

Article

Tribal and Non-tribal Agencies: A Comparison of how Social Work with Families is Conceptualized in the United States

by

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Keywords:

Family, family definition, tribal social work, child welfare, nonprofit agency, extended family, direct practice

Abstract

As definitions of “family” have evolved in the US over the past several decades, so too has child welfare agencies’ need to provide appropriate and meaningful services. This article discusses the findings and conclusions drawn from a case study involving two different types of social work agencies: Native American child welfare and not-for-profit family services. Within this discussion, the authors use their findings from case study vignette focus groups to explore how the definitions of family impact the provision of services. At each agency, participants addressed issues surrounding domestic violence, teen pregnancy, child welfare involvement and the inclusion of extended families as part of client’s support network. By focusing on the changing social concept of “family,” the study’s respondents discussed the need for direct practice using broader, more inclusive approaches to family and child welfare. Through the comparison of two agencies which serve different demographics, the article makes clear that further study is needed, and a wider scope must be considered, in order to adequately serve America’s expanding population in need of family services, direct practice and extended support.

Introduction

Child welfare work is highly dependent on the definition of family. Agency definitions of family structure can determine who gets services, where children are placed and who is identified as support for the family. The purpose of this study is to investigate discourses of family and social work practices in two different child welfare contexts. Hence, the research question for this study was:

How does an agency’s definition of family affect the way social workers describe, explain and justify social work practice with families within different child welfare contexts?

The traditional nuclear definition of family in the US (a father, mother and 2.2 children) has been evolving for some time, as the family structure has changed (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Since the 1980s, households with married couples and children have decreased by 31%, while the number of households with single parents has increased. The rise in single-parent families is due not only to the current divorce rate of approximately 48%, but also to an increase in births outside of marriage, as

41% of births in 2010 were to single women (Jacobson, Mather, & Dupuis, 2012, 3-4, 8-9). Moreover, same-sex parenting contributes to the changing American family structure. In 2010, 170,000 children were being raised by 110,000 same sex parents (Gates, 2013, 3). Another contributing factor is the 64% increase since 2000 of grandparents raising grandchildren. As of 2010, 7.8 million children lived with a grandparent, and 2.5 million of those grandparents had legal custody (US Census, 2011). Finally, although births to teenage mothers have steadily declined (the teenage birth rate was 2.9% in 2012), the US still has the highest teen birth rate of all developed countries (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

Another element affecting this familial transition is the fact that the US population is evolving from a majority of Western European descent to a multicultural society. Population trends and census statistics forecast a shift to a multicultural demographic in the upcoming decade. By 2043, the United States' non-Hispanic white population is expected to be smaller in number than its ethnic population. Furthermore, both the Hispanic- and Asian populations are expected to double in the US by 2060. In addition, the Native American population is expected to increase by more than half, while the black population will increase by 1% (US Census, 2012). As a result, there is an increased need to understand how family is culturally defined, which is vital to help keep pace with these changing population trends.

In the US, the child welfare system is a large network of services provided by State, County, Native American, not-for-profit and for-profit agencies. Public agencies administering services are the 50 states, their counties and Native American tribes; private agencies which administer services are for-profit and not-for-profit agencies, which may include faith-based organizations. The Social Security Act of 1935 shifted legal responsibility for child welfare services to each individual state, and most states have now delegated the administration and delivery of child protection services to their individual counties. In 1974, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act provided a national standard definition of child abuse and neglect and a method of reporting suspected abuse, which acts as a model for all states (Karger & Stoesz, 2002, 2, 419).

Although the states and counties share the legal responsibility to deliver child protection services, many child welfare services occur within not-for-profit and for-profit agencies. Counties contract with some of these agencies to provide specific services for child welfare clients, while other agencies fill gaps or provide additional services for child welfare clients that the counties do not. Some examples of services provided by not-for-profit and for-profit agencies are foster care licensing and homes, housing, parenting skills training and therapeutic services. As one can see, the social services system in the United States is a patchwork of private and public agencies, all attempting to serve a population which continues to change in size and demographic.

The contemporary reality in the US is that the child welfare system is overburdened by high caseloads (Pryce, Shackelford, & Pryce, 2007, 29-34), a lack of out-of-home placements and poor statistical outcomes for youth who exit the system (California Department of Social Services, 2007). The most disturbing fact is that the US system focuses on providing services to families after the abuse or neglect has occurred, as opposed to offering much-needed preventive services (Berg & Kelly, 1997, 26-27). As a result, the system has predominantly been focused on child protection, rather than family maintenance. In recent years, a paradigm shift has begun across the states, moving in a direction towards preserving families by building better partnerships with families, community members and tribal agencies (Waldfoegel, 1998, 110-111). Although the approach is beginning to change and the definition of family is expanding, it will still be necessary to determine if agencies and social workers have begun to internalize and expand their definitions and practice.

In the United States, the government attempts to balance the rights of children, parents and the states as to the timing and manner of intervention in the lives of families experiencing child neglect and maltreatment. Policies such as The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, in addition to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978, emphasize family considerations, placement, services and timelines. In deference to their long history, Native American tribes have a unique relationship with the federal government. This means federally-recognized tribes in the US are considered to be sovereign nations. ICWA policy also recognizes the unique political

relationship between tribes and the federal government, with tribes identified as a party to any legal action taken when a county's child welfare agency is involved with Indian children. The ICWA ideally represents both the interests of the child and the tribe, and also specifies the requirements to be followed every time a Native American child enters (or is at risk of entering) the child welfare system. This law identifies preferences for placement, noticing requirements to the child's tribe, the requirements for removal and for an expert witness, the termination of parental rights and adoption (California Indian Legal Services, 2012, 8, 19-25, 26).

The ASFA provides timelines for family reunification, as well as an emphasis on permanency for foster children. The guidelines allow 15 months of service time for family reunification, after which time the child needs to be placed in a permanent placement such as adoption. To facilitate this in the allotted time, the Act introduced concurrent planning. Such planning necessitates a dual mandate, which focuses first on family reunification while simultaneously considering permanent placements. The Act also emphasizes placement preferences and the need to reduce multiple foster placements (ASFA, 1997).

The theoretical perspective that informs this study is critical social work theory, specifically as it is applied to discourse and language. The discourse, or the way we talk about social work, also helps us to construct ideas about our social work practice (Fook, 2012, 65), which means there is a relationship between our language and our actions. The language that social workers use impacts service delivery by labeling who is included in-, and as part of, a family. The labels we use are important because they determine what to focus on, what we value and who has power (Fook, 2012, 74). The language and labels that social workers use create whom we consider to be clients in our practice. In child welfare, those who are labeled as part of a "family" are more likely to receive services than those who are not. However, the meanings in this language are not static, but fluid (Fook, 2012, 77). Our study examined the meaning that social workers give to the "family" in their work, and to whom that label is applied. We are particularly interested in determining if agency labels have changed in the same way that "family" has changed in the United States over recent years.

Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2004) provide a definition of family that has three different perspectives. The first is a structural definition: Family is defined by who is considered part of the household. This definition usually includes parents and children, and occasionally extended family, e.g. the American government uses a structural definition when conducting the census. The second perspective is a psychosocial definition, in which family is defined by the roles each member performs. In this definition, each member has a specific role within the family (to take care of the household, socialize, rear children, etc.). The third perspective is a transactional definition, in which family is defined by the behaviors and emotional ties which exist between the people involved.

Social work research on the definitions of family, and the impact these definitions have on services, is very limited. The little research that does exist is primarily with LGBTQ families (Peterson, 2013, 487). Research with older lesbians has found that “family” is often broadly defined, and includes supportive relationships beyond the biological family. These relationships can be called the “family of choice” (Gabrielson, 2011, 330). Family of choice is defined as “the people to whom you are not related to by blood but you identify as family,” and was significantly related to social support for older lesbians (Gabrielson & Holston, 2014, 201, 212). Bould (1993, 138) has created another broad definition, the family-as-caretaker, defined as “the informal unit where those who cannot care for themselves can find care in times of need.” In the context of social services, this definition can be problematic and raises a number of questions: What happens when the family members can no longer take care of each other and agencies need to step in to provide services? Does the family definition change, and does that affect who is allowed to receive services? Are some people then left out from receiving help because of an outdated, narrow definition of family? This study will contribute to the literature by exploring how agencies consider the definition of families in their work, and how they answer these questions.

Methods

Design

The current study uses a qualitative focus group design, designed to investigate discourses of family and social work practices in two different child welfare contexts.

Focus groups are commonly used in social work research to examine social problems, including experiences of violence (Letendre & Rankin Williams, 2014), service needs with immigrant families (Ayon, 2014), assessment of child risk in child protection cases (Forgey, Allen, & Hansen, 2014) and racial disproportionality in the child welfare system (Miller, Cahn, Anderson-Nathe, Cause, & Bender, 2013). Focus groups can provide rich data because of the group interaction which occurs. Participants ask each other questions and describe situations that may not have otherwise come up in an individual interview (Duggleby, 2005). A limitation of focus groups is that one or two members may dominate the group. As a result, others in the group may stay silent or they may then give biased responses (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Considering that all of the participants in each group were from the same agency, this may apply to the current study. Social workers who worked at the agency longer, or who were more experienced, may have unknowingly silenced other social workers who may not want to comment against the agency, and therefore agreed with their colleague's responses. Thus, including participants from several different agencies may have led to a wider range of information.

The current study was reviewed and approved by the Humboldt State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is the University's department that is responsible for the ethical protection of human subjects in research according to California State and US Federal Regulations.

Procedures

Two focus groups were held in the northwestern region of the U.S, one at a Native American social service agency, and one at a not-for-profit family agency. The first group lasted two hours and the second group lasted approximately one and a half hours, and both groups were facilitated by two moderators. The first moderator asked most of the questions and read the vignettes, whereas the second moderator facilitated the recorder and observed key interactions between focus group members.

The Native American social service agency, where the first group was held, is operated by a Native American tribe and provides services to enrolled members of the tribe. These services include child and adult protection services, emergency

financial services, parenting and culture classes and preschool classes. Participants in the focus group were all employed in the child protective services (child welfare) department. These employees worked with families who were also involved with the county's child protection services. Although the county has a legal responsibility to provide protective services, the Native American tribe has jurisdiction over Native American children in the child welfare system. Four people participated in the focus group; all the participants were women, aged 27, 32, 35 and 37. Three were of Native American descent, and one was African American. One had an MSW, one was attending school for an MSW and one was attending school for a BASW.

The second focus group was held at a not-for-profit family agency which provides shelter for families who are homeless, case management and other services to assist people in becoming self-sufficient. Many of the clients the agency works with are also working with the county's child protection agency and the Native American child protection agency. Many parents whose children have been removed by the child welfare system are homeless, and needed housing and other services before they could be reunited with their children. Therefore, this not-for-profit agency provides important services in the child welfare system. Four people participated, three women and one man, aged 22, 28, 32 and 57, and all the participants were Caucasian. One person was just completing an MSW, one was just entering an MSW program, one had a BASW degree and one possessed a Bachelor's degree in Psychology.

To help facilitate conversation and standardize the focus groups, case vignettes were used. These prompts provide a short description of a case, and ask for specific information from participants. Historically, case vignettes have been used in past social work research on child protection decision-making (Stokes & Schmidt, 2012), social work practice (Eskeline & Caswel, 2006) and gatekeeping in child welfare (Khoo, Hyvonen, & Nygren, 2003). The case vignette used for this study was written by Lennart Nygren and Siv Oltedal for the "Social Work with Families: Social Workers' Constructions of Family in Professional Practice International Comparative Study." The vignette covers a young teen as she becomes a mother and struggles to parent her child; a history of domestic abuse within the family complicates her

support. The vignette describes and presents three different time-spans as the case progresses. In the first situation, the child protection case has not yet been opened and the teen has just initiated services. In the second situation, two years have passed, a child protection case is now open and the teen and her child are removed from the home. In situation three, another two years have passed and the teen mom requests to have her child returned. Participants were asked what advice they would give the social worker in response to each section of the case, and what actions they would take. Before the case was read, social workers were asked what their personal definitions of family were, and also how the agency defined family.

Data Analysis

Each focus group was recorded, and then later transcribed verbatim. Content analysis was used to help identify the following predetermined themes: definitions of family, interventions and the effect of culture and policy (Rothwell, 2013, 176). Next, the transcripts were reread, using open coding to identify the additional themes that emerged across the two focus groups (Patton, 2002). The additional themes identified were social work with different genders and generations. Focus group transcripts were analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Each author analyzed the data independently, and the results were compared to increase reliability.

Findings

Definition of Family

The study asked the research question, “How does the agency’s definition of family describe, explain and justify social work practice with families within different child welfare contexts?” Social workers reported their both own personal definitions and the legal constraints of their agency definition. Comparing the definition of family that Native American and not-for-profit social workers gave, we found the participant’s personal definitions were very similar; however, agency definitions differed. Social workers in the Native American agency defined family personally and professionally in broad and large terms. Family included parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends and community members:

...people that are my aunts and uncles, people that are my parents' best friends that I had grown up with my whole life and they are a parental figure to me. And who have taught me a lot during my life. It would be somebody in the community that I would consider family that's not biologically related.

The context of family was not differentiated between immediate and extended families unless tribal professionals were dealing with other non-tribal social workers. Several social workers stated: "I would never use the word 'extended family' unless it had to do with work or if somebody was asking me a question like that." A situation requiring differentiation involved working with a federal program, which requires a more exclusive definition to meet funding and program requirements. Otherwise, the definition of family was the same in professional and personal settings for all respondents from the Native American agency.

Social workers in the not-for-profit agency defined family in their personal definitions as large, and include extended family, the "people who are part of a support system and people who provide help, but may not be related biologically." The professional definition used at the agency was not as broad; instead, it was a legal definition based on the head of the household, custody, guardianship or intact families. One person explained it as: "...the idea of somebody's family as a whole is more encompassing than our agency, which tends to be the household family. (They are) the people that are residing in the home together." The family is typically comprised of a nuclear family. "It would be mom with kids, dad with kids...Grandma, grandpa with kids, aunt and uncle with kids." Currently, this legal custody definition determines who is eligible for services from the agency.

Interventions

Participants were asked what actions they would take in each of the three situations of the case vignettes. This led to which interventions the social workers and agency would perform. When examining the description of social work practice in regards to the case study, the Native American social work practice was more inclusive than the not-for-profit practice. When interacting with child welfare services, the Native American social workers would provide support services, including case planning to

both of the parents, the grandparents and sometimes the great-grandparents of the child. One Native American participant stated:

We pull the fathers in and have conversations with them as well and help them be a part of the planning process, and hopefully get them engaged and give them the opportunity to play an important role in their child's life.

This is an agency practice and a legal process applied regularly by the Native American agency.

The Native American social worker's interventions were family-centered, culturally-focused and trauma-sensitive. Beginning with situation 1, services were centered on helping the family by identifying supportive relatives and individuals outside the family network who could assist the family in finding positive solutions. Furthermore, the identified supportive team members have a responsibility to the family in encouraging behavioral changes, as well as a responsibility to connect the family to their culture and ceremonies. One participant described it as: "The family's role is to help come up with solutions to what brought them to the attention of child welfare services. I'd also look to the family to help the families stay connected to their culture and community."

Case planning activities offered an educational aspect of historical trauma, the effects of colonization, traditional Native American parenting, pre-contact and trauma-informed care. A focus on domestic violence support was also paramount in the participant's response to the case study. Native American social workers discussed the importance of effective safety planning, emergency housing, batterer intervention, anger management and informing the family of the effects of domestic violence and the cultural "inappropriateness" of having violence in the home. The family may also be referred to for substance abuse and mental health assessments, and adults and children were included in both the case planning and decision-making processes. Many intervention services would have been put into place starting in the first situation in an effort to prevent situations 2 and 3 from occurring, and to keep the teen mom and her child in the home.

Social workers in the not-for-profit agency were limited as to the interventions they were able to provide, as services were centered on the head of household and the child was often not included in the case plan. Non-custodial parents and their side of the family were also not involved in interventions or services provided by the agency. The strength of their program was a 24-hour staffed shelter, with social workers spending a total of eight hours a day observing and meeting with their client families. As one participant explained:

I think we have a better perspective sometimes on what the family could benefit from, because a lot of the families they can jump through hoops, [but] they may not really know what they need until we're here supporting them and watching them feed their child at dinner, or give their kid a bath, or make sure their kid gets to school in the morning. [Being here] everyday with a 24-hour supportive staff is a different perspective, which is a good perspective.

Due to the cooperative living arrangement, the social workers identified a social accountability factor for clients, as the shared living allowed clients to compare their behavior to other families. Families living in the shelter were working on their interpersonal skills, managing anger, finding their own housing, reentering the workforce and providing a safe and supportive environment for their children. The workers described clients' experience as, "Transforming and very eye-opening for the people who live in the shelter." Many families work closely with child welfare, and some children are in the reunification process. Although the agency could not directly participate in getting extended family involved, workers were often able to collaborate with county child welfare, with the workers valuing the aspect of creating effective support systems for their families.

Interventions around domestic violence services were essential in case planning. Families were encouraged to develop a safety plan, were often referred to parenting classes, counseling and anger management. The agency also offered life skills classes at the shelter around the topics of self-esteem, stress reduction, parenting and codependency. Case managers informed clients about the effects of trauma and referred them to mental health, along with alcohol and other drug assessments.

The social workers at the not-for-profit agency could not provide interventions during situation 1 of the case vignettes to help prevent the breakup of the family. Because of the domestic violence in the home, the father of Maria (the teen) would not be allowed to come to the shelter with the family, and because of that he was not part of the family definition would not receive services. Many services were offered by both agencies; however, the Native American agency offered services to the extended family, while the not-for-profit agency only offered them to the family members living in the shelter together. The Native American agency also looked for support for the family outside of the immediate family, whereas the not-for-profit agency focused on supporting only the members living at the shelter.

Gender

The Native American participants were aware of their need to check their gender bias. As one participant stated, "I'm working with a family that has a mother and a father. I work more with the mother because the mother is more engaged [with services] than the father is." Culturally, mothers and females of all ages tend to be the ones responsible for the rearing of children. The social workers also saw the potential and ability of the father to engage in services and to be an effective parent. When discussing direct practice, workers believed the work was not much different with the mother or the father. Moreover, they did not approach the work differently, other than being more reflective where their biases are concerned.

In situation 2, in which Maria is unable to care for her child, the Native American social workers would have considered the child's father the first choice for placement if he had been acceptable. Workers were aware of the lack of services in providing support to a father, and this disproportion was identified as one of the differences between male and female clients. The participants believed family dynamics, family structure, participation in ceremony, drug addiction and violence were all factors which made a difference as to how they as social workers engaged with people differently: "You're going to be looking at the father the same way [as the mother], figuring out those family dynamics and how they work." Having knowledge of these factors provided some insight on how to talk with families, and how direct workers

could be with their clients, as such knowledge creates a primary method of building trust.

Social workers in the not-for-profit agency identified ways their work may be different with men and women. If someone is an abuse victim or abuser, the client will have a different case plan:

Well I think it is all circumstantial; again, depending on where the female is coming from or where the male is coming from. We have men that come through the program that have been labeled "abusers"...we work [using] a different approach [with him] than we would work with a woman who is labeled a "victim."

The nonprofit social workers also perceived a lack of services for men, hence causing the need to be more creative in finding ways to help male clients, especially around alcohol and drug issues:

"Well if it is a single father, I guess they don't get as much support, so we have to find new ways to support them in the community." The not-for-profit agency had a male participant who felt his work with clients was different and that it was helpful to be a man. He stated specifically: "Men and women are different, and given that approach, I work here, partly because I am a man and [I am] okay to deal with men, because it is helpful to have a male working with males." His agency took active steps to hire men, and this was part of their holistic approach.

Social workers did not think gender affected their assessment as to who gets to come into the program; in contrast, acceptance is based on child custody and the client's past. Three respondents agreed that the assessment addressed personality and what services will work with the client regardless of their gender: "It is meeting each client where they are, no matter their gender or their past trauma...If I go to sit down in a case management with a man or a woman and they seem scared or anxious, the way I approach them is going to be different than if they are super-abrasive and argumentative, no matter what their gender." Factors other than gender also affect how not-for-profit social workers work with clients.

Social workers at both agencies recognized a lack of services for fathers. In addition, they both stated there are differences in how they work with men and women. The Native American social workers recognized personal bias and cultural differences in expectations. The not-for-profit agency thought the differences were because of individual needs, and hired a male social worker to work with men.

Generations

Elders

Native American social workers discussed distinct differences in how they approached their work with elders. Conversations with elders were less direct and more respectful, as social workers looked for someone else who would be more appropriate to speak to an elder about a certain behavior. This concept was described as: "Sometimes, even if elders are not acting properly it's more difficult to have a direct discussion with them because it doesn't feel like that's my place. Like that should be another elder talking to them or someone who has more wisdom and experience than me." There is a placement of earned respect for elders that makes direct (and difficult) conversations more challenging.

Elders have a responsibility to deal with the dysfunction within the family unit, or in the case of this study, to address the violence of Maria's father. Native American social workers see elders as an integral part of family intervention. As part of this intervention, one worker stated:

That's why in this context, having a family meeting with the grandparents, it would be my hope that they (the elders) would admonish the parents (for acting) inappropriately. Maybe they (the elders) don't know what is going on, but if they do find out they would be the ones telling Dad, "You can't be doing that."

All participants stressed the strong value of respecting elders and their vital roles within tribal families.

Due to the program's limitations, the not-for-profit agency did not emphasize their work with elders, though social workers did discuss that a grandparent has received

services as the head of the household when they possessed custody of their grandchildren. If Maria, her mother and her child came into the program, they would work with Maria's mother. The participants also acknowledged the importance of having grandparents on a support team for families, but did not directly engage with extended family members. When collaborating with the county child welfare department, one participant explained: "It would be important to find out, to ask the county social worker, to talk to the grandparents [of Maria]." Once again, the not-for-profit agency expanded their definition by collaborating with other agencies. They also stressed their understanding of the limitations of services they could provide to the client, but valued the need to connect to families which have extended support systems.

At both agencies, social workers recognized the important role grandparents can play in the case; nonetheless, the not-for-profit social workers were restricted by the agency definition, and did not include grandparents who were not living in the shelter. The Native American social workers would invite the grandparents to a family meeting, where the grandparents were expected to perform their role of admonishing parents for their bad behavior.

Youth

Native American social workers also saw a distinct role for children within a family. They reported that it is difficult at times to navigate when collaborating with county child welfare services because the county child welfare department does not always pay attention to the dynamics of the family, or to Native American customs. Native American workers will pull a child away from the family and talk to the youth before a family meeting because it is considered inappropriate and disrespectful for children to talk to their family about the family's behavior. An example given was: "When we are in family meetings, they (the county child welfare department) expect young people to say everything to their parents and that's not really a realistic expectation. So we need to be the voice for the children." Native American social workers provide many services to children, and stated that they feel more comfortable working with youth. The workers are more direct in their practice, yet do not want to be treated as peers, but with respect.

At the not-for-profit agency, children under the age of 18 are not allowed to enter the shelter as the head of the household. The nonprofit agency identified that although it is not typical to provide services directly to children in the program, they have flexibility in providing case management services to pregnant teens. They all agreed with the following statement regarding the case vignette: "I would want to case manage both of them [the mother and pregnant daughter] because the child is going to become a mother." In most cases, however, the child is seen as the child, and children do not receive services at their agency. Services are provided only to the head of the household.

Native American social workers regularly provide services to children, while the not-for-profit social workers do not; they only provide services to the parents. In the case vignette with Maria, they would have flexibility and provide case management to the teen. Native American social workers also reported that children have a special role in the family, and that other agencies are not always aware of this dynamic.

Effect of Policy on Practice

In the Native American service agency, policy played a significant role in child welfare services and interventions provided to individual families. Due to the active efforts requirement of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), Native American families received many more interventions, as Native American social workers interacted with the requirements of ICWA on a regular basis. During situation 3 of the case vignettes, participants in the child welfare context stated they would use the active efforts requirement of the county child welfare department to restart reunification timelines for clients. In court, tribal social workers also regularly argue against the termination of parental rights and adoption, recommending a customary adoption instead. The Active Efforts mandate was explained as:

A requirement of the Indian Child Welfare Act law that requires not just the reasonable efforts that [are] required by normal state or federal law... they require social services to play a more hands-on role in engaging families and doing a lot more early interventions...to prevent the breakup of the Indian family.

As a result, when Maria's child was removed from the home (in situation 2) she would not have had her parental rights terminated. Therefore, two years later (in situation 3), Maria would be able to reunify with her child.

In the not-for-profit agency, state and federal policies were used when defining who the head of household was, as well as with the legal issues of custody. Social workers were knowledgeable about child welfare policies and of the ICWA, but were not directly responsible for explaining these policies to families, or even for enforcing these requirements. One participant stated: "We don't really work with too many policies. We will work with [tribes] and ...with child welfare...but we never are a mediator or initiator of that process." Agency policies have a larger impact regarding the nonprofit direct practice model. The agency policy determines who receives services, and it bears repeating that social workers struggled in finding services which offered support to minor parents and single fathers. In general, the nonprofit social workers felt that there was a lack of state and federal funding for these populations.

Families in the shelter were required to follow shelter policies, and program compliance was required to receive services. Families were required to be clean and sober from alcohol and other drugs, act in a nonviolent manner and complete their chores. None of the agency policies would have assisted Maria in reuniting with her child in situation 3 because the primary agencies of authority would be the Tribal and County Child Welfare agencies; nevertheless, were she in need of housing, she could have entered the shelter. Many parents enter the shelter when the county child welfare department has determined they can have overnight visits with their children.

Native American social workers would have been able to assist Maria reunite with her child because of actions they could take due to the ICWA. The social workers at the not-for-profit agency do not work with the ICWA or other federal policies, directly; nonetheless, they could offer shelter services to Maria during that time.

Discussion

The personal definitions of both tribal and non-profit social workers are large, broad and similar to definitions found in Gabrielson's study as the "family of choice" (2011). Family included all relatives and people who may not be biologically related, but with whom they also have a significant relationship. In the Native American agency, their definition was similar to the personal definition of family. Grandparents, mothers and fathers, children and other supportive people were also included in the case planning and interventions that social workers suggested for the family in the case study. In the nonprofit agency, the definition of family was clearly more limited, being based on the head of the household and guardianship, or with custody of the children. Nonprofit definitions were limited by legal restraints, meaning that their case planning excluded extended relatives or other supports. Non-profit social workers only suggested interventions for Maria's mother in the case, and possibly for Maria because of her age.

Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2004) perspectives on the definition of family appear to apply to this study. The social workers' personal definition of family was similar to the transactional perspective, including people they had a significant relationship with and who have helped them, even though they may not be biologically related. The non-profit agency used a structural definition, and only those people who were in the household at the time they entered the shelter were considered family. The child(ren) themselves and their legal custodian(s) were the only ones labeled as family. Additionally, the Native American agency defined family in terms of psychosocial functioning, and family members had different roles that social workers suggested to use as interventions with Maria's family in the case vignette. For example, the elders would be called upon in their role to reprimand the father for his abusive behavior. From a purely structural perspective, neither the grandparents nor the father would have been included as family and would not have had the opportunity to participate in any interventions, thus missing out on this critical cultural component.

The Native American agency's definitions of family appear to be similar to the changed social definition of "family" in the United States. The Native American definition is consistent with Native American cultural beliefs and values, which have

likely persisted for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Rather than the agency changing, US societal definitions have become more inclusive and similar to the Native American definition, as a broader extended family definition is common in many cultures. Carillo, Ripoll-Nunuz and Schvaneveldt (2012) describe numerous adult relatives as assisting in parenting in Ecuador.

Possible reasons for the nonprofit agency not expanding their definition of family may be due to funding and space allocations. Each family in the shelter is assigned a room, which may not be able to accommodate large extended families. The goal of the agency centers around housing and self-sustainability, and it may be quicker and easier to achieve sustainability for smaller families. There is a high need for emergency shelters, although there is a lack of affordable housing in the community.

Moreover, the case study suggested interventions and supports were highly dependent on the agency's definitions of "family." The tribal definition was broader than that of the nonprofit, and our study discovered more people and supports were also involved in the tribal agency interventions compared to the nonprofit agency interventions. The social workers in the nonprofit recognized the importance of numerous people in work with families, and attempted to collaborate with other agencies. The results of this study can be explained by critical social work theory as it applies to discourse. The discourse, or the label of family, an agency applies clearly determined who received interventions in each agency. The agency with a broader definition gave more services to more people than the agency with a more narrow definition of family.

Implications for Social Work

It is important to know if our practice is consistent with the ideas and values of the people we work with as social workers. One of the core tenants of social work practice is to "start where the client is." Since the definition of family appears to be culturally informed, understanding the gap between an agency definition and a client's can be vital to the success of our work. When the agency uses a limited definition of who can be involved in interventions, the family must rely more heavily on professional supports and less on informal supports, thereby creating a

dependency on agencies. The inconsistency to collaborate with the client's natural supports may diminish their ability to problem-solve in the future, as the client may come to view the agency as the one that holds the power to solve their issues of concern.

From a critical theory perspective, families should be actively involved in both social change and their case plans. They should also be in control of defining for themselves who accounts for their family instead of the dominant institutional definition (Briskman, Allan, & Pease, 2009). A limited "nuclear" definition of family is consistent with Western values. However, while dominant US values are Western, the changing face of the family does not always represent Western values. Critical social work practice would recognize many different constructions of family, and how a limited definition may be oppressive to families. Power is created through societal structures, and if agencies control the definitions of family, the agencies are holding the power to create meaning, instead of the families themselves. As social workers, one way we can include families in the empowerment process is to allow them to define their own structures and membership.

Limitations

Caution is advised when generalizing the results from this study to other tribal and nonprofit agencies. In the United States there are over 500 federally-registered tribes, and each tribe has its own governmental structure, codes or laws, culture and values. We were reminded of this by a participant: "Every tribe has a different approach, and depending on where they are located and historically what has happened to their communities...I think community standards are different." Furthermore, each tribe is unique, and their child protection departments will have differing policies and standards. Another limitation with our study was the small number of participants, as we were only able to facilitate two groups with a total of eight participants. Additional focus groups may therefore find nonprofits with expanded definitions of "family."

The study design may have led to results that were descriptive in nature instead of more interpretive. Since all of the participants in each focus group were employed at

the same agency, there was uniformity in their responses. Participants who had worked at the agency longer appeared to dominate the discussion, while workers with less experience agreed with the responses of their senior colleagues.

Future Research

Future research should also include a state, county or governmental agency. In the United States, these agencies have the legal and financial responsibility to respond to child abuse and neglect. The inclusion of those agencies' perspectives would be highly informative and important considering their primary position to provide services and support for families in need. Unfortunately the researchers were not able to arrange for a county child welfare focus group, and future research should also compare definitions of family in US child welfare contexts to other international child welfare contexts.

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