

Rearing Generations: Lakota Grandparents' Commitment to Family and Community

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Abstract Disproportionately, American Indian grandparents assume the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. Few studies have examined the experiences of American Indian grandparents living on reservations. Utilizing Indigenous Methodologies and exploratory, in-depth interviews with 25 Lakota elders living on the reservation. This study explored the realities of raising grandchildren including: reasons they began caring for their grandchildren, challenges they face, and they reveal the care and concern for the broader community's grandchildren within the cultural and social context of the reservation.

Keywords American Indians · Elders · Grandparents · Grandchildren · Indigenous methodologies

Introduction

This research seeks to describe the social and cultural contexts that shape the experiences of Lakota grandparents raising grandchildren on the Pine Ridge reservation. Therefore, this article will do two things 1) tell the stories of Lakota grandparents raising their grand children, and 2) remind us that although there is inequity in this story, the beauty and contributions of Lakota grandparents is etched in the community. Through open-ended, exploratory interviews grandparents offered a rare reflection of the many contributions they have made to their families and their community at large. The elders were considered to be “raising” grandchildren if they provided substantial financial, emotional, or practical support to grandchildren, independent of the portion of time they spent co-residing with them. As

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custodial grandparents throughout the children's upbringing, the elders continued to provide financial and emotional support to the grandchildren into adulthood. The dedication to this task has indeed taken emotional and spiritual tolls on these individuals. Nonetheless their devotion has given time, love, compassion, and family to children, who if not for their grandparents, may have never experienced familial support.

Grandparents raising grandchildren in Lakota society is not a new or novel concept, as there is a long history of grandparents often rearing grandchildren (Deloria 1988). Lakota grandparents have always held a central role in caring for their relatives (Deloria 1988). For example, during the boarding school era, 1875–1950's, (e.g. Child 1998; Trazfer et al. 2006) children were removed from their homes to be educated and assimilate them into mainstream society, American Indian grandparents effectively advocated for the return of their grandchildren from government custody (Adams 1995). These traumatic experiences continue to have a lasting negative intergenerational effect on American Indian people and shape the social, cultural and emotional context for their communities, including the Pine Ridge reservation.

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation located in South Dakota, home of the Oglala Lakota Nation, has remained the interest of many researchers, filmmakers, and tourists, alike. An endless stream of media has continually descended upon this unique community to capture only a glimpse of the complex social, cultural, and economic conditions on Pine Ridge. The curiosity and examination of this unique context have shaped mainstream society's consciousness of what and who the people of Pine Ridge were, are and can be. Since the reservation's inception, the descriptions and reporting of the conditions have honed in on negative events and circumstances, be that the events of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, abject poverty, or the recent crisis of adolescent suicides, there is no denying the focus on the negative social consequences for people living on the reservation.

By and large, the exposure to the richness of culture and beauty of Lakota people is often through a non-Lakota lens. Therefore the outlets to bring forward the positivity of Lakota lives in a scholarly format, and push aside the negative, are limited. It is important to be vigilant in allowing the story of Lakota people from diverse Lakota perspectives to be and to create a more contextually accurate portrayal of Lakota lives. The narratives of these Lakota grandparents can seem to live within despair, but their stories and the context are presented openly, and honestly, through their own worldview. The central focus of this research is to gain an understanding of the experience of Lakota elders raising grandchildren, in particular the reasons they began caring for their grandchildren, the challenges they face, and the care and concern they have for the broader community's grandchildren. Threaded through their narratives are their strength, dedication and resilience needed to provide care to their grandchildren in the face of adversity. These narratives are examined through the lens of the social and cultural context that shapes the elders raising their grandchildren.

This approach is a very central part of Lakota ideology and the presentation of their experiences should always remind us that beauty while sometimes cloaked, is in fact present. A common reaction to avoid these difficult, but real discussions is understandable. However, as lived by the grandparents themselves, their response is to have the discussion, which speaks directly to their unique perspectives as Lakota people. As evidenced here:

Life demands that we exercise perseverance, face adversity with courage, demonstrate fortitude in the midst of temptation, tell the truth no matter how painful, walk in

humility, sacrifice for our families, practice generosity to be truly rich, respect all who are a part of the Great Circle of Life, choose honor above personal gain, act with compassion toward the needy, strive for harmony in personal relationships, and otherwise demonstrate the virtues that give meaning to life. (Marshall 2001, p. 202)

Although unknown by some, or overlooked by others, evidence in everyday lifestyle choices shows a strong obligation to the core values of a Lakota society that has matured over thousands of years, in this particular place, is interwoven within the experiences handed from one to another, intergenerationally (Kawagley and Barnhardt 1998). The grandparenting experiences of these Lakota elders are presented with these values and underlying principles. We call the reader to look beyond the negativity of the social and economic conditions to see the elders' experiences as they see them, through a social and cultural lens that highlights their living of these traditional values in a modern context.

Pine Ridge Indian Reservation

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the home of the Oglala Lakota Tribe, is located in the southwestern corner of South Dakota along the Nebraska border. There are roughly 41,000 tribal members (Bureau of Indian Affairs 2012). According to the 2000 Census, the population of the reservation is 15,521; yet, population estimates are difficult to determine because census figures are inaccurate because the rural terrain and many people are overlooked. The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development published a study by Colorado State University that determined the population to be 28,787 (Crash 2005). Alternatively, the Oglala Sioux Lakota Housing Executive Director stated that the population is closer to 40,000 (Crash 2005).

The reservation entirely encompasses Oglala Lakota County, formerly Shannon County, and extends into two neighboring counties. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2000), Shannon County was the second poorest county in the United States with unemployment on the reservation reaching nearly 80 %, for which 49 % live below the federal poverty line, and 61 % of children under the age of 18 live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The median household income is \$20,916. The per capita income for Shannon County is \$6286. The annual income for 26.7 %, or the largest portion of households, is less than \$10,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

While the subject, content and socioeconomic circumstances may seem harsh, they are. Pine Ridge has remained one of the top ten poorest counties in the United States since its creation. In comparison to every other population in the U.S., American Indians have higher mortality rates, lower income levels, higher suicide rates, and live in impoverished areas. These demographics can be compared to countries in central Africa. As we know with extreme poverty, that of third world conditions, the social issues do not reflect that of standard poverty in the U.S. Therefore, the conversations about poverty tend to be more extreme, the "other," that does not necessarily fit the socio-geographic constructs of our disciplinary understanding. Considering the experiences of Lakota grandparents and the people of Pine Ridge can challenge our very understanding of poverty in the U.S. It can also create a fixation on the poverty, which in turn takes our focus away from the grandparent's stories, and dedication to their families.

Literature Review

In the United States, there were 6.7 million grandparents whose grandchildren younger than 18 lived with them (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). In 2009, 2.7 million grandparents were responsible for the most basic needs of one or more grandchildren; 1.7 million of these were grandmothers (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Ten percent (7.5 million) of all children were living with a grandparent (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). For American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) “grandfamilies” there are approximately 100,000 grandparents raising grandchildren under the age of 18 years (U.S. Census Bureau 2012a; b). This number does not fully reflect those who informally adopted their grandchildren so this report may not reflect a full estimate of the AI/AN grandparents raising their grandchildren (Cross and Day 2008). The raising of grandchildren in AI communities can be culturally and traditionally informal and outside legal adoption, foster care or legal guardianship (Cross and Day 2008; Mooradian et al. 2007; Weibel-Orlando 1990). Traditionally, there has been involvement of grandparents in childrearing and a general openness to caregiving by grandparents in many AI/AN cultures (Mutchler et al. 2007; Weibel-Orlando 1997). AI/AN grandparents raised their grandchildren for extended periods of time and provided care for five or more years (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2005).

Cross and Day (2008) found that AI/AN grandparents assumed caregiving roles for their grandchildren for similar reasons as all other races who raise grandchildren. AI/AN populations have experienced a long series of traumatic assaults that have resulted in negative consequences for their families and communities (Evans-Campbell 2008). These traumatic events are well documented and include massacres, genocidal policies, and forced removal of AI/AN children to boarding schools (Stannard 1992; Thornton 1987 as cited in Evans-Campbell 2008). These events, along with contemporary traumatic events such as interpersonal violence, child abuse and neglect result in a negative toll on individual mental health as well as on the healthy functioning of families and the social structure of AI/AN social structures (Evans-Campbell 2008). In AI/AN communities, there are high rates of adult morbidity and mortality, higher rates of teen pregnancy, and substance abuse (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2005; Weibel-Orlando 1997; Mutchler et al. 2007). Additional reasons for grandparents assuming the responsibility of parenting their grandchildren include abandonment, incarceration, divorce, limited child care resources, unemployment, health and mental health issues (Mooradian et al. 2007). AI/AN families experience economic distress and limited opportunities for employment in some reservation communities. AI/AN individuals may leave the reservation for employment, leaving their children in the care of grandparents (Mutchler et al. 2007; Shomaker 1989).

There were costs and benefits related to grandparents raising grandchildren. AI/AN grandparents who had sole custody and responsibility for the children experienced poverty, physical activity limitations and limited access to resources and services (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2005; Cross and Day 2008). Cross and Day (2008) noted that the grandchildren in the study did not find the physical limitations as a disadvantage. One third of the caregivers in this study lived below the poverty line with another 21 % living near the poverty line and only 25 % of them receiving public assistance (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2005). Benefits included transmission of cultural and family values through the close intergenerational relationships. The health and behaviors of children raised by grandchildren were similar to those who lived with their biological parents (Solomon and Marx 1995). These grandparents felt relieved that their grandchildren were safe and with family and focused on the love in the care they provide

(Solomon and Marx 1995). Grandparents felt closer to their grandchildren and adult grandchildren often reciprocate and provide care to the AI/AN grandparents who raised them (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2005; Fuller-Thomson 2005; Weibel-Orlando 1997).

Methodology

Indigenous Methodologies

In order to conduct a study with Lakota elders, the methodology and research design must be respectful of their cultural and social position. Therefore, this study employed Indigenous Research Methodologies, the theory and methods of conducting research from the standpoint of an Indigenous epistemology (Kovach 2009). Indigenous research methodologies are born out of Indigenous relationships – to each other, to their ancestors and families, to their environment, their spirituality, ideas, wisdom, and traditions that have supported the living on this land for centuries (Wilson 2008). Indigenous methodologies include the sharing of knowledges through oral history and storytelling and are co-created in relation to others (Kovach 2009). More specifically, the author utilized the Indigenous Methodology known as the Conversational Method which provides a “culturally organic means to gather knowledge within research” with Indigenous people (Kovach 2010, p. 42). Conversational method is also found in western methodologies, through narrative inquiry, but differs when utilized from an Indigenous framework. These differences include:

- a) It is linked to a particular tribal epistemology (or knowledge) and situated within an Indigenous paradigm
- b) it is relational
- c) it is purposeful
- d) it involves particular protocol as determined by the epistemology and/or place
- e) it involved informality and flexibility
- f) it is collaborative and dialogic
- g) it is reflexive (Kovach 2010, p. 43).

For the Lakota elders this was particularly pertinent and a cultural match for an elder sharing information and wisdom with younger generations. The research questions delved into their life experiences, and the elders could share stories directed towards the questions in a manner that is comfortable and familiar. The Conversational Method offered the Lakota elders greater control over what they wished to share with respect to the research questions; hence the method acknowledged, incorporated and operated within the parameters of their cultural norms (Kovach 2009).

After meeting in a place that was private and convenient for the elders, the interviews consisted of open-ended, exploratory questions about their life history (e.g., Where were you born? Where did you go to school? Do you have children? What are your strategies that help you maintain the life you want to live?). The elders were able to directly relate a story to the questions posed. This relational conversational methodology allows for reciprocal give and take, as the author and elders questioned each other to gradually create a mutual interpretation on a topic or an idea. Similarly, Russell Bishop, a Maori researcher utilizes “collaborative storying” where the researcher is also a participant and through the collaborative process, the

relationship between the participant and the researcher grows and deepens as the stories are shared (in Kovach 2010, p. 43). For example, in developing an understanding of the boarding school experience described in detail later, the elders shared stories of their experiences of boarding school. When asked the author readily shared familial experiences related to boarding schools, which lead to a deeper understanding of the experiences on this reservation as we were able to compare and contrast further developing a deeper relationship to each other. Kovach (2010) noted that this give and take deepens the shared insights, builds richer relationships, and demands the researcher to become an active listener.

Participant Characteristics

Twenty five Lakota elders living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota participated in semi-structured, open ended, exploratory, in-depth, and face-to-face interviews. These conversations are part of a larger qualitative study focused on better understanding health and well-being among older Lakota men and women. Conversations were recorded and lasted between one and a half to nine hours in length. Twenty of the elders were women (all widowed or divorced), and five were men (three married, two single). They ranged in age from 55 to 98 years, with three under the age of 70. All but five spoke Lakota as their first language and often communicated with each other in Lakota on a regular basis. All participants were bilingual; therefore interactions for this study were conducted in English. At the time of the study, most of the elders resided on the reservation with the exception of three, two living in a nearby city to access resources for their grandchildren and one living in a long-term care facility. All had been born on the reservation and attended day school or the reservation boarding school.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Prior to commencing research activities, this study was approved by the tribal research review board as well as the university IRB. The first author, an American Indian researcher, conducted all the communication in the study, including setting up the interviews and visits as well as the recording of the elders' stories. Convenience sampling was employed by networking with tribal members the first author interacted with over the course of 5 years. Establishing these relationships assisted with the production of a core group of Lakota elders whom referred the first author to their friends, family, and acquaintances (Weiss Robert 1994). For this study, the first author introduced herself to community members, described the study and inquired if they knew of any elders who may be interested in participating. They discussed the project with their elder family members and then, upon their consent, the author contacted the elder to discuss the study more directly and then the elder agreed or declined to participate. Additionally, snowball sampling was used when the elders recommended others to participate in the study. There are nine districts on the reservation, each with a senior center and elder congregate meal site. Operating within an Indigenous framework, building relationships with the elders was imperative to conducting this research. The author visited with mostly women at the elder meal sites as the men usually sit together on one side and the women on the other. The researcher sat with the women and visited, allowing a relationship to form, which continued regularly throughout the duration of the research. Often the elders would interview the researcher, beginning with the collaborative relationship, before agreeing to participate in the interview process, for example asking where she is from, who her family is, and etcetera. After

being vetted by the elders some chose to participate in the research readily, for others it took months to feel comfortable enough with our relationship to participate in an interview.

Although not specifically asked about their intergenerational relationships, nearly all (23 of 25) participants discussed their experiences raising grandchildren. Grandparents seemed to be interested in sharing their stories for the betterment of others as a direct reflection of communal values. They described how they became substantially involved in their grandchildren's lives, the benefits and challenges associated with grandparenting. More broadly, elders were consistent in their desire to communicate the values of their community with regard to child rearing and the role of elders in supporting the well-being of younger members of the tribe. The significance of the grandparenting role in elders' lives underscored the potential value of this unintended but valuable theme that emerged from the data. While it was not the intention of the research to extrapolate the social and cultural contexts of grandparenting on this reservation, this article is a reflection of the elders' unique desires to share knowledge. Given this potential value, subsequent data analysis focused specifically on the experiences of participants as grandparents and as elders in a community explicitly invested in the well-being of children.

Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then manually reviewed for reporting patterns, or themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis was utilized to identify the themes related to traumatic experiences in Lakota elders. Thematic analysis involves six phases: 1) *Familiarizing Yourself with the Data*. The first author participated in the interviews, transcribed them, checked for accuracy against the recorded narratives and once printed both authors read them thus becoming very familiar and close to the data. 2) *Generating Initial Codes*. In reading the narratives of the elders, the authors identified repeated patterns across the data set through open coding, including reasons for assuming caring for grandchildren, challenges of raising and/or supporting grandchildren and children in the community. 3) *Searching for Themes*. The codes were then analyzed to form a theme. The importance of children and grandchildren was a theme that appeared across the stories from the elders. Raising and financially supporting grandchildren became a prominent theme. 4) *Reviewing Themes*. The themes are evaluated and refined. In examining the theme "grandchildren," the transcripts were reviewed again to ensure that all of the elders' narratives were captured related to this theme to assure accurate representation. There are experiences that relate to one or more themes and upon further examination these themes were clarified, for example several of the elders discussed the children in the community, while not biologically related they view them as the community's grandchildren. These ideas were categorized into the subthemes more clearly and their own experiences with their grandchildren was delineated. 5) *Defining and naming themes*. For each theme, the authors wrote detailed memos of analysis by identifying the "story" that each theme told and how this fit into the overall "story" that the Lakota elders shared. For the grandchildren there were three main themes, the situations that resulted in their raising grandchildren, the community's grandchildren and the challenges of raising grandchildren on the reservation. The story of each theme was clarified and analyzed in relation to each other to ensure that the elders' experiences were well represented and included. 6) *Producing the Report*. The results of these analytic efforts were a description of raising grandchildren on this reservation.

Findings

All but two of the elders in the study had raised grandchildren at some point in their lives, so the findings reflect the narratives of the twenty three elders who shared their experiences of raising grandchildren and two of the elders shared insights into the pervasiveness of grandparents raise their grandchildren on this reservation. Several of the elders live in multigenerational households where they either directly raise their grandchildren by having them in their homes, or by providing material and emotional support outside of the home. This support continues as the grandchildren move into adulthood and the grandparents continue into older adulthood.

Context of Raising Grandchildren on this Reservation

Grandparents raising grandchildren is very pervasive and common experience on the reservation, with Elder 9 stating simply, "...everybody does it, it doesn't bother them." Another elder woman shared her views on why it is important to take on the responsibility of raising grandchildren: [I for interviewer, E for elder].

I: It seems like a lot of grandparents raise their grandkids.

E: They are. I read in the...paper; it shows that the man is 98 and the woman is 95 and they have their little grandson is six years old and it says, "How old is too old?" to raise your grandchildren or your great grandchildren. As long as you can get around is how I feel. Children bring happiness. This other way, how could you be happy without a family? Because a lot of these people don't have anyone to go home to, like some there is no use to rush home; there is nothing there. (Elder 10, aged 82)

Keeping the families together and ensuring that the grandchildren are cared for is primary, also there is a sense of responsibility on the part of the grandparents to transmit their familial and cultural values to the grandchildren. Elder 10 revealed that children are happiness, they are also the future of the tribe so both personally and communally raising the children is important. As Elder 17 shared his views:

Being an elder I have the wisdom of the heritage side of what you've been taught by your grandmother or grandfather. This is what you teach the children and when you came in here – "Would you like some water and some coffee?" That's how we bring them up. It's important to be an elder nowadays.

The elders support and teach the grandchildren when they are young and the grandchildren repay them by supporting them and providing companionship in their later adult years, as Elder 15 related, "I stayed with my grandson and I came back and I go back and forth... I like it. Mmm hmm. I'm glad to be with him all the time." The importance of family is valued and keeping family members together across both their lifespans is a priority for the elders in this study. The relationship is mutually beneficial as Elder 5, aged 93 shared,

Like the doctor said, I shouldn't live alone. And I needed help a lot of times. He said, "So you shouldn't live alone." Well, that's the way the old people *feel* too, you know. That they - they'd rather live at the old house in the woods. They always live - and so that's why they draw in their grandchildren. They help them with the house works and a lot of things.

Participating with the family on raising grandchildren and assisting their adult children with their children is an important practice for the elders. Alternatively, feeling supported in their older adulthood and respecting elders is also a Lakota value and creates a mutually beneficial relationship for both the grandchildren and the elders. All of the elders in the study discussed the importance of their grandmothers on their lives when they were children and that they want to pay that forward to the next generation by teaching them cultural and familial values, including the Lakota language, as they were taught.

Beyond the personal commitment to the value of family there are many reasons that contribute to the elders' assuming the responsibility of caring for children in their homes. These factors are multifaceted and include the impact of assimilation tactics, the social and economic conditions, and cultural values on the reservation. One male elder shares insights into the broader experiences that may influence the inability for families to parent their children on the reservation. He shares,

...the values are, are on American society is financial, its money. You know for the Lakota people, its family. That's most important. So, you are torn between making a living and keeping your family together and it doesn't happen, like it did with me. Everybody I been growing up with, associated with, just about everybody we all suffered post-traumatic stress of something and the girls that we married, the women we married suffered it too. We had no skills in family, nothing. (Elder 21, aged 63)

As a result of this, he was unable to parent his own children and as a result has a more distant relationship with his family.

I miss my children and my grandchildren, I guess because when I was growing up and I'd get on my horse or walk because they lived two and half miles north on that side and I lived right down here and I'd walk over just to see them in the summer time. I can't understand why kids don't go to see their parents. I think it has to do with sobriety, we don't drink and we don't use and back then [when he was a child]. We didn't do hardly any of that but there's more of a bond than there is now...I don't have that real tight bond that I had with my grandparents or with my parents and that's because of the alcoholism.

These elders shared insights into the prevalence of grandparents raising grandchildren which is pervasive on this reservation. Partially, the value of family which relates to taking care of each other and as the traumatic experiences of some of the parents resulted in having limited skills in creating a healthy family. The elders provide financial and emotional support to the grandchildren in lieu of their parents care. They do so for a variety of reasons.

How they Began Raising Grandchildren

The elders began raising their grandchildren as a result of alcoholism, accidental or early deaths of the parents and the parents leaving the reservation for employment opportunities. One elder has spent her entire life raising children and grandchildren and continues to do so. She notes the following:

I: You raised your grandkids and your own kids; have you ever had a time when you didn't have kids in the home?

E: [shakes head no]

I: No. How do you feel about that?

E: It never did bother me. I mean and then I'd see my kid and I see them leaving their kids. We were just talking about that last night. [Her grandson] said, "How was my mom?" First time he ever mentioned her. It was a no-no with him. He'd just get so mad. He said, "How did you get me?"

"Well your mother used to drink a lot and your dad... was gone three days. Here one day, I went to work early that morning, a [co-worker] said, 'They've got two of your grandkids up here.' Some people that drink a lot and were walking around between the hospital and that trailer house, then that trailer house wasn't there. They had been froze to death if it wasn't for those dogs - those stray dogs. There must have been a lot of [dogs] because [the children's] temperature was normal and it took them about a half hour to get them away from those dogs. [The dogs would] growl and run at them and stuff so there was three [rescuers] and got [the dogs'] attention and these other two [rescuers] grabbed [the children] and put them in their car. They were looking for cans and they called the cops too, but by the time the cops got there, [the rescuers] had gotten them away from the dogs. The cops took [the children] to the hospital. Those dogs saved [the children] because it was winter time. I could imagine. They were two little boys, and right away I thought, *where's the third one?* They didn't find no third one. She has another one. They must have been 2 and 3 [years old] and he was what 2 months old? ... A month went by and she brought [the third baby] to me. You should have seen him, he was so skinny and had no life... I took him to the hospital. They gave him 48 hours; the doctor said he might be out of danger. He might. They said he didn't have no - he was undernourished and everything... I just sat there and cried and cried. After he got better I said he's not going back to [to his mother]. She said I didn't want him anyway. (Elder 4, aged 72).

While many of the stories of grandparents raising grandchildren are not as harrowing as this one, there are other families who struggled with substance abuse that resulted in neglect of their children. Unfortunately, as much as this circumstance may seem extraordinary it is not an uncommon experience for children living in extreme poverty on the reservation. Although it may be difficult to look past the obvious emotional trauma of the child, the grandmother seems to be more concerned with creating a dialogue that demonstrates the evolution of the child to a place where he can begin talking about the trauma. This reservation experiences many social and economic situations that have created an environment for some families where they are unable to parent and the grandparents stepped in to provide the care that the children needed. An elder man who in his younger years lived away from the reservation shared,

...that [my and my partner's] drinking was just too much I had to drop out [of school] then my daughter's mom and I broke up and I went on a downward spiral and I ended up living on the streets in Denver... I have one daughter. Basically I was a single parent, raised her and then she, we have two grandkids and it didn't work out between stress of something and and now one is 14 and the other one is 11 (Elder 12, aged 55)

This elder provided both supportive care to his daughter and grandchildren as well as sole custodial care for the grandchildren over the years. The situation vacillated between custodial care and supportive care as the children grew older. In reflection, the two elder men shared small windows into their own absent parenting as a result of alcoholism, as a means to address and identify where their own personal experiences with their parents may have played apart in

the way that they parented. Recognizing that participation in their grandchildren's lives occurred more consistently after they were living healthy lifestyles created outlets to invest this energy into their grandchildren. The elders live the Lakota values of family, generosity and sacrificing their own later adulthood freedoms to assume the responsibility of parenting their grandchildren.

In addition struggling with substance abuse, AI/AN communities have high rates of accidental deaths leaving some children without parents, this reservation experiences this phenomena as well. Some grandparents have been there to pick up the pieces, as one elder shared her experience:

One daughter had a car wreck and died and this one [grandson, now an adult] was eight months old and another one was five years old, and I raised both of them. Her mom was working at...uh...[inaudible] for I don't know how many years, but these two were raised by Social Security when I had them...she had a car accident and died, and these two were getting Social Security and I raised them. (Elder 7, age 75)

This is one example of a single mother with children and the grandmother stepping in to care for the children when they needed a home. Without question, she welcomed the children into her home and continues to provide a home for the adult children as they move through adulthood. Additionally, this elder was one of three elders who shared that they were legally given guardianship of their grandchildren; the other elders did so informally. For Elder 7, she and another explicitly stated that they were able to obtain financial support for their grandchildren and the other had gainful employment and raised the children without other assistance.

Parents also left the grandchildren in the care of the grandparents in order to positively improve their lives through education or employment. The economic context on the reservation is such that gainful employment is often located outside the reservation communities. One elder shared that her daughter released custody of her child in order to go into the military. Another shared,

E: ...my grandkids are always happy to see me. I raised three of them, no, four of them and they're still here, but they don't bother me that much. If they really need something then...

I: How come you raised four grandkids?

E: Their dad and mom were living in [a nearby town] and my son was going to school... over there. So, he went there for three years. But his kids - [I] had to keep them over here; they had two, three kids over there and I got the bigger ones, so they could go to school over here. I kept the three oldest ones. After they came back, [the grandchildren] didn't want to go back, so I just stayed with them until they graduated.

The relationship between the grandmother and the grandchildren was important to both of them and the family let the children decide to stay with their grandmother even after the parent's schooling had ended.

The elders began raising their grandchildren in the home as a result of seeking employment or education off the reservation, early deaths and alcohol or substance abuse issues. The care offered by the elders was both continuous until the grandchildren left the home as adults and also on an as needed basis as issues arose in their adult children's lives. The elders also provided insights into the challenges of raising grandchildren which they often raised from their middle age years and great-grandchildren into their older adult years.

Challenges of Grandparenting Grandchildren

The elders did not address directly the negative impacts on the grandchildren of being raised by grandparents instead of their parents; they also did not explicitly comment on how the presence of the grandchildren negatively affected the elders' well-being. However, one of the elders did share a challenging situation of a confrontation she had with her grandson when she was much younger, more than 30 years ago:

...The only time you get punished if you are doing something out of the way and you don't listen. How else do you correct your child? That's why a lot of these kids are out of hand because they take up and they give; if you try to correct them, then they say, "I'll turn you in for child abuse." I know, because I raised my two grandkids and the boy became a teenager and got with other boys. He came back and demanded money which I didn't have, and he said, "That's my money you get" and I said, "Sure, and I gave you your share already," but I said, "I have to buy your food and for the house, so you've got your spending money already; I gave it to you." He said, "I'm going to turn you in for child abuse;" I said, "You do that, I'll turn you in for elderly abuse." I turned 55 and I got smart too. [laughs] After that, I didn't have a hard time with him because I told him that like he uses bad words and raised his hand to sock me, I guess. I grabbed him here and I threw him in the bed, and said, "Don't you ever raise your hand to me. I took you in and I raised you, and you treat me like this? I'll use a belt on you if you aren't careful." But after that, I didn't have no problems with him. (Elder 10, aged 82)

The intergenerational differences can emerge and while this elder was able to handle the confrontation, it offers insights into the challenges of older grandparents raising grandchildren. She also offers that she was aware of elder abuse and resources available to mitigate should things not have improved between them. The high rates of substance abuse and alcohol consumption on the reservation and the overcrowded intergenerational homes can result in the elders being exposed to situations where their well-being may be compromised (Johnson et al. 1995).

Many of the elders provided financial support to their grandchildren and sometimes even their great-grandchildren. For those elders who were able to work in a career, and therefore have retirement benefits they fill the gaps for the younger generations and sacrifice their own resources for the betterment of the grandchild's future. As one elder stated:

E: I have to buy everything. I put my grandson through school. He just came back from [college] and I help him. It's a big scholarship. Gates... Yeah, the Bill Gates [Foundation Millennium] scholarship.

I: They get a full ride?

E: No, they don't. They get their tuition and schooling, and their books and their room, but nothing for their personal things. Then nothing for washing, you know.

I: Transportation.

E: Yeah, getting from here to there.

I: So you help him with that?

E: I want him to be a doctor to go on. I told him I would help him to the end.

I: Who lives with you?

E: My granddaughter and her kids. The one little one, the college student, and another girl – she's [in high school]...

I: How come she doesn't work?

E: I don't know. We wonder, and we wonder. [Sounds weary, talks low]

I: Do you ask them for help?

E: Uh, huh. They say the grandma is supposed to support them. She says that, "Grandma is supposed to support them, that's what a grandma is for."

I: That's hard, enit?

E: It's very hard. I try to send him \$200 or \$250 every month. I got him this [car] to go to school in, I pay for it. (Elder 1, aged 85)

This demonstrates the extent of the material strain the elders are willing to live under, sacrificing resources they need for benefit of their families. Interestingly, this is a reflection of what Elder 21 states above, money is recognized as important but more important is family, which also speaks directly to the core values of Lakota people. This elder is invested in the success of her grandson and will do what it takes to help him through his education, committing herself financially when she has very little to spare. Elder 16 also offered insights, "...But some of us have grandkids, we need school clothes and we need certain things and they don't have the money and that's the reason why we always have to have these sales or sell some things to get them things." Assuming the responsibility for their grandchildren whether that includes financial support or raising them in their homes is motivated by their investment in the well-being of the next generations.

In addition to financial strains on the grandparents, the social and emotional distances between the generations can be hard to bridge. Since some of the grandchildren were intentionally given to the grandparents, or unintentionally abandoned, or they came from unstable homes, they bring to their elder grandparents unresolved emotional issues that have not been addressed. One elder commented on her grandson, the baby from the earlier story who was abandoned outdoors in the winter and the dogs kept him warm, on how she sent him to treatment, not for substance abuse, but instead to help him work through his anger:

E: He really needs help. That anger is so bad in there, when he was in treatment. What, he was there about three weeks, I'd say and I'd call him. It was a different sound of his voice and you could even feel it. It looked like he was free of something, and now it's getting back to that, and now you can hear the hatred.

I: Would he see a medicine person?

E: He goes with [her daughter] and he sweats and he feels different; you can see the way he walks and everything when he's angry, and stuff you can tell that too like, he's like he's someplace else. He's just really mixed up. Otherwise, when he's a good feeling, he's the best kid. I told that guy, his counselor that time. He said he's really doing good, but he's really going to need help because he's got that [whatchacallit] about his mother and it's all bound up in there. It's going to take really long time to get that out.

I: How old is he?

E: He's seventeen. I think we better get it out of there before. He gets mad and I think he could really kill someone and not know it. When I was going to [boarding school], that's how I was too. I was so angry and Ooh I just hated god, everybody. [cries] I know what he's going through, and I can't help him. 'Cause one time the priest, if I didn't get [help], I could [have] kill[ed] somebody and I wouldn't even know it. [crying] (Elder 4, aged 72)

The burning anger within the grandchild due to his abandonment by his mother thus not only sears him, but also creates anguish and concern for his grandmother. Thus bringing up her own feelings about the boarding school she attended as a child. She related and has great insight into the anger and frustration her grandson is carrying inside. And the resource-limited environment in the reservation leaves the elders and their grandchildren to struggle on their own to relieve the emotional weight of their stressful experiences, but also reveals that the pain is so deep the grandmother knew well enough that she could not be the only outlet for recovery. This elder took her grandson to treatment away from the reservation in order to help resolve his emotional issues. Another elder observes that this is a community-wide issue where he shares:

The underlying things I saw here were depression, it underlying just about everybody has it. A lot of anger ...yeah, lots of anger its underlying and uh, economics are terrible. You have federal help here but it doesn't last long. The programs turn over every couple of years. There's no stability. Somehow we get on. (Elder 21, aged 63)

Despite the poor economic conditions and the social ills that result from limited opportunities, historical and contemporary trauma, the residents of this community persevere and through sheer will and determination continue to support their families.

These elders provided a small window into the challenges of grandparents raising grandchildren. The emotional needs of the children as a result of abandonment and the unstable resources in the community to support the elders in this effort demonstrate the resilience and strength of the elders in providing for their grandchildren. The elders also care deeply about the community's grandchildren and the well-being of those who may not be directly related to them, they also provide support to those children.

Caring for the Community's Grandchildren

In addition, Lakota elders also consider the younger generations living in their community as if the latter were their own grandchildren. The elders speak frequently about their varied experiences with these younger generations, often expressing the sentiment that they worry for them, and want the best for them. Elder 11 recounted that when she is at the gas station she will frequently see young children unsupervised who will always ask her, "Grandma, can you buy me some chips?" Her own financial resources are limited and sometimes she will buy them the 39 cent bags of chips and the cheapest cans of pop. She feels compelled to help the little children as best as she can while admonishing their parents for not meeting the needs of their kids. As this elder recounted such instances, she took pains to tell me that this problem was not unique to this reservation or this country. She stated that she has seen on television third-world countries with situations that are similar.

It is also important to emphasize that the very expansive loving and generous spirit the Lakota elders possess is the result of the values embedded in their Lakota culture. One elder shared the following story that exemplifies this spirit of emotional care and concern, and of the willingness to be present there for the next generation, even when the elders do not know those they encounter personally:

...One day I was going to work one morning and...um, I start going down that hill and I thought *I wonder what that dog is draggin'?* but it was the weeds were high and all I

could see was this blond, a blond and the grass moving, so then I went down, and there was a road like this [gestures], and I turned there, and I was going, and you know it was a two year old baby dragging a little tiny one. That baby had her by the diaper, pulling her with him. Oh, my god, I was so mad. I just flew through; I didn't care if I went through somebody's yard, and out the other, and went right to the police station. And I told them, I said, "Look what I found." And it was five o'clock in the morning cause I had to go like almost five miles to work, but ooooooh I never did find out who they were; they should have been [there with their kids], and they just leave their kids; they don't even have a reliable babysitter and off they go. (Elder 4, aged 72)

Despite the many heartbreaking situations like the one described above, there are community members, with elders' as the focus of this study, who are doing their very best to intervene to protect the lives of the children and adults in their communities. The elders also try to educate the children and adults in their communities; they try to provide an environment that allows the children to experience understanding and compassion, also providing them with opportunities to learn from their mistakes and grow. One elder was a leader in her community. As the Elder Representative, she managed the elder meal site in her community. A church group from another state donated a television to the elder community center. And the elder continued to recount the following:

They brought, uh, a little donation, a TV and here, uh, the other [day], about six months ago; they brought us a new TV - a big one. So we have that. This is really something. We put our new TV in there. Somebody broke in and stole the TV, and this cop happened to be there. I went to the cop and I took pictures of it, and where the wires were torn out and said, "Check over to that house, four or five down; some boys were carrying a TV in that house."

So this cop walked in, and sure enough there was a TV, right on the floor. So he said, "Isn't that the elders' TV?" [The youth] didn't say anything; he put his head down. "I'm going to give you a half an hour to take that TV back over there if that's the elderly TV." He said, "I can't myself; it's too heavy" [we laugh]

Whatcallit [the policeman], he said, "Who else was involved in this?" So he named three other boys, you know.

He said, "You call them, I'm going to go visit them and send them over and you carry this TV back over there." [She laughed].

So I don't think anyone would ever want to break in and carry anything out because, you know, they probably *shamed themselves out*. "It's too heavy [chuckles]. Did you carry it yourself? No, three others." So I went and put screens on the windows, and cost me about \$300 to fix the door, where it can lock. So, we're safe now. We keep our door closed, you know, and our screens, so we're alright, we're doing alright. (Elder 19, aged 89)

Later in the conversation, this elder and I talked about how the systems in place are not based on Lakota values, and how they therefore debase the Native youth's self-esteem and self-worth. In this case, the elder did not press charges or demand the youth be arrested; instead, she relied on an adaptation of Lakota values and traditional Lakota ways of punishing: she made them right the wrong they had performed. This also serves as an example to the broader community in allowing the children to make mistakes and to learn from them, utilizing cultural ways of teaching for the community and their children to learn.

Discussion

The elders in this study readily raised their grandchildren and committed themselves and their material resources to raising many of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The reasons for becoming a custodial grandparent confirm previous studies findings. The elders parent children from their younger adult years and into their 90s with adult grandchildren living in their homes. The elders raise their grandchildren in a social and economic context that has limited resources to support their efforts but their cultural values of family and caring for the future generations motivates them to support their grandchildren. The grandparents take on the responsibility as a result of substance abuse, neglect, parents seeking employment and educational opportunities, and children orphaned as the result of accidental deaths. A significant finding for this population is the care and concern for the broader community's children. The elders step in to help the community's grandchildren through leadership and guidance as well as providing assistance with food.

Grandparenting grandchildren on this reservation is pervasive. One elder identified that she sought assistance with supporting her grandchild with formal emotional and behavioral treatment to mitigate his anger related to his abandonment from his mother. The rest of the elders did not mention how they helped their grandchildren deal with the grief and loss of their parents. Outreach efforts by the behavioral and mental health services for these families are imperative. These resources offer concrete support and tools for managing the family dynamics for the children, parents and grandparents who have experienced instability. There may be children with emotional, behavioral and developmental issues that result in more intense physical and emotional commitment on the part of the elders, which may be more than they are able to give. As stated previously, one elder offered a small window into a confrontation that did not escalate into violence. More research is needed to gather evidence of what supports the grandparents may need to navigate through these situations. Cross and Day (2008) found that AI grandparents need access to respite and support groups to manage the crisis as well as the day-to-day psychological supports that are needed when the elders are also grappling with their own life issues.

It should be noted that most of the research sample is largely comprised of women. On the reservation there is a common saying that the women are the “backbone” of Lakota culture and community. The elders raise these grandchildren in a very resource limited environment as the stories reveal. While the context reveals social and economic conditions that are among the poorest in the United States, which consequently entails classic signs of the socially impoverished, these elders readily sit at this confluence for their grandchildren. The elders live Lakota values in a modern context where generosity, commitment to family and sacrifice for the future generations is paramount.

The elder women often have meager incomes and this study clearly shows they share everything they have with their families. They are truly the “backbone” that is keeping these families together by providing a stable home with financial and emotional support throughout their childhood and into adulthood. It is common practice as one elder said, “Everybody does it.” Their efforts should be acknowledged as they provide an incredible service to the community. The elders did not directly address how they interact with the social service system related to raising grandchildren, more research is needed to reveal the resources available and if there are challenges accessing these resources that relate to being an older adult. Supportive services are imperative to augmenting the efforts of these grandparents raising their grandchildren as they navigate living in this social and economic context.

The elder men in the study revealed their experiences with alcoholism and the effects on their families. The elder women did not reveal in any detail their own behaviors or circumstances in their households that contributed to the inability of their children to parent. The unresolved emotional issues remain and accumulate across the generations. Assessing for AI/AN clients and patients for substance abuse issues and identifying resources for the individuals and their families is imperative for familial well-being.

Cross et al. (2010) also found the historical traumatic experiences were a major contributing factor to AI/AN grandparents raising their grandchildren. Brave Heart (1999) describes a curriculum for resolving historical trauma and rebuilding parenting practices. The *Wakanheja* curriculum addresses the effects of historical trauma and infuses Lakota traditional values as a protective factor for children and prevention against alcohol and drug use. This curriculum may be utilized by trained peer facilitators and mental health practitioners in this community. There is thus a great need for mental health services that would address the unresolved grief and loss in this community. Particularly, these services might be useful among older adults to help the elders cope with their grandchildren's emotional health. As shown by one of the elders, the grandchild's emotional pain brought to the forefront her own memories of pain from her childhood school experiences. The intergenerational experiences can be transformed into healing for both the grandmothers and the grandchildren.

Additionally, the elders also see the broader reservation community as part of their consciousness of care and concern. With their limited resources they provide as much as they can to the community's grandchildren. They are respectfully called "Grandma" by the small children. The elder women attempt to provide for the children in the face of extremely limited resources in their community. The Lakota values of generosity and bringing up the next generation are lived within the elders and they readily help the community. The models of grandparents raising grandchildren have not been conceptualized to encompass the broader community of all of the children. The elders are concerned about them as a community, mourn their losses and celebrate their accomplishments.

Social workers, and other supportive professionals in the health fields may need to consider and explore these unique situations from a case-by-case basis, in order to truly understand the intricate concerns that are impacting the elders' and their grandchildren's well-being. Evans-Campbell (2008) asserts that the treatment models for addressing trauma should also include familial and community level approaches. There are tribes who have reinstated traditional practices as a method of community healing. Identifying culturally appropriate practices for this reservation community is ongoing, but needed for a multi-faceted approach to the complex issues. Although some tribes are taking action to address these issues in a culturally responsible, community based way, there seems to be recognition from tribes that these issues might not always be fully remedied by traditional practices. Giving a nod to the possibility that these issues are new, and a realization tribal people have never encountered previously. In fact, the very root of these issues may be so deeply manifested within the community that tribes have to generate new and innovative ways to reestablish healthy, non-stagnant, culturally-centered communities again. When there are advances to make communities healthier through community-based resources the impact on the grandparents raising grandchildren could be positive.

Continuing, further research is needed to unravel the complicated dynamics that result from grandparents assuming a custodial parent role. More information is needed regarding familial and individual interventions to determine and alleviate the stresses on the grandparent and the grandchild related to the transition into their grandparent's home and addressing the instability of the parents. Outreach to grandparents related to behavior, health and school related issues

are imperative for supporting the child as they grow into adulthood. The technological gap will also need to be addressed as the younger generations have access to the internet, smart phones and other technology that the elders may not be familiar and could impact their parenting. Also, assessing tribal programs, both urban and reservation to determine the methods and programs that have been in place to determine best practices and to share models of supporting intergenerational AI/AN families.

Study Strengths and Limitations

A number of strengths and limitations of the study warrant attention. The small sample size of Lakota elders allowed the researcher an extended amount of time, which provided insight into the life histories and experiences of Lakota elders living today. Very little is known about the details of elders living today and with this study a major contribution allows a window into the context and experience of caring for grandchildren. These in-depth descriptions provide an important cultural, social and familial foundation into pervasive familial dynamic that is underreported in the literature. In terms of limitations, as with most qualitative research, the findings are highly contextual, not intended to be transferable to other settings, which would have their own unique contextual factors. This exploratory study reveals a description of grandparents raising grandchildren, however, the elders were not directly queried about grandparents raising grandchildren on this reservation. However, the theme arose in a substantial amount of the interviews. The vast majority of the elders have provided care to their grandchildren at some point in their lives. Their care and concern for the next generations is a common thread through the interviews. Potentially, if the elders were asked directly, the information provided may have been more comprehensive especially in relation to the rewards, challenges, and supportive services. Hence, this study can serve as the beginnings of a baseline and leaves room for further research to examine this topic more fully.

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