarding school attendance, relocation and disconnection from family and culture, significantly related to current G1 child externalizing difficulties, including acting out behaviors, as well as internalizing difficulties, including intrusion and depressive symptoms. Both of the direct paths of history's effect on child difficulties today, however, were mediated by history's effects on G2 parents. In essence, the ancestral colonization effect was transmitted to G1 children today through trauma's disruption of G2 parenting, including a lessened sense of parenting competence as well as increased negative/harsh parenting behaviors.

The effects of history through the generations, particularly boarding schools and relocation, can also be seen in words from First Nations parents of adolescents who worked with us to find family strength while living in a high-risk urban area in British Columbia. These words were given to us publicly via radio interview about our project or video creation in support of our project.

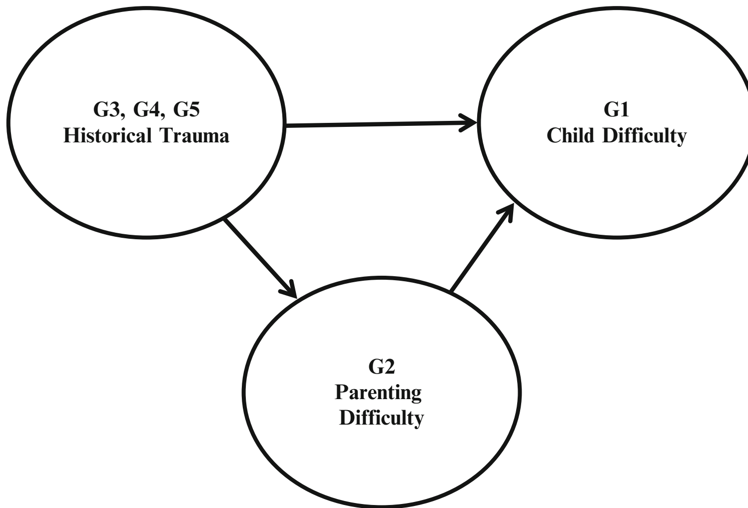

Fig. 1 Parenting through seven generations

An elder who participated with her 12-year-old granddaughter: "I'm a 60-year-old great-grandmother who survived the trauma of being forced into the residential school system. I was 6 years old…I fought for dignity until I was kicked out at the age of 15. I was physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually abused and I passed this on to my family with alcohol and drug addictions. I was desperate to find someone who could help my family use methods to move in our struggle to become a healthy family."

A single parent whose children were ages 14, 13, and 7: "My grandmother went to residential school and it did impact her kids, my father, and on my mother's side it was the same…the communication barrier was just so great that it impacted our whole family, even with my brother and the cousins today…how they were taught in residential school not to talk…I think the biggest hurdle was communication…I grew up with not having a father and not having a mother. He (my father) fell into the street life…and I jumped from foster home to foster home until my grandparents took me back to the reserve…"

A professional single mother with four children ranging in age from toddler to teen: "The legacy I inherited is authoritarian…as being somewhat like a drill sergeant…it was so hurtful to reenact it in *my* family…"

A single mother of boys ages 8 and 12: "Both my parents and grandparents had been through residential school and I could see how it affected our whole community…I seen a lot of pain and suffering and the way people tried to take away their pain with drugs and alcohol. It was horrible…"

Colonization's effects on families and communities through the generations have led researchers to identify potential protective factors that can ward against these effects on American Indian individuals today. These models have focused on

enculturation as an important buffer not only against the stress of historical trauma relative to health outcomes (Walters et al. 2002) but also against discrimination faced today relative to alcohol use (Whitbeck et al. 2004). Enculturation for American Indians involves either retaining, if passed through the generations, or reviving, if disrupted through history, the strengths and protective ways of the ancestors. Enculturation is a process distinguished from acculturation and assimilation by its focus on retaining American Indian culture as a way of viewing the world. It can be compared to learning aspects of mainstream culture in order to survive (acculturation) or taking on mainstream culture solely as one's own (assimilation). Enculturation is typically reflected today by the retention of traditional spirituality, American Indian identity, and traditional activities within one's life (Whitbeck et al. 2004).

A colonization history of community and family disruption has resulted today in a majority of American Indians parents' living and raising children within mainstream society, with only 22 % of American Indians residing on reservation or Indian trust lands (U.S. Census 2011). Among those families, there are many that are also culturally disconnected from their tribal and ancestral story. The focus on enculturation as a protective factor leads to the question of how traditional ways, spirituality, and Indian identity are for parents and children who are surrounded by mainstream influences.

Continued Colonization: A Legacy That Lingers?

During the time of colonization and removal of American Indians from their lands, a new government and society was being formed. Ideas were being formed and foundations were being developed for national systems that remain today, systems of government, commerce, finance, education, and justice. The American Indian voice was purposefully removed from the foundation of the nation's institutions of power. Mainstream society, though more diverse today than at the nation's inception, still have at their operational base remnants of a dominant worldview (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kleinman 1998; Schlitz et al. 2010).

For the majority of American Indians parents and children living off-reservation, it is this mainstream society and its institutions that they encounter on a daily basis. Parents raising children within a dominant society, one that does not understand their worldview, their ancestral history, or how to respectfully support them in their culture, can often experience feelings of being misunderstood, and as a result, far too many experience frustration, sadness, and anger. The expression of these emotions, for some parents, can contribute to destructive forms of interaction within the family.

In our work with First Nations adolescents and their parental caregivers we found that, in addition to increased family conflict, current feelings of discrimination contributed to the display of adolescent HIV-risk behaviors, including early initiation of alcohol and drug use as well as sexual behaviors. Parents had a hard time understanding adolescent difficulties (Davis et al. 2010). For too many

indigenous families, they must walk through this world with the impact of an ancestral history of colonization and be in a society that may, unknowingly, exacerbate these historical effects.

Parenting in Two Cultural Worlds: Finding Balance

In past work, we incorporated what we have come to term "societal blindness" into our work, a lack of societal acknowledgment and understanding of the American Indian story. We knew that we must bring forth the truth of the ancestral story for many families because the history of colonization had corrupted the flow of this story through the generations. As such, we created a two-stage conceptual approach to implementing evidence-based parenting programs in American Indian and First Nations communities which allowed this story to come forward. We experienced a level of success using this procedure when working with indigenous community families both in the United States and Canada (Dionne et al. 2009; Davis et al. 2010).

The number of U.S. families coming to us through the court and child welfare systems began to increase. As a result, we were beginning to glimpse the variability in families relative to the impact of their ancestral path, the quality of their involvement with mainstream society, and their level of healthy vs. unhealthy functioning today. There were families with high levels of historical trauma events in their ancestral history, some suffering greatly, others suffering less. There were families with less trauma in their ancestral history, but they were suffering greatly, while others suffered less. With both ancestral paths, some experienced stress in mainstream society while others did not. How could we make sense of this variability on our path to strengthen families?

It was at this point in our search that we turned to the elders and "started at the beginning" as described above. As a result of this journey, we are currently in the process of allowing our motivational interviewing procedure to reflect not only colonization history but also the larger societal issues driven by this history and faced by so many parents and children today. To understand variability and resilience to history, we explored work indicating variations in what is termed "Native identity". Red Horse and colleagues (1978) documented three different American Indian family lifestyle patterns. One set of families have a high level of enculturation where traditional life defines their style of living. Second are those families who are either acculturated or assimilated where non-Native styles of living have been adopted, the distinguishing factor being whether their Native culture remains a part of their self. Third is what Red Horse refers to as "pantraditional" families who are struggling with their reclamation of traditional ways that have been lost today. More recent work stresses the need to separate out historical trauma events that have occurred for families from the manifestation of that trauma in the life of today's parent and child. A contributing factor to the presence of enculturation within families where the ancestral story is strong and

protective is whether the ancestral story, contains strategies of resilience or defeatism for families (Denham 2008).

It is our view that the mainstream story, and the stress that it places on families, can interact with the ancestral story to exacerbate difficulties. The mainstream story can vary in families related to both how present it is in the family's life (how involved are they with mainstream institutions, such as justice, child welfare, and education as well as teachers and neighbors) and the quality of this presence (the strength of resonance).

From this understanding we have created a scale of balance for living in two worlds and have brought this discussion of balance into our motivational interviewing process with families prior to engaging in parent and family strengthening. This scale applies regardless of whether a family resides on or off reservation because mainstream society will nonetheless surround all families at some point and have the potential to impact their lives. We explore the presence and quality of both ancestral and mainstream stories in the lives of parents and their children. For some families, the strength of the ancestral story has been weakened and the story or lack thereof weighs heavily on them. Moreover, some parents are involved in drug use and/or domestic violence, their children have been removed until the parents address their issues, but services to address these issues are culturally mismatched to the family. Sadly, the stresses of both stories for these families can result in children s not being returned to the home unless the services are completed.

In our process, the goal is to assist each parent in finding a balance between the two worlds, both ancestral and mainstream, in any form that works for them. In essence, parents can create their own social constructs related to who they are from history and within this society. As individual parental knowledge is collected, we also provide parents with the opportunity to visualize the balance they value for their children and future generations between these stories. We help parents to identify how they can achieve this balance and encourage them to receive parenting skills strengthening. We have begun to view existing evidence-based parenting programs that have been developed. We are currently going back to those basic domains of parenting known to be protective for children and attempting to conceptualize these domains to preserve the ancestral ways of interdependency and interconnectedness between parent, child, family, community, and earth. We view our re-conceptualization of parenting interventions, relative to the research-based distinction between "culturally specific" vs. "culturally sensitive" intervention, in a different way.

Our journey through the exploration of worldviews has led us to understand not only how these worldviews continue to clash but also how we can incorporate an acknowledgement of this clash in working with families to help them find balance and strength. We have also learned from elders that our journey of learning will never end; it will continue and affect the work we do as long as we walk this earth. We should honor this process, never lose patience, and see it as what is important.

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