

**Walking Together for American Indian Families and Children:
Opinions of Tribal Relationships from the Viewpoint of Counties with Specialized
American Indian Child Welfare Units**

by

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**Presented to the Dissertation Committee at
The School of Social Work
The University of Minnesota**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Minnesota

Spring 2024

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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my advisors, Amy Krentzman and Kristine Piescher, for their excellent critical feedback that has greatly improved the quality of this dissertation. They have been extremely supportive and responsive spending an unfathomable amount of time guiding me during this several year process. I am also grateful for the high level graduate classes during my years at the University of Minnesota which have given me the skills and opportunity to conduct this quality of research.

I am extremely grateful for the guidance and support of Dr. Priscilla Day who has been the American Indian cultural consultant for this research. She one of the foremost teachers and scholars of American Indian child welfare in Minnesota conducting national and international presentations, publishing critical writings, and coordinating and leading many important projects and teams for the betterment of American Indian families and tribes. She has looked at my work with a native lens and very helpful in ensuring my words and conclusions are appropriate for the reality of American Indian child welfare.

I am most grateful to my wife, Camille, for her help with writing style and diction and for the sacrifices she has made in tolerating my being mentally unavailable while writing or contemplating issues in this manuscript.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the social workers and staff from American Indian Tribes and from public CPS agency whom I have known that have worked together tirelessly to improve the lives of American Indian families and children.

Abstract

Considering the disproportional overrepresentation of American Indian children in out of home placement and involvement with public child protection agencies, this research examines the opinions of American Indian child welfare staff of two county child protection agencies with specialized American Indian units regarding their working relationship with tribes. This qualitative exploratory study extended the lens of the Holding Space Framework from American Indian public health to child protection. It conducted 20 semi-structured interviews of social workers, supervisors, and program managers. Participants described their individual relationships, their unit's relationships, and their agency's relationships with tribes. They commented on the importance of the relationship, the relationships' outcomes for American Indian families, and suggestions on building and maintenance of relationships with tribes.

This study found the importance to those relationships and to social work practice of county staff's commitment to American Indian families, as well as the benefit of staff with American Indian heritage or previous work experience at tribes especially in positions of authority. The study suggested positive relationships provided positive outcomes for American Indian families and that the HSF pillars of governance, trust, and culture fitted well for describing and probing tribal-public child welfare relationships. The

Limitations to the study were that formal input from tribes was not available except through opinions of tribal members employed by county agencies, only two public agencies were included as only, and the participant sample consisted of volunteers and not randomly selected.

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Preface

Many terms are used for Indigenous people living in the United States (e.g., American Indian, Native American, Native, Indigenous, tribal name, etc.). I would like to honor North American Indigenous people by using the name they prefer to describe themselves; however, preferences among tribes are numerous and varied. To avoid confusing the reader, therefore, I have used the term *American Indian*, a designation preferred by many Ojibwe tribes in Northern Minnesota, where I live and where I conducted my research. That said, even in Northern Minnesota, many Ojibwe tribes prefer the use of their specific band or tribal name, such as Red Lake, White Earth, Bois Forte, and so on. On occasion to reduce confusion, I will use the term *Native* in situations where I use *American Indian* in the same sentence, such as when comparing Native and non-Native populations.

I should also clarify terms related to child welfare. Child protective services (CPS) are mandatory services authorized by state statutes; they provide services to families with alleged child maltreatment and are administered at either the state or county level. Child welfare (CW) is a broader service category that may include child foster care, child disabilities, preventative or voluntary services for families, and, in some instances, child health services and other child and family services. This research involved local child protective services agencies, indicated as “CPS agencies.” Also, I used *child welfare* when referring more broadly to public policies, law, and the like involving children. Local agency implementation of federal law regarding children, for example, primarily involves CPS agencies but may also include other child welfare services.

Finally, I turn to the primary federal legislation I considered in this dissertation: the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA), a law central to the activities of public child

protection programs working with American Indian families. Due to the Act's long title and the frequent need to reference its requirements, the acronym *ICWA* often functions as an adjective to describe entities related to the law. Examples of such usage include *ICWA* practice, *ICWA* services, and, especially in this research, *ICWA* units, which are teams of CPS social workers who work exclusively with families to whom *ICWA* applies.

Introduction

The Problem

In the United States, CPS agencies are tasked with evaluating and investigating reports of alleged child maltreatment, as well as intervening in families according to the child protection laws and guidelines of individual states. However, reports alleging maltreatment, responses of CPS agencies, and outcomes of intervention are not equitable for all children and families.

Across the United States, in 2019, American Indian and Alaska Native children had the highest rates of substantiated findings of maltreatment resulting from CPS investigations, registering 14.8 findings per 1,000 Native children in the population, with each child counted only once in the event of multiple instances (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, 2021). CPS agencies' substantiated rates of maltreatment were 1.9 times greater for American Indian children per thousand than for White children, with each child counted only once in the event of multiple instances. In 2020, child welfare agencies placed American Indian children per thousand in foster care 3.7 times more often than they did for White children (Children's Bureau, 2021; Kids Count Data Center, 2021; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, 2021). In Minnesota, the state with the highest rate of racial child placement disproportionality in the United States (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, 2021), child welfare agencies were 16 times more likely to place American Indian children in foster care as compared with White children (Minnesota Department of Human Services - Children and Family Services Division, 2021).

After exiting foster care, Native children are at a significant disadvantage compared with children of other races who have exited foster care (Watt & Kim, 2019); specifically, Native

children are much more likely to be homeless, unemployed, and incarcerated as compared with non-Native children. Such disparities greatly impact tribal life, continuity of tribal customs, ways of thinking, ways of life, spirituality, and—in the case of children—the connection to family and tribe, as well as general wellbeing (“Guidelines for State Courts and Agencies in Indian Child Custody Proceedings,” 2015).

At the same time, American Indian tribes hold deep distrust of U.S. institutions and policies concerning tribal nations because of the United States’ historical treatment of American Indian tribes. U.S. American Indian policy and action for the past half millennium have enforced the colonization, eradication, and assimilation of Native people, including massacres of Native communities (Brown, 2009; Byrn, 2017; Eaglewoman, 2017; Madsen, 1985), removal of Native communities from Native lands and compelled relocation to reservations (Brown, 2009; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Motes, 2017; Stannard, 1992), fraudulent treaties (Lass, 2011; A. Treuer, 2010, 2015), and seizures of nearly all Native lands for U.S. farming, mining, cities, and homesteads (Churchill, 2002). U.S. laws and policies also banned Native ceremonies and cultural expression (Talbot, 2006), and U.S. authorities removed Native children from their families and tribes and sent them to boarding schools that were designed to “change” them into American children by harsh measures and severe punishments under horrid conditions (Adams, 1995; Davis, 2001; Grinde, 2004; Lomawaima, 1994, 2018; Schuck, 2005; Smith, 2004; Stout, 2012; Trafzer et al., 2006). Finally, U.S. authorities removed Native children from their families and had them adopted by non-Native families in order to assimilate the children into mainstream society and disrupt their cultural and tribal connections (George, 1997).

These horrific events caused significant trauma within Native tribes and families that persists today (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Waszak, 2010). This history has motivated Native tribes to be suspicious of and much less receptive to child protection intervention in cases of alleged child maltreatment (Bjorum, 2014); what's more, considering the racism still experienced by American Indians, it has exacerbated their fear that governmental institutions and policies are still trying to assimilate tribal cultures and eradicate tribal nations. Given this formidable history, it is imperative that contemporary public child protection systems must, therefore, develop and implement structures and working relationships with tribes and tribal social workers. What remains that scholars and practitioners have yet to determine, however, are the optimal characteristics for such relationships and the degree to which—and *means* by which—CPS agency staff perceive they affect child protection outcomes.

Area of Study

To remedy the problems outlined above, and to stop both the egregious practices of removing Native children from their homes and tribes and stripping them of their culture, the U.S. Congress, in 1978, enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act (George, 1997; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Indian Affairs, 1984). ICWA requires that public child welfare agencies honor tribal sovereignty and knowledge regarding what is best for their people by including specific requirements for the custody of Native children; however, compliance with the law has been inconsistent over time and across jurisdictions (Children's Bureau, 2020; MacLachlan, 2018; Summers & Deserly, 2017). In terms of compliance, states such as Minnesota have imposed financial penalties for counties that fail to reach a certain benchmark,

but most states have operated without penalty for ICWA non-compliance. The only check had been reversal or voiding of prior court decisions, based on noncompliant practices, but that only occurred in the event of a successful court challenge. Examples of practices indicating noncompliance include failure to notify the tribe of the CPS agency's involvement with the family, placing the child without tribal qualified expert witness testimony, or placing the child in a manner discordant with statutory provisions. Some county attorneys and county courts have even resisted implementation of ICWA (Turner, 2016), while others have actively tried to overturn it.

With respect to assigning cases to child welfare workers, many CPS agencies have generalist social work organizational policies, meaning that social workers receive case assignments depending on their functional role (intake workers, child maltreatment investigators, ongoing service providers, foster care workers, adoption workers, licensors, etc.) as opposed to receiving assignments based on the ethnicity or ICWA eligibility of the service family. For example, an agency might be organized so that each professional role has distinct responsibilities but where workers within those roles handle cases regardless of either the race/ethnicity of the family or ICWA eligibility. In such instances, when working with ICWA-eligible families, all workers are expected to abide by the law, as well as relevant state laws and rules (set by, for example, a state department overseeing children and families). In these cases, each worker is a generalist, and may be assigned ICWA cases. ICWA eligibility is, I should stress, based not on race but rather on citizenship in independent tribal nations, with membership determined by the tribes. As I will discuss more below, opponents of ICWA have used allegations of racial discrimination as a legal basis for challenging the Act in court.

Rather than a model where all workers serve all Native families, some CPS agencies have chosen to use specialized ICWA teams to improve child protective services for Native families. A specialized ICWA team can take many forms. Smaller counties or regions may assign American Indian cases to one or a few workers in a unit alongside workers who are not assigned any American Indian cases. Larger counties or regions may have one or more entire units of ICWA workers handling only American Indian cases. From my experience, common characteristics of this practice include social workers receiving in-depth training on ICWA requirements, and ICWA workers and their supervisors serving as the conduits for developing and maintaining working relationships with tribal child welfare staff.

As I will explain later, in my professional experience, agency decisions on organizational personnel structure regarding assignment of ICWA cases depend on factors such as the number of referrals of American Indian families, financial resources, advocacy from active organized tribal councils, and pressure from state ICWA quality assurance boards in states with high disproportionality rates and formalized ICWA complaints. Also, states and agencies have sought to achieve effective culturally sensitive practices by encouraging those in their workforce to obtain advanced degrees and by providing additional training and practice resources available through the Children’s Bureau and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute NCWWI (S. L. Cross et al., 2015; NCWWI, 2017).

Objectives of this dissertation

While ICWA was developed to address many of the egregious wrongs committed by the U.S. government against Native families, there is much we do not know about how ICWA workers and units best achieve their mission of equitable and just service to Native families.

Specifically, research has yet to show which practices are most useful; this study will, therefore, focused on discerning those practices that ICWA workers themselves described as optimal in building relationships between specialized ICWA social workers situated within local public child protection agencies and the tribes they serve. In this research, I used the Holding Space Framework, which urges that non-tribal institutions working with tribes incorporate the pillars of governance, trust, and culture. This study's results enhance our understanding of a method on how to increase culturally sensitive service, support culturally consistent child safety decisions, and, hopefully, reduce both American Indian involvement with child protective services and foster care placement rates.

Literature Review

Researcher Characteristics and Reflexivity

I am a White male from the American Midwest who has spent nearly 40 years practicing and administering child welfare within St. Louis County, Minnesota's Children and Family Services Division, a county where approximately one third of service families were of American Indian heritage. For six of those nearly 40 years, I supervised the specialized ICWA unit that serviced all cases of families for whom ICWA applied. My experiences impressed on me the cultural differences between Native and non-Native families, one of which was the strong community orientation of Native families as compared with the independent/individualist orientation of most the predominant culture. Non-biological tribal members are called (and thought of as) "aunties" and "uncles," a practice signifying how the entire community plays a part in raising children.

I have seen generosity even when resources were scarce, with tribal members opening their homes to others when their house is already full or sharing food or clothing when the family has barely enough for itself. So too have I observed a strong sense of respect for tribal elders and a seeking of their counsel about difficult matters—a sentiment that contrasts with many Americans' views regarding the role or even “value” of the elderly in modern society. Finally, I have seen the sense of peace and togetherness that comes from participation in cultural rites and ceremonies. American Indian ceremonies often call on help from ancestors and evaluate decisions with an eye to the coming seven generations.

My experience in the field has shown me the pernicious effects of historical trauma, poverty, mental illness, and chemical use. With sadness, I recorded the statistics of racially disparate reports of child maltreatment and the placement of Native children into foster care. But I also took stock of a resilient, thriving, life-giving society in Native communities, one that valued and supported its members, surrounding them with community supports. I noted the need for culturally sensitive practices by frontline social workers and witnessed, firsthand, the salient effects of this practice when it was executed well. Some of the most effective practices I observed were an engagement attitude of “Here is a family who is struggling” and then attention to removing barriers, improving functioning, and calling on family strengths, as opposed to an oppositional stance of “I must save these children from their abusive parents.” Other good practices included the recognition by workers that service family experiences might differ from their own due to racism, poverty, or childhood trauma.

The effect of boarding schools and historical trauma on families and tribes was often harder to discern. In my opinion, most American Indian communities and Native families with

which our unit worked seem to have been affected. While I observed anger directed at workers, it might not have been personal but rather directed at the system that the social worker represented. Gaining a family's trust can take considerable time, time that most social workers do not have given their overwhelming caseload responsibilities and requirements. In my experience, good cultural practices included knowledge of local American Indian history and current relationships between the American Indian community and the larger community, including schools, law enforcement, and physical and mental health centers. Knowledge of American Indian cultural resources and activities (where to find powwows, beading classes, jingle dresses, etc.) was also helpful.

As an ICWA supervisor, I strove to build relationships with tribes to overcome barriers created by the negative history between our nations and to work cooperatively for better outcomes for local Native families with children at risk of maltreatment. I saw the effects of a good working relationship with local tribes and the negative effects for families when the relationship was not positive, where the principles of the Holding Space Framework (discussed below) were absent. I saw situations of tension and conflicting priorities, such as whether to include a psychological evaluation in the service plan, approving who could supervise family visitations when necessary, and deciding whether a family's connection with a relative or family friend with legal problems or at risk of substance use was problematic. Such conflicts confused families about the expectations for reunification and which plan the court was supporting. Agencies and tribes have different roles, responsibilities, and authority, but our ability to work with one another can determine a family's success, the length of their children's placement in foster care, and the duration of their involvement in child protection.

One element of my experience that bears on the research I undertook for this dissertation involved our unit's multiple joint projects with the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth (the Center at UMD), which worked to improve American Indian child welfare practice. These projects were funded by the Bush Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. They included meetings, trainings, and collaborations among the Center, the Annie E. Casey staff, and the unit.

The Center at UMD was also awarded a grant from the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services to develop a model for implementing ICWA. The project created a team that conducted an institutional analysis of St. Louis County's implementation of ICWA, created gap statements, recommended changes, and drew on this knowledge to devise a replicable model available to other child protection agencies. A tribal–state partnership team that included elders, county attorneys, tribal attorneys, state and tribal judges, guardians ad-litem, and county staff were assembled to oversee the grant. I was asked to be a member of the analysis team and the tribal–state partnership team.

During a two-day retreat in 2019, the tribal–state partnership team reviewed the report from the institutional analysis and discussed the priorities of tribal members of the team. Tribal members stated the need for CPS agencies a) to recognize tribal sovereignty and tribal expertise in understanding and creating effective interventions for struggling Native families, b) to include tribal voices in child welfare policy and case decision making, and c) to support the tribes' efforts and acknowledge their successes in maintaining children's and families' connections to their tribal communities (Minnesota Tribal-State Partnership Team, 2019). The team discussed the gaps described in the report and identified next steps. One of those next steps inspired the

focus for my dissertation: the use of ICWA specialized units in CPS agencies. In this dissertation, I will examine county CPS agencies with specialized ICWA units and their relationship with tribal child welfare staff.

Historical Context

To understand the contemporary context informing the work of CPS agencies with American Indian communities and families, it is necessary to understand the effects of the historical experiences of American Indian tribes with the U.S. government, its institutions, and its policies (Goodkind et al., 2012; Whitbeck, Chen, et al., 2004). This history has been one of colonialism, assimilation, attempted eradication, and broken treaties (Martinez & Williams Bordeaux, 2017a, 2017b). Continued and consistently elevated foster care placement rates trigger, in Native communities, memories of boarding school policies of mass removal of Native children from their homes and tribes and transferring them to White institutions (Morrison et al., 2010). Those experiences led to mistrust of U.S. government institutions and intentions, especially in the case of child welfare policies and programs that purport to act in the best interest of children (Bezo & Maggi, 2015; Bjorum, 2014; Goodkind et al., 2012; Hartmann & Gone, 2016). In this Historical Context section, I discuss colonization and assimilation. Colonization consists of two subsections: a) Successful Pre-Columbian American Indian Society and b) Colonization of Native Lands and People. Assimilation consists of two subsections: a) Boarding Schools and b) The Indian Adoption Project.

Colonization

Successful Pre-Columbian American Indian Society. Including attention to pre-Columbian American Indian knowledge is essential to this research on CPS relationships with

tribes because knowledge of success and sophistication of pre-Columbian American Indian society counters 19th and 20th century racist beliefs that American Indians were savages with an inferior civilization that required assimilation into superior Western European society and culture (Adams, 1995; Pearce, 1965). Such attention also counters current racist beliefs that American Indian parenting methods—consistent with their cultural rites and traditional practices—are inferior. That mindset and lack of understanding fosters unfair suspicion that child maltreatment is occurring when it is not and it results in disproportionate reporting to CPS agencies as well as calls to intervene (Wells et al., 2009).

Knowledge of American Indian history and roots also enables healing and developmental growth for Native people through a sense of connection to their tribe, Native ancestors, and culture (Simard, 2009, 2020). Because experiences of growing up American Indian in the U.S. are unique, Native mental health professionals have identified culturally sensitive developmental markers that differ significantly from traditional developmental markers in assessments of individual growth (Simard, 2009, 2020). Historical knowledge and its role in Native developmental knowledge help CPS agencies to appreciate the cultural needs of American Indian families and to develop culturally sensitive service plans.

While many in the U.S. tend to think only of European settlers when they imagine history on the continent before the formation of the country, the fact is that American Indians inhabited the whole of North America for at least 40,000 years and flourished as sovereign tribes in sophisticated civilizations (Martinez & Williams Bordeaux, 2017b). Before European contact, the total Native population in the Americas was one fifth of the world population. American Indians constructed and inhabited complex urban centers across the continent (Brooks, 2017;

Martinez & Williams Bordeaux, 2017b) including intertribal, multiethnic, multilingual cities, pyramid mounts, and major religious and cultural centers. American Indian tribes also established thriving successful societies with both complex systems of governance and rich traditions, societal rites, and spirituality (T. Cross et al., 2000). As French (1994) described, Native people maintained a worldview that differed from that of colonizers, a mindset predicated on an ethos of harmony—that is, the value of living in harmony with nature and one another. Internal tribal hostilities and command over others were discouraged; individual independence and group cooperation were highly valued.

Of particular relevance to this dissertation, tribes held a community-oriented view of raising and nurturing children (T. Cross, 1999; T. Cross et al., 2010). Indian communities had well-developed customs and traditions with respect to child-rearing, one that produced a community-wide system of child protection and that often implicated extended family and community members in the raising of children. Relatives and elders maintained watchful eyes on parents and children (T. Cross et al., 2000). Importantly then, children were not viewed as their parents' property but rather as gifts from the Creator who were endowed with an intrinsic value based on their personal relationship to the Creator.

Colonization of Native Lands and People. In the 16th and 17th centuries, European countries claimed land in the New World through the Doctrine of Discovery, a notion that flowed from the European Law of Nations and that advocated subjugation of all peoples whose norms diverged from Western ideals (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Williams, 1992). European nations began colonizing and expropriating lands and resources, including in the Americas, with the removal of American Indian tribes and with attempts to extinguish American Indian culture

(Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; French, 1994; Rogin, 1991). Immigrants from Western Europe created settlements, cities, and eventually their own government—the United States—that was independent of tribal peoples even though it occupied tribal land. This government was driven by the desire for ownership of tribal lands and resources, by Christian zeal for religious conversion, and by the colonizers’ belief in their own cultural and racial superiority (Adams, 1995; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). These forces undergirded the notion of Manifest Destiny: the belief that the United States was destined by God to occupy and govern all lands and people from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

Capturing and promulgating this notion in 1753, George Croffut published a chromolithograph titled “American Progress,” which depicted Lady Columbia flowing westward with farmers and pioneers driving Native people and bison ahead of them with railroads, telegraphs, city skylines and other symbols of encroaching Western civilization pictured behind (Adams, 1995; Croffut, 1753). In the same vein, French (1994) described the U.S. government’s actions and policies encouraging genocide and eradication of Native people and culture:

American Indians suffered tremendously during this period (1500–1890s) of raw physical genocide. Treaties were arbitrarily broken whenever new land was needed or when new findings of natural resources could be exploited. Perhaps the most significant lesson to be learned from this most infamous chapter in U.S. history is the process whereby we, as a society, relegated a fellow group of human beings to the status of a troublesome animal that needed either to be incarcerated or hunted for bounty. As we will see, these were not isolated events perpetrated by wild and savage American Indians. There is a solid history of documented

government policy which supports this policy of reducing American Indians to the status of sub-humans—below even that of black slaves—in order to justify our treatment of this group. (p. 23)

Whereas the population of American Indians in what is now the United States was 5,000,000 or more before their contact with Westerners, it plummeted to 240,000 by 1900 (Madley, 2015). This profound population loss was due to several actions by the U.S. government. In the early 19th century, the U.S. Army used irregular warfare against Native populations (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Grenier, 2005). Irregular warfare, or “extreme violence” against civilians, included tactics such as armies and settler-civilians killing unarmed women, children, and elderly people, as well as burning homes and fields to drive out the Native people. The Dakota War of 1862, the Bear River Massacre of 1863 (see Madsen, 1985), the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 (see Byrn, 2017), and the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 (see Beasley Jr., 1995; Brave Heart, 1998; Brown, 2009; Eaglewoman, 2017; Penman, 2000; H. C. Richardson, 2010; D. Treuer, 2019) are all examples of irregular warfare perpetrated by the U.S. government against American Indian people.

The Trail of Tears, one of the more notorious elements in American history, was an infamous act of cruelty, greed, land usurpation, and ethnic cleansing (Motes, 2017). After the discovery of gold in what was then known as Carolina, armed U.S. military men herded people of the Five Civilized Tribes (the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muskogee, and Seminole Nations) over 1,000 miles in a mass march at gunpoint and in the dead of winter to areas west of the Mississippi (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Motes, 2017; Stannard, 1992). Thousands died on the way. Government authorities acted on the Indian Removal Act of 1830 requiring relocation of all

American Indian tribes to the west of the Mississippi River even though the United States Supreme Court at the time declared the law unconstitutional (Motes, 2017).

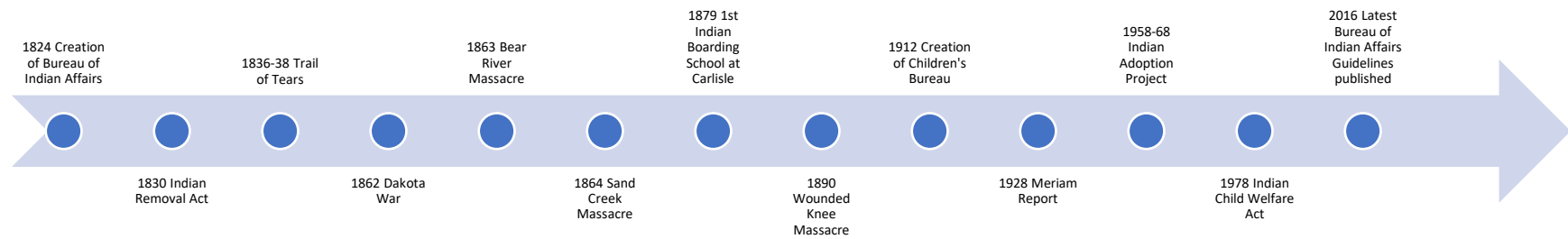
U.S. political powers, critical of American Indian tribes' resistance to assimilation policies, enacted the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 (Stremlau, 2005), which reduced federally recognized Native American landholdings by about 90,000,000 acres (Madley, 2015). The Act played a central role in the clearing of hundreds of millions of acres of land and provided a cornucopia of natural resources for the building of the United States at the expense of American Indian tribes. Political proponents of the Act observed that the strong communal nature of tribes served to preserve the tribal culture of Native families and children and inhibited Native individuals from assuming Western values and lifestyles (Stremlau, 2005). The Act's redistribution of tribal land from tribes to individual tribal members was thus intended to force economic survival onto individual families and destroy the influence of tribes over their families and children.

While these are only a few examples, the long-term effects of colonization of American Indians in the United States have been numerous and varied, including poverty, historical trauma, and mistrust of the government and governmental programs like child protection that have the authority to remove children from their homes and communities. These and other negative effects impact tribal relationships by lowering public perceptions of tribal sovereignty, discouraging trust that the government will follow through with its promises, and devaluing American Indian culture. These aspects of the tribal–state relationships must be rebuilt for cooperative child protection programs to succeed. Please see Figure 1 for a timeline of selected

historical and child welfare-related events between the United States and American Indian tribal nations.

Figure 1

Timeline of Selected Events in American Indian Child Welfare Policy and Historical Events Causing Deep Native Distrust of U. S. Institutions



Assimilation

Owing to continuing American Indian unrest in the West, George Armstrong Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn, and Whites' fears of more Indian wars, in last decades of the 19th century, the U.S. government switched from military coercion to a policy of assimilation by attempting to indoctrinate American Indian children with Western values and ideals of civilization and lifestyle (Laderman, 2002). Across the United States, advocates of this approach perpetuated the notion that Americans and Europeans belonged to the highest form of civilization and that American Indians were savages living in a Stone Age society (Adams, 1995; Ahern, 1997; Pearce, 1965). Philanthropists assumed American Indians were less civilized because their customs and ways of living differed from those of Western society, a belief that galvanized the hegemonic relationship characterizing American Indian–White relationships. Moreover, many Americans and their policy makers subscribed to Darwin's evolutionary theory of natural selection and believed that American Indian societies could not compete in the real world and were, therefore, doomed to extinction. These supporters of what was known as social Darwinism arrogantly believed the only way to save Native people was to reform them into European Americans (Churchill, 2004; Pratt, 1973). Government officials felt that developing a comprehensive schooling program and bringing Christianity and civil law to American Indian communities would elevate tribal peoples into self-reliance (Ahern, 1997). As such, the U.S. government sought to destroy Indian cultures and replace them with Western values, ethics, beliefs, and ways of life, principally by forcing American Indian children into boarding schools and by encouraging their adoption by White families.

Boarding Schools. While the U.S. history of colonization, broken treaties, and assimilation has created deep resentment and lack of trust in tribal–state relationships, the American Indian boarding school era (roughly 1871 to 1940) was a method of cultural genocide that severely blemished American child welfare policy. This policy and its related practices are still remembered and resented in American Indian communities, further eroding trust in American child welfare policies and programs to this day (Adams, 1995).

These boarding schools began to be used in earnest in 1889, when Richard Pratt developed a school regiment in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for American Indian children based on an experimental program he developed with adult Navajo captives in Florida (Ludlow, 1886; Morton, 1962; Pratt, 1973). Pratt recruited the first students from Sioux tribes in South Dakota. Soon, such schools proliferated, and attendance became mandatory, with government authorities forcibly removing Native children from their families and tribes. Sometimes agents used threats of withholding annuities for starving tribes, but many times military forces simply rounded up children without parental consent (Adams, 1995; Child, 1998; Lomawaima, 1994, 2018; Szasz, 2005). Authorities built several hundred schools, meant to manage all American Indian children in the U.S., and agents sent children several hundred miles away from their families and tribes. Government and Christian religious organizations ran schools according to military style, with the ultimate goal of stripping away American Indian culture and instilling American values.

Conditions at these boarding schools were horrid (Adams, 1995; Davis, 2001; Grinde, 2004; Lomawaima, 1994, 2018; Schuck, 2005; Smith, 2004; Stout, 2012; Trafzer et al., 2006). Intake personnel deloused the children, sometimes with DDT. To eradicate the cultural identity of the Native children, school officials cut the traditional long hair of Native children, took away

their Native clothes, and put them in uniforms. School authorities physically punished children if they spoke their tribal language or performed any cultural ceremonies. Administrators crowded children into inadequate, unheated dormitories with no separation of the sick from the well. School conditions allowed the rampant spread of tuberculosis, trachoma, and other diseases (Lomawaima, 1994; Meriam, 1928), and medical care was inadequate. Many students died from disease and under-nourishment (Adams, 1995; Bess, 2013; Child, 1998; Grinde, 2004; Lomawaima, 2018), and several sick children were sent home to die or simply died while running away in search of home. Requests by parents for the return of their children were overseen by government Indian agents—not the parent or tribal chief—and were often denied. Evidence of the mistreatment of Native children can be found in letters of heart-wrenching loss and pleas by both parents and children (Child, 1998; Lomawaima, 2018). Studies revealed many incidents of sexual and physical abuse, as well as neglect of children by staff (Adams, 1995; Bess, 2013; Child, 1998; Grinde, 2004; Lomawaima, 2018).

Schools advertised themselves as institutions for academic and industrial learning, but in reality, because they were so underfunded, they relied on the manual labor of the children (Adams, 1995; Lomawaima, 1994). Children worked half of each school day to maintain the school; boys were taught shoemaking, harness-making, and gardening, as opposed to agronomy or the use of tractors (Davis, 2001). Girls were taught to make clothes and to perform domestic chores; many were used as maids or were enlisted as domestic help within neighboring communities. Put simply, these boarding schools groomed a class of laborers to support White society rather than preparing Native students for competitive, higher-level employment options.

Children resided at the schools during their formative years and the institutions used military discipline to compel obedience (Adams, 1995; Davis, 2001; Szasz, 2005). The institutions indoctrinated children with the racist attitudes that Indians are lazy and that their culture is inferior. Schools taught neither the history of the Native societies that had been thriving for thousands of years nor the wholesome developmental benefits of students maintaining a strong connection to their Native families and tribes. Upon being forced to act “appropriately” in a White culture, and being required to speak English, students returned home with negative attitudes about themselves and their communities. Many, for example, had trouble readjusting to reservation life and experienced friction and distance in their relationships with their families and tribes. Eventually, stories of abuses at the schools and vigorous complaints by Native families and communities reached the ears of political leaders, who had their own concerns about the schools—specifically, the cost of maintaining them. Congress commissioned an investigation that revealed how Native children were treated, and the Meriam Report of 1928 strongly condemned the activities and conditions at the Indian boarding schools (Meriam, 1928).

During the last two decades, many Native researchers and scholars have studied and published stories about the experiences of children at boarding schools and the effects of these experiences on families and tribes (Davis, 2001). Though each school was different and children experienced these institutions in their own individual ways, the boarding school era impacted every Native tribe and family (Adams, 1995; Trafzer et al., 2006). Boarding school experiences and policies generated historical trauma for American Indian communities, and their legacy continues in those communities, adding to the already prevalent mistrust of county child protection systems and their capacity to remove children from the home.

The Indian Adoption Project (1958–1968). The Meriam Report’s condemnations of American Indian boarding schools and public awareness of conditions at the schools led many schools to be abolished, eventually, with control over other schools transferred to Native tribes (George, 1997; Meriam, 1928). The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a White entity formed in 1824 by the U.S. government and designed to subjugate and assimilate American Indians and Alaska Natives (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2021), became concerned, however, that, as more American Indian children returned to Native communities, they would become re-acculturated to Native ways and lose the effects of their assimilation (George, 1997). Thus, the Bureau encouraged White families to adopt American Indian children, preferably far from the children’s home reservations.

The BIA’s charter did not allow the Bureau to be involved in adoption proceedings, so it contracted with the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) to act as a clearinghouse for the interstate placement of Native children with non-Native families (George, 1997; U. S. Dept of Health Education and Welfare, 1976). The CWLA was a White national organization formed in 1921, at the urging of President Theodore Roosevelt, which included multiple independent agencies working for what were perceived to be the needs of children and the betterment of their conditions (Child Welfare League of America, 2021). The CWLA branches of the U.S. states and territories were the agencies that removed the children from their homes (Abourezk, 1977; Fletcher, 2011). The extreme poverty on reservations (Headly, 1958) and the market demand for children by White middle-class families wanting to adopt enabled this policy and practice, but it was also cloaked within the Christian zeal of “saving God’s forgotten children” (George, 1997).

By the 1970s, the Indian Adoption Project and the state child welfare agencies placed many American Indian children into foster care and adoption. In fact, nationwide surveys conducted in 1965 by the Association on American Indian Affairs revealed that 25–35% of American Indian children had been separated from their families (George, 1997). Many stories emerged of child welfare agencies taking newborn babies from Native mothers in the hospital and placing them up for adoption, as well as stories of Native children removed without court sanction or any explanation to their parents other than that the children were Indian (Adam & Pender-Cudlip, 2018).

Legislative and Institutional Redress

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978

American Indian voices and advocates in the 1970s reacted strongly to the taking of Native children from their families without due process, as it had occurred during the Indian Adoption Project, as well as the racial disparities resulting from actions of the child welfare system. A congressional committee investigated these concerns, and its report revealed that the federal government had a damning role in American Indian removals (Abourezk, 1977). As Abourezk (1977) explained:

It appears that for decades Indian parents and their children have been at the mercy of arbitrary or abusive action of local, state, federal and private agency officials.

Unwarranted removal of children from their homes is common in Indian communities. . . . Because of poverty and discrimination Indian families face many difficulties, but there is no reason or justification for believing that these problems make Indian parents unfit to raise their children. (p. 12)

Public recognition of child intervention injustices and support for fair American Indian treatment grew across the country (Rosenfield, 2011). The Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA), founded in 1923 to defend the rights of American Indians and Alaskan Natives while promoting social, economic, and civic equality for their communities, became involved and set off a chain of events that ultimately resulted in the 1978 passage of ICWA (Basic, 2007; Hand, 2006; Jones, 1995; Mannes, 1995; Perry, 2000). While ICWA is a large and complex law, in pertinent part it states:

The Congress hereby declares that it is the policy of this Nation to protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families by the establishment of minimum Federal standards for the removal of Indian children from their families and the placement of such children in foster or adoptive homes which will reflect the unique values of Indian culture, and by providing for assistance to Indian tribes in the operation of child and family service programs. (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978)

Of significance then, ICWA effectively renounced the assimilation policies that had so thoroughly damaged the heart and legacy of American Indian culture. Indeed, the law aspired to preserve tribal culture, families, and communities (Barnes et al., 2019; Bussey & Lucero, 2013), which it did by affirming the right under U.S. law for American Indian tribes to care for their own children and to make autonomous child welfare placement decisions for tribal children. ICWA required child protection agencies to immediately notify tribes of situations that could result in child welfare intervention (Basic, 2007), while also requiring consent of tribes through qualified tribal expert witnesses for the placement of Native children in foster care. Placing

agencies were required to follow an order of preference when choosing foster homes: a relative's home, a tribal home, other Native foster homes, lastly other options. Agencies were obliged to ensure that American Indian children maintained connections with their families, tribes, and culture while they were in foster care, and the Act required culturally appropriate services as means of remedying the effects of racism and resisting cultural bias (T. Cross et al., 2000; Evans-Campbell & Campbell, 2014). What's more, the law required "active efforts," a more rigorous service delivery than "reasonable efforts," to assist families in remedying child maltreatment risks. It also required agencies to return children to their families when imminent danger was no longer present and affirmed tribal sovereignty and tribal members' rights in child welfare proceedings in all public child welfare systems. ICWA sought to prioritize the preservation of the family unit and the maintenance of Native culture when balancing family preservation and child welfare (R. Weiss et al., 2013). The welfare of the tribe was now in the child's best interest.

The federal government regulates the implementation of ICWA through the BIA, an office within the U.S. Department of the Interior, charged with formulating and implementing policies that promote Indian self-determination (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2021). In 2016, the Bureau issued updated guidelines with clearly detailed procedures and expectations for CPS agencies and workers (Guidelines for Implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act, 2016; Landry, 2015). Compliance by state child welfare agencies is, however, inconsistent and some jurisdictions have actively resisted implementation (MacLachlan, 2018). Although Minnesota, for example, now deploys a scheme of financial consequences for noncompliance, until recently there had been no penalty for failure to abide the law. Even more, limited compliance has

resulted in subsequent reversals of court rulings, such as that of the Baby Veronica Case in 2013, which brought to the attention of the public the rights of tribes over their people (Children’s Bureau, 2020; Edwards, 2016; Turner, 2016). In this case, a custodial White family and an American Indian biological father who had not been in a custodial role with the child both claimed custody of Veronica. Anti-Native factions sought to diminish ICWA’s effect by narrowing its interpretation (Conard, 2016), and the court gave custody to the White family. The most direct challenge to ICWA came in 2018, when U.S. District Court Judge Reed O’Connor of the Northern District of Texas deemed ICWA unconstitutional in *Brackeen v. Zinke*, a ruling at which he arrived by stating the law gave preference due to race and ignoring the membership of American Indians in sovereign tribal nations. In 2023, the U. S. Supreme Court reviewed and reversed the *Brackeen v. Zinke* decision affirming ICWA as constitutional.

As of this writing, the ruling is being appealed in higher U.S. courts. That said, 40 years of precedent had considered ICWA to be constitutional based on membership in a nation, not on race.

U.S. Public Child Protection Agencies

To implement ICWA, the federal government places responsibility with U.S. states through their CPS agencies with federal and state oversight. Organizational structures of state and regional CPS agencies vary greatly across the United States. State legislatures define child maltreatment and responses, leading to a variety of child protection statutes and rules, as well as organizational arrangements to administer and fund them. The number of people, the geographic size, the poverty rate (and other indicators of social economic status), racial populations, political priorities, budgets, unique state characteristics, and history all affect state policies, administrative

organization, and child protection's place within a state's large administrative structure. Child protection can exist within the Department of Human Services, Department of Health, or Department of Children and Families, and is commonly nested within the division of child welfare. Child protection may be combined with or separate from foster care, childcare, or children's disabilities. The organizational chart and administration of services looks quite different in New York and California as compared to South Dakota and Wyoming. The complexity of administrative offices of states with larger populations with many departments and tiers can make it challenging to penetrate the bureaucracy.

Child welfare programs are administered by the state or county—or, in some instances, by a combination of the two, based on the size of a county or city, as is the case in Nevada and Wisconsin. In some states, parts of child protection services are purchased from external providers rather than provided internally (e.g., visitation, supervision, chemical dependency services, intensive family-based services, foster care, Native specialized services, or social work training). In county administered programs, counties manage personnel and implement, maintain, and direct day-to-day responses and services to families involved in child protection. In state-administered programs, by contrast, the state retains control but maintains regional local offices to provide services. Nine states currently use county administration, 39 use state administration, and two (Nevada and Wisconsin) have hybrid administration with each state's largest county using county administration and the other counties falling under state administration.

CPS agency organization influences implementation of ICWA and fieldwork practice with American Indian families, especially in terms of access to funds and services, to ease the transition of families between social workers (case flow within the agency) and to improve

worker-to-worker and supervisor-to-worker consultation and support. As mentioned earlier, CPS agencies may include ICWA practice within *generic* child protection units or social workers—with all workers trained to service all cases. For example, this may be true of intake staff and immediate responders. Some agencies assign ICWA cases to *specialized* units—with workers employing expertise with ICWA and sensitivity to historical trauma, as well as familiarity with local American Indian tribes and the child welfare staff for those tribes, individuals who will be the focus of this research given the significance of CPS organization to ICWA implementation.

Current Research

Historical Trauma

Many scholars argue that, to truly understand working with or collaborating with American Indian communities and families, it is essential to appreciate and internalize the profound impact of historical trauma (Walls & Whitbeck, 2012b; Whitbeck, Chen, et al., 2004). The deep roots of historical trauma negatively affect American Indian children, families, and tribes today, disrupting family functioning (Evans-Campbell, 2006), for example, the symptoms of such trauma are often present in families referred to CPS agencies (Horejsi et al., 1992). For decades authors have recounted the lingering effects of the traumatic history experienced by Indian tribes, with particular attention to U.S. extermination and assimilation policies and practices of the past (Brave Heart, 2003; Brave Heart & Debruyn, 1998; Townsley & Goldstein, 2013; Walls & Whitbeck, 2012b, 2012a; Whitbeck, Adams, et al., 2004). Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart described historical trauma as a consequence of the massive losses of lives, land, and culture following European contact and colonization and described how such effects caused unresolved grief across generations (Brave Heart & Debruyn, 1998). She further described how

this legacy has contributed to higher rates of social pathology, including suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism, and other social problems among American Indian communities. Empirical studies have documented evidence of historical trauma (Bezo & Maggi, 2015; Goodkind et al., 2012; Hartmann & Gone, 2016) and have advanced tools for measuring such effects (Walls & Whitbeck, 2012a; Whitbeck, Chen, et al., 2004).

Research has addressed effects of historical trauma as a public health issue (Walls & Whitbeck, 2012b, 2012a), and scholars have recommended observing social/historical antecedents as opposed to pathologizing individual perceptions of loss and individual traits (Walls & Whitbeck, 2012a). Researchers have further recommended that interventions be intergenerational; that they include teachings on traditional narratives, beliefs, and practices; that they address historical events in culturally appropriate ways; and that they facilitate communication and interaction between elders, parents, and youth about present and past conditions and family dynamics (Brave Heart, 1998, 2003; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Goodkind et al., 2012). Fortunately, though inconsistently, the field of child welfare has started attending to issues of historical trauma. Without such knowledge, CPS social workers may operate in a domain of unintended albeit still harmful ignorance, thus further exacerbating engagement difficulties, while also providing inadequate service plans and contributing to disparities for American Indian children and families.

Specialized ICWA Social Workers

Through my network in ICWA child protection services, I am aware of several specialized ICWA units and social workers in CPS agencies; that said, my exhaustive review of the literature yielded only one empirical article that examined ICWA social workers (B.

Richardson, 2008). In that work, the author conducted a two-year sequential mixed methods study of 24 American Indian families and community service providers involved with the Specialized Native American Program Unit (SNAPU) in Woodbury County, Iowa.

The Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS) instituted the SNAPU to address Iowa's disproportionate rate of American Indian families in the state child welfare system, and the Unit concentrated its efforts on community outreach, prevention, and intervention with American Indian children and families at risk of involvement with the child welfare system. The SNAPU had a five-fold goal: a) improving cultural competence in the delivery of services; b) maintaining compliance with ICWA principles; c) reducing Native caseloads; d) increasing available Native foster homes; and d) emphasizing the use of relatives and community networks for family support. Formal training helped SNAPU workers to assist families with more culturally consistent strength-based practices and to build resilience within families.

During the first year, researchers performed quantitative tests and reassessments of family functioning, and, during the second year, the researchers conducted qualitative surveys of families and their community providers. Richardson evaluated the SNAPU's effectiveness in improving outcomes for American Indian families involved in county-level child protection.

The author used qualitative and quantitative data, including pre- and post-intervention assessments of family functioning (NCFAS), as well as risk of abuse and neglect (CFRA-CFRR), and found that families improved in family functioning scores (this study did not use a control group). More specifically, the number of families with high and medium risk scores decreased, and the number of families with low risk scores increased. The study also assessed collaboration between CPS and community service providers through social network analysis

and community surveys. Qualitative interviews with IDHS and American Indian community service providers reflected improvement in the relationship between IDHS and the community providers because of the providers' perception of social work practice changes that improved cultural competence, compliance with ICWA, and flexible spending policies, and away from child placement as the response to child maltreatment allegations. Family interviews revealed that Native parents felt empowered through the Unit's respect for the family, that they reported positive feelings related to changes in their lives, and that they believed that those positive changes were enhanced by involvement with the Unit. The study concluded that Woodbury County's efforts successfully engaged American Indian families and that Native placement rates declined after implementation of the Unit.

Child Welfare Collaboration between American Indian Communities and CPS Agencies

Recognizing the justification for American Indian suspicion of CPS intervention, several authors have written on the paramount importance of building trust through collaboration with American Indian communities to increase positive outcomes for children and families in their care (Barnes et al., 2019; Hand, 2006; Landers & Danes, 2016; Lidot et al., 2012; Rotenberg & Cerda, 1994; Winters et al., 2020). Haight et al. (2018) conducted a scoping study of articles addressing overrepresentation of American Indian children in North American child welfare systems and found indications that partnerships between government child welfare systems and Native tribes and communities could improve services to American Indian families.

Limb et al. (2004) examined the relationship between compliance with ICWA in one Southwestern state and the rate of reunification of American Indian children with family or tribal members following out-of-home placement. The researchers reviewed public child protection

records of 49 ICWA-eligible children who were placed in alternate care collecting data on compliance with placement type, use of qualified expert witnesses, and incorporation of Indian culture and resources. The study surveyed 78 state caseworkers and 16 tribal workers regarding their knowledge and attitudes regarding those three areas of compliance. The researchers used quantitative research methods including bivariate analyses, chi-square tests, and t-tests. The authors of that study concluded that collaborative partnerships between CPS systems and urban American Indian community-based programs showed promise in reducing disproportionality and disparities, noting as well that tribal and state workers emphasized different aspects of ICWA and practiced differently, while also stressing the reduction in the number of American Indian children in child welfare cases, the positive effect on active efforts requirements of ICWA, and the reduction of non-kinship out-of-home placements.

In another study, Bussey & Lucero (2013) presented a case example of collaboration between Colorado CPS and the Denver Indian Family Resource Center (DIFRC) whose purpose was to address disproportionality among American Indian out-of-home placements by providing direct services and systemic child protection services intervention. The DIFRC's direct services incorporated American Indian cultural values to address family stressors, especially caregiver substance abuse and mental health issues, and their systemic interventions centered on collaborative partnerships with Colorado Child Protective Services (CCPS) providing them with practical ways to comply with ICWA. CCPS data showed an increase in the number of children remaining at home or with extended family and a decrease in the disparity ratio for placement of American Indian children compared to White children.

DIFRC developed a Family Preservation Model (DIFRC FPM) for urban-based American Indian families, including culturally-responsive strategies for child welfare practice aimed at reducing disproportionality (Bussey & Lucero, 2013). The model promoted change at the family level as well as within CCPS departments to improve case outcomes for American Indian families and children. Their efforts sought to prevent the removal of Native children from their families while “(a) strengthening parents/caregivers’ abilities to protect children; (b) improving family functioning and increasing well-being of all family members; (c) increasing family self-sufficiency; and (d) strengthening and maintaining children's connections to their cultures” (p. 396). With few existing models for services to American Indian families, the method for creating the DIFRC model was based on recommendations for culturally competent services and needed changes in CPS systems’ treatment of these families obtained from American Indian child welfare professionals and refinement and expansion from practice-informed evidence. The research design for this study was a case study of the project intended to reduce disproportional out of home placement for American Indian children. The model documented improvements in lowered family re-referrals, an increase in kinship placement rates, and significant improvement of family level scores in the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale-American Indian version, measuring caregiver capabilities and family safety. Moreover, the DIFRC FPM included eight components for specific system change and improvements and stressed establishing collaborative agreements with CPS regarding American Indian children, with particular attention to the following objectives: (a) creating protocols to identify American Indian children upon first contact with a department and to enhance support and resources for kinship placements (b) recommending child welfare best practices for Native families and

children; (c) establishing commitments to culturally-responsive practice and ICWA compliance at the departmental level; and (d) strengthening oversight of ICWA compliance at the state level. DIFRC and CPS have found these four elements to play a role in impacting disproportionality and disparity (Bussey & Lucero, 2013) (p. 397). Bussey & Lucero (2013) concluded that collaborative partnerships between child protection services systems and American Indian community agencies offered a promising strategy for improving ICWA practice and keeping Native children connected to their family, tribe, and culture. ICWA compliance could be enhanced, in other words, while the number of Native children involved in the child welfare system could be reduced.

In another descriptive case study, Mindell et al. (2003) examined and explained the collaboration of an American Indian community organization, a state child welfare agency and a university to provide an improved service model to improve outcomes for American Indian families. The Native American Foster Parent Association (NAFPA), the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and Loyola University were partners in that collaboration. The methods for building the collaboration were surveys, focus groups, and several community organization engagement meetings. Surveys and assessments were used to identify service gaps and training needs.

Illinois does not have any American Indian reservations or American Indian land base, court, or tribal–state agreement. In 2000, the Illinois American Indian population had members from 136 of the 557 federally recognized tribes, with 30,006 individuals claiming exclusive American Indian heritage and with 59% of that number—or 21,555 individuals—residing in the Chicago metro area (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). Chicago had the eighth-largest concentration

of American Indians in a U.S. urban setting (U. S. Census Bureau, 2002). The great tribal and racial diversity presented changes to child welfare workers in terms of identifying and engaging American Indian families in a culturally attuned manner (Wagner, 1998).

Mindell et al. (2003) stated that the collaboration stemmed from concerns by a group within the American Indian community about the lack of cultural knowledge and practice by state child welfare officials. The group forged strong cooperative connections, first with DCFS and then with Loyola University, eventually leading to a collaboration where each partner contributed their particular expertise, resources, network, and orientation. The collaboration developed a culturally driven practice model for urban American Indian child welfare, one that involved building resources, training workers through a culturally responsive curriculum, monitoring ICWA compliance, and assisting DCFS and court personnel. The guiding principles of this collaboration were accessibility of training and resources to all components and geographic locations of the child welfare system, community empowerment and participation, and recognition of urban American Indian experience, culture, and history.

An article by Porter et al. (2012) provided an extensive description of the collaboration involved in creating and implementing the Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act (WICWA), a state law for implementing ICWA. The collaboration included the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (WDCF), the Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center, Wisconsin tribes, and county child welfare agencies. The collaboration aimed to increase understanding of the law and the reasons behind it, as well as to improve communication and coordination between all stakeholders responsible for the welfare of American Indian children in Wisconsin. Porter et al. (2012) outlined four areas for systemic change: (a) implementing the WICWA into

regulations, policies, and practice; (b) strengthening the working relationships between tribes, state, and county child welfare agencies; (c) increasing practitioners' knowledge of the intent, purpose, and history of ICWA; and (d) increasing identification of American Indian children covered by the WICWA. The method employed for identifying these goals was interviews and round table discussions with stakeholders including tribal social services directors, American Indian child welfare staff, tribal and WDCF attorneys, and WDCF staff. The project used the system change model of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) (Fixsen et al., 2013) and Kotter's theory of organizational change (Kotter, 1996). The article stated that the criteria for successful implementation of the WICWA would consist of reduction of unnecessary out-of-home placements of Native children, consistent application of the Act, and establishment of corresponding policies and case practices aligned with the role of tribes and the best interests of their children.

A summary of this *Current Research* section appears in the section *Critical Analysis of Themes*, below.

Theoretical Framework

The range of theories relevant to child maltreatment is quite broad. To understand some dynamics of child abuse, social work practice with parents and children involved with child protection lends itself to explanations from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979, 1982, 1988), and family systems theory (Papero, 2000). Organization theory (Gharajedaghi, 2011; Perrow, 2000) can explain and guide research in terms of how agencies might be best organized to efficiently and effectively implement CPS programs. Policy and political movement theories (Larimer, 2017; Weible & Sabatier, 2017) can explain

how child protection policies and laws are crafted and enacted. Critical race theory (Hill-Collins & Solomos, 2010) and racial identity theories (Broman, 2015) can shed light on racial issues between Western European and American Indian cultures. And group theory and social relationship theories are relevant to aspects of creating and maintaining relationships among interacting child welfare service agencies (Sweeney & Webb, 2007).

I decided that the Holding Space Framework (HSF) was the best suited framework to guide the research associated with this dissertation. I chose the HSF because it emphasizes relationship characteristics necessary for Native/non-Native partnerships for culturally sensitive interventions in American Indian communities and because American Indian communities, scholars, and practitioners were instrumental in the HSF's research, development, and formulation. The framework has a strong evidence-based background in explaining successful relationships in tribal–academic health research projects (J. E. Lucero, 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018), making it potentially applicable in other Native and non-Native partnership settings, such as child protection. Considering the commonalities between public health and child welfare services and the partnership necessary between CPS agencies and tribes in implementing ICWA, the HSF is apt for exploring relationships between CPS agencies and tribes working for positive outcomes for American Indian families and children.

Development of the HSF

The HSF was developed through a series of research studies and supported by the University of Washington and Arizona State University, as well as by the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center (J. E. Lucero et al., 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS,

2018). The research that led to the creation of HSF began via an examination of university–community health projects that used a community-based partnership research (CBPR) model in American Indian and other marginalized communities. The studies determined that success of partnership projects by tribal and outside organizations required a relationship with three characteristics (or “pillars”), which are discussed in more detail below (J. E. Lucero, 2020; J. E. Lucero et al., 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018). These findings led to the development of the HSF (NCAI Policy Research Center and MSU Center for Native Health Partnerships, 2012; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018).

Evidence-based Research for HSF

In 2009, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the nation’s medical research agency, funded a large national study of public health projects that used community-based methodology with the goal of clarifying those elements necessary to maximize impact on health disparities for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities and other diverse communities facing health disparities (J. E. Lucero, Wallerstein, et al., 2018; J. E. Lucero, Wright, et al., 2018). A mixed methods research study including 450 participants in more than 300 community-based partnership research projects established the concepts behind the HSF and found them to be necessary and explanatory factors in successful projects (Hicks et al., 2012; J. E. Lucero, Wallerstein, et al., 2018). The study was meta-level, using an indigenous-transformative lens across diverse settings. It integrated an iterative mixed methodology grounded in an indigenous-transformative paradigm recognizing different ways of knowing. The NCAI Policy Research Center and the University of Nevada–Reno School of Community Health Sciences used the results to develop the Holding Space Toolkit, the basis for the HSF (Belone et al., 2016; Duran et

al., 2019; Hicks et al., 2012; J. E. Lucero, 2020; J. E. Lucero et al., 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and MSU Center for Native Health Partnerships, 2012; Sandoval et al., 2012).

Use of HSF in Child Protection

Though the HSF was developed from and for tribal–academic partnerships in public health, it was well suited to child protection partnerships between CPS and tribal child welfare staff working for positive outcomes for American Indian families. Both child protection agencies and public health agencies had a history of partaking in past assimilation practices, leading American Indian communities to be wary of and suspicious toward outside social policy interventions (Guadagnolo et al., 2009; J. E. Lucero, 2020; Pacheco et al., 2013; Wallace, 2020). Such agencies had both been viewed as outsiders with their own agendas and had been seen as unconcerned with tribal cultural integrity—and both were often directed by an administrative structure combining health and human services. Both child protection and public health had the mission of improving American Indian wellbeing as a part of public welfare; in addition, the three pillars of the HSF—governance, trust, and culture—were embraced, through requirements of ICWA and BIA Guidelines, in practice requirements for CPS work with American Indian families.

The Three Pillars of the HSF

Governance. The HSF identifies the governance pillar as the agreements that partners have in creating the partnership—that is, what each party can expect the other to do as well as how disagreements will be handled (J. E. Lucero, 2020; J. E. Lucero et al., 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018). For CPS agencies, the bottom line expectations for working with American Indian families and tribes are articulated in ICWA (Library of Congress

Congressional Research Service, 2013) and BIA Guidelines (Guidelines for Implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act, 2016). These documents described what tribes can legally expect from partnering CPS agencies. Several states had additional statutory clarifications and requirements, and many local child welfare agencies had local policies or understandings with tribes. Governance acknowledges the sovereignty of American Indian tribes and their wisdom in terms of the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts to be considered in making child welfare decisions, while also acknowledging that tribes know what is best for their people (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2021; Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978).

Trust. The trust pillar asserts a belief and confidence in the notion that partners will do what they have committed to do (J. E. Lucero, 2020; J. E. Lucero et al., 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018). Trust builds over time from observations that partners' actions and manner are consistent with their promises and includes open, truthful interactions, as well as a mechanism to resolve differences as they arise. With CPS–tribal relationships, trust should mean that tribes expect that CPS will, at a minimum, follow ICWA and BIA Guidelines and that CPS will honor the cultural child welfare expertise of tribal staff.

Culture. The culture pillar recognizes that American Indian tribes have thrived for several millennia, with concepts of community, family relationships, spirituality, and customs that diverge from Western notions (T. Cross, 1999; T. Cross et al., 2000, 2010; T. L. Cross, 1986; Hand, 2006; J. E. Lucero, 2020; NCAI Policy Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018). The ways that this pillar relates to child welfare is as follows. A connection to a child's Native culture can produce healing, a sense of belonging, support, and emotional life-giving. A thriving Native community produces thriving Native children and families. Assessment of child development

and of parenting practices can accept developmental markers and parenting styles that vary from mainstream cultural values (Simard, 2009, 2020), and best practices for social workers are for them to be culturally sensitive and humble (T. L. Cross, 1986; Fox et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2010; J. Red Horse, 1997; J. G. Red Horse et al., 2000). The culture pillar for CPS–tribal relationships stresses that family engagement and services will be consistent with each family’s cultural identity.

Critical Analysis of Themes

My own journey working together with tribes through child protection services in Northern Minnesota has taught me the importance to tribes of the recognition of their status as an independent nation, the recognition of their knowledge and expertise in what is best for their families and children, and the inclusion of their recommendations and opinions in child protection cases and policies regarding American Indian children. I have also learned that culturally sensitive child welfare practice with American Indian families is significantly different from non-Native practice, and that the working relationship of CPS agencies with local tribes has an impact on the quality and timeliness of outcomes of child protective services intervention with American Indian children.

Summary of Current Research

Specialized ICWA Social Workers.

There was only a single empirical study of a specialized CPS unit working with American Indian families (B. Richardson, 2008). The author found that the specialized ICWA unit’s work resulted in increased family functioning, reduction in out of home placements, and increased positive attitudes between community service providers and the county. Though the

study did not discuss working relationships between CPS and tribes, it did show evidence of good outcomes for American Indian families through culturally sensitive practice, compliance with ICWA, and collaboration with community service providers.

Child Welfare Collaboration between American Indian Communities and CPS Agencies.

There was much literature on the need for culturally appropriate engagement, practices, and services (e.g., Bjorum, 2014; T. Cross et al., 2000; Hand, 2006; Red Horse et al., 2000), and a smaller literature on the benefits of collaborations between various combinations of American Indian service agencies and advocacy groups and child protection agencies (Haight et al., 2018; Lidot et al., 2012; Limb & Brown, 2008; N. M. Lucero & Bussey, 2012; Mindell et al., 2003; B. Richardson, 2008). Several collaborations between CPS agencies and American Indian communities had produced improved outcomes for American Indian families involved in child protection via the development of culturally sensitive services and compliance with ICWA as evidenced by the following examples.

Limb et al. (2004) found that in a Southwest state ICWA requirements were met when both CPS agencies and tribes were involved in planning. The two sides had differing views of the same requirements and emphasized different aspects of the law. Bussey and Lucero (2013) studied the collaboration of an urban American Indian family program that had success with child reunifications for American Indian families involved in CPS agencies. On a macro level, the State of Illinois saw good results in creating a state-wide culturally sensitive training and services model following developing a three part collaboration by American Indian community advocates, university, and the Department of Human Services (Mindell et al., 2003).

Holding Space Framework.

HSF with its strong empirical basis, its culturally sensitive development including significant tribal input, and its use in American Indian public health partnerships promised to be a good framework with which to examine working relationships between CPS agencies and tribes using its three pillars of governance, trust, and culture.

Gaps in the Literature

There was a wide gap in published academic literature about use of specialized ICWA workers or ICWA units or teams in general within CPS agencies. There had been no published empirical studies of optimal characteristics of relationships between specialized ICWA public child protection social workers and tribal child welfare teams. Nor had there been any published research on optimal practices used by ICWA workers to achieve the aims of ICWA. This dissertation begins to meet these needs and address this gap in scholars' collective knowledge in this field, thus informing both theory and practice.

Specifically, I examined CPS agencies with specialized ICWA units and gathered agency staff perspectives of their working relationship with American Indian tribal child welfare staff to achieve positive outcomes for Native families and children. I further analyzed staff perspectives of the best practices in forming and maintaining positive working relationships with tribal counterparts. These findings inform best county-tribal relationship practices in an effort to improve outcomes for tribal children and families with the overall goal of decreasing disproportionate rates of CPS involvement, foster care, and other egregious health and socioeconomic disparities among American Indians.

Research Questions

Research questions are presented, along with corresponding interview guide questions, in Table 1, below. Use of the interview guide questions is discussed in the Method Section.

Table 1

Overarching Research Question, Research Sub Questions, and Corresponding Interview Guide Questions

Overarching Research Question: How Do Counties with Specialized ICWA Units Use Those Units to Optimize Their Working Relationships with Tribal Partners to Achieve Optimal ICWA Implementation?	
Research Sub Questions	Interview Guide Questions (question number)
1. What are the perspectives of county ICWA staff on the current status of relationships with tribes (as defined by Holding Space Framework and its pillars of governance, trust, and culture)?	In your opinion, how would you describe your agency’s working relationship with tribes? [Probe: How do you know? How do you measure it? If different relationships with different tribes, what are the factors creating differences?] (6)
2. How important to the county CPS agency is the working relationship between the agency and tribes (as defined by Holding Space Framework and its pillars of governance, trust, and culture)?	How important is the working relationship between the agency and the tribes to the county CPS agency? What indicators do you see that leads you to this opinion? in what ways is the relationship important to you? (7)
3. What are the perspectives of county ICWA staff on how their relationship with tribes affects outcomes for American Indian families and children?	In your opinion, how does the relationship of specialized ICWA workers with the tribe affect outcomes for native children and families? What examples have you experienced on your caseload or in the agency that show the impact of the relationship on outcomes? (8)
4. How does an agency with a specialized ICWA unit build and maintain a constructive working relationship with tribes?	In your opinion, what does an optimal working relationship with tribes look like? How does your agency build and maintain working relationships with tribal partners? How do you personally build and maintain working relationships with tribal partners? (9)
5. Are HSF and its pillars of governance, trust, and culture a good fit for describing the relationship between an ICWA unit and tribes?	[governance] Is tribal voice incorporated into your service plans? How does that work? [Probe: Who makes what decisions? How do workers and tribes make shared decisions? Which ICWA requirements are the hardest to fulfill? What advice do you have for other counties on ICWA implementation?] (10) [trust] How would you describe the level of trust between yourself and tribes, and vice versa? What are some specific examples where you have observed trust in your work or in the work of others? What are some specific examples where you have observed distrust in your work or in the work of others? (11) [culture] How important is cultural relevance in your work? [Probes: How do you (or your staff) become culturally aware or remain culturally relevant? Have you attended any Native/Indigenous activities or cultural events? If so, tell me more about that? What kinds? Which ones? Who attends? What is that like? Is participation encouraged by the agency? What is the impact of such activities on your work, in your opinion? How would you say that you provide culturally sensitive

practice and services to American Indian families? What role do tribes play in ensuring cultural appropriateness of the service plan? (12)

What kind of special trainings or mentoring do ICWA workers receive, if any? Are local tribes involved in training? How do you become aware of culturally sensitive services and programs? How do you learn which schools, teachers, mental health providers are supportive of native students and culture? Which are not sensitive or supportive? What kinds of such trainings have you participated in? Which ones were particularly effective and why, which ones were particularly ineffective and why? (13)

Methods

Design

This research was an exploratory inquiry using qualitative thematic analysis to examine the working relationship between selected CPS agencies with specialized ICWA social workers and their tribal child welfare partners serving American Indian families and children. I used an American Indian cultural consultant knowledgeable in American Indian child welfare to give guidance on cultural appropriateness of research design, implementation, and interpretation of findings. I chose a qualitative method rather than the quantitative approach to allow for more in-depth discovery of rich and complex information as opposed to orienting the work toward hypothesis testing and prediction (Durdella, 2019; Goldstein, 1994; Yin, 2016). A qualitative method is better suited to answer the How? and Why? questions central to this project (Goldstein, 1994), and to conduct interviews with key informants. It allowed me to capture and comprehend more complete answers to this study's questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; R. S. Weiss, 1994; Yin, 2016, 2018). Such a technique allowed for elaboration, comments, follow-up queries, and a recognition of new or evolving questions as the research progressed. It was an especially apt method for discovering personal views, perceptions, attitudes, and meanings. The interview method facilitated ease and timeliness of gathering information (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

Following Gubrium and Holstein (2012), I used a narrative style of interviewing where the interviewer encourages the interviewee to adopt a more active role in creating narratives around experiences as opposed to passively responding to interview questions. This style facilitates lively discussion and draws the interviewee into the process of constructing concepts

and themes as an active participant. For the analysis plan, I adopted a version studied and outlined by Deterding and Waters (Deterding & Waters, 2018), using aspects of both inductive and deductive design. Many 21st century qualitative researchers have moved away from the true grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967)—and elaborated on by Glaser (1992), Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Charmaz (2000)—choosing, instead, to embrace an approach with both inductive and deductive elements. The deductive side of this process, which typically involves beginning with a hypothesis and gathering data to test it, finds its analysis informed by peer-reviewed research and the application of existing theoretical frameworks. The inductive side, by contrast, which usually starts with gathering data regarding a subject and using those data to better understand the subject, affords the researcher the freedom to discover novel and often unanticipated connections and concepts. During analysis of the interview data, this combined inductive–deductive approach uses flexible coding (See Data Analysis below) and also takes advantage of the modern qualitative research computer software.

Context

I chose to sample specialized ICWA units in Minnesota counties both because I was familiar with the Minnesota child protection system, its known disparities, and its county/state collaborations with Minnesota tribes and due to my prospects for successfully recruiting participants for research saturation in this region. Minnesota had a large American Indian population relative to other states—the 15th largest in the country, with an estimated 108,322 American Indian persons (U. S. Census Bureau—U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021)—and maintained specialized ICWA units in counties with large Native service populations. Minnesota also presented ease of access from the University of Minnesota.

Minnesota offered a unique tribal–state context with opportunities for shared governance, evaluation, training, and data collection between public and tribal child welfare entities. In 2017, the legislature codified most of the BIA Guidelines into state law (Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act), and the Social Services Information System had been expanded to include ICWA practice data fields. To comply with ICWA and the BIA Guidelines and to acknowledge the voice of American Indian tribes regarding child welfare for American Indian families, Minnesota engaged in several activities to comply with its Child and Family Services Review Plan (Children’s Bureau, 2020).

First, the Minnesota DHS met regularly with the Indian Child Welfare Advisory Council to review child welfare issues and improve outcomes for American Indian children and families. The Council had American Indian representatives from the 11 Minnesota tribes and two urban communities. The tribes and DHS had put special focus on the initial and continued training of CPS social workers for working with American Indian families and children to increase worker cultural sensitivity, to help workers understand local American Indian history, to increase ICWA compliance, and to create partnerships with tribal staff necessary for good outcomes for families. Together with tribes, the Minnesota Child Welfare Training System created basic and advanced training on ICWA, MIFPA, the Tribal-State Agreement, the Social Services Manual, and data recording (B. Bussey, Personal Communication, 1/20/2021). The University of Minnesota–Duluth’s Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare, in collaboration with tribes, created and provided the ICWA portion of the required training for all public child welfare social workers, as well as ICWA training for tribal staff who requested it. In addition, DHS retained Indian Child Welfare Staff to provide technical assistance to social workers regarding ICWA practice.

Because child protection laws and CPS authority were determined by each state, using only Minnesota CPS agencies may have slanted practice information toward Minnesota laws and policies. That said, ICWA and BIA guidelines applied in every state; thus, this research has the potential to deepen our understanding of CPS's working relationship with tribes in implementing ICWA and to determine whether HSF might be a useful guide for any agencies looking to improve their tribal relationships.

Sample/Sampling Strategy

Through my professional connections in child welfare, I knew that Minnesota had three counties with specialized ICWA units and some counties where ICWA cases were assigned to specialized workers within generic (non-ICWA specific) child protection units. The sample for this study included participants (described below) from consenting county CPS agencies in Minnesota that maintain specialized ICWA units. Together the three counties with specialized units included eight units with 50 social workers, eight unit supervisors, and three ICWA implementation program administrators (personal communication with Human Resources departments in the three counties, March 15, 2021).

I started recruitment of participants with telephone solicitation of the unit supervisors and the ICWA program implementation manager at each agency to enter this research study and for agency staff including themselves to become participants. The presentation to the agency staff included the purpose, research questions, design, time commitment, plan for confidentiality and security, and intention to publish the results. The request explained that participation involved recorded individual interviews conducted via Zoom online software allowing interviewees to participate from a location of their choosing while the interviewer remained at a private,

secluded location. Recruitment included a Zoom meeting with units with specialized ICWA social workers or emails to social workers with ICWA caseloads.

Most public agencies prohibited employees from receiving outside financial rewards for engaging in work related to their employment; therefore, subject remuneration was not a component of the proposed study. Incentive for participants to be involved was the opportunity to engage in an effort to enhance ICWA practice for better outcomes for American Indian families and children and to gain knowledge about the relationship-building practices within their own agency. All staff from the two consenting agencies who were willing to take part in the study and had appropriate roles (see below) were accepted as participants.

Participants

Participants in this study were employees of two county CPS agencies in Minnesota that assigned ICWA-eligible child protection cases to specialized units created to serve American Indian families. Participants included social workers and supervisors from the specialized ICWA units and, in one county, from generalized intake units (mixed units) that had responsibility to initially contact and interact with American Indian families and tribes. The overall program directors for ICWA implementation from each county also invited and accepted into the study. No additional inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied. All applicants from the above units and the two program administrators were accepted into the study resulting in twenty participants in the research (see Table 2 and Table 3 below).

Table 2*Participants*

Participants		ICWA Caseload Unit	Mixed Caseload Unit	Indigenous Heritage	Previous Tribal Employment or Internship	MSW	ICWA Scholar
Alias	Current Role						
Amy	Social Worker	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Arthur	Social Worker		FA		✓	✓	✓
Avery	Social Worker		FA	✓	✓	✓	✓
Calley	Social Worker	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Daenerys	Social Worker	✓			✓	✓	✓
Elaine	Social Worker	✓			✓	✓	✓
Gabriel	Social Worker	✓		✓	✓		
Hamish	Social Worker		FA				
Jasmine	Social Worker	✓		✓	✓		
Lark	Social Worker	✓				✓	✓
Lionel	Social Worker	✓				✓	✓
Marinetta	Social Worker		FA				
Monica Joan	Social Worker		INV			✓	
Sage	Social Worker		INV	✓			
Ann	Supervisor		FA				
Felix	Supervisor		FA				
Koda	Supervisor	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Sofia	Supervisor	✓		✓	✓		
Elizabeth						✓	
Mara				✓	✓	✓	✓
		10	8	9	11	12	10

For mixed caseload units: INV identifies an Investigation unit; FA identifies a Family Assessment Unit

Table 3

Participant Demographic and Tribal Connection Summary

Agency Roles	Social Workers	Unit Supervisors	Program Administrators	All Participants	%
n	14	4	2	20	100%
Age Range	27 - 62 yrs	29 – 51 yrs	38 – 52 yrs	27 – 62 yrs	
Female	9	3	2	14	70%
Male	5	1	0	6	30%
American Indian Tribal Member (TWE)*	5	2	1	8	40%
Indigenous Heritage (IND)	6	2	1	9	45%
Tribal Work Experience	8	2	1	11	55%
Either IND or TWE	9	2	1	12	60%
Years in Child Protection Range	4 – 24 yrs	12 – 33 yrs	15 – 27 yrs	4 – 33 yrs	
ICWA Scholar**	8	1	1	10	50%

29 hrs, 40 mins of interviews

*Tribal work experience includes previous experience as an employee or intern at an American Indian child welfare agency

**ICWA Scholar means completion of an MSW ICWA Scholarship program with an emphasis on ICWA practice

Ethical Issues Pertaining to Human Subjects

The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed this research proposal and determined that the study was “not human subjects research.” The IRB Board found that the research does not meet the criteria for human subject research set by either the federal DHS or the federal Food and Drug Administration (MN IRB form 310) because this project focuses on policies, practices, and procedures, and the individuals who will be interview subjects are all professionals with whom I would engage in only a professional context.

Informed Consent and the Protection of Sensitive Information

I started each interview explaining the study, reading an informed consent statement (see Appendix A), and asking for a verbal agreement to participate before proceeding. I informed participants that there was no penalty for declining to participate nor would the agency be informed of the identity of participants or if they subsequently declined to participate. Individual data items were identified only through aliases. I asked participants to refrain from using names of clients or describing situations that could identify clients.

Data Collection

This study involved one-time, individual, quantitative surveys and semi-structured, qualitative interviews of participants following the interview guide contained in Appendix B.

Quantitative Survey Data

Quantitative Survey questions described in Appendix B were asked of participants at the beginning of their individual interviews and were downloaded with the recorded qualitative interview data downloaded into the University of Minnesota Secure Personal Box Storage (Box) with names changed to aliases. Box was a HIPPA level secure online digital storage system

providing individual two entry protected electronic space for University of Minnesota student, professor, and employees. Use of Box for data storage this research follows recommendations by the University Office of Information Technology and the School of Social Work. During analysis these data were loaded into NVivo and attached as attributes to their corresponding qualitative interviews using the same aliases as identifiers (see below). NVivo data files were stored in Box.

Interview Data

Interview data (audio and video recordings of responses to qualitative questions described in Appendix B) were gathered through Zoom software, downloaded to Box storage and uploaded into Sonix online software for transcription. Using Sonix's tools, the transcriptions were edited to correct audio to digital translation mistakes. The final transcription was downloaded to Box and all data from this interview were data deleted from the Zoom and Sonix systems. These data were loaded into NVivo using their alias identifiers.

Zoom was the online video communication software provided by the University of Minnesota with security for private communications by options of password protection, waiting room entry requirements, and hosting controls. The software had audio and video recording of session features with warnings to session participants when in use. Access to recordings by authorized hosts was through two entry authentication.

Sonix, owned by Sonix , Inc (Sonix AI Inc., 2022) was a secure on line audio analog to digital transcription service. The software had bank-level security by using sockets layer (SSL) certificates and encryption algorithms for data transfers and required two-factor authentication for access. I used Sonix's feature of creating aliases such as *Interviewee-1* to protect the identify of participants.

Interview Transcripts

I used member checking to ensure interviews accurately captured participants' thoughts and feelings. After the transcription for each interview had been completed, I sent the material to interviewees via email and will ask them to review them for accuracy and to suggest edits as they felt appropriate. In some instances, I had follow-up questions or requested elaboration of statements they made in their interview.

Interview transcriptions were deleted from Sonix as described above and were retained in Box and NVivo until successful defense of this dissertation. Final edited transcriptions will be retained with all individual identifiers removed. The data may be used in future research and publications by this author and possible co-authors; before that time, however, the data will be completely de-identified.

Field Notes

After each interview, I created field notes describing initial impressions, reactions, and comments regarding the interaction. Other field notes were generated at other times during the research process as thoughts and connections occur. All of these notes were generated using MSWord, stored in Box, and eventually loaded into NVivo. Field notes also may be used in future research and publications, but as above, all data will be de-identified.

Data Analysis Plan

For data analysis, I used the flexible coding plan described by Deterding and Waters (2018), which relies on aspects of inductive and deductive design through the use of modern

qualitative analytical research software. Flexible coding was a top-down rather than a bottom-up, line-by-line coding system; it involved a setup process and three stages to create a conceptual map of themes and answers to research questions. Deterding and Waters termed their process “flexible coding” because it enabled easy recoding of data for use in secondary research. I used NVivo-14 for Windows to analyze interview texts, and memos.

Setup

I uploaded data source documents into NVivo. I started by adding four a priori codes (Miles et al., 2020) into the database derived from the HSF: *Tribal Relationships, Governance, Trust, and Culture*. Using NVivo’s attribute feature, I added the demographic and individual characteristics of interview participants to their interview transcription. I also established an a priori code for “excellent quotes” to facilitate access to well-stated phrases or statements supporting significant textual evidence and support for concepts during later analysis and write up.

Stage 1—The Big Picture: Indexing and Memos

I created a code, called an index code, for each of the research questions. I then read through all the documents and created one or more memos of major ideas and concepts that have emerged, before uploading these memos into NVivo and establishing codes to encapsulate these concepts. This step differs considerably from bottom-up, line-by-line coding found in grounded theory research coding (Deterding & Waters, 2018).

Stage 2: Applying Analytic Codes

Next, I again read through the data and linked larger sections of text to the analytic codes that include a priori codes, large concept codes, and index codes. Following successive readings,

additional themes and concepts emerged which were documented with memos and for which I created new codes and linked them to relevant text.

Stage 3: Exploring Coding Validity, Testing, and Refining Theory

I built a refined hierarchy of codes and subcodes into a codebook reflecting the relationship of concepts emerging from the data as well as the number of texts supporting each code. By examining the codebook, I generated ideas for collapsing codes, editing code descriptions, or merging codes. Texts linked to codes with large numbers of texts provided clues for the creation of subcodes that supported lower-level concepts. I used NVivo's features of querying and display tools to look for further relationships and interlinking concepts. Analysis of data by demographic attribute gave hints for future research. Examining the texts linked to the index codes provided the basis for formulating answers to the research questions. The codebook provided a visual display of the study's concepts and relationships, and by examining the concept structure, I had a basis for statements about both the aptness of HSF for these research questions and the importance of other concepts beyond the framework.

Summary of Techniques to Enhance Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research means the degree that one can trust the findings and conclusions of the research. This is influenced by the strategies and techniques of design, sampling, collection of data, and analysis, and interpretation (Polit & Beck, 2022). For qualitative research, trustworthiness and scientific merit can be enhanced by high degrees of

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020). Below, I outline the strategies I took to enhance trustworthiness in this study in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Strategies for trustworthiness sometimes appeared in more than one of the four categories.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the truth of the data and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2022). It establishes whether confidence can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

A common method of strengthening credibility is triangulation which is using different data sources, investigators or methods of data collection to support converging conclusions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The data sources of this proposed research study included staff from two different CPS agencies each with three classes of administrative levels (social workers, supervisors, and program administrators). In addition, the community context of one agency was a metro region and one had mixed urban and rural constituencies. These varied sources allowed for triangulation to support, refine, or refute conclusions.

A second method of strengthening credibility used in this research was member checking which is having participants review and comment on the accuracy of interview data and interpretation. I asked participants to review their interview transcripts making any corrections or additions that best reflect their views (see dependability below).

Other credibility factors used in this research were reflexive journaling, audit trails, iterative coding, negative case analysis, and thick descriptions. Reflexive journaling was used

after each interview and during the analysis phase of the research. Audit trails of procedures and decisions were entered into a research journal that I kept to track all details of the study. Analysis of data used techniques of iterative coding and recoding. Negative cases were explored, and alternate explanations considered. The results used thick descriptions (see below in transferability) and illustrative quotes (see dependability and transferability below) to allow readers to see the connection between data and conclusions (Geertz, 1973; Miles et al., 2020).

Dependability

Dependability involves participants' evaluation of the findings, interpretation and recommendations of the study such that all are supported by the data as received from participants of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Through the researcher's process and descriptions, a study would be deemed dependable if the study findings were replicated with similar participants in similar conditions (Koch, 2006). Dependability assumes quality and integrity of processes, that things have been done with reasonable care (Miles et al., 2020). As mentioned above, this research included an audit trail in the research journal with sufficient information for another researcher to review or duplicate the research (also see below in Confirmability).

Use of a Cultural Consultant.

This research used Priscilla Day, D.D.E. as the cultural consultant. Her credentials were long and substantial. She was a tribal elder and member of the Leech Lake Band of Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. She had been a professor in the Social Work Department at the University of Minnesota, Duluth campus for 17 years. She had been Head of the Social Work Department and Director of UMD's Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies. She guided the Center

in creating the annual Child Welfare Conference and the American Indian Child Welfare Conference for Native child welfare workers and tribal staff. She co-created Bridging Our Understanding workshops, specialized training for child welfare workers working with American Indian families and tribes. She had won numerous awards and recognitions. She had presented American Indian child welfare topics at national and international settings. I met with Dr. Day throughout this research especially regarding cultural aspects. She was an outside voice that could identify and balance insider county child protection bias and White majority racial bias.

Other Dependability Safeguards.

As mentioned above in the credibility section, this research used member checking. I asked participants to review and edit interview transcriptions including additional thoughts that may have occurred since the interview. Member checking increased the likelihood of the transcription accurately reflecting the thoughts of participants and, in turn, increase the accuracy of findings based those transcriptions.

To strengthen dependability, this research also used reflexivity. Reflexivity means examining and revealing one's own conceptual lens, explicit and implicit assumptions, preconceptions and values, and how these affect research decisions in all phases of qualitative studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). My background of work and experiences in county child protection was explained in the Reflexivity section of the Literature Review. I entered reflexivity notes in the research journal regarding possibilities of personal biases and discussions with my cultural consultant and academic advisors concerning bias.

Miles and others (Miles et al., 2020) add that dependability is enhanced by clear definitions of constructs. The major constructs of HSF were defined and explained in the Theory

section of the dissertation. Relevant constructs regarding the definitions of ICWA, child welfare, child protection, and CPS were provided in the Preface and ICWA section of the Literature Review.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Several qualitative research authors advocate the use of thick descriptions to help readers of research to determine the transferability of research to their own or other sites (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Payne & Williams, 2005). Thick descriptions are detailed descriptions of behaviors and experiences and their context so that the behavior and experiences become meaningful to outsiders (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This research used thick descriptions in the field notes after each interview and in the results section.

Payne and Williams (2005) pointed out in their criticism of adequate description of transferability in many qualitative studies that external generalization of theory is ignored. By this they mean explaining how theory used in the study can make the results applicable in other settings. In this dissertation, the extension of HSF to CPS is explained. The answer to the research question of the fitness of HSF to describe working relationships between specialized ICWA units and tribes gives information for readers to judge transferability of research findings to other CPS agencies or settings.

Miles and others (2020) stress that transferability is strengthened by clear sampling and recruitment protocols. This research was explicit about the sampling and recruitment protocols in the Methods section. The participants were clearly defined: social workers, supervisors, and

program administrators of specialized ICWA units and intake mixed units in CPS agencies. The phenomenon of working relationships was clearly described in the extension of the HSF to CPS.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers. Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are clearly derived from the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As in credibility and dependability, use of member checking helped ensure accuracy of interview data. I used rich quotes to exemplify connection of findings to data. I kept an audit trail in the journal, field notes, and memos. They contained details of decisions and the analysis as it progresses. To counteract cultural bias, single researcher bias, and child protection insider bias, I met with my cultural consultant and with my two academic advisors throughout the entire research. The final dissertation was defended before a public meeting and a five-member dissertation committee.

Limitations

A large limitation of this project was the lack of formal input from American Indian tribes with respect to the quality and effects of their relationship with the CPS agencies being studied. I began the process of securing tribal permission for interviews with tribal workers through contacts in each tribe's Social Services Department. I met with tribal supervisors or directors of ICWA programs from four tribes in Northern Minnesota and explained my research request, but each of them declined to participate at this time because, as they explained, they were too short of staff and were focusing on other urgent priorities. One tribal director suggested that I go before the Minnesota ICWA Council (consisting of representatives of the 11 Minnesota tribes) and request their approval. This limitation was partially offset by the number of American

Indian tribal members and former tribal child welfare staff employed in CPS ICWA units and also by the familiarity of the cultural consultant with tribal issues with Minnesota CPS agencies. I planned to continue pursuing tribal permissions for separate research on CPS–tribal relationships in the future, but this dissertation will include only interviews with CPS agencies.

A second limitation is that the number of county CPS agencies is two impacting generalizability of the research.

Summary

Issue

American Indian children were involved in child protective services and placed in foster care at far higher rates than other racial groups. This greatly impacted tribal life and disturbed the continuity of tribal customs, ways of thinking, traditions, spirituality, and for children, their connection to family and tribe and general wellbeing (“Guidelines for State Courts and Agencies in Indian Child Custody Proceedings,” 2015). Foster care placement was a traumatic event for children, their families, and their tribes. Relationship between CPS agencies and American Indian tribes could be contentious and polarized due to historical and current racist experiences. The character of the relationships could affect outcomes for American Indian families and children.

Goal and Questions

In light of the disparity in foster care placements and involvement with child welfare agencies, the goal of this research was to explore working relationships with tribes by public CPS agencies with specialized ICWA units. This research looked at the qualities in those relationships, the methods used to build and maintain relationships, the value agencies held

regarding relationships and the agencies' perception of the outcomes of the relationships for outcomes for American Indian families. This research used the lens of the Holding Space Framework as a guide and comments on its value in extending its use from American Indian public health to American Indian child welfare.

Research Questions

Please see Table 1 identifying research questions and corresponding interview guide questions.

Method Summary

This research was carried out as an exploratory study using a qualitative inductive methodology based on interviews with specialized CPS ICWA and intake social workers in Minnesota, their supervisors, and their program administrators. Analysis included the use of computer software to transcribe, code, and analyze data. Data was protected in secure off-line private storage devices. The University of Minnesota IRB has determined that this study is not considered to be human subjects research.

Summary of Research Impact

This research focused on opinions from the public child welfare side of the CPS-tribal partnership. The research contributes knowledge about optimal agency-tribal relationships and best practices involving specialized ICWA and intake workers that can be used by other CPS agencies to improve their relationship with American Indian tribal staff and provide collaborative culturally sensitive child welfare services. The research provides ideas, attitudes, and methods that can help with tribal relationships by including governance, trust, and culture.

Potential Implications for Policy or Practice

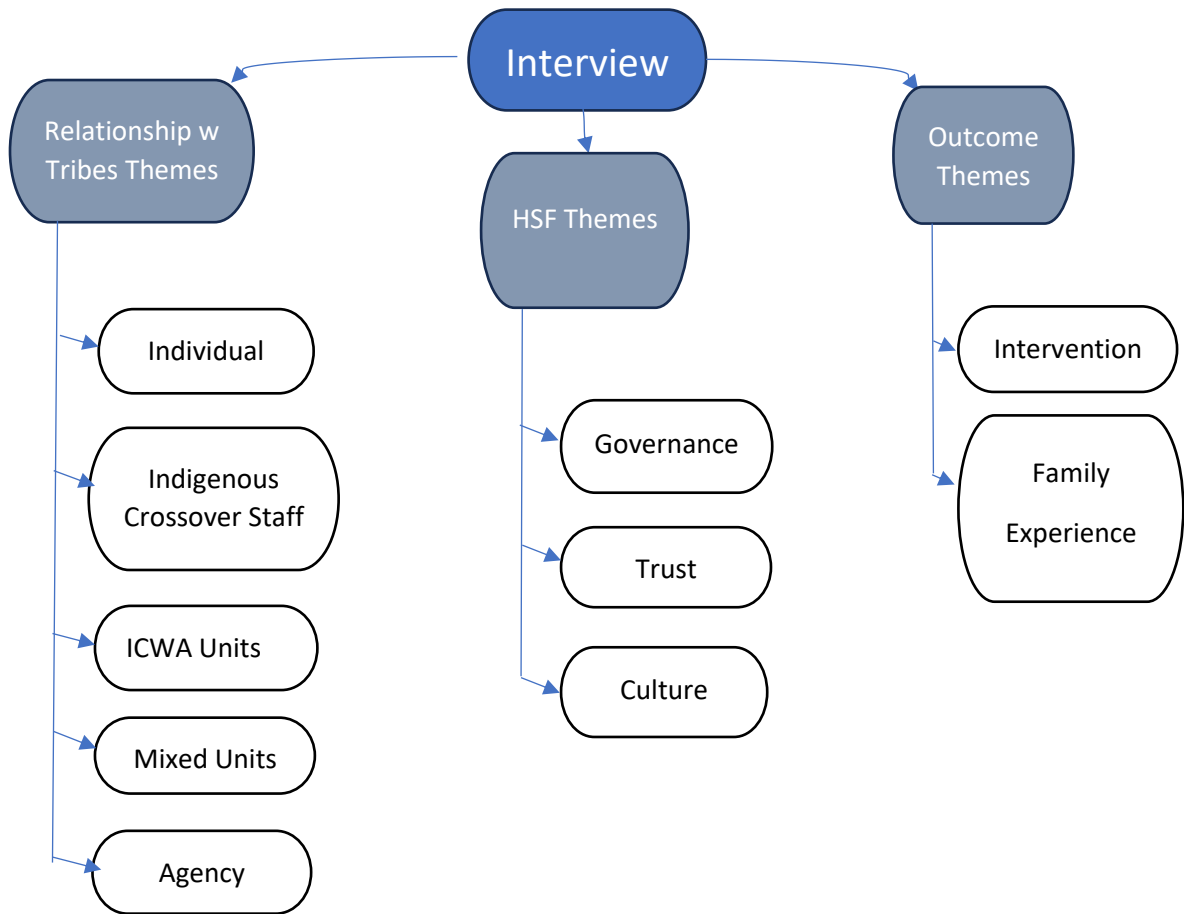
Other CPS agencies can use this study's information and examples to create better relationships with tribal staff in their joint work with American Indian families at risk for family disruption. Improved CPS agency-tribal relationships support the well-being of children and tribes by strengthening family cultural engagement and services, helping children retain their connection to their tribal culture, maintaining more families without child removal, returning more foster children to their homes, and the expedited reuniting of families after placement in care.

Findings

From analysis of interview responses for emerging themes and subthemes, responses relevant to the research questions fell broadly into three categories: (a) perspectives of county staff on their working relationships with tribes, (b) describing relationships using the Holding Space Framework themes of governance, trust, and culture, and (c) perceived outcomes of tribal-county relationships. Figure 2 displays a pictorial overview of the findings.

Figure 2

Themes Emerging from Participant Interviews



Perspectives of County Staff on Their Working Relationships With Tribes

This major theme involves four subthemes: (a) participants' individual working relationships with tribal child welfare staff, (b) the influence of Indigenous and crossover staff (crossover staff are county staff with previous child welfare employment or intern experience at a tribal agency), (c) ICWA-only unit working relationships with tribal child welfare staff, (d) mixed unit working relationships with tribal child welfare staff (mixed units are generic units handling all ICWA and non-ICWA intakes) , and (e) agency-level child welfare relationships with tribes.

Participants' Individual Working Relationships With Tribal Child Welfare Staff

Subthemes emerging from responses regarding individual working relationships with tribes were as follows: (a) most participants felt individual working relationships with tribes were positive; (b) individual relationships were perceived as being unique; (c) staff emphasized the importance of recognizing the shared responsibility and authority of tribal partners; and (d) trusting relationships were thought to facilitate hard conversations.

Most Participants Felt Individual Working Relationships With Tribes Were Positive. County staff volunteering to participate in this research overwhelmingly described their personal working relationship with tribal child welfare staff as good or excellent. Four examples of responses from two supervisors and three social workers follow.

Sofia, an Indigenous ICWA supervisor, explained that positive relationships with local tribes and those in nearby states were a function of regular meetings and conversations about mutual wants and needs. "I think that I have a pretty good working relationship with our tribal partners," she explained,

those four main tribes [tribes with the most families in common with the county child protection services]. And I think it's even since then expanded because we have monthly meetings and regular conversations with tribes from here to [two neighboring states]. And so that's been helpful. ... And I think there's a working relationship with the [tribal] supervisors, especially in tribes ... in those states, ... having conversations about what they want and what they need from us and from our unit.

Ann, an intake FA supervisor, emphasized how comfortable she was talking with tribal staff even about contentious issues because of her trust in her tribal relationships:

I would say I have professional relationships not personal [ones]. It's not like I go to dinner with them [i.e., tribal staff] or hang out on the weekend. ... But I feel like when I think of the different people [lists first names of staff in four separate local tribes], I wouldn't hesitate to pick up the phone and call any of them, no matter how hard it [a contentious issue] was, because I have a relationship with them, and I trust that.

Hamish, an intake FA social worker, said he thought his tribal working relationship was good because he had had only one disagreement with tribal staff, and that single disagreement “wasn't over a safety issue for the kids” but was, instead, “more of a policy issue that they had with their housing.” For her part, Sage, an Indigenous social worker, stressed that, “I feel like my relationships with tribal staff are very good. I'm very open with our tribes,” while Marinetta, a social worker, described herself as having “an excellent working relationship with tribal partners, both locally and [with] tribes that might be outside of our region.”

Individual Relationships Were Perceived as Being Unique. Research participants described their personal relationships with tribal child welfare staff as varying according to tribal workers and their tribes, the role of county workers, and those workers' previous experiences with tribes. Minor themes that emerged from these data included: (a) tribes and tribal workers preferred different levels of involvement in cases; (b) personal relationships could be influenced by county workers' child welfare roles; and (c) personal relationships were built over time through previous experiences.

Tribes and Tribal Workers Preferred Different Levels of Involvement in Cases. Lark, an ICWA social worker, explained that tribes and their tribal workers varied in terms of their preferred degree of involvement in cases and regarding degrees of communication. "People work differently," she offered,

Some [tribal] workers might want just an update right before court. Some might want to come to every meeting. So, it's just kind of figuring out how to best work together. ... Usually, when I get a new case with a new worker or someone I haven't worked with before, I'll just ask them, "What kind of communication do you like? Do you like if I put it on your Outlook calendar when I'm going to see a family? Or do you want a call or a text?" Just because everybody's kind of different in how they like to get communication.

In terms of responses that he had received to such queries, Lark went on to say, "I've had some of them say, 'Oh, I do way better if you send me a text instead of an email because I don't check my emails as often,' or something like that. So," he concluded, "[I view my role as] just kind of listening to what they need as far as communication goes."

In the same vein, Hamish noted the importance of recognizing tribal differences and preferences, stressing that “each one of those relationships is different just because there are some tribes that are really active in cases and there's some that kind of want us to take the lead and just kind of fill them in.” Even more, he added, “there's others that want to be out there right away with us on everything.” Put simply, for Hamish, it was essential to find out “who those tribal workers are and kind of what they expect.”

Personal Relationships Could Be Influenced by County Workers' Child Welfare Roles.

Participants' roles within the county agency could affect relationships. People in various roles (ongoing case managers, investigators, family assessors, safety planners, kinship searchers, and support staff, etc.) had different functions, which could have led to different involvement with tribes depending on county role responsibilities and the wishes of the tribes.

Lionel, an ICWA social worker, talked about a different relationship with tribes with his change in ICWA roles from case management to intake. The working relationship, he offered, “depends on the tribe,” and that relationship, he speculated, had likely changed since his time as a case manager. “Most of the tribes,” he went on,

won't go out on an intake initially until they hear back from enrollment if the family is eligible. If the family is eligible, then sometimes they will participate, sometimes they won't, depending upon where I am with the case. So, I would say [that] it depends on the tribe, but I think most [of them] like being updated on what's happening with the intake.

Arthur, a social worker, commented that he felt his close relationship with tribal staff was the reason behind county management's choosing him as a safety planner. "I usually am talking to tribal partners quite a bit," he noted,

so as far as personal relationships, I would say I have a good working relationship with tribal partners to help families and work better for families. ... I was told by county administration it was because it was my relationship with tribal partners and the tribal workers—that was part of why I was being brought in.

Personal Relationships Were Built Over Time Through Previous Experiences.

Participants said individual partnership experiences over time helped shape working relationships (also see "The Influence of Indigenous and Crossover Staff" subsection below). In this regard, Lionel, a social worker, said his previous role as a case manager established relationships that were still current. Because of case management—which differs from that of intake—he had had cases with individuals for quite some time and had thus "got[ten] to know a lot of the workers," or at least the ones still there, as their program managers or directors.

Echoing the above sentiment, Avery, an Indigenous social worker, stressed his previous history with tribes and drew the connection between that tenure and experience and the development and maintenance of his relationships with tribal communities over the years. His working relationship was, in his own words, a "really close one," which allowed him to make lifelong relationships through coworkers with whom he worked when he was with two bands as well as with coworkers and tribal workers whom he met while in a county setting. "So," Avery summarized, "I think I have a personal relationship in that I have friends that work for tribal agencies and obviously I worked for a tribal agency as well that I'm very close to over the years."

Staff Emphasized the Importance of Recognizing the Shared Responsibility and Authority of Tribal Partners. Several participants emphasized the importance they held in their relationship with tribes, stressing that these connections were built on treating tribal partners as co-case managers and thereby recognizing their shared responsibility and authority. Several of those whom I interviewed for this research commented on efforts to keep tribal staff current on case activities. Marinetta, an intake FA social worker, for example, described having an excellent relationship with tribes and noted that she had earned respect from tribal partners because of her commitment to include tribes in all case decisions while also having ongoing conversations with tribal partners about families. Elaborating on this attention to tribal voice, she offered:

[It]was really instilled in me that ... you should really not do a thing without partnering directly with a tribe. Every conversation, every action [should include] continual consultation and discussion and such with tribes. So, I have made that a real[ly] strong part, to continue to make sure I communicate with tribal representatives, [by] email, phone, texts, [and] in person. And I feel like I've earned a lot of respect from tribal partners based on my willingness to really go above and beyond [and] to make sure that they're included. No decisions being made without including them in every decision and conversation that I've had about a family ... or anything to do with that particular case. So, I feel very confident in my tribal relationships.

Sage, an Indigenous social worker, regarded her relationships with tribal staff as being “very good” and described herself as being “very open” with tribes, such as by knowing that a certain tribe likes to be “very involved when we have cases with them.” Developing this notion

of trust and rapport built over time, she added that taking family assessments involves “a lot of coordination,” and while going out with the tribes

it was they and us together on any family assessment, and that seemed to work really well. Like it was really good teamwork. And just like with me and [a particular tribe], I felt like I and [a tribal worker at a second tribe] have a great relationship. So, me and [second tribal worker], we work very well together. I would say when I was out in the field with [names both tribes], we were very heavily involved in teaming, going out with them, calling constantly.

Such thoroughness and attention to detail, Sage offered, “actually showed our families that we are working collaboratively together.”

Finally, Lark described how she had consulted with a tribal partner to address a problematic foster home placement. “I’m comfortable picking up the phone and calling the tribal worker before I make any decision,” she offered, adding that:

I do want to check in with them ... [and say], “Hey, our placement is going to [be] disrupt[ive] for this kiddo. Here's what I can do. ... Do you guys have any moms saying so-and-so might be an option?” We can send their information to our kinship workers and have a brief background check done, and then I'll just send all of that to the tribal worker and then follow up with them and say, “Did you see the options? What are you thinking?” And we kind of just, you know, make that decision and talk through it together. That's typically what I do.

Trusting Relationships Were Thought to Facilitate Hard Conversations. Several participants said that trust facilitated difficult conversations and allowed them to work more collaboratively. As described above, Ann, an intake FA supervisor, felt that because of the strength of her relationships she could at any time pick up the phone and talk to tribal staff no matter how hard the issue. Making the same point, Hamish observed “I felt comfortable being able to express myself, and I’ve also felt very comfortable when I make a mistake and they correct me that they’re teaching me. I always open the door up to that,” he added,

and this job will be a learning experience until the day I retire. ... I’m always saying, “Could I have done something differently? What would have made this better? What do you think?” ... So I’m always questioning what I do and how I do it and try to make it better.

For Hamish then, meeting with tribal workers at American Indian family homes was essentially like thinking of such individuals as “coworkers.”

Summary. Most participants in this study described their individual working relationships with tribal welfare staff as good or excellent, and they felt their relationships with tribal staff were unique to the tribe, the tribal partner, and the participant’s county role in ICWA implementation. These relationships were built over time through experience with each tribe and tribal partner. Several participants emphasized the importance of recognizing shared case responsibility and the authority of tribal partners. Relationships rooted in trust enabled hard conversations between partners.

The Influence of Indigenous and Crossover Staff

This subsection addresses the following themes: (a) previous tribal relationships brought over to present positions at the county, (b) relationships built through recognition of tribal sovereignty and advocacy for tribal goals, (c) relationships providing culturally appropriate services, (d) the value of Indigenous staff in leadership roles, (e) crossover relationships that have helped with present collective work with tribes; and (f) difficulties for crossover staff.

Previous Tribal Relationships Brought Over to Present Position at the County.

Gabriel, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA social worker, had worked longer in tribal child welfare than he had in county child welfare. In describing his working relationship with tribes, he commented on the continuity of relationships in working in the county ICWA unit. “You know,” he observed, “I think a lot of folks within the ICWA unit who have tribal experience had those relationships already. And [working here] it's just a matter of going to a different desk.” After laughing at that assessment, Gabriel added,

You report to work at a different desk and now your relationships are still there. ... And so, there's that kind of that crossover stuff and ... I feel comfortable working with [names four local tribes]. I feel very comfortable. And on a number of issues, we've collaborated together ... maybe [on] a little more macro level just because of our relationship and our kind of our knowledge of how we think and work.

In a similar vein, Daenerys, another crossover ICWA social worker who, with her family, had lived for several years on a reservation, described being friends with many tribal social workers, some of whom she had known for at least seven years. “We’re friends,” she put it succinctly; a lot of the time “these tribal partners, they become your friends.

For his part, Avery, an Indigenous, crossover social worker, stated that he had made lifelong relationships while working for American Indian tribes and in his current position with county child welfare. He described his personal relationship with tribes as being “a really close one” and noted as well that he had “made lifelong relationships through coworkers” with whom he had worked when he was with two different tribes as well as with peer tribal workers whom he had met while in a county setting. Speaking more directly about his relationships with specific tribes, Avery added that he had “had the same social workers in their [named city] office for a very long time,” where he had worked “for close to around eight years.” Over that time, by Avery’s account, even when he was with one tribe he was still “constantly in contact” with the office of another because some families might have a background spanning both tribes. Which meant, he explained, that “we’d see each other in court.” Such interactions afforded a degree of “camaraderie among all the tribal workers,” he went on, because no matter “what band you’re with” you were all “in this game together,” able to “commiserate together,” [while also being able to] ... attend the same trainings and see one another in court—all of which meant that personal relationships were inevitably professional ones as well.

Relationship Built through Recognition of Tribal Sovereignty and Advocacy for Tribal Goals. Amy, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA social worker, maintained that her strong relationship with tribes was based on her recognition of tribal sovereignty, deference to the tribes, and advocacy of tribal issues. She added that the agency’s response to tribes impacts personal relationships and has required extra effort for her to maintain her tribal relationships. “Personally,” she expressed in this regard, “I think that I have a strong relationship with the tribes, and I think that comes from a place of recognizing that tribal sovereignty and deferring to

the tribes.” Amy stressed that she viewed her role “as a conduit” for her tribal partners—someone positioned to help them accomplish “the outcomes that they want for their children and families” and advocate for “what it is that the tribes are wanting to achieve.”

In Amy’s estimation, “because of that, I have a pretty positive relationship with the tribes, with the caveat that sometimes I feel like the agency's response to tribes impacts personal relationships.” The agency “doesn't always have positive relationships with our tribal partners,” she added, which could cause “some animosity” and require “some navigation” that would need to happen “on a personal level.” Amy mentioned one specific tribe with whom she did not believe the agency had “the best relationship” and she concluded that that tension had “resulted in some work” that needed to be done “on a personal level.” Importantly, she stressed, “this may be what my agency does and represents, but it's not what I do and what I represent.” Securing the trust of the tribes, she concluded, meant “deferring to them, empowering them, inviting them to the table, and then implementing the active efforts that they want to see have happen,” all of which would improve the personal relationships essential to the larger constellation of professional interactions.

Relationships Providing Culturally Appropriate Services. Mara, an Indigenous program manager, strongly felt that, to understand the life and issues of American Indian families, Indigenous heritage was essential for ICWA practice. In her words, “It’s critical for our communities to have people [in county child welfare] who have lived the lifestyle.” Also stressing the necessity of culturally appropriate services, Amy, drawing on her own experiences as an Indigenous person, offered that she felt comfortable discerning which services might be helpful and beneficial—and knew “how to find that information”—because it was her own

community. Still, she recognized that this was “not the same experience” for her “non-Native counterparts.” Such recognition was, she summarized, “like being aware of what resources are available in the community and how to inform our families of those resources.”

The Value of Indigenous Staff in Leadership Roles. Elizabeth, a program manager, talked of the value of having Native and crossover staff in leadership positions. “One thing I really admire about Sofia [alias for an Indigenous crossover ICWA supervisor],” she explained,

and now we've hired Amy [alias for an Indigenous crossover social worker] as our ongoing team lead, [is the] ongoing education [of the experience], those constant reminders when we're looking at really hard decisions about reunification and when we're having to cope with risk.

There were “strong voices of leadership” that were “reminding us about why we have these really important laws [ICWA and MIFPA],” Elizabeth continued, because

at one time twenty-five percent of these kids were not being raised by their own parents and corrections need[ed] to be made. And sometimes corrections can be kind of scary when we're used to doing child protection in a certain way. And so, I think that having these leaders in our agency, we're always focused on that spirit of ICWA and live it and breathe it.

Finally, she concluded, there is “value in our current leadership with that lived experience,” a “level of understanding that you can't get any other way” that “becomes imparted through their supervision” and that can be “just really, really helpful.”

Crossover Relationships That Have Helped with Present Collective Work with Tribes. Koda, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor, spoke of building relationships and collaborative work first while at her tribe and then continuing after coming to the county:

And so, I think with my work at the tribe level, we really worked hard to maintain and build those relationships, even with [names of three large counties]. So, when I came here [as county ICWA unit supervisor], it wasn't really that hard to continue to establish those relationships because they were already there. And I think those tribal reviews really hold us accountable. We're able to have difficult conversations within those spaces and at the end come to an idea of what we're going to do next, collaboratively, because what I tell our staff is like, "We shouldn't be at a battle with the tribes. We should very much be in collaboration."

Some Difficulties for Crossover Staff. Calley, an Indigenous crossover social worker, talked about having to absorb negative remarks from tribal workers with whom she had previously worked. "I think my personal relationship with tribes is all right," she offered in this regard. "I think we get along pretty well. But then," she added,

going to my own local community, my own tribal meetings and stuff, and ... having to listen to this tribal social worker ... and then they boss us around and they say we're doing nothing. And so, it's really hard to then come back and work with them when they're pretty much telling us that we suck all the time. And then in respecting that, it's very hard, ... and it takes a lot for me not to express my feelings.

Summary. Most crossover employees spoke of having good relationships with tribes because they were a member of a tribal community or due to relationships established during previous employment or in an internship at the tribes. Some described the nature of their relationships as being personal friendships built over years of working together, and they explained that they had brought their view of child welfare with them from work with the tribes. Others had worked longer in tribal employment than with the county. Participants in this research felt those experiences allowed employees to offer more culturally sensitive services and receive better cultural practice guidance from Indigenous persons in leadership positions. Though most participants felt their tribal relationships continued to be positive in a county setting, some thought certain county policies or decisions affected participant relationships with tribes and required extra effort to restore the relationship. One crossover worker felt that though her relationship with tribes was still good, moving to the county subjected her to negative comments from former co-workers about practice within the county.

ICWA-only Unit Working Relationships with Tribal Child Welfare Staff.

This section discusses responses regarding the ICWA-only caseload units. Responses regarding mixed intake units are presented in the next section. The two county agencies in this study had different personnel organizations for ICWA implementation. In one county, the ICWA intake workers were located in the ICWA unit alongside on-going case management workers whereas in the other county ICWA intakes were distributed among the general intake units resulting in social workers and supervisors with mixed ICWA and non-ICWA case responsibilities. Interview responses varied regarding tribal relationships of ICWA-only caseload units and mixed caseload units.

Interview responses regarding the ICWA-only unit working relationship with tribes can be distilled down to the following basic findings: (a) the ICWA units felt their working relationships with tribes were positive; (b) regular meetings with tribal staff were an important factor in improving tribal-county ICWA working relationships; (c) ICWA unit internal mentoring supported tribal teaming practices; (d) supervisor and administration leadership were necessary to improve relationships; and (e) the need for newer unit members to understand tribal sovereignty in regard to ICWA practice.

The ICWA Units Felt Working Relationships with Tribes Were Positive. Most members of the two ICWA units felt that, while relationships with tribes had not always been good, they had benefited from certain improvements. Daenerys, for example, a crossover social worker with both prior and present tribal connections, stressed that “our unit’s relationship with tribes has gotten better over the years.” She added that there is generally “room for growth in some areas” but still concluded that her unit maintained a “pretty solid relationship with the different tribes.” For Daenerys, this positive relationship was a function of several factors. “I think we value tribal relationships,” she noted, adding that, “We show up [at regular tribal-county meetings], ... work with tribal partners, ... listen, ... always try to follow their placement preferences, ... [and] try our best to do the ICWA inquiry [asking families about American Indian heritage and tribal affiliations and notifying tribes]. Moreover, she went on,

There are really good pockets of people throughout the agency who really do care about good work [regarding ICWA practice]. It's not just the [ICWA] Unit. But our unit, we do care about tribal relationships. We [have] actively involved the tribes in all of our cases, from what I've seen. I can say that for my unit, but I can't say that for all units at [name of

county]. I think there are still areas at [name of county] that really need to work on those tribal relationships and specifically involving the tribe in cases that involve their tribal members.

Koda, an Indigenous, ICWA supervisor, had previously worked in a child welfare position at a tribe, and, while there, she had made intentional efforts to build relationships with county child welfare staff. Koda felt that those previous efforts had facilitated and solidified her unit's tribal-county relationships, and she continually emphasized to her unit the need to work collaboratively with tribes. "I think that each of my workers have a really good relationship and rapport with the tribes that we work with," she explained, "and that was prior to me even coming [as ICWA supervisor in this county]." She went on to convey how there had been considerable mistrust as she transitioned from a former tribe employer to her current position with a county because the tribe hadn't always been present at staffings or family contacts due to high workload. They "just didn't have the capacity to have tribal reviews at the time," she stressed, adding that, while working at the tribe level, "We really worked hard to maintain and build those relationships, even with [names three counties including the present one]," and those relationships were thereby easier to establish and maintain, she reasoned, "because they were already there."

Due to having this groundwork and tending to these connections, Koda explained that, at least in her time there, "I don't think we've really had... much tension between tribal nations. We very much respect their opinion and their voice, and we work alongside them to benefit the family." And so, she continued,

I always tell our team, you know, we're never making a decision in isolation. It's because we can come off as a biased opinion because we're the county, and we're running a lot of our things by statute. But when we have tribal nations coming to us and having us think [in] different ways, or maybe we're thinking [in] different ways and inviting the tribe into that thinking, we're building a lot of good rapport and relationships. I mean, I think ... maybe we've had a disagreement about one case throughout the duration that I've been here for a year.

And so, Koda concluded, she and her peers find that, at the end of a case, “we’re now in collaboration, working together to benefit the children in those families” and always trying to “find a way” because “we just have that mutual respect for our tribal nations and our communities”—a sentiment echoed by Elaine, a crossover social worker who had interned at a tribe for her MSW ICWA scholarship, and who stressed that the ICWA unit sought to be “very intentional about building relationships and wanting to hear tribal voices and perspectives and incorporating that for families.”

Regular Meetings With Tribal Staff Were an Important Factor in Improving Tribal-County ICWA Working Relationships. Daenerys spoke about the effect of regular meetings between county staff and individual tribes in helping to build relationships and lessen tensions. “I think our unit, specifically, has a pretty solid relationship with the different tribes,” she estimated, and “part of that,” she added, “is the ongoing meetings that [named previous ICWA supervisor] had set up.” She then explained that the current ICWA supervisor had now taken over those meetings and that this gave the staff opportunities to “meet with [the] tribe, the tribal workers, and ... just build relationships with them so we get to know them,” which had

“really helped over the years” because the relationship was no longer “as contentious as it used to be.”

For her part, Sofia, an Indigenous crossover ICWA supervisor, remarked on having “a pretty good working relationship with our tribal partners, one that has since “expanded” due to “monthly meetings and regular conversations with tribes from here to [names two neighboring states],” while Lark, an Indigenous crossover social worker, stressed the significance of relationship-building through regular meetings, especially the quarterly check-in meetings to staff cases, all of which—as gatherings—afforded the potential for individuals to resolve differences by working together. “There's been some disagreements and stuff like that or like, ‘Oh, I've had a hard time getting a hold of so-and-so,’ or, ‘Oh, you said you were going to do this,’” Lark conceded, but in general he found that meetings created “a space for us to raise those concerns and see how we can do better,” [noting as well] that room for improvement involved “a communication style, getting services to families, or whatever might be the concern.”

Finally, Lionel, a social worker with long-term relationships with several tribes, talked about the meetings and conversations with tribes following the tribes’ requested schedule. As Lionel surmised, based on what he had heard talking to people whom he knew spanning two tribes, “Our relationship with our unit and tribes is pretty good.” Offering some greater detail on the nuances of his interactions with various tribes, he added, “We do quarterly staff things with them about all of our cases,” although now the frequency was quarterly “because that's how they want it,” although before then it had been “however soon they thought that we needed to have it.” Lionel then named a tribal social service director and said that she “was having them like every two months for a while, because I think she was trying to get to understand us and know

us, and maybe there were concerns that her workers had.” In the end, however, after doing the meetings “really frequently,” the above mentioned tribal social service director concluded, by Lionel’s account, ““Oh, we can just do this every six months because you guys, we're good, you guys are good.””

“We've offered to other tribes too,” Lionel noted, “if we get a lot of cases.” Then, after naming three tribes as examples, he added,

if they ever want to do quarterly consults, we would do them with them. ... And we also do quarterly staffings with [a particular urban multi-tribal agency] because they represent tribes out of state. So, we do quarterly staffings with them ... and then when we review those cases with tribes. They take that back to the tribes and talk to them. ... I think that [we] ... try to go out of our way to make sure we're communicating with the tribes as a unit.

ICWA Unit Internal Mentoring Supported Tribal Teaming Practices. Sofia, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor, mentioned that a factor in the strong working relationship between the ICWA unit and tribes has been the internal dialogue of unit members holding one another accountable to good ICWA practice, as well as new workers’ general unfamiliarity with existing practices. “I think that sometimes it's a struggle for folks who aren't used to this work to come in and have an outside person [tribal worker] who has the power,” she stressed, “and we want to respect that.” Thus, she continued, “sometimes it's challenging for some folks, especially in the early stages.”

Sofia then added that her unit would be in meetings and would hear workers say, ““If that’s what the tribe wants to do, that’s what we do.” And so, she continued,

there's kind of this group mentality, and group storming, norming, and forming. They hold each other accountable. It's quite interesting to see. So, yeah, I think their [the unit's] [tribal] relationships are good. And if there are some things that happen there [between county and tribal workers], gosh, I think I've only been pulled in once. And even at that point, like they had already figured it out amongst like the worker and the tribal partner. ... So, I feel the relationship amongst them and tribal partners are really good and really, I think, positive.

Supervisor and Administration Leadership Were Necessary to Improve

Relationships. Addressing the significance of supervisor and administrative leadership, Jasmine, an Indigenous social worker, said,

I think our unit has kind of changed a lot. ... Like in the beginning of the unit, it depended on the person like the supervisor and then the other staff on how that [tribal-county] relationship was because I think it really kind of depends on the management, like the supervisors or the managers.

The Need for Newer Unit Members to Understand Tribal Sovereignty in Regard to ICWA Practice. Finally, Amy, an Indigenous crossover ICWA social worker, talked of the need for newer unit members to understand the sovereignty of tribal nations as it relates to ICWA and ICWA practice:

I think that for units and individual workers and agencies to have the best relationship with tribes, there has to be that understanding and recognition of that tribal sovereignty and [an] understand[ing of] those tribes as political entities. ... I think that we've got a pretty young unit right now with newer workers and less experienced workers, or perhaps workers that don't fully understand that tribal sovereignty or that political status. And I think that results then in some frustrations from the tribes towards the unit. So, I think that the unit has the goal and is willing to achieve the goal, but I definitely think that there's some work that needs to be done to get to that point.

Summary. Most members of the two participating ICWA units responded that they felt the unit had positive working relationships with tribes. They said relationships had not always been so, but there had been changes and improvements. Regular meetings with each tribe were an important factor in building tribal-county working relationships. In addition to ICWA unit members, all county child welfare social workers were welcome to attend. The meetings often centered around cases but many also included updates on personnel and other changes occurring or imminent in the tribe or the county. One comment noted the need for newer unit members to arrive at a better understanding of tribal sovereignty in ICWA practice.

Mixed Unit Working Relationship With Tribal Child Welfare Staff

In one county, maltreatment reports of American Indian families eligible for ICWA were handled in general intake units rather than in specialized ICWA units, resulting in mixed ICWA and non-ICWA caseloads. Intake social workers made the first contact with American Indian tribes and families and continued services until services were closed or the family had been transferred to an ICWA ongoing case-management unit. The intake units had significant

interactions with tribes and were important in developing tribal-county working relationships. Participants in this study included two social workers from each of the three intake units and two intake supervisors, and their responses below touch upon both (a) views of positive unit working relationships with tribes, and (b) some positive and some negative examples of building tribal working relationships.

Views of Positive Unit Working Relationships With Tribes. Many social workers in the general intake units felt positive about their unit's working relationship with tribes, and their responses can be classified according to the following subthemes: (a) workers had extensive ICWA practice experience with the agency and with tribes; (b) the unit was able resolved issues easily by talking about them; (c) the FA units had a positive relationship with tribes because of the unit's ethnic diversity and cultural exposure; (d) the FA units were committed to working with tribal partners; and (e) the supervisors' commitment to tribes flowed down into the units.

Workers Had Extensive ICWA Practice Experience With the Agency and With Tribes.

Felix, an intake FA Supervisor, said the unit had extensive ICWA practice experience, as well as within the county agency and within tribes, while also noting that the unit's tribal relationship was positive. "I guess if I was just to characterize it as like bad, good, excellent," he offered, "I would say we're definitely good as a unit." He then explained that:

I've got a number of workers that have ICWA experience previously and are very active within my unit. I've got folks that have worked in outside tribal agencies, and then I've got folks that have worked in the ICWA unit and that have worked in other American Indian Community organizations as well. So, I've got a pretty well-rounded staff, and

they have a lot of experience and thereby they have a lot of connections with the [American Indian] community. And I would say that that really helps. And then in addition to those folks, I've got other folks that are very engaged in our ICWA work and our ICWA process improvement plan and really advocate to get the tribal partners involved. And I think that's felt and heard in the [American Indian] community. And when I've checked in with tribal partners about things, they [the tribal partners] are getting feedback from [unit] workers regularly, that sort of thing. So, I would say good to even pushing towards excellent—some really good relationships, really good intentionality.

The Unit Was Able to Resolve Issues Easily by Talking About Them. Felix went on to relate that the unit resolved issues with the tribe by having unit workers simply talk through concerns without negatively affecting the working relationship. “And every once in a while,” he explained, “when there's a miss from maybe somebody that's newer or maybe even somebody that's experienced, but they just missed something, those things have been resolved easily by just talking about it. And I think that speaks to having a good relationship as well,” he went on,

that it doesn't derail everything that you make an error. I'm thinking about forgetting to maybe call a tribe and running out to do something first or a notice that was missed. We don't have too many errors like that, but when we have, they have been brought to our attention, and we've been able to talk about those and it's not like it has derailed our relationship. So, I think part of the reason I would characterize it as good-to-excellent is that there have been a few adverse situations and those have not become a bigger issue that has derailed our relationship.

In terms of gatherings, Felix explained that they meet monthly with two specific tribes and quarterly with two others. He then added, “I think we’ve had a time over the last year, since I’ve been supervising at least, one time where the [tribal] worker said, ‘Oh, yeah, I didn’t hear from your worker about this family situation,’ and/or, ‘They haven’t called me back for a while,’ and we were able to kind of talk through that.” But he also recalled a time with a certain tribe when the tribe “shared some structural things where they didn’t have the capacity for their assigned worker to handle all of the intake calls, you know, where we’re like notifying them of a new case, that sort of thing, and there’s some procedural stuff that needed to be worked out.” They were able to “work that out,” Felix stressed, although “it took a couple of months and a little bit of reiteration before we were all on the same page.”

The FA Units Had a Positive Relationship with Tribes Because of the Unit’s Ethnic Diversity and Cultural Exposure. Hamish, an intake FA worker, said the FA unit’s diversity and cultural exposure contributed to a good relationship with tribes. Speaking of his FA unit, he offered that “we have a good mix of people from different ethnic backgrounds. And there’s a lot of cultural exposure,” he went on,

I guess, here in the office. Like I said, I obviously go to a coworker with a lot of questions regarding Native American cases. So, I would say from the FA point of view, we have really good working relationships with [them]. I mean, the workers are on a first-name basis. And it’s like, I’ll call up and I’ll say, “Hey, [named tribal worker], it’s Hamish [alias],” and she’s the [name of tribe] worker. You know, it’s like we’re all working together. So occasionally, you know, if it’s a tribe that we haven’t worked a lot with, just because of geographics or something like that, then it’s a little get to know you.

But for the most part, everybody does a nice job of working with the tribes on the FA side of things.

The FA Units Were Committed to Working with Tribal Partners. Ann, an intake FA supervisor, said the two FA units had a strong relationship with tribes because they had a huge commitment to tribal partners. “It’s hard to separate the two FA units; I see them as one,” she noted. “[They] have phenomenal relationships with the tribes. Like I said, they don't even consider working a case without contacting a tribe. They go above and beyond. They're always meeting with the tribe at people's houses.”

The Supervisors’ Commitment to Tribes Flowed Down Into the Units. Ann talked about her—and the other FA supervisor’s—commitment to tribes and the positive effect on their units. “Felix [alias] and I too both have such a huge commitment to our tribal partners, and I think that flows down,” she began, adding that “it's not ever acceptable to not do the work in that way.” What’s more, she went on, “It's not hard, and I cannot think of one staff person in the FA unit that is not fully on board and passionate about working with our tribal partners.” Arthur said that my FA unit followed the lead of the supervisor and the support of co-workers in developing a working relationship with tribes. He added, “I know like at least my personal supervisor is very good at making sure to reiterate, ‘Hey, you need to be getting tribes involved.’ And workers are good at doing that with other workers and supporting that. So, that's really cool to see.” In sum then, she concluded, as a unit,

I think we're trying to actively do that and become better. And I know myself as a unit like helping others if they have questions or things like that, or they help me with tribal

partners too. If I don't have a relationship trying to reach out as a unit to work better with them.

Some Positive and Some Negative Examples of Building Tribal Working

Relationships. Several social workers commented on seeing examples of both positive and negative work affecting tribal-county working relationships in the intake units, with their responses fitting into the following subcategories: (a) relationships were workable but could be improved; (b) some inclusive work with tribes and ICWA best practice and some almost adversarial work; (c) some intake workers had good relationships with tribes and some avoided working with tribal partners; (d) some workers were intimidated to work with tribal partners; and (e) investigations revealed examples of both positive and negative relationships and ICWA practice.

Relationships Were Workable but Could Be Improved. Avery, an Indigenous crossover FA social worker, thought the intake units' relationship with tribes was fairly solid but could be improved:

I would say the [intake units' tribal] relationships are fairly stable. Are they perfect or are they as good as they should be? No, they're not. There are things that the supervisors do with the tribes to the bands that I don't agree with, and I think they should do differently. But I think that's just based on my own experience and my own cultural values. But yeah, I would say that they're a work in progress and that management is trying to build positive relationships with the bands.

Some Very Inclusive Work with Tribes and ICWA Best Practice and Some Almost Adversarial Work. Daenerys, a crossover ICWA social worker, said she had witnessed positive and negative examples regarding the intake units' inclusion of tribes and in terms of fulfilling ICWA requirements in working with the family. "My experiences with the intake units, I think on and off, throughout the years including up until now, have been good and bad," she offered, which meant she had "seen really good work in IIU, where they include the tribe, and they're actively doing active efforts and doing the inquiry and really trying to do a good job with the family." However, she stressed, "I've also seen where they didn't include the tribe and they didn't work with the family. It was very adversarial almost. So, I've seen some good and I've seen some bad."

Some Intake Workers Had Good Relationships with Tribes and Some Avoided Working with Tribal Partners. Arthur, a crossover social worker in an FA unit, said the FA units' tribal relationships were good. In the INV unit, some workers would ignore the tribal partnership, but overall, the unit's tribal relationships had been getting better. As he put it, "I would say the FA units have a pretty good relationship [with tribes]," and he attributed "part of that to because they [FA workers] do some case management." He clarified that this was not because they [INV workers] didn't work with tribes on investigations,

but there's more of that ongoing contact on cases when people are case-managing something for two or three [or] four months. ... I know FA units are pretty good about reaching out to the tribes, not only about reports, but to provide active efforts and work simultaneously to best meet the needs of the children and families. Not to say anything negative, but I would say the relationship FA has is better than INV. I've had some

circumstances where workers are just like, “I didn't have the tribal partner come because it didn't feel like it.”

“Do I feel some workers in that unit have good relationship [with tribes]?” Arthur asked. “Yes. Do I feel the overall one on the investigative is as good as the FA's? No.” That said, he added, “I do see some efforts being made by that unit [INV] to go to more collaborative meetings [with tribes] and that kind of thing, which is good because that always wasn't enforced. So that's nice to see.” In conclusion, he noted, “I'm not saying it's awful in the INV unit, but in my current work, I don't see it as good.”

Some Workers Were Intimidated to Work with Tribal Partners. Marinetta, an FA intake social worker, said there were many social workers in intake who were intimidated by ICWA cases, and their reactions to that fear negatively impacted tribal relationships. “A lot of folks are intimidated to contact tribal partners,” she contended, before speculating that this could be “because they've had their own poor experience” or perhaps “because somebody else has had a poor experience.” But, she added, “I think more of it is fear-based thinking, [wondering] ‘Am I going to do something wrong?’ [or] ‘Am I going to say something wrong to offend somebody?’ [or] ‘Am I going to follow the law correctly?’ [or even] ‘Am I just going to sound or look stupid?’—that kind of thing. I think it's more of if there's poor relations, at least on the FA side, it is more of a fear of the unknown, not necessarily disrespect.

Continuing on, Marinetta explained that “It definitely negatively impacts it [tribal relationships]” because

there are folks that will even as much as go on to [named a local tribal reservation] without contacting a [tribal] representative or somebody from ICW [Indian child welfare] [and] then saying, “Oh, well, I already went and met with the family. Now I'm going to call the tribe.” And they [tribal staff] get a little upset about that. We have come so far in intake that the local tribal partners, [named three tribes] sit in the daily screening meetings and any case that might be [named a tribe that could be involved] will be read with a tribal representative on the phone. Same for [named the other two tribes]. So, they're very aware of the cases that are coming in. So, if you're not calling, then they're even extra crabby about that. [Most tribes require prior notification and approval of any county child welfare activities on their reservation.]

In the Investigations Unit Were Examples of Both Positive and Negative Relationships and ICWA Practice. Sage, an Indigenous social worker and screener in an INV unit, said she felt very good about her rapport with tribal staff and had a passion for working with American Indian families. She said, though, some unit members hesitated or refused to take ICWA cases and demonstrated a different ICWA practice. She was disheartened by some of the practices that were described or neglected in case notes. “I feel like my relationships with them [tribal partners] are very well” and that “I'm very open with our tribes.” She went on to say that:

When we were taking family assessments, it was a lot of coordination. We were going out with them. It was thus them and us together on any family assessment, and that seemed to work really well. ... For my coworkers, that might not be the same relationship. ... I feel like I have a really good rapport with them [tribal partners] where I don't think some others [IIU social workers] do. I think there's more hesitancy on the

investigation side of doing. ... There's a select few that take ICWA [cases] and are okay with it. But there are others that are very vocal [in stressing] "I don't take ICWA," or they've made comments about ICWA or [wondered,] "Why do we need to do things?" and ... [have not understood] active efforts or the lack of communication or the lack of or inability to contact the tribe or [experiencing] no follow through.

"To me," she went on, "I don't see that [working with tribes] being an issue. But for others it is." She expressed noticing that there was "a difference, people with different practices" but concluded that she was "just passionate about our ICWA families and knowing that historical trauma and giving it [good practice] to our families," reasoning "that they deserve[d] best treatment for everyone." Screening was "really hard," she added, because she would be "seeing case notes and reviewing everybody's case notes from family assessment and investigation," which made it "really hard to know what I would consider active efforts and communication with the tribe and [to see] just the lack of documentation and follow through." Put simply, she conceded, "It's heartbreaking."

Summary. Comments regarding the three mixed unit working relationships with tribes ranged from positive regard for the unit's work to mixed reviews stating positive and negative aspects of the unit's working relationship with tribes. Examples of positive unit working relationships included working having had extensive ICWA practice experience both with the county agency and in previous employment or internship with tribes. Tribal relationships enabled the unit to resolve issues easily by talking through issues. The FA units' ethnic diversity and cultural exposure supported good relationships with tribes, and these units were also committed to working with tribal partners, which followed from the commitment of their supervisors.

Finally, comments characterizing both positive and negative aspects of mixed units' tribal relationships included the view that unit-tribal relationships were a work in progress with some practice showing inclusive work with tribes and ICWA best practice as well as some almost adversarial work. Some intake workers had very positive relationships with tribes, and some workers avoided working with tribal partners and seemed to have a different standard of ICWA practice.

Agency Child Welfare Relationships With Tribes

This section's themes are divided into responses from two viewpoints: (a) management's perspective and (b) social worker and supervisor perspective: positive comments about the agency's relationship with tribes, and (c) social worker and supervisor perspectives: where the county agency could do better.

Management's Perspective. Subthemes emerging from the program perspectives of the program managers centered around (a) collaborating with the American Indian community, (b) developing together with the indigenous community a child welfare model specific for American Indian families, (c) changing quarterly meetings with tribes, (d) participating in or sponsoring American Indian events, (e) sharing Native event information and supporting time for staff to attend, (f) developing specialized contracts for specialized American Indian Services, (g) county management participating at high-level tribal-state organizations, (h) contracting with tribes for culturally based services, and (i) planning and supporting culturally based service projects.

Collaborating With the American Indian Community. Mara, an Indigenous, crossover program manager, explained how collaboration with the American Indian community and tribes enabled the hiring of an Indigenous person with a tribal cultural background as ICWA program

manager and also how the community was included in developing the PIP. She explained that a particular American Indian partnership group had been created for two reasons:

There was concern from the community that we [county social services] have not been a good partner to our community, our Indigenous community, or our tribal partners. And so, they pushed us and wanted to have this [named partnership group again] started. Also at the same time, we were on our ICWA PIP. And so, it was perfect timing. Everybody came together. So, it's [the partnership group,] a mixture of service providers, people who have been impacted by the system, and then some elders. So, we've got a few elders in the group and so they really helped with my position [hiring an Indigenous person with a tribal cultural background]. ... And so that group helped to develop the PIP.

Developing Together With the Indigenous Community a Child Welfare Model Specific for American Indian Families. Mara spoke of her responsibility to develop a specifically American Indian child welfare model from an Indigenous lens. She saw it as her job to be the bridge between the Indigenous community and the county and to build the bridge together. “I’m the Indian Child Welfare Program Manager,” she explained, adding that, “We want to develop essentially a child welfare model that's specific for American Indian families,” where the focus “is on not doing just regular child welfare” but rather on “infusing culture.” Thus, she continued, the ultimate goal is to “practice from an Indigenous lens and provide services in that way.” Working with community was, as Mara saw her job, vital, particularly where she could “be that bridge in between the Indigenous community and [names county] and then build this model with them.”

Changing Quarterly Meetings With Tribes. Mara commented on her desire to have more in-depth questions and discussions at tribal-county quarterly meetings. Heretofore, she explained, meetings had involved a summary of certain cases and situations, with a few questions and not much follow-up. But, as she stressed, she remained concerned that “We're not meeting timelines. We're not always getting inquiry. We're not doing MIFPA notices. Sometimes we don't do placement preference.” Therefore, she concluded,

I would like those conversations with our tribal partners to be like, “Okay, what kind of active efforts should we be doing here?” and diving into those conversations versus that surface-level kind of check-in on how the cases are going. I want us to have those hard conversations and not have to feel like people are taking things personal[ly]. And then ... with our tribal partners, [I would want] to see, “Is this beneficial for you? Should we be looking at including culturally specific services? Can we talk about whether or not you have an elder that can go meet with families?” There's the casework and then there's that general, like, we want to make sure that we're providing all of the services and opportunities available to your families, but we don't know what you have available. And here's what I know was available in [names another state county]. Do you have something similar here? If not, can we do a contract?

Participating in or Sponsoring American Indian Events. Mara also commented on the county ICWA program’s local involvement and sponsorship efforts, noting that, “We’ve [the county ICWA program] participated in a few different [American Indian] events, [and] we sponsored the [named the American Indian event].” She then named an American Indian center

and pointed out that they conduct the annual Honor the Children Powwow, which typically takes place in March, but which would be moved to the summer. “So, we sponsored that,” she added,

We had a tabling event there. And then we also sponsor some of the different events that happen. So, there's an ICWA Under Attack event where it's virtual and in-person. And so, we are part of planning for that. We then attend those events. There's different healing ceremonies and things that I'm learning about in the area that we we've gone to.

Sharing Native Event Information and Supporting Time for Staff to Attend. Mara explained how she and Koda [alias for the Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor] really try “to get that information that we just naturally have because we're Indigenous people and then start sharing it with the agency.” Essentially, she added, “We're trying to just get better about [making it clear that people know:] Here's an event, here's a learning opportunity, [and] share this with parents.” Moreover, she continued, it was important to stress that:

Hey, staff can go, and we have this requirement where people have to have thirty hours of training every year. ... So, if people go to a powwow, we also have it where they go to an event, they get two and a half hours of it paid time. So, if you go to an event on a weekend and you're checking out a powwow, [if] it's your first time you've ever been, you can count two and a half hours of it as work time, and then the rest is up to you.

Developing Specialized Contracts for Specialized American Indian Services. Mara also described the use of contracted culturally aware community liaisons where the liaisons went along on initial social worker contacts with American Indian families. As she put it, “We have this thing called [program name] liaison,” which involves “a specific contract that we have with

[name of Indigenous center],” a group that is “like a bridge” where “they go out” and are “looped in when a [child maltreatment] report comes in. If they're identified as ICWA,” she added,

then that [program name] liaison is included in those emails. So, kind of how things work here is we've got community people who are looped in when cases come in. ... So, the [name of another American Indian center], these other agencies that we have contracts with, they're just part of the email when we get a report and it's going to be assigned [telling us] ... this case is going to this person. And so, that [first program name] liaison then can go out with the intake worker.

“Historically,” Mara continued, “they had been working one-on-one with the ICWA team,” but “what we're seeing now,” because Mara and Koda were now there and thus “have that lens,” is that “there's less of a need for that [program name] liaison to assist our intake staff in ICWA because they're getting the knowledge, training, cultural exposure and experiences,” meaning what they are now “us[ing] that person for is overflow.”

County Management Participating at High-level Tribal-State Organizations. Elizabeth, a program manager, described her county’s presence on higher level tribal-state groups and the county’s efforts at improving relationships with tribes. “Senior management has had a presence,” she explained. “Before I got hired, [names director of her county’s Public Health and Human Services Department] was serving on the tribal state partnership team.”

Contracting With Tribes for Culturally Based Services. Elizabeth also delved into building relationships through contracts with tribes for culturally based services, especially foster

care. She noted that her county has partnerships with tribes for services that are oftentimes contract-level and added that:

We've been having a very long term contract with [named the tribe] to provide [named same tribe] family counseling and advocacy service. We're working with [named same tribe] right now about the possibilities of developing an emergency foster home to primarily serve Indigenous children and youth. We had some recent meetings just with our foster care because we do try to, if we have Native American relatives, to just refer to [named same tribe], but to strengthen that partnership between our foster care units. So, I think that's been more driven at a management level.

Planning and Supporting Culturally Based Service Projects. “Another example,” Elizabeth went on to explain, “is [named a community family support group]. I know that [named program founder] has hired an Indigenous community consultant to better strengthen her services.” That same program, according to Elizabeth, “serves many families of color in our community,” which is “another area where I think senior management is more involved,” and she stressed, too, that “We've got good feedback from [named representative from the state ombudsman's office] regarding input from tribal elders with our opioid allocation planning.” Receiving sufficient input from tribal partners was why they had “gotten these really pretty huge allocations,” she added, and thus:

That's an area, I think, for growth here in the next few years as we find out what those dollars might look like. And our priority areas, I've heard prevention and harm reduction is just to make sure. And that's challenging because we don't have enough culturally

sensitive and appropriate providers. You know, so that's an area where we need to be really intentional.

Social Worker and Supervisor Perspectives: Positive Comments About the Agency's Relationship With Tribes. Positive comments regarding working relationships centered on the following: (a) having Indigenous tribal members in positions of authority helped the county's reputation with tribes, (b) changing practices at the county level in collaboration with the American Indian community, (c) including tribes in county hiring panels and in agency policies and training, and (d) seeing positives in the ICWA team, MIFPA training, and advisory board meetings.

Having Indigenous Tribal Members in Positions of Authority Helped the County's Reputation With Tribes. Lionel thought the county agency's reputation with tribes was positive partly because of having Indigenous leaders and partly because of the ICWA program staff going out of their way to keep tribes involved. "So, I think that having them [Indigenous women who are tribal members] in those positions helps with our reputation," he began, "but I think our reputation is pretty good with the tribes. We try to make sure we go out of our way to keep the tribes involved and work with [them] ... as is," he added. In one especially apt description of the relationship, he offered:

We're co-captains on this thing. If I had to remove a kid in case management from a placement, I'm talking to the tribes first. And I've had tribal workers go out with me to help move kids to a different placement. You know, not like it's your job as the county worker. Go ahead and do it. I've had them come on to help me with it because they wanted to be a part of it. And I think that mattered to them. So, I think that as a unit, I

think we do a good job of trying to make sure that we keep those relationships with the tribes as a tribal unit on a good path.

That said, Lionel was careful to stress that “I’m going to go back and look at what [named former county Child Welfare Director] did.” That former Director had come along on some of the tribal consults, including one several hundred miles away, “because it was important to her.” And so, Lionel concluded, “I think ... our reputation with the tribe is okay as a county.”

Changing Practices at the County in Collaboration with the American Indian Community. Koda commented on how her county agency is redoing practices across all programs, including child welfare, by bringing in the American Indian community. Speaking of her own county, Koda noted it was, changing its “entire practice” and “building and bringing in community [communities of color].” Koda emphasized that she “really want[s] to uplift [the American Indian] community and bring them in.” To accomplish this, she explained that:

We have a few meetings. So, we have Transforming Systems Together ... and they're focusing on child welfare, foster care, child protection, and really kind of navigating how we move forward. And they're [communities of color] at the table with our leadership about what they have experienced or witnessed within their communities. So, we have Black representation, American Indian representation and so on and so forth. And they're kind of driving future practice. ... We're still very much building trust and rapport with those communities.

Including Tribes in County Hiring Panels and in Agency Policies and Training.

Monica Joan, an intake social worker, felt a lot of progress had been made in partnering with

tribes with their inclusion in interview panels for hiring county staff, in making agency decisions, and in training staff:

I think we're doing a lot more partnership [with tribes] than we had in years past. There seems to be a lot more contact. ... We've now been including them in interview panels, consistently. That was something that when I got hired, that wasn't necessarily common practice. And now it would be a rare occasion that you have an interview panel in which there isn't a tribal member present. So, I think again, it's just that continued partnership and inclusion, and we're just seeing it more and more, not just on the ground level, but on an administrative level as well.

Even more, Monica Joan added, “We’re leaning into” a particular American Indian child welfare program at a university, and “We’re having a lot more trainings.” In fact, she added,

We just had a two-day training yesterday. We met this morning with upper management to talk about some additional funding that's going to target ICWA. We're looking at doing the IDI [a program for individuals to help them understand their connection to their culture] for staff, including the county attorney's office. So, I think there's a lot of great efforts and initiatives being made.

Seeing Positives in the ICWA Team, MIFPA Training, and Advisory Board Meetings.

Koda, the ICWA unit supervisor, returned to the notion that, put simply,

I know what I'm doing. I know the change I'm bringing into my team at least. And it's creating small change, but it's consistent change. And I can really see that when I talk to my team or just like last week when you came to our meeting. I felt that that was very

uplifting and beneficial for everybody to kind of bring back the work that we're doing here and get excited, re-excited again and re-energized about the stuff that we're doing here and why we're here.

Having been pleased with the additional MIFPA training, Koda spelled out how “we went over how to process a MIFPA notice step by step” and concluded that “a lot of it is, we're on a PIP because we just don't have the proper training here at [named her county],” meaning that “it's up to our unit to kind of develop that training and make it into practice.” She then discussed the county’s ICWA advisory board, which meets quarterly and includes her county, the county attorney’s office, and family facing community agencies. “We all come together,” she explained,

and I find it very productive because it usually centers around something that we're doing. So, a few quarters ago, we talked about case plans and we kind of laid out: This is how we do case plans. And the community is like: Well, this is what we don't like, this is punitive. ... And so, okay, we'll take that as positive criticism about how we can better our work and change things.

Social Worker and Supervisor Perspectives: Where the County Agency Could Do Better. Several participants brought up items where they thought the county could improve in regard to its relationship with tribes. These included: (a) county staff ignoring tribal recommendations, (b) upper management delegating rather than participating in meetings with tribes, (c) limited understanding of tribal sovereignty and sharing of power by those who don't typically work with tribal partners, (d) attempted implementation of a new major practice change without solicitation of tribal input, (e) agency’s response to tribes affecting personal working

relationships, (f) the agency needing more awareness of ICWA and its spirit especially in funding resources, (g) management needing to hold people accountable to ICWA best practice standards, (h) supervisors needing to hold staff accountable for respectful interactions with tribal partners, (i) a need for greater staff diversity, and (j) the county system not communicating with itself.

County Staff Ignoring Tribal Recommendations. Jasmine expressed frustration following situations she had experienced with county staff, social workers, supervisors, and the county attorney wherein recommendations of tribes regarding tribal families were ignored. Specifically, she didn't appreciate it when the tribe would recommend an approach, but the intake and intake supervisor would respond with, "Oh no, I don't think they need to do that." Or, as another example,

if I go to a permanency staffing, and I have the tribal rep right there in the meeting and they're saying, "This is what we want." And then I have people, managers, county attorneys saying, "Um, I don't know. ... I think we need to come back and rethink this." Like when we have a tribe and a guardian and me ... [are] on the same page. And then I bring it to this permanency staffing, and the people that are there are like, "No." ... That's frustrating. ... We're supposed to [honor the wishes of the tribe]. This is a tribe. They're making a recommendation. And you don't want to listen to it? You think your decision is a better one than theirs about their family and their tribal member?

Upper Management Delegating Rather than Participating in Meetings with Tribes.

Ann, an FA supervisor, commented that upper management often delegated meetings with tribes and did not themselves participate in those gatherings, which meant that upper management's relationship with tribes was "not great," in her estimation. "When you're the boss, you delegate," she put it simply, and thus "upper management tends to not participate with tribal partners." As such, in terms of deciding which meetings to attend, "I don't know that upper management is solid in that area right now," and the result is "not a good look" for her county administration because there were simply not enough county representatives at the table.

Echoing the same theme, Amy, an Indigenous, crossover social worker, observed that only the ICWA unit had been showing up at joint meetings and conferences with tribes. "And we have joint meetings with our tribal partners that no one else [from county management] except for Sofia [alias] are showing up at," she noted, and

I know that I was invited and got to participate in a ... some kind of conference where we, [named her county], hosted other tribal and state entities here at [named her county] to exhibit our ICWA courts and was [*sic*] really appreciative that ... [as a line worker] I was invited to participate in that. But it was the ICWA unit that was present. And what a missed opportunity for higher levels to be present at that space. I'm also familiar with the fact that there's been other ICWA conferences and events that those in higher positions have been invited to, or at least that's my impression and they've not attended. And so, I think when we're not showing up, when they're not showing up to these different conferences or conversations, that indicates the level of importance and that it's not important.

Limited Understanding of Tribal Sovereignty and Sharing of Power by Those Who Don't Typically Work with Tribal Partners. Sofia, an Indigenous crossover ICWA supervisor, talked about areas of the county not used to working with tribes not understanding tribal sovereignty and not sharing authority with tribal partners. As she put it,

I think as an agency, we still have work to do in regards to our relationships with tribal partners and tribes in particular. I think that we as a unit [ICWA unit] can be really inclusive and understand tribal sovereignty. But then when you move outside of our unit to folks who don't typically work with tribal partners, they don't understand that tribal sovereignty and have a hard time grasping that. I think, too, as social workers, we hold a lot of power and sometimes it's challenging to share that power. And that's something I think that's learned. Not everybody is just willing to do that. And as an agency, sharing that information and like sharing that power with other people in positions of power is very challenging. I do think that we have some work to do and some more understanding as an agency and then [we need to do] that relationship-building.

Attempted Implementation a New Major Practice Change Without Solicitation of Tribal Input.

Illustrating this subtheme, Amy, an Indigenous crossover ICWA social worker, described an attempt by administration to implement a new program for social work practice with families without tribal input. “There this new system coming out called *Listen*,” she explained,

that's this MI Intelligence that we're using, and it was determined that we would use that without our tribal input. There wasn't a conversation with our tribal partners about what

they thought. And most recently, last week, there was finally a conversation. And I know that our division director said, “Well, does it matter what the tribe thinks? We're going to do what we're going to do.” And if we're in a state where we're making statements like that, then I think that clearly indicates the health of that relationship and that it's not good.

For his part, Gabriel described that tribes with whom he was working were upset when they found out about the practice changes because they had not been consulted. The changes, especially recording of family sessions, would affect American Indian families. “Tribes are pissed,” he said, referring to the policy that now called for audio- or video-recording family sessions. “They don’t like this at all.”

And so that raises issues. Like the [named tribe] worker, for example, basically saying, “I'll tell you this right now, Gabriel [alias], we go out and we do a joint home visit together,” which is fairly common—[we’re] trying to coordinate and do joint visits together. ... “Once you hit that ‘record’ button, I'm going to stand up and leave the room. So, you don't have a joint visit anymore.” ... I don't know what it means when we're talking about doing this on [the] reservation; we're talking about sovereign territory and stuff like that. I don't know where that's going. I mean, tribes are pissed, and they may even say, “You're not going to come here if that's what you're going to do.”

At another tribal meeting, Gabriel also found that the tribe had not been consulted:

I'd happen to mention or ask what they thought about that [the new practice protocols].

And they were like, “What are you talking about?” [He described the new practice procedures]. “You haven't heard about this? You haven’t heard that they're going to make

us do this?” And like the jaws drop and they're like, “What?” You know, so they're like, taken back and they're like, “We haven't heard anything about this.” And so, they hurry up and they call their supervisor and it's like, no supervisors haven't been talked to. Nobody from the county has talked to the tribes about any of this.

Agency's Response to Tribes Affecting Personal Working Relationships. Amy, an Indigenous, crossover social ICWA worker, commented on her need for personal rebuilding efforts to counter the effects of difficulties in the agency's working relationship with the tribe.

And so, I think ... I have a pretty positive relationship with the tribes, with the caveat that sometimes I feel like the agency's response to tribes impacts personal relationships. And so, I think that the agency doesn't always have positive relationships with our tribal partners, which results then in some animosity and some navigation that has to happen on a personal level. I don't think that the agency has the best relationship, for instance ... with [named a local tribe], and that has resulted in some work that's had to be done on a personal level. You know this may be what my agency does and represents, but it's not what I do and what I represent. And then a demonstration of deferring to them, empowering them, inviting them to the table, and then implementing the active efforts that they want to see ... happen, which then improves that personal relationship.

The Agency Needing More Awareness of ICWA and Its Spirit Especially in Funding Resources. Elaine, a crossover ICWA social worker, felt the county had made progress regarding ICWA practice but still needed more awareness of the spirit of ICWA. “I think the agency as a whole could be doing more,” she offered, adding that:

I think about the day-to-day work and how I feel sometimes we have to really argue to get something approved that would really make a big difference, something like a phone or a phone card. It feels like you've really got to fight hard to get something that seems so important. ... I feel the county's made progress, but I think [it still needs] just some more awareness of ICWA, what it means, and the spirit of it and understanding [of] it. I guess that would be my answer. I think we can do more. We can do better.

Management Needing to Hold People Accountable to ICWA Best Practice Standards.

Sage, an Indigenous intake social worker, felt management needed to increase staff accountability to ICWA best practice standards. When I asked, “Why don’t some people want to take ICWA cases?” she replied, “I think it just comes down to accountability and management. I mean, honestly,” she continued, “I think if management held employees accountable for understanding ICWA and understanding historical trauma and best practices,” then

all of our units would understand these. This is our job description. We are to do this, and we are to have these relationships and be a professional and be coordinating [with tribes]. Then I think that would change things. I think when our tribal partners don't get that respect and communication from certain workers, they may feel distrusted and not respected. So, I feel like it could be a give-and-take.

Supervisors Needing to Hold Staff Accountable for Respectful Interactions with Tribal Partners. Avery, an Indigenous, crossover intake social worker, said managers needed to take a more assertive role in insisting workers act respectfully at tribal meetings. “For example,” she offered,

We had a meeting with a local American Indian agency recently, and I kind of got upset in this meeting because supervisors ... were letting their workers come in and out of the meeting. And it was real[ly] obvious that a couple of the county workers were just completely checked out in this meeting. They were talking amongst each other, looking on their phones. And I got really upset about this, because in my eyes they are [*sic*] making us look really bad as an agency. We're looking very unprofessional, very disrespectful. And I think that supervisors should keep that in check and make sure that workers aren't doing that. And we're being professional and courteous and respectful. ... I know one of the supervisors that I talked to about this got kind of upset with me. And I'm just like, seriously, like, we need to act like professionals when we're out in the community. This is a tribal partner agency that we work very closely with, that we rely on for a lot of services for our clients. And we need to come to the meeting and act respectfully and be professional and ask questions and be engaged. And so, yeah, that's just kind of one example of me being upset with my agency about how they're handling things with our tribal partners.

Needing Greater Staff Diversity. Avery, an Indigenous crossover intake social worker, commented that management should exert more effort in recruiting and hiring American Indian staff:

I feel that it's kind of an exclusive club at [named the county]. We don't have a lot of diversity in management, and we don't have a lot of diversity in staff. And it always kind of strikes me as funny as that we are close to all these reservations here in [named the city]. We have this wonderful ICWA focused program at [named the university] and

great social work programs at [names two other local colleges]. And we have a lot of Native students coming here for the master's program and for social work programs. And it's like, how are we not getting these people recruited to work at [named county] is beyond me. ... So that's another issue I have with the agency about diversity.

The County System Not Communicating With Itself. Koda, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor, was struck by internal inefficiencies in the county system and specifically how the different areas in the system do not work effectively with one another. Koda would “get really hung up on” how “the system does not communicate with the system itself well,” such as having a “foster family who didn't get paid for seven months,” which meant it would “jeopardize that placement because she's cutting hours in her job.” As the woman from the foster family put it: “I'm cutting hours from my job. I don't have daycare. I have no income.” This oversight wasn't the fault of the ICWA unit, Koda stressed, “because we're advocating to get this person paid.” Instead, it was “the financial side of things or foster care side of things.” It is “hard to represent a system where we're doing our end of things,” Koda added,

but then the other part of the system isn't holding up their end. And that makes it really easy for people to point fingers, [saying, for example]: “[name of county] sucks.” “Koda [alias], you suck.” “Mara (alias), you suck.” Like, “You guys aren't doing your job.” “You guys don't care.” But it's just like, yeah, that's the big picture what you're seeing. But it's the system dysfunction that is preventing X, Y, and Z [from happening] ... you know? So, it's just like the systems within the system is [sic] hard to navigate. And I think that's probably our biggest headache: ... that our system doesn't communicate well with other areas in the system.

Addressing the same theme, Marinetta, an FA intake social worker, spoke of how messages from the county attorney’s office differed from good practice and emphasized that one incident could sully the reputation of the county as a whole. “I can think of something in the last year,” she explained,

where a worker was told by leadership by way of the county attorney's office that we're leaning too hard on the tribe ... [regarding] how to work with the family or reunification or removal and those kinds of things—that we're taking too much tribal input and not utilizing our own input. Those kinds of things are disappointing because those are the things, unfortunately, that one incident in one unique case—that was very complex—[can] ... become ... the gossip, [such as,] “See, the county's not doing anything. They won't even work with the tribe.” That's frustrating.

Summary. Responses regarding the agency’s working relationship with tribes were separated into management’s perspective and combined social worker’ and supervisors’ perspectives. Management gave vision statements and examples of collaboration and interaction with tribes and American Indian urban communities, which included developing an American Indian-specific child welfare model, sponsoring of American Indian events, specialized culturally centered service contracts, participation at high-level tribal-state organization meetings, and planning and supporting culturally based service projects.

Social workers’ and supervisors’ comments were grouped into positive comments about the agency’s relationship with tribes and where the county agency could do better. The positive comments included having Indigenous tribal member in positions of authority, one county having changed its entire practice in collaboration with the American Indian community,

including tribes in county hiring panels, as well as making policies and training, and seeing positives in the ICWA team, MIFPA training, and advisory board meetings. Comments regarding where the county agency could do better included ten issues of wide range: county staff ignoring tribal recommendations, upper management delegating rather than participating in meetings with tribes, limited understanding of tribal sovereignty and sharing of power by those who do not typically work with tribal partners, attempting to implement a new major practice change without seeking tribal input, the agency's response to tribes affecting personal working relationships, the agency needing more awareness of ICWA, management's need to hold staff accountable, greater need for staff diversity, and the county system not communicating with itself.

Holding Space Framework Themes

This section identifies deeper themes that emerged after participants learned of the Holding Space Framework. These themes became apparent in response to more probing questions regarding the three pillars of governance, trust, and culture.

Governance

Recognition of tribal sovereignty and tribal voice in joint decisions are key components of the Holding Space Framework's governance pillar. Many participants emphasized the importance of recognition of tribal sovereignty in their general comments regarding tribal relationships. After hearing the explanation of governance as a pillar of the HSF, participants additionally mentioned partnering, teaming, and sharing of case authority and responsibility with tribal partners. Emerging subthemes included (a) sharing authority and responsibility with tribes,

(b) including tribes at case decision points, (c) including tribes in family service planning, and (d) deferring to tribes.

Sharing Authority and Responsibility With Tribes. Elizabeth, a program manager, said her county’s standard practice was to share case decisions and responsibilities with tribes:

How I see it now is that it [the working relationship] is complete partnership [between tribal and county workers], even to the point of doing almost every home visit together, making decisions together. Tribal social workers being included in all the family meetings—I think now that is our standard practice.

Echoing Elizabeth, Sage, an Indigenous Intake INV social worker, talked of the tribes’ right to have information and give input on cases involving their members:

[Three local tribes have been] invited into our process, so their voices are being heard [at intake]. ... We're actually asking the tribe for their input first, ... [as if to say:] “Here's our [child maltreatment] report. What do you want to see [have happen]?” ... [For us, we’re] letting them know that their voice is very important to us ... [and that] they have every right to know everything, and [that] they need to be heard.

In a similar vein, Daenerys, a crossover ICWA social worker, stressed, “I think the really important part about tribal relationships is having them at the table. So, any time you're doing a [family] meeting, [that means] inviting that tribal partner to meet with them.” For her part, Koda, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor, talked of guiding her unit to work collaboratively with tribes. “What I tell our staff is [that] we shouldn’t . . . battle with tribes.” Indeed, she continued,

We should very much be in collaboration. And there might be some things where we disagree, and that's okay. ... We can have disagreements in court. That's fine. We can be on totally different sides. That's okay. But I want to make sure that we continue to remain [demonstrating] that respect for everyone involved because, at the end of the day, we're working for the family.

And I don't think we've really had, since I've been here, really much tension between tribal nations [and our unit]. We very much respect their opinion and their voice, and we work alongside them to benefit the family. So, I always tell our team, “We're never making a decision in isolation.” It's because we can come off as [having] a biased opinion because we're the county, and we're running a lot of our things by statute. But when we have tribal nations coming to us and having us think [in] different ways, or maybe we're thinking [in] different ways and inviting the tribe into that thinking, we're building a lot of good rapport and relationships. ... We just have that mutual respect for our tribal nations and our communities.

Expectation of Involving Tribes in Case Plans From Beginning to End of a Case. “So that's my expectation for my team,” Koda added, continuing with her expectations for the ICWA unit,

that we're still involving tribes from the very beginning until the closing of a case. And I know . . . some of our tribal partners don't have the capacity to be involved at the early stages. And I think my staff know that and are comfortable with that idea. But . . . we're still going to make that phone call, or we're still going to provide so-and-so with an

update via email just so they know our active efforts in trying to engage with them, to involve them in the decisions.

Calley, an Indigenous, crossover, ICWA social worker, described her practice following Koda's leadership. "We are really lucky as a team to have Koda [alias for an ICWA supervisor]," she noted,

in just the leadership that we have had. We very much so are pro-tribes and reach out to them. So, I'll send my notices within my timeline right when I get my cases. And then if something happens with the case or if we need to decide if it's going to case management, even if I haven't heard back from the tribe [whether the child is eligible for tribal membership], I will call them. ... [And ask,] "Are you interested in intervening? Do you want to be a part of this?" So, [we are] trying to do that right off the bat. ... They [the tribe] should be part of the decision... They're their children. They have the right to intervene if they need to, and their opinion matters, and we need to take it into consideration. And honestly probably go with what they have to say because they know their tribe and their people better than anybody. So, we try. Our unit is pretty good about it.

Early Partnership Bolstered Tribal Relationships. Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, referred to early partnerships building tribal relationships and stressed that such a partnership at the beginning of a case "would bolster a relationship." She emphasized that,

Just the feelings that, again, their tribal partner feels they have a big stake and they're allowed to be at the table. So, I think that really sets the tone and I think it sets the tone

for the family. Again, this united front coming that we're here to support you. And triangulation is not as easy if everybody's at the table together. [Triangulation can occur in the three-sided family/tribe/CPS agency relationship where two of the sides align against the third side.] And I think that is the biggest thing that I see when we just have a strained relationship with a tribal partner.

Including Tribes at Case Decision Points.

Participants described how, at certain points during their work with families, significant decisions are made, and tribes are involved in these decisions consistent with the governance pillar of the HSF. These significant decisions included screenings of child maltreatment reports (whether the allegations in the report met the guidelines as child maltreatment and should have been opened), investigations of child maltreatment allegations, the transfer process of a family from intake to on-going case management, bringing a case to court through a dependency petition, and emergency child safety situations. Next I will describe these significant kinds of decisions and the ways in which the tribes were involved with them.

Tribes Attending Screening and Intake Decisions. Elizabeth, a program manager, cited tribe inclusion in the child maltreatment report screening team as an example of a partnership with tribes. The screening team determined whether intervention was needed and decided which efforts could be made to avoid removing the child. She mentioned two tribes [later three] who were currently sitting in on screenings and added that she had wondered, "How can we partner at the earliest point possible with our ongoing unit?" And so, she went on,

if there's even a risk of removal, it might be that we bring out an ICWA social worker. And I think that goes to maybe address potential for bias and kind of a norm and just really that second set of eyes [asking], Have we done everything to prevent removal? Have we looked at informal [safety plans]? I think that's where bias comes in the most, is when we're looking at what's okay for an informal safety plan. ... We might be able to at least attempt a safety plan that could avoid a placement altogether. ... So those are big, big changes in terms of partnership.

Ann, an Intake FA supervisor, also described the present intake screening process with tribal staff, noting that, “We have to screen cases based on face value of a report and per statute and screening guidelines,” and added that:

[Tribal staff] are at the table, and so they can give their input. So, when we read a report, they're there and [for example] it's like we think this is a family assessment. Here's why. Here's what the screening guidelines say. [Named a tribal worker], what do you think? ... And then sometimes for example, drinking and driving with your kid in the car, it [by law] has to be an investigation. We don't have a choice. [Tribal worker's name again], do you agree with that? So, they are at that screening decision.

Meanwhile, Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, "definitely believe[d]" the inclusion of tribes at the screening meetings had helped the agency's relationship with those tribes, as well as “the local representatives,”

just because they do feel included. They know from right away if there might be something coming in regarding a family. And they also have the ability to speak up

during the screening meeting if they believe something should not be screened or give their opinion on that, and ultimately [they] can become involved right away.

Marinetta added that disagreements sometimes occurred and that [these disagreements] started respectful conversations. She advocated a stance that both the county and tribe sought to understand and support families and avoid placements if possible:

There are times when tribes will be very forceful that this is not to be screened in [see glossary], [insisting that,] “This is not something that we believe is child maltreatment.” And it will start a conversation. ... When the conversations happen in a respectful manner, everybody's okay with agreeing to disagree, and ultimately tribes are out there to help their members as well. So, you don't want to screen something in and give somebody a paper record of something that doesn't need to be there. But they [the tribal staff] also welcome the chance at being able to just support a family.

If we come at it like that, where we really want to understand and really partner with families, [then it] shouldn't be an issue. It's when we're running out with a pre-filled police hold [see glossary] and we're taking the kids and we'll remove them [that we have a problem]. ... that removal is so traumatizing for everyone involved, including those children, that [it is important to] ... have those kinds of frank conversations.

Tribal Feedback in Investigations. Sage, an Indigenous Intake INV social worker, talked about including tribal voice in child abuse investigations:

For me, even though they [staff from certain tribes] didn't want to be involved [in going out on child maltreatment investigations], I would still coordinate with them on the phone

and get their feedback of what they would like. And if an out-of-home placement needed to occur, of really getting their thoughts on placement preference. Or what their thoughts are if it needed to be a removal or not removal. To me, I would ask them, “What are other options?” Different safety aspects, different avenues, informal arrangements, different options that they might have for cultural services for the family. ... So, I would still, on [the] investigation side, coordinate with them and get their input on any decision I would make. We would do the safety plan like I would do it with the family, but then also the tribe would definitely have involvement with it.

Tribal Staff Were Included in the Case Transfer Process From Intake to Ongoing

Workers. Amy, an Indigenous crossover social worker, described the important planning meeting her county used that brought together the family, the tribe, the county workers, and any other supportive people the family wished to have present. The meeting identified safety goals, services, and supports to be used in the new service plan with the ongoing county social worker.

A recent implementation within the agency that people found “pretty exciting” was, she explained,

the case transfer process [used when a case was transferred from an intake worker to an ongoing case manager]. ... Something that I think we focus on here and [within] the unit . . . [are] things called family transfer meetings, where we're gathering everybody right at the beginning of a case. ... Having everybody at the table and creating right talking about why we're here and talking about what our worries and concerns are, and then also talking about what our next steps are, and especially for the families who are Indigenous and have tribal partners involved. We want them at the table so that they're a part of those

conversations from the start. So, the way that shows up in our work, they have a say at the very beginning and how we're servicing families and where we're utilizing services.

And then what's happening is once an ongoing worker is identified that ongoing worker and the initial worker come together at a family meeting with support people. . . . The family is also welcome to invite and include who[m]ever they want to be a part of it. So, we've had our ARMS [adult mental health] workers at the table and sobriety coaches at the table and parent mentors at the table. . . . This internal document [the case map] that's being used to talk about these families is being presented to these families. So, they know exactly what's been presented within the agency, [and] they know exactly what the worries and the concerns are that have brought them into the court. And within these meetings, then case plans are being created. And because we have our tribal partner, they're at the table, culturally competent case plans are being created.

Finally, Amy related that, in one transfer meeting, the mother wanted her children to get their American Indian names; she wanted to go to a culturally appropriate service to address her substance use; and she wanted to attend an [American Indian] ceremony. In her words, the agency was aware that she wanted to participate, wanted access to these services, “and that our agency is going to be taking steps to support that. And so that's getting written right into the case plan for the parents and for the children.”

Placement Decisions Were Made in Conjunction With Tribal Wishes. Ann, an Intake FA supervisor, described a close working relationship with tribes before and during a joint decision to place a tribal child out of their home. “In speaking of my unit,” she offered,

I also think because of the relationship with the tribes, it's so easy [because] . . . if you're in a placement situation, you're already working with them. We can ask them, “What do you think? What's your placement preference?” I remember, like with Ho-Chunk, placement preferences were a little bit different than [with] other tribes, and I remember being shocked by that. I just assumed all tribes would have the same placement preferences. The FA unit doesn't have a ton of placements. We usually have started with an informal arrangement, finding a relative that can informally take the kid. We might then move to a voluntary placement because we have to [because] . . . this isn't working so well. And then if it's not working well, we go to a formal CHIPS situation, and the tribe is definitely involved in all of those spots.

Tribal Consultations Were Required Before Beginning Any Court Action. Comments were made about the appearance of the governance pillar in preparing for court. Monica Joan, an Intake INV social worker, pointed out that the county attorney’s office required social workers to have tribal contact and connection before holding a pre-petition meeting. The meeting was the first step in the Child-in-Need-of-Protection-Services court process. In her words:

We’re not pre-petition screening [see glossary] anything until tribal contacts have been made. So, if you’re getting that police hold, you’re not getting [it] through the county attorney's office and getting a petition unless [tribal] contact has been made and . . . you [the social worker] have spoken [with them,] and you've made that connection.

On the same theme, Ann, an Intake FA supervisor, added: “Every single county attorney asked that question. It’s so cool! They ask,” she continued:

“Have you inquired? Did you inquire with the dad? Did you inquire with the kids? Did you inquire with the parent? Are the tribes involved? What does the tribe say?” ... So, that's a win that we're to that spot. ... The offer to come out and assist is always being made, especially with tribes that are local and [with] case transfer meetings. The invitation is always being included even on the EPC [Emergency Protective Court hearing] contact list before we're going in for an EPC, ... if there's a tribal attorney or a tribal worker that needs to be assigned. So there appears to be far more checks and balances in the last five years than what I had experienced in 2016–2017.

For Emergency Situations Tribes Were Consulted About Options. Lionel, an ICWA social worker, talked about his tribal contact process in an emergency child placement situation.

“If we have identified a tribe,” he began,

we're calling and asking them their opinion, ... A lot of times, you know, Koda [alias for his supervisor] will ask us, “Have you talked with the tribe?” ... Normally we're talking to the tribe and asking them, “This is what the report is. This is all we know. Do you know anything more about the family that we need to be concerned about? If we need to do this placement, do you know any relatives that we could place with? Are there any preferred native homes that you think these kids should go to that you guys are connected to or prefer?” So, I try to ask those questions when I can.

Including Tribes in Family Service Planning.

The family service plan was a formal document stating how the collaboration of tribe, county, and the family intended to address and reach the child safety goals. The development and implementation of the plan included supportive services and much collaborative communication, discussion, and physical and emotional support for family. The plan also called for *active efforts* by county workers in helping the family achieve its goals, a higher level of service than the *reasonable efforts* required in non-ICWA cases.

Collaborative Service Plans Came About Through a Working Tribal Relationship and Respect for Tribal Sovereignty. Mara, an Indigenous crossover program manager, described the need for a working relationship with tribes and respect and understanding of tribal sovereignty. Those elements were necessary for the best case scenario of tribal workers really guiding the case plan. As she put it, referencing those ICWA workers trained in American Indian child welfare practice,

I think they value that tribal input. So, I think tribal voice in [a] case plan really depends on that relationship that the worker has with the tribe. And not just that value, but that respect and that understanding of sovereignty and that political status. . . . I feel like when workers have that relationship, the tribal worker's really guiding the case plan. We know what the safety factors are or the protective factors and the risk, all of that. We know [about] . . . the report, [and] we know why we're involved. But really, the workers are working with the tribal partners to develop that plan together. That's like best case scenarios.

Best Practice Was Involving Tribes in Making Case Plans. Koda, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor, described best practices with tribal partnership in case planning:

Best practice for our unit and area when it comes to tribal nations is [that] they're going to be involved in that process [creating family service plans] . . . Does it happen all the time? Probably not. . . . We're trying not to make these decisions alone and we're really trying to work with the family themselves when developing their own case plan. And so, when we're at that step, where my workers are going to the homes and building that case plan with families, my expectation is that tribal nations will be invited and have a voice. . . . So, I think my staff do a good job of having them involved or having their say. . . . [If tribes are not able to make it to the meeting,] we send it to the tribes to either sign off on it or to criticize and let us know what we should be adding or deleting.

Consulting With Tribes on Case Plans Is the Expectation. Avery, an Indigenous, crossover, Intake FA social worker, said, “We are expected to collaborate as much as we can with the tribal workers on creating those safety plans and those case plans. Lionel, an ICWA social worker, similarly commented,

When we do the case plans for the family, we need to consult with the tribe on the case plan. . . . It's repeated to us. That's how we're taught, at least in our ICWA unit. . . . We're supposed to talk to the tribe.

For me, developing case plans, I talk to the tribal worker and say, “These are the areas I think we need to work on. What do you think?” We kind of narrow them down. . . . Sometimes the tribes know the family or know the relatives or have maybe worked with the family. . . . So maybe they might have more insight about what works for the family and [what] doesn't. . . . I think part of it is that you always have to ask, and that's always part of being the equal partner.

Including Tribal Partners Right Away. Many workers mentioned the need to involve tribes at the start of a case. On this notion, Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, commented:

Intake workers should be working with tribes right out of the gate. And I think we're getting better at that here at [name of county]—[that is,] of including the tribal partners right away. Sometimes at the initial door knock. And that part's helpful, but especially in getting those service plans together. But I definitely believe it should be a partnership. Everybody plans it together along with familial input. And we're getting there.

Similarly, Jasmine, an Indigenous ICWA social worker, invites tribal staff to join her in meeting families and then they draw up a case plan together. As she explained, “I've had tribal reps go out with me to meet with families and then we kind of talk about it,” and then,

I'll draft up a case plan and I'll send it to them and ask them to review it, [essentially wondering,] “If you need anything to be added or you want something taken off, you know, let me know and I can fix it.” ... You want to be on the same page for the family.

An Important Part of Tribal Relationships Was Having Them at the Table. Daenerys, a crossover ICWA social worker, described how she included the tribal worker at a recent family meeting and how she received input from the tribal worker and the family and built a case service plan. As Daenerys explained of the interaction during the meeting, she (Daenerys) had said:

“We're going to build a case plan. What do you guys want to see for the case plan?” So, the dad added stuff [ideas for the plan], [and then a tribal worker] added stuff. And we talked about what he would need to do to get his child back. Having those tribal partners

at the table when you do that is really important. That doesn't always happen because sometimes like [named a tribe] is completely overwhelmed. So, you can invite them, but they don't have any capacity to do that kind of stuff. You just try to as much as you can get their voice included in whatever way works for them. So, . . . say [named above tribe's social worker] can't meet with me. So, then I call her, and I ask her, "What do you want to see happen? What do you think?" So, I'll send her case plans and be like, "Please let me know what needs to be taken out. Changed. Added. You know, talk to me about this. Do you like this case plan? Do you want to see different things?" So, it's that constant including tribal partners and the decisions in the case plans. . . . It's all about including them; having them at the table; having them at staffing; having them at consultations; inviting them to home visits; inviting them into whatever you're doing about the case . . . about their family.

And then in addition to that, I spam. I spam them basically [laughs]. I don't know how else to describe it [laughs]. They literally receive every single email that I get about any of my cases, even if it's the smallest, even if it's the smallest minute kind of detail on my case. They are cc'd and provided all of that same information and all of the same documents. Some tribes asked me to stop [laughs]. But it's part of federal law. You're supposed to include tribes.

No Big Decisions Without the Tribe. Arthur, an Intake FA social worker, explained, "When we have family meetings,"

the tribal voice is definitely there. That is something that's really good to see. ... There's no wiggle room that their voice needs to be here. We're not making big decisions or without their input into the plans for the family or the opportunity to weigh in.

Creativity in Including Tribal Voice if the Tribe Has Limited Capacity. Lark, an ICWA social worker, described how she included tribal voice when tribal capacity was limited. “I will invite the tribal staff to the case planning meeting with the family,” she explained, adding that,

Going back to capacity, some [tribal] workers are able to be there. Some will provide input prior, like, “Hey, I think that mom needs to address her mental health, her chemical health and housing.” And so, then if they're not able to make it to the meeting, I'll tell the parent, “Hey, I was able to talk to the tribal staff. They're sorry that they can't be here today. But these were the three things that they think that you could maybe use some assistance in. How do you feel about that?”

And that might give us a starting point to start talking about the case planning and what the parent might think that they need. Some tribal workers might want to appear by phone or by Zoom or by FaceTime. And so, I will accommodate that and just let the parent know, “Hey, the tribal worker is going to be on the phone. They might have some input if you have any questions for them.” ... I usually will also offer for the tribal worker to sign the case plan. ... I've had some tribes want me to send the case plan to them before the parent signs it or at the case planning meeting where they sign alongside the parent.

Different Tribes Had Different Involvement Preferences Requiring Adaptability.

Monica Joan spoke of the great variation in tribal preferences:

Something that is hard from a worker perspective is different tribes have different involvement preferences. And so [named a tribe], for example, when I've called, has been like, "Yeah, whatever you assess, just notify us." They haven't wanted to be as involved. So, you really have to gauge there's not a lot of consistency in different family responses. . . . There's just a high level of adaptability that's required in this position.

Deferring to Tribes. Koda, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA supervisor, spoke of working with tribes when there are difficult decisions to be made. "I think we definitely get in that territory of [determining when and what to defer to tribes],

where we think we're assessing something that might be safe or not. I like to have my workers come to me with where they're at, [where we're asking:] "What are the options? Will we remove? Do we not? Do we have supportive services over here?" ... And if we're still stuck, I sometimes involve county attorneys, ... and they actually encourage us to have those meetings often when we just don't know next steps as a county entity what we can or cannot do. Does this meet [the legal definition of] "egregious harm"? Does this meet statute? And then involving the tribes in those discussions as well. And so, I never liked to have the tribes make the ultimate decisions. I just like to tell them [unit workers:] "Be transparent." This is where we're at. This is what we're thinking, ... and we're open to your opinions. What are your thoughts? So again, it's just that transparency and communication, open communication with our nation.

Many social workers explicitly stated that in their ICWA practice they have deferred decisions to tribes. On this, Avery, an Indigenous, crossover, Intake FA social worker, stressed that, “With an ICWA case, I feel like the tribe has the final say. . . . Sovereignty gives them that final say. . . . We defer to the tribe.” In the same regard, Amy, an Indigenous, crossover, ICWA social worker, offered:

Recognizing that, while I'm an Indigenous woman with traditional values, I work for a county agency, and my job again is to be a conduit and a support to my tribal partner. And so, [if] my tribal partner says, “Amy [alias], this is what we're going to do,” I'm like, “Okay, this is what we're going to do.”

Daenerys replied in a similar fashion, conceding, “If a tribe doesn't think it's needed,” then,

I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to push for something that a tribal entity is saying is not going to be helpful for a parent. I think in our unit, the tribal voice is always present. It's never not present. Like they're part of these conversations. They're included. And furthermore, . . . they have a super powerful voice in court, too.

Finally, Gabriel, an Indigenous, crossover ICWA social worker responded: “Sometimes I feel really strong about something, and I really want this one thing to be in the case plan. But in the end, if the tribe says, “No, I don't think we need that,” I defer to them.

Summary. In earlier general comments participants emphasized the importance of recognition of tribal sovereignty in tribal–county working relationships. After learning that governance is a pillar of the HSF as applied to child welfare, respondents supplied additional comments on partnering, teaming, and sharing of case authority and responsibility with tribal

partners. Sharing in decisions from the beginning to the end of a case was an agency expectation. Tribes were included at case decision points: intake screening, the case transfer process, placement decisions, and formulation of family services plans. Some tribes had limited capacity requiring flexible and creative solutions for their voices. Many workers deferred to tribes in situations where there were differing opinions. County staff professed transparency as a policy in situations where the law required county actions.

Trust

When participants were specifically asked about trust in the working relationship with tribes as the second pillar of the HSF, their responses revealed three subthemes: (a) county staff trust of tribal staff, (b) feedback regarding tribal trust of county ICWA staff, and (c) trust building.

County Staff Trust of Tribal Staff. Remarks regarding county staff trust in tribal welfare staff produced these subthemes: (a) participant trust in tribal opinions and expertise, (b) disagreements and changes not seen as trust issues, (c) disagreements initiating conversations, (d) trust of tribal voice varying depending on whether the tribal worker was American Indian, (e) trust being hard to achieve if the tribal worker had a colonized view of child welfare, and (f) treatment of tribal staff as professional equals.

Participant Trust in Tribal Opinions and Expertise. Many participants spoke of their trust in tribal opinions and expertise with respect to culturally sensitive knowledge and how to work with tribal families. These participants' remarks were similar to the initial general remarks on tribal relationships given before the explanation of the three pillars of the HST.

When asked about this, Lionel, for example, an ICWA social worker, responded, “I trust what they [tribal partners] say. I look at them as being the experts about their tribe and about their families, ... what their families have experienced, ... and the best course of action with that family.” Meanwhile, Avery, Indigenous crossover Intake FA worker, talked about his time as a tribal child welfare social worker before working for county child welfare. He said he trusted and appreciated the guidance he had received from tribal staff, and he held great trust in their opinions. Remarking on his experience as a tribal social worker, he observed,

I worked a lot of cases for [named a tribe] and essentially [named the tribe’s director] was my supervisor even though I worked for [named a second tribe]. And so, I was able to get to know her really well, get to know kind of how her brain works and what her outlook is on child protection. And that kind of went the same with [named another tribe, as well as] with [named two tribal social workers]. And I trusted them one hundred percent. I thought that they were phenomenal at what they did and knew what the hell they were doing and knew way better than I did. And [I felt like] I should sit back and shut up and do what [named above director] told me to do, essentially because she knows a lot more about this stuff than I do, basically. So, yeah, one hundred percent I've trusted the tribes and felt that they were more competent than myself at this work. So, I totally [currently] trust them.

Sage, an Indigenous, Intake INV social worker, also appreciated a tribal lens and services in working with American Indian families, underscoring how much it “really helps just to get their [tribal staff’s] perspective.” Supporting professional trust of tribal workers, Sage added,

there are different options and services. They're very knowledgeable. I work a lot with our Native families, and there's a lot of things on the [culturally] traditional side and different services and supports that I found very helpful to be very involved with them. ... They do have a lot of different things [cultural services and engagement] that we can't offer, especially if there's that traditional history too.

Disagreements and Changes Not Seen as Trust Issues. Arthur, an Intake FA unit social worker, said he did not see misunderstandings or disagreements with tribal partners as trust issues. He accepted that situations and decisions could change and stressed that he still valued the tribal workers' opinions on family relationships, resources, and ways to help the family. "I do trust tribes," he began, and "I don't take anything like a misunderstanding or disagreement as a non-trust issue. I certainly trust what they're doing in the work they're doing," adding that,

Even when we've had disagreements, it's not about trust [or] not trust. You know, we're trying to stay focused on the family. So, as me personally, I do trust the tribal partners in their work [on] ways to better help families. I think they know their communities and know resources and connection, ... [in terms of] what is best. ... I trust, value their input and voice into how to better serve families, and I do trust that a lot.

Disagreements Initiating Conversations. Marinetta, responded to the question, "Does it seem like the tribe voice is heard and accepted?" by saying, "I do think so," before continuing with,

I have sat in on a fair amount of those [intake screening] meetings. And there are times when tribes will be very forceful that this is not to be screened in, this is not something

that we believe is child maltreatment. And it will start a conversation. And there have been times when we have screened something out; there are times when we have screened something in and said, “No, I really feel it follows the statute. This is what we're going to do. We really want you to be involved.” But when the conversations happen in a respectful manner, everybody's okay with agreeing to disagree and ultimately tribes are out there to help their members as well. . . .

If we come at it like that, where we really want to understand and really partner with families it shouldn't be an issue. . . . [That] is when we can have those kinds of frank conversations. I think that's where that trust gets built, which is your second pillar there. So, it's a daily battle to continue to keep that trust.

Trust of Tribal Voice Varying Depending on Whether the Tribal Worker Was American Indian. Daenerys, an ICWA social worker, in regard to the question, “Do you think you, members of your team, and people in your agency trust the advice coming from tribes?” responded with:

You know, I think it varies. Just like we have great people in positions at the county and ICWA, specifically, who are tribal members and then some that aren't. I think the same happens for tribes. They have tribal members [as child welfare staff]. They [also] have tribal workers who are not actually Native American. So, you also get . . . that [non-Native] perception as well. So, when you have a White person or a different ethnicity or race working as a tribal . . . worker at a tribe, . . . you can sometimes get those differences of practice.

Trust Being Hard to Achieve if a Tribal Worker Has a Colonized View of Child

Welfare. Amy, an Indigenous crossover ICWA social worker, talked about the predominance of colonized ICWA practice (see *colonized ICWA practice* in Glossary) with its influence even on practice by Indigenous social workers. She emphasized the effect on tribal-county trust from such practice and the need for identifying and decolonizing it.

“It's difficult to always trust our tribal partners,” she began, before adding,

You know, I talk about deferring to the tribe and empowering the tribe, being a conduit for the tribe. And that's difficult when tribal partners share a colonized perspective of child welfare and that exists. And I think the hope is to provide quality services to the families that we're serving and follow ICWA and support that. But sometimes tribal partners have a colonized view of child welfare ... That's difficult to then want to defer to the tribe and trust the tribe. [Some tribal members, though American Indian, still have learned to view child welfare with a lens embedded in Western colonial and assimilation thinking rather than a lens springing from and consistent with American Indian culture and way of perceiving the world. An example would be willingness to sever family ties rather than take great efforts to preserve them when considering safety plans for American Indian children.]

When I say colonized and I think about tribal workers who may practice in that way, I can think . . . [back] to when I first started practicing as a tribal social worker. And I think I caused a lot of harm to my tribal families because I came in with my social work degree and my Western teaching of what is social work and what is safe and what's in the best interest of a child. And I practiced then in that way, where there wasn't this deep

belief that the best interest of a child is to be with their family and their community, and that there wasn't a way to achieve safety for that child and that family. And that resulted in a lot of children . . . [being] transferred in custody to non-relatives. And so now as a practitioner in a decolonized way, there's this recognition that we can achieve safety for our children with their families, and that our traditional ways of doing things are very beneficial to the health of the children and the families and the communities.

And I think about my first case plans that I would write in my practice when I first started: “You must be sober to visit with your children,” for instance, and “You must be complying with urine analysis, and you must obtain housing, and you must complete your treatment completely successfully before your children come home.” And there is [sic] lots of hoops to jump through and boxes to check. And now I think my case plans are very tailored to the needs of the family, and I don't have arbitrary timelines and expectations. And I think the visitation is a very huge and significant piece, where there's this recognition that these kids know when their mom or dad are high. They've lived that life prior to us getting involved. And there's a way to visit with a parent safely, even if that parent is using or hasn't been sober or if even showing up under the influence.

And there's things that we consider such as age. And you're not going to want a mom nodding out and holding an infant, but you could have a mom show up and sit there on the couch with her kids, her five- and her six-year-old, and watch a movie. And they would be safe. And I think that's very different than traditional social work. . . . But there's tribal entities that subscribe to that traditional Western kind of child welfare practice. And I was one of them for a few years before decolonizing that practice.

Treatment of Tribal Staff as Professional Equals. Gabriel, an Indigenous ICWA social worker, talked of the professional respect he showed tribal staff in working with them:

I never doubt the professionalism of a tribal worker. I just presume that even though we may have differences of opinion on things, that they're coming from a certain place and that's that. I don't question it or doubt it. So, I always treat them as an equal, and I'll introduce them as an equal. When we're meeting with families, oftentimes the county's met with a family several times before the child shows up. And so when that happens, I'll say, "This is so-and-so and [name of tribe]. She's my equal counterpart just working for the tribe instead of the county." I'll tell the family she has as much say in this as I do. We're on equal ground here.

Feedback Regarding Tribal Trust of County ICWA Staff. The study was limited in not being able to get direct tribal viewpoints about tribal-county relationships. Participants, however, did reveal comments of whether they felt trusted by tribal staff and feedback they received from tribes in regard to how much they were trusted and their practice. For example, Sofia, an Indigenous ICWA supervisor, received positive feedback from more distant tribes about the work that her unit had been doing with tribal workers (counties often are involved with families from out-of-state tribes). She interpreted the feedback as trust in the work of her unit by tribes that were used to a less collaborative response. As she put it,

We've received some pretty positive feedback, I think not so much from tribes locally, but nationwide. I know we have some tribes in Alaska and some tribes, I think, in the southern United States. And I think the biggest compliment is, "I have never gotten so many updates," and, "I know exactly where things are at with this family." And so I don't

ever have to question because I'm regularly in contact. And nobody's really said anything directly about trust, but for me, that indicates that there is that trusting relationship.

Especially if they're in the know and feel confident about the work that we're doing.

Koda added, “A lot of times I feel like we've built that trust with tribes where we're being transparent with what's going on. We're updating them regularly and they're essentially trusting us with decisions when it comes to next steps.”

Several workers talked about receiving positive comments on their work from tribal partners. For example, Amy, an Indigenous ICWA social worker, received compliments and said, “I certainly personally feel trusted. I don't want to toot my own horn, but I've had tribal partners that have said, ‘Oh, good, I'm glad that it's you and that it's not someone else.’” So, I do feel personally trusted.

Working for Trust in View of Historical Trauma and Tribal Distrust of the Government. Hamish, an Intake FA social worker, aware of historical trauma spoke of the efforts he was making to establish trust with tribal staff and families. “I do trust them,” he said, speaking of his tribal partners,

and I hope they trust me just as much. I think that I go out of my way to earn that trust back from them. . . . In my position and with the history [historical trauma from governmental policies and actions], I am always going to . . . be in a position where I am the distrusted person. I am the government worker. And so [I go out of my] way whether it's working with family or with the tribe of proving my ability and what I can do.

The best compliment I can get, and I've heard this recently, was from one of the tribal workers when one other worker was talking with them and they said, "Oh, Hamish [alias] is on that case." And the tribal worker, "Oh, okay, good." Like she was confident that I was going to do a good job with it. I take [that] as a huge compliment when they have that trust in me.

So, you know, I trust in that. They want just what they want, the same as we want. They don't want any of their kids, any of their family, hurt or sick or dying. They want the families together. That's what we want. So, I trust that again. And we're going to have different opinions, but we can come to some sort of agreement. And that's part of building that trustful relationship. If, you know, if we have that trust relationship, if they trust my decision, I'm thinking things through thoroughly and with the kids and the family's best intention. And I'm trusting that they're the boots on the ground.

You know, if it's out on the reservation, especially that they know the situation, the family, the supports that they have. And they can make a good healthy decision too. [I can earn their trust by] just following through with what I say I can do, and I think having a good communication with them, having the tribal workers see how I talk with families, see how I go out of my way, but maybe look into alternative support solutions for them.

Speaking to the same theme, Avery, too, discussed working hard to develop a good reputation with tribes. "Over time," he began,

you kind of figure out where you stand with [named a tribe]. ... You develop a reputation with them. And I like to say that my reputation is good overall with the tribal

representatives and with the bands. And that's been hard-earned. I've had to work really hard at that. And I've ... tried to do my best and tried to work collaboratively. And I think, overall, I have a good relationship [and] . . . good reputation.

Being an American Indian Worker May Inspire Trust. Jasmine, an Indigenous ICWA social worker with an American Indian appearance, felt that being perceived as Native may encourage trust in her by tribal partners. “If they see me and know that I’m Native,” she reasoned,

they would trust me a little bit more than a non-Native person. I don't know if that had anything to do with it, but it could. Do I feel like the tribe trusts me? I hope they do. I've been doing this job for a long a long time. And I know a lot of people know it, and I'm hoping that they would [trust me].

Trust Building.

Trust Is Developed Over Time and With Follow-Through.

Ann, an Intake FA supervisor, observed, “I think the tribes trust our FA workers.” Moreover, she continued,

They know they [county FA workers] are not purposely not calling them or not including them. So, I see that trust with them, and I believe trust is developed over time. If you do what you say you're going to do, time and time again, they now trust you. If you repeatedly don't follow through and do what you should be doing, then why should they trust you? They're not going to.

Following Through on Active Efforts and Having Good Outcomes. Avery explained that, when it comes to American Indian families, what is valued [in terms of trust] is “following through on active efforts [see glossary], you know, putting the rubber to the road with active efforts and actually doing active efforts and having good outcomes on cases and especially good permanency outcomes on cases.”

Talking With Tribal Partners About How Relationships Could Be Improved. Avery said that for other counties to improve their relationships with tribes and build trust, they needed to collaborate. “Sitting down at the table, calling up [named a tribal ICWA program director] at [named tribe],” for example, might entail asking,

“Hey, why don't you guys come down over to the building here? We got a bunch of coffee here and some doughnuts and some snacks. We'd love to sit down and meet up and talk about our relationship and how it could be improved and how we could work together. Let's meet at one o'clock on such and such date.” ... So, I think reaching out to the tribes and saying, “Hey, we want to collaborate.”

I Trust Tribal Partners Because They Follow Through and Show Up. And so, Marinetta added, “I feel like I can trust especially our close local folks because I've had that relationship that when they say they're going to be there, they're going to be there. When they say they're going to do something,” she continued, “and they're going to and if something comes up, I am notified and I show that same courtesy.” Furthermore, Marinetta described trust as being committed to what we need to do, doing what we say we're going to do, and saying opinions and talking comfortably about differences. Specifically, she stressed,

Trust for me. That's that showing up. That's that. I don't want to say the word “loyalty,” but I just feel like we are committed, both committed to doing what we need to do. That's how I gauge that trust; like, I can trust they're going to do what . . . [they] say, and they can trust me. And . . . I can also say my opinion: This is what I think about this. And maybe it differs from what you think. And let's talk about that. And you can have that conversation in a way that develops that comfortable space, that just brings trust as well.

Trust Takes Time. Our Unit Has Put in the Time. Lark, a crossover ICWA social worker, felt that trust with tribes had “been able to be built up” because he had “been with [name of county] for a little while now” and had found that trust could be “built between people by doing what you say that you're going to do over time. It takes time,” he continued,

And so, I do think that there's a pretty trusting relationship. And I do think also that our unit as a whole has put [in] time and effort. Like when [named previous supervisor] was the supervisor, we would go up to [named a distant tribal reservation] like every other time. . . . I really think those quarterly meetings really help with trust building, too, because . . . we give updates but we kind of [address] staff concerns with everybody, with all of the tribal caseworkers, with the tribal attorney, the county attorney, [and] with the supervisors. They're like: Everybody's there and everybody can provide input.

Transparency Is Necessary for Tribes to Trust. Lark emphasized being transparent in work, stressing, “I am huge on transparency and keeping everybody on the same page as much as possible,”

whether that's check-ins with everybody involved or doing the same home visits together or just making sure that everybody hears the same information so that they can make informed decisions and come with an informed opinion when it is time to make decisions. ... I think a big piece of being able to trust people's opinions is making sure that they have all the information needed to make an informed decision and opinion.

On the same topic, Calley, an Indigenous crossover ICWA social worker, said she trusted that tribal workers would know their culture especially if it is a Native tribal worker working in their own tribe. She gave examples, though, of many tribes having workers from other tribes with differences in their culture. She also felt distrust toward non-Native people working with Native families, even in her own agency. She worried about people she felt had a “savior complex” or took a tribal child welfare position because they needed a job and could not get one anywhere else.

Summary. Trust subthemes that emerged included county staff trust of tribal staff, feedback regarding tribal trust of county ICWA staff, and the building of trust. Participants held trust in tribal opinions and expertise. Factors behind the trust were that disagreements and changes in expectations were not seen as trust issues and disagreements started conversations between tribal and county staff. Trust by county staff sometimes varied depending on whether a tribal partner was American Indian or had a colonized view of child welfare. Comments revealed county staff taking efforts to treat tribal staff as professional equals.

Many participants felt trusted by tribes because of positive feedback they received from tribal partners and positive comments from distant tribes of their interactions with the ICWA unit. Factors mentioned were practice transparency and awareness of effects of historical trauma,

as well as historic distrust of the government. One worker felt that being an American Indian facilitated tribal trust in her. A common statement was that trust was developed over time and with follow-through. Staff advised building trust by talking with tribal partners about how relationships could be improved, putting in the effort to work for tribal trust, being transparent, and following through on expectations.

Culture

After participants received an explanation of culture as the third pillar of the HSF, two subthemes emerged from their responses about culture in their relationship with tribes: (a) the importance of workers' cultural sensitivity, and (b) the tribe's crucial role in developing culturally sensitive service plans.

The Importance of Workers' Cultural Sensitivity. Several participants emphatically stressed the importance of cultural sensitivity in county staff working with tribes and American Indian families.

Cultural Sensitivity Is Critical According to the American Indian Community. Mara, an Indigenous crossover program manager, felt strongly that cultural sensitivity was essential based on statements and directives coming to her county administration from tribes and American Indian communities:

I think it [cultural sensitivity in county child welfare staff] is critical. And . . . [for me] hiring into this position is a great example of how important it is. The questions that were drafted by the [American Indian] community focused on my experience within the community. Not just: Have I worked with it? Or: Have I lived in this community? [But

instead:] Can I talk about my lived experience with the community and what I see or what's important to help the community heal? So, anybody else who maybe had the resume qualifications, if they couldn't answer that, they weren't getting the job. And why is that so important? Because [the] community said it was important. Because I come with that lens that we need to assess our community through, which ICWA requires.

Learning for Non-Culturally Competent Hires Comes at a Cost to the American Indian Community. Mara continued by saying that if workers did not come with this lens, their learning curve came at a detriment to American Indian families. Addressing cultural competency, she explained that:

You can hire people that need to grow in that area, but then that's on the backs of the community that you're serving. When you hire someone not culturally competent, who is hit by that? Our community. [Mara, as an American Indian member of an Anishinaabe tribe, presented her thoughts through her tribal lens.] Our community experiences the microaggressions; our community experiences the lack of connectivity or knowledge of services; our community experiences the bias and not understanding that when we say that we hear voices and we talk to spirits, that's not because we're crazy. It's because we legit[imately] hear voices and talk to spirits. Like, it's those kinds of things that if you aren't from the community, you don't . . . have that experience, [and so] then you have to go and learn it. Where if you come into it, the work with that lived experience in the community, and you know how to be a social worker, the ability to engage with family and impact positive outcomes for them is increased.

It Is Critical for Our Community to Have Programs Grounded in the Community's Values. Mara continued her thoughts about having workers from the American Indian communities:

I always like to say in order for a program to be beneficial for the community that it's serving, it has to be rooted and grounded in that community's values. So, the [named a tribal parenting program] is successful because it's grounded in the community's values. Why [named a non-Native treatment center program] might not work for people is because it's not grounded in their culture and within the values that they have that were removed from [them]. I could go on and on about it, but it's critical for our communities to have people who have lived the lifestyle.

Mara also gave an example of where an American Indian social worker working with a Native family wanted to ensure that her assessment of a family was culturally accurate and asked Mara for her opinion on the risks of child endangerment and the service plan. The worker asked Mara to accompany her to the home without giving Mara any preparatory comments so that Mara would rely on her own judgement. Mara said,

[We] went in, met with the family, did our thing, [and] left. And so, she was like, "Okay, what do you think?" And I was like, "Man, this is a really high-risk case. But it seems like we have a good plan." Removal wasn't involved. And she said, "Okay, what do you think about their house?" ... That is not how I live [now]. But I grew up living like that.

So, my response or reactions are different because of our experiences. And that's normal for our community or for people that live in poverty. And so, we didn't have a

punitive response. It was more supportive and understanding. And that's what our community needs. They don't need somebody coming in and judging them and [telling them that] they're horrible at a horrible time in their life. They need somebody to come in and say, "Damn, you're really struggling. How can I help you? This is horrible." ...
Validate people.

An ICWA Unit Held One Another Accountable for Culturally Sensitive Work. Sophia, an Indigenous crossover ICWA supervisor, described how her unit held one another accountable for culturally sensitive work, noting that cultural competence "is right up there [in importance] with respecting our tribal partner's voices. And I think that starts," she added,

from the very beginning stages of somebody [a new worker] coming into this unit. Right from the interview stage, we talk about that partnership with tribes and working with Indigenous families and the impact that our agency and child welfare has on Indigenous families. And so, I think that's really critical of bringing that from our very first meeting with somebody who is starting in this unit—letting them know what the priority is and then, too, if there are concerns, we talk about that.

And again, I go back to the group holding each other accountable. And I really appreciate the people in the unit. It's even as simple as . . . [someone] saying common slogans or phrases, and somebody will go, "Hey, I think that's a microaggression." And they go, "Oh, is it?" And they'll Google it . . . [and say,] "Oh man. I didn't even know." And so, it's being open to that feedback and then being open then to share it too, and say, "Hey, we're going to all hold each other accountable." And so that competency is big too. I think we have people with a lot of knowledge, and we also have people who have done

this for twenty, thirty years. And so, them being willing to share their knowledge and say, “Hey, I don't think that was right.” That is how we, I think, form that competence.

Ann, an Intake FA supervisor, also felt strongly about the importance of culturally sensitive social workers. She emphasized the importance of self-awareness and one's connection with one's own life experiences.

I think it [cultural sensitivity] is imperative. I don't think you should be doing this work [American Indian child welfare] if you don't have that. And to me, this goes beyond even working with Indigenous people. You know, I think of cultural sensitivity as broader. So, whether you're an Indigenous person, or you're somebody who grew up in the inner city of Chicago and know nothing but gang life, or you're somebody who lives in a trailer out in the middle of nowhere and doesn't have running water in the winter, so be it. That's how it works out in the woods in the winter. Staff have to have the ability to understand that world that that person lives in and what's important to them. And we can't put our own judgment and bias on that.

And so, to me we all have biases. ... And I think part of that [cultural competence] is just self-awareness. We all fall in a different spot ... because of our own life journey. ... So, I think it's important that staff know where they're at in terms of their areas of growth, [knowing what's] ... needed and then [showing] a willingness to step into that so that they can learn and grow and become better at understanding the person in front of them.

Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, talked of the need to be genuinely curious about the family's culture and to ask good questions. She discussed connecting with a family by understanding the family's values without making assumptions and stressed that cultural sensitivity was as important as communication. Cultural sensitivity was "extremely important," she observed, whether "working with a Native American family, an African American family, [or] a Caucasian family." Indeed, without such sensitivity, she wondered,

Why are we doing social work? If you really want to connect with somebody and assist somebody or get to know or partner with somebody, you have to be able to let them teach you a little bit about their culture and how things are in their family and what's important to them. And [you need to] utilize that. Asking good questions and being genuinely curious to be able to help them . . . remedy whatever needs to be done or get to that next level or meet those goals that they want to see for their family. Cultural sensitivity is something we should all have, and you never are completely culturally competent, I don't believe. You're always learning, always. And you have to be open to that. . . . You have to be able to communicate and you have to be culturally sensitive.

Lark, a crossover, ICWA social worker, said that families are the experts of their family's culture but noted, too, that families and members of families may be at different places in terms of their culture. Cultural sensitivity in a county worker is "extremely important," Lark noted, before adding,

I am not Native myself. And so, I know that the families are the experts on their culture, what their beliefs are, and even like for individual families where they're at in their journey of discovering who they are. I have some families who are super, really cultural

and wanting to do their cultural practices and some aren't, meaning the parent and sometimes the parents and the kids aren't on the same page. Because I've had older kids, too, who are like, "I don't identify with that. I don't want to meet with the tribal worker. I don't want to be in a Native-specific placement." And so then [it's] just navigating that with the tribe . . . [and] looking to the individual family on where they're at and what they want and acknowledging that they're the expert on their cultural piece and on their family.

Importance of Understanding American Indian History Including Historical Trauma and the Boarding School Era. Avery, an Indigenous, crossover, Intake FA social worker, addressed the importance of cultural sensitivity in an American Indian child welfare social worker by saying,

You know, I just think it is so important. . . . I went to a home visit recently and the mom was practically hysterical when I got there because she thought I was coming in and taking her kids into custody. And understanding historical trauma and the residential boarding school system and the history of American Indians with the U.S. government is really helpful when I go out and meet with these families. Because if I didn't know about this, this history about residential schools or historical trauma, who knows what could be going through my head . . . when I see this. I'm saying hysterical crying, or I hear[d] this other mom say, "Yeah, the last time I asked the county for help, I got my kids taken away from me and they didn't come home for a couple of years." . . .

So, I don't know how you could function without knowing those . . . background [details] and some history about the families that you work with. I mean it's very crucial.

... Like today, I went out on an educational neglect case. ... These are American Indian children. Why are they not in school? Well, let's look into the boarding school era and boarding school history for an answer to that. And I understand the background of boarding schools and what schools look like today. ... This, you know, how is that relevant now today? And how is that connected? So, it's very it's crucial that people know about this stuff when they are working with American Indian families.

Hamish, an Intake FA social worker, told a similar story early in his child welfare career.

“Coming here and doing the job that I do now,” he noted, has been

eye-opening to what the struggles are or what they have been for Native American families. ... I think when I was fairly new, I was interviewing a couple of kids at their house with a tribal worker. And, I didn't realize the fear, the impact that my position put on them, [or] . . . how defensive they were and how fearful that [they were that:] “Here's a person coming.” It was a moment that I probably won't ever forget because here I am. If you know me, [you know that] I'm this fun-loving guy who loves to tell stories and [who] gets along with kids. And I don't ever come across as a mean, fearful person. And these kids were just terrified that I was talking to them.

I had a tribal worker with me [to] put them a little bit at ease. But it didn't. So, I spent a little while talking with the tribal worker afterwards. And I look at those situations now, of whether it's historic or it's something [from] their own experience that they've had . . . earlier in their life, or [whether] a family member tells the stories. There's always going to be this idea that the government workers are bad. And they're here to take us. ... I'm just trying to break down those barriers as best as I can, trying to

make them at ease as best as they can. Meeting them where they're comfortable, learning as much about their story.

Indigenous Leadership and Staff Committed to American Indian Families Enhanced Culturally Sensitive ICWA Practice. Koda, an Indigenous, crossover, ICWA supervisor, reasoned that Indigenous leadership and unit staff committed to American Indian families provided culturally sensitive ICWA practice. “Specializing in ICWA,” Koda stated,

my staff have been immersed in this work for years, and [it] really shows to me their commitment to American Indian families, whether they identify as American Indian or they're an ally to the community. . . . And they very much value [county] Indigenous leadership because that can really structure and frame the kind of work that we're doing and bring in a whole new perspective . . . [facilitating] new relationships [and] opportunities for staff to help uplift and work alongside families as well as healing their own spirit.

So, like having that ceremony that we did early in the year with our elder from [named elder's tribe], I think really helped uplift and remind staff why they do this work. And I think with Mara [alias] and I here, we're really bringing in that Anishinaabe perspective and really bringing in our grandfather's teachings, rites of love, respect, [and] humility. You know, that's just something that we both genuinely live by, I believe. I don't know if Mara [alias] would say that, but I see that in her, and I like to say that I do that as well. And so, . . . I think our demeanor is just different as Indigenous women and leadership. And I think our team really leans on that when it comes to decision making.

So, I think my team is very open to our culture and really wants our families to succeed with what they're currently dealing with or working through and dealing with, regardless of their backgrounds. And they really want to have families lead their journey and [determine] what would best benefit them, whether it's a cultural resource [or] getting them in touch with tribal nations and things like that.

The Tribe's Crucial Role in Developing Culturally Sensitive Service Plans. Many respondents described the cultural sensitivity brought into family services plans by the voice of the tribal partners and the services tribes have developed for their people. The tribal recommendations and planning of services were facilitated by the working relationship between the tribe and the county.

Collaboration With Tribes and Their Services Provides Culturally Sensitive Service Plans. Avery, an Indigenous crossover Intake FA social worker, addressed the importance of culturally sensitive service plans for families involved with child welfare agencies by noting:

I think it's of the utmost importance, tomorrow I'm waking up early and going to [identified a tribal substance-use treatment program] to see a kid. ... I just love that program over there. It's culturally relevant for American Indian families. And I feel like those type[s] of agencies are very beneficial with our American Indian families.

Avery then identified another three other tribal programs, a substance-use program developed at a local reservation, and a parenting program and a youth program developed by a more distant tribe.

Sofia, an Indigenous crossover ICWA supervisor, stated that using tribal partners and services was “critical,” adding that,

I know [named a local tribe] has been a prominent presence in the [named city] area. But now we're in a stage where we have [named a second tribe], who has mental health and substance-abuse and ARMHs services, and [named a third tribe], who has an urban office, and they're all offering those culturally appropriate services too. And so, [that means] utilizing them and [learning] what their tribe and what that person wants.

Ann, an Intake FA supervisor, echoed Sofia on collaborating with a tribal social worker and family in developing a culturally sensitive service plan. Specifically, Ann stressed:

So, if [named a tribal social worker] is sitting with a [county] worker and developing a plan with a family, [named tribal worker] can share the opportunities that her tribe has, the things that her tribe offers that could possibly help this parent or this person like absolutely one thousand percent. To me, that just has to be there.

Finally, Daenerys, a crossover ICWA social worker, stressed that “whenever we have a youth or a kid in care, or that we're even just working with voluntarily, we try as much as we can to refer them to [named a tribe] or [named a second tribe] for their therapy or cultural services.”

Culturally Appropriate Service Plans from Involving Parents and the Tribe and Discussing Options Especially Tribal Services. Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, addressing how one might arrive at a culturally appropriate service plan, said the process involved the parents and the tribe discussing options, especially tribal services:

The parents, the family, is [sic] involved with the development of the service plan. But the tribe is right there as well. And when I develop a plan with somebody, I will say we'll talk about treatment or therapy or something like that, and it will be [named a tribal program with two locations], for instance, ... [Named another tribe] also has therapy here now. So, there's another option of a therapeutic culturally appropriate service.

Sofia, an Indigenous ICWA supervisor, described creatively using ideas from tribes and families. "I think that we talk a lot in our unit about 'Services don't equal safety,'" she offered,

And so how we approach situations is through wanting to see behavior change and then how we measure those things too. So, understanding that not every person who has a substance-abuse disorder needs a comprehensive assessment and treatment. It's understanding that maybe having those conversations and maybe they just need to go to ceremony, or maybe they need to start spending more time with their family, and that's how they achieve their sobriety. So, for me, and I think for the unit, too, it's those services. [But it is also] how we keep them culturally relevant [and ensure] . . . we're consistently assessing what the service is that they need. And then if there's a different way that the family or the tribe wants us to address that or that aspect, then we take those into consideration and we try to figure it out.

Sage, an Intake INV social worker, talked of seeking and using the tribe's perspective with their different options and services:

They [the tribes] are very knowledgeable. I work a lot with our Native families and there's a lot of things on the [culturally] traditional side, different services and supports

that I found very helpful . . . [and that] . . . have a lot of different things that we can't offer, especially if there's that traditional history too. . . . So, to me, the voice of the tribe is definitely helpful because then we know what is out there for our families.

Calley, an Indigenous crossover ICWA social worker, echoed the need for tribal opinion and services for culturally sensitive plans, stressing,

I always rely on them [the tribes] for their own cultural services. I will call the tribal worker and be like, “This is what we're looking for. Can you help me? Is there anything that you know of?” Because I don't know of everything. . . . So, we rely on them for the services, for the cultural services and the stuff that we don't know because we don't see it every day, and they do.

Finally, Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, offered, “I think our tribal partners carry with them so much knowledge that is culturally appropriate that we really miss the boat when we don't ask them for their opinions or utilize those services or try and think of creative ways to get that service.”

Tribal Plans More Likely to Be Community Based. Marinetta, an Intake FA social worker, explained that, in regard to tribal partners, “it's more like really utilizing the community and really utilizing extended family members, to connect and support . . . maybe check in on folks. I have found there are ways to have things be a lot less formal,” offering, she concluded, “maybe a softer approach.”

An Urban Area Had Tribal Agencies and American Indian Community Agencies Providing Culturally Sensitive Resources. Lionel, an ICWA social worker, described the many

American Indian resources available from the tribes and urban American Indian community agencies. “It’s nice that some of the [tribal] urban offices have their own resources,” he noted,

But you also have other organizations, too, like [named an American Indian community agency] who have family advocates that we can refer to and work with [for] our families. So even when we're done with a child protection case ... they can work with that family. They also do family programming where the families can go beating, drumming, dancing, [or do] other activities. We have a division of Indian works where they have a food shelf and clothing and other therapy programs, especially over in [named an Indian woman’s resource center in a neighboring city]. They do housing, they do mental health, and they have other family advocates stuff, too.

Summary. After an explanation of culture as the third pillar of the HSF as applied to American Indian child welfare, two subthemes emerged: the importance of workers’ cultural sensitivity and the crucial tribal role in developing culturally sensitive service plans. The American Indian community was quite direct in stating the importance of county staff having lived experience in Native culture. Learning for non-culturally sensitive staff came at a cost to the Native community in microaggressions, lack of knowledge of services and community experiences, and bias of not understanding the people. Community members and Native staff felt it was critical for workers to have extensive experience with American Indian culture. Cultural competence in county workers was as important as respecting tribal partners’ voices.

Moreover, workers in an ICWA unit held one another accountable for culturally sensitive work. Cultural sensitivity included understanding American Indian history, historical trauma, microaggressions, and boarding school experiences. Having county Indigenous leadership and

staff committed to American Indian families greatly enhanced culturally sensitive ICWA practice. Collaboration with tribes and their services provided culturally sensitive service plans. The plans involved joint discussions with tribes, families, and county staff. Tribal input often resulted in more community based plans. In an urban area, both American Indian agencies and tribes provided culturally sensitive resources and services.

Outcomes from Tribal-County Relationships

Participants felt overwhelmingly that positive working relationships with tribal workers resulted in better outcomes for Native families and children, whereas negative relationships resulted in worse outcomes. In participant responses, two themes appeared: (a) through a positive tribal-county working relationship, American Indian families had better experiences with child welfare intervention and (b) positive tribal-county working relationships led to better child placement outcomes.

Through a Positive Tribal-County Working Relationship, American Indian Families Had Better Experiences With Child Welfare Intervention

This theme focused on the experience of families subject to ICWA when county and tribal child welfare workers had a positive working relationship. The family experience impacted outcomes of child welfare intervention. Subthemes that emerged from these research interviews included the following: (a) cultural intervention required responding to families' needs for validation: being understood, recognized, and valued; (b) the family felt supported when the tribal worker was present; (c) collaboration clarified goals; and (d) collaboration brought more resources and culturally sensitive resources for families.

Cultural Intervention Required Responding to Families’ Needs for Validation: Being Understood, Recognized, and Valued. This subtheme involved the importance of culturally sensitive practice where the family feels the workers know what their life is like, recognize the challenges they face, and validate their worth as American Indian people. The resulting trust enabled families to engage in change and allowed some families to reach out for child welfare services when they needed help.

Mara, an Indigenous ICWA program manager, displayed her passion for changing the experience of American Indian families coming into child protection. She said that with the changes made in the ICWA program, she had started to see the results of their efforts. As she described it, in a manner that eventually brought a tear to her eye during the interview, she wanted people to know that “that person [the county social worker] that I [the American Indian parent] met with, that served me and walked alongside me, that they respected me, that they valued me, and that they saw me. They saw me.” Continuing on, she said,

Ah, I get all emotional. It's about healing, right? In our families. Our Indigenous families need to heal. And sometimes people just need to be validated and be seen in their time of struggle. And so that's what I would like is our families to know that they weren't like trash or they weren't important. I need them to feel valued so that next time when they come back, they're more willing to share. They're more willing to say, “All right, here's what I'm struggling with.” And at [names the county], we were starting to see that [families were starting to call for help when struggling]. So, families who generationally [generation after generation] were having issues with the system and didn't want to work [within it], after they had a good experience then they started calling before the reports

would come in and say[ing], “Hey, I did this, that, and the other. Can you help me?” ...

We have to change their experience so that they can trust us.

The act to which Mara’s quote referred may have involved maltreatment or some other problematic behavior by a parent that caused a family to break up, such as alcohol or drug use. Mara’s point was that the family called for help because they hoped to change their behavior and keep themselves intact, whereas in the past they would have withheld such information and aspirations from Child Welfare Social Services.

Finally, Koda, an Indigenous ICWA supervisor, also reinforced the importance of a social worker’s lens so that the family could be seen and heard: “There are times where families are just so grateful for us [Indigenous workers] to be involved and have their voices be heard in a different light.”

The Family Felt Supported When the Tribal Worker Was Present. Several social workers reflected on tribal families feeling supported when the tribal worker was present. Ann, an FA supervisor, described the difference in family engagement when a tribal worker accompanied her or her staff on a family home visit. The nature of the engagement often influenced whether the family would work voluntarily, on a mutually agreed upon plan, or following a petition to court requiring mandatory intervention and possible child removal:

If I knock on the door with [names a tribal worker], it is one-thousand times different.

Whenever possible she is with [me] on that first door knock. When families see their tribal social worker with the county [social worker], there is more trust, less trauma, etc.

It is the same with our other tribal partners. ... Anytime they [tribal workers] can be with

us in the field while we are assessing and working with families, it leads to better outcomes for families!

In a similar vein, Elaine, a social worker and previous tribal intern, explained that she had heard that many families felt that “having their tribe present during interactions in meetings or in court” was “really, really huge” because it indicated “support from a community that they belong to and that may have had their child's interests in mind.” Finally, Arthur, a crossover social worker (see Glossary), brought up that during an investigation with both county and tribal workers present and working together, an American Indian child felt safe enough to talk about what happened. “Putting [in] that effort to have that relationship” did “tie to outcomes,” he stated. “I don’t think that child would ever [have] talked [about] what was going on if that tribal partner wasn't there and we weren't having a relationship. I don't think it ever would have happened.”

Collaboration Brought Clarity of Goals. A family in child protection often has many professionals in their lives with many directives telling them how to avoid placement or to reunify. In addition to the tribal and county social workers, there may be a guardian ad litem, a county attorney, or family attorneys. Also, the families themselves may want their own plan. With many and perhaps even conflicting recommendations presented to them, the family may not know what to do. If the tribal and county workers do not have a positive relationship with one another, triangulation can occur, causing confusion and delay or failure to accomplish family goals and plans.

Illustrating this theme, Elaine explained that with tribal-county collaboration “we see how we can work together towards the same goal, can help create trust amongst a group ...

following through ... and being really clear with expectations and where we're going." What she needed to see to "get to the next level," she went on, rather than just ongoing monitoring, was "families knowing what is expected and having everyone on the same page really." That, she stressed, was essential in "creating good outcomes." And so, "the sooner everyone can be on the same page and know what has to be done or what we'd like to see happen, the sooner that can happen, [and] the sooner people can get going on stuff." Finally, Elizabeth, a program manager, also emphasized the importance of collaboration and its capacity to clarify goals. "When you have that strong partnership," she noted, "we're being much more clear [to the family about what is expected,] and I think we're doing a more thorough assessment."

Collaboration Brought More Resources and Culturally Sensitive Resources for Families. Tribal resources are culturally centered resources that tribal families often prefer, finding them to be a better fit perhaps because such resources don't make them feel like a "foreigner" for participating in them and don't seek to separate them from their cultural values. Tribal-county collaboration opens up tribal resources for American Indian families in addition to services available to all families. On this point, Koda reflected that, "A lot of times I think families are really grateful for the tribe being involved." Most tribes, she continued, "are able to help families differently than we can. They have other resources for other tribal members than what we are able to provide."

Also speaking to the question of resources, Monica Joan, a social worker, pointed out that, "If we're partnering, there's more resources that can be offered to families that way." The tribes, she went on,

have resources we don't. So, that's really important to consider. And the work that we do is hard enough. So, if it's not combative and we're working together, not against each other, then that's the best-case scenario for everyone, and most importantly, our families.

Finally, Elizabeth, a program manager, added: “Because of our partnership with the tribes, ... outcomes are so much better. Services are so much better.”

Summary

Participants asserted that positive working relationships between tribal and county child welfare workers resulted in better outcomes for Native families and children, whereas negative relationships resulted in worse outcomes. In participant responses, two themes appeared: (a) positive tribal-county working relationships led to better child placement outcomes; and (b) through a positive tribal-county working relationship, Native families had better experiences with child welfare intervention.

Regarding the first theme, participants generally felt that, due to good relationships, there were fewer court cases and higher rates of family reunification (children returning home from out-of-home placements), as well as shorter time of children in placement, less reoccurrence of child maltreatment, and a higher rate of Native children maintaining or building connections to their tribes. Regarding the second theme, participants emphasized the importance of families feeling seen, understood, and validated, which raised trust levels and willingness to engage in service goals. Families generally welcomed tribal social workers alongside county workers, which increased their trust and feeling of support. Collaboration between tribal and county workers provided a better family assessment and clearer goals for the family, as well as less

confusion about what to do to achieve the goals. Collaboration between tribes and workers provided a better array of services for tribal families and services consistent with the family's culture. Cultural services were more understandable and comfortable for the family, thus enabling them to better take advantage of the services.

A good experience with the tribal-county partnership appeared to foster better child welfare outcomes. Some efforts at improving family experiences appeared to have had results in having families reach out to the partnership for help when struggles returned.

Positive Tribal-County Working Relationships Led to Better Child Placement Outcomes

Participant responses illustrated how good relationships led to a number of better out-of-home placement outcomes for American Indian children. The outcomes are grouped according to the following subthemes: (a) voluntary service plans rather than removal of children, (b) shorter length of time in out-of-home care and quicker reunification, (c) American Indian children remaining connected to their tribe, and (d) lower recidivism rates. Participants also described how negative relationships led to worse outcomes.

Voluntary Service Plans Instead of Removal of Children. In one county, ICWA cases entered through a three-unit common intake: the Initial Intake Unit (IIU). Two units specialized in Family Assessment, a child protection intervention program for families alleged to have committed less egregious child maltreatment, while the third intake unit conducted child maltreatment investigations of egregious reports and situations where state law required mandatory services. Each of the three units could file a dependency petition and bring an allegation into court for legal review and possible nonvoluntary out-of-home placement.

Ann, a Family Assessment Unit supervisor, enthusiastically described that, by collaborating with tribal partners, her unit members have worked with most families on a voluntary basis, rarely having to use court-ordered out-of-home care. “Since the Family Assessment Unit split,” she explained, referring to an earlier time when all three intake units operated as one, “there have only been a handful of families that have had to go into court,” and “I truly believe that it's because our staff are so committed to working with the tribes alongside families, and we have been able to create safety without having to go into court.”

Shorter Length of Time in Out-Of-Home Care and Quicker Reunification. Elaine, a social worker, felt her relationship and involvement with tribes shortened the length of out-of-home placement and hastened reunification:

I think I'm seeing where kids are returning home sooner. ... There's a lot of efforts into safety planning and building support networks with their professionals [tribal child welfare social workers and tribal treatment providers] and family. And I think I'm seeing that happen earlier than we did traditionally. ... I think having tribes involved has an impact on reunification, for sure.

Sofia, an Indigenous ICWA supervisor, also described how a good working relationship between the county and tribal staff social workers facilitated reunification:

What I pause and think about is if we [county and tribes] are working together on that common goal, which is typically reunification, then we're able to be a team and help each other and work together for the family. And so, I think that's where we see those best outcomes is when we have that goal and then that relationship. ... We're able to work

together. And I think of specific families where a partnership has gone really, really well, [with] tribal partners and the county social worker on the same page. That's a great partnership.

Lionel, an Indigenous social worker, echoed the notion that collaboration with tribes contributed to higher reunification rates:

I think that kids going home is higher when we work with the tribe together as a partnership, making sure that they have a say in everything that's going on, making sure that we tap into their expertise, and they tap into ours. ... I think we're always good about asking each other like, "What do you think? What's your experience with this? Or: What other ideas do you have?" I think for the most part, it matters a lot.

Stressing this point even more, Lionel gave an example of the effect of collaboration that resulted in a creative and very unusual early return home recommended by the county-tribe social worker partnership. As he explained, the court considers the petition supporting child removal at the initial hearing, and technically, the family need not engage with social services or work on a service plan until the petition is proven, which may be several months later. At the first hearing, the county social worker usually asks for continued out-of-home placement. In this case, however, Lionel noted that the collaboration between the county and tribal social workers and the family members had stabilized the family situation far earlier than was expected—to the point where the parties recommended a return home at the first hearing. In Lionel's rendition of this, "I've gone into your first CHIPS [Children in Need of Protection or Services court] hearing asking for a trial home visit ... based on this family, these parents doing treatment right away and they're in [the treatment program]. They're remaining sober."

American Indian Children Remaining Connected to Their Tribe. A central tenet of ICWA is that American Indian children remain connected to their tribes and culture when they are in temporary or permanent out-of-home care. Several participants described how the collaborative working relationship between county and tribe supported tribal children's connections to both their tribe and culture.

Amy, an Indigenous social worker, put it this way: “When there's a collaborative working relationship, beautiful outcomes can be achieved. And we can see that if children aren't returning home, that they're still connected [to their tribes]. And they're still within their community and with their family.” In the same vein, Arthur, a social worker, noted that he had “worked with the tribe to help find a relative the bio[logical] parent didn't even know, but the tribe knew, were [*sic*] out there. So,” he added, “we got them connected with family. If we didn't work together, I don't think that would have happened.”

Elizabeth, a program manager, spoke of the high rate of American Indian foster children returning to their parents or relatives within their tribal community:

When you have that strong partnership, ... those partnerships ... allow for better outcomes. ... Over fifty percent of our families do reunify. And potentially another successful outcome would be a transfer of custody to relatives. ... If children aren't returning home to their parents, they're returning home to family.

Elizabeth attributed the rate and success of reunification with family or relatives to tribal involvement and “that real intense focus on finding family members.” From a tribal perspective,

she continued, “it's our brothers and sisters, our aunts and uncles. In a tribal community it is [a] much broader net of support.”

In responding to whether tribal-county relationships affected the child staying within the tribe, Felix, a supervisor, described a particular family situation that preserved a placement with a relative through collaboration with a wide network of tribal participants:

It was a lot of close collaboration with the mom, the grandma, the great grandma, the tribal partner, and the American Indian Ombudsperson, in addition to the people on the other side that were reporting their concerns that we were subsequently investigating. So, it was a global intervention that kept that child to this day with their relative.

Lower Recidivism Rates. Child protection recidivism refers to subsequent involvement with child welfare services in cases involving child maltreatment where a family intervention has previously occurred. Felix, a Family Assessment unit supervisor, cited reduced maltreatment reoccurrence rates due to collaborative work with tribes across the ICWA staff, indicating that outcomes from collaborative efforts were positive.

I know that our ICWA unit is looking at their numbers for repeat maltreatment in particular. ... I think those numbers are getting better. And I would say, anecdotally, when I think about the work that's done on the floor [“on the floor” refers to relational work with tribes done by county social workers], partnering with tribal social workers is extremely impactful.

Negative Relationships Led to Worse Outcomes. Respondents also underscored how negative relationships resulted in worse outcomes. Sage, an Indigenous social worker, discussed

the consequences of a county worker's negative relationship with a tribal partner, stating that, "Our family shouldn't see a negative relationship; they should see it as that we're working with them [tribal workers] for them [the family]." And so, she went on,

I feel like if our family sees us and feels that we're not working together, they're going to [feel a] lack [of] trust between one agency or the other. For the family itself, I think it does make a difference for them. They're probably going to be hesitant of who's telling the truth and who is really looking out for the best interest of my [sic] family, if the county and the tribe can't get along. So, I definitely think it [a positive relationship] is important.

Sage also elaborated on how a lack of collaboration could potentially delay court decisions. "I could one-hundred percent agree that if that relationship is not well, it could definitely put a toll on permanency or a future for the family," she explained, adding that:

I mean, nothing is more embarrassing when you go to the courts and they [the judge] say, "Okay, tribe [tribal social worker], what do you think?" And for them to say, "Well, I don't know. I haven't talked to the [county] social worker." You know, yeah, it can definitely put things off [i.e., delay hearings and progress in court]. So, I mean, if you get along and you have that relationship and communication, I mean, it works a lot smoother for the family.

Discussion

Primary Contributions to the Field

This research focused on the working relationship between American Indian tribes and public child protection services (CPS) agencies with specialized units servicing families eligible

under the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). In brief, I found that agencies with specialized ICWA units had numerous interactions between their CPS staff and American Indian tribes and also maintained a working team focused on and dedicated to ICWA practice. Participating agencies allowed me to interview their staff and examine their practices. I invited several tribes to participate in this study but was unable to either interview tribal staff or get formal tribal input given the limited availability of tribal staff and pressing tribal projects. As such, while I considered interactions only from the public CPS agency perspective, my findings demonstrate characteristics of relationships that the agencies found useful in practice—insights that can help other agencies work more collaboratively with American Indian tribes.

Public CPS agencies with specialized ICWA units are rare in the United States. In searching for examples across America, and after contacting the Department of Human Services or its equivalent in 17 states, I found only six such units. Prior research suggests there may be fewer than 30 ICWA units within the 3,235 counties in the United States (ODS, 2023). Many states with a greater density of American Indians (i.e., a larger percentage of American Indians in the population) likely had an insufficient population within their counties to support a unit dedicated to working with American Indian families.

Two county public CPS agencies participated in this research: one, a large urban agency with American Indian public CPS services that were provided mostly by a single unit, and the second, a mid-sized urban and rural agency with ICWA intake services that were provided within general intake units, as well as ongoing ICWA services that were offered in a specialized unit. Having two different settings and ICWA personnel arrangements afforded me a wider spectrum of county practice along which to examine the process of building and maintaining

relationships with tribes. Finally, my study relied on the Holding Space Framework (HSF), which allowed me to describe and scrutinize working relationships between tribes and public CPS agencies, while also assessing the suitability of the HSF itself, and particularly its application to American Indian child welfare, in that the framework was originally designed for tribal and non-tribal academic research relationships in American Indian public health.

Major Findings

This research produced four major findings from the CPS agency perspective (see Table 4):

1. Participants felt county employment of CPS staff with Indigenous heritage and/or previous employment or internship with tribes (crossover staff) positively improved relationships between public CPS agencies and tribes (see *Two Overarching Emerging Themes* below).
2. Several participants emphasized the importance of county ICWA workers having a passion and commitment for the well-being of Native families and tribes in American Indian child welfare. Commitment, in this regard, would include valuing tribal culture and acknowledging a family's connection to tribal communities, practices and ceremonies is healing, validating, and encouraging of healthy families and children. Commitment drew energy, ideas, and creativity into a partnership and a desire to work together for a common good. This passion was described as leading to improved communication, the resolution of disagreements, and stronger working relationships with tribes (see *Two Overarching Emerging Themes* below).

3. Participants felt positive working relationships with tribes provided positive outcomes for American Indian families and children involved in the child welfare system (see *Research Question 3* below). The perceived outcomes included both better overall experiences for tribal families and examples of positive foster-home outcomes, such as placements avoided, reduced time for reunification with families, voluntary rather than court-ordered services, and reduced recidivism (i.e., lower levels of repeated child maltreatment).
4. The Holding Space Framework, developed for tribal and non-tribal academic research relationships in the field of American Indian public health proved suitable for extension into the domain of American Indian child welfare. In particular, it provided a lens for public CPS agencies to better understand and improve working relationships with American Indian tribes (see *Research Question 5* below).

Table 4

Major Findings

Overarching Themes:	
<p>Interview data yielded two overarching themes. First, participants felt CPS staff with Indigenous heritage who had previously been employed by or interned with tribes had a positive effect on relationships between agencies and tribes, and second, it is essential for county ICWA staff to demonstrate a commitment to Native families and Tribes by working to improve Native families' lives and well-being.</p>	
Major Findings	Sub-findings
<p>1. Participants felt county employment of CPS staff with Indigenous heritage and/or previous employment or internship with tribes (crossover staff) positively improved relationships between public CPS agencies and tribes.</p>	<p>(a) Indigenous staff and crossover staff had a significant positive impact on tribal relationships and on the agency's ICWA practice. (b) It was critical for American Indian communities to have county staff that understood and appreciated American Indian heritage. (c) County staff with Native heritage had different lived experiences than did their non-Native staff counterparts. (d) Indigenous individuals in leadership positions positively impacted compliance with ICWA. (e) Crossover employees brought previously established tribal relationships with them to their practice in the county office. (f) Participants in this research felt that their experiences allowed employees to offer more culturally sensitive services and put them in a position to receive better cultural practice guidance from Indigenous persons in leadership positions.</p>
<p>2. Several participants emphasized the importance of having a passion and commitment for the well-being of Native families and tribes in American Indian child welfare.</p>	<p>(a) Commitment included valuing tribal culture. (b) Commitment acknowledged a child's and family's connection to tribal communities, cultural practices, and ceremonies as healing, validating, and encouraging of healthy families and children. (c) Commitment drew energy, ideas, and creativity into a partnership and a desire to work together for a common good. (d) Commitment led to improved communication, the resolution of disagreements, and stronger working relationships with tribes.</p>
<p>3. Participants felt positive working relationships with tribes provided favorable outcomes for families.</p>	<p>(a) Positive tribal partnerships provided better experiences for Native families with child welfare interventions. (b) Participants gave examples of positive foster-care placement outcomes, such as placements avoided, faster family reunification, voluntary rather than court-ordered services, and reduced recidivism.</p>
<p>4. The Holding Space Framework developed for tribal and non-tribal academic research relationships involving American Indian public health proved suitable for extension into American Indian child welfare by allowing CPS agencies to better understand and improve relationships with American Indian tribes.</p>	<p>(a) In their working relationship with tribes, specialized ICWA units and mixed units provided evidence of all three pillars of the Holding Space Framework. (b) After the explanation of the framework, responses to focused questions about each of the pillars underscored how prevalent and necessary the three pillars were in the participants' ICWA practice.</p>

Overarching Themes:

Interview data yielded two overarching themes. First, participants felt CPS staff with Indigenous heritage who had previously been employed by or interned with tribes had a positive effect on relationships between agencies and tribes, and second, it is essential for county ICWA staff to demonstrate a commitment to Native families and Tribes by working to improve Native families' lives and well-being.

Major Findings	Sub-findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">(c) Responses provided a path for creatively building and maintaining tribal relationships.(d) Using the Holding Space Framework in the domain of American Indian child welfare affords greater depth and yields more comprehensive explanations of tribal-CPS agency working relationships while also offering direction regarding how to evaluate and improve them.

Two Primary, Overarching Themes

Using interview data from public CPS agency employees, in addition to answering the five research questions (see Table 1, p. 51), my research yielded two overarching themes involving, specifically (a) the effect of staff with Indigenous heritage and of staff with previous tribal child welfare employment; and (b) the need for a commitment to Native families and tribes with a desire to improve their lives and well-being.

The Effect of Staff With Indigenous Heritage and of Staff With Previous Tribal Child Welfare Employment

Participants said Indigenous staff and crossover staff had a significant, essential, and invaluable positive impact on tribal relationships and on the agency's ICWA practice. Mara, an Indigenous program manager, strongly felt that to understand the life and issues of American Indian families, practitioners of ICWA had to understand and appreciate Indigenous heritage. In her words, "It's critical for our communities to have people [in county child welfare] who have lived the lifestyle." Amy, a social worker, drawing on her own experiences as an Indigenous person, said that she felt comfortable discerning which services might be helpful and beneficial—and knew "how to find that information" because it was her own community. She said her lived experience was not the same experience as that of her non-Native counterparts.

Elizabeth said Indigenous people in leadership positions acted with strong reminders of ICWA law when making hard decisions in child custody matters, adding that such leaders had the value of lived experience: an experience you "can't get any other way" that "becomes imparted through their supervision" and that can be "just really, really helpful." Indigenous

county staff often showed their strong connection to American Indian families and tribes by referring to them as *our people* and *our community* instead of *clients* or *cases*.

Participants said crossover employees had established positive tribal relationships during previous employment or internships with tribes and that they brought those relationships and their view of child welfare practice with them to their work at the county. Many crossover employees were also tribal members, and some had worked longer in tribal employment than with the county. Participants in this research felt those experiences allowed employees to offer more culturally sensitive services and put them in a position to receive better cultural practice guidance from Indigenous persons in leadership positions.

Though most participants felt their tribal relationships continued to be positive, some thought certain county policies or decisions negatively affected participant relationships with tribes and required extra effort to restore the relationship. Indigenous and crossover county employees seemed especially to understand the significance and importance of tribal sovereignty and were strong advocates in promoting recognition of tribal sovereignty and collaboration in ICWA practice. Indigenous and crossover staff were far more aware than were non-Indigenous staff of racism and micro-aggressions present within the county and their voices added to the pressure to internally address such practices. These staff, with knowledge of tribal culture and tribal ways and historical trauma, were better able to build trusting relationships with tribal staff. They were consulted on work with American Indian families and tribes.

Commitment to Native Families and Tribes: Desire to Improve Their Lives and Well-Being

The second overarching theme of this research was the firm belief by several social workers that essential to positive relationships with tribes was a heart-felt, passionate

commitment to American Indian tribes and families. Daenerys stated, “They have to care about Native American families. They have to care. I mean, I think it's as simple as that. They have to care about Native American families.” Gabriel said knowledge of ICWA “is secondary to passion . . . to a desire to do this work, not just taking a job. I want to be in the ICWA unit because I want to service tribal families and tribal communities.” Additionally, Mara responded, “Why do I continue to do this work? . . . It's connected to learning more about my culture and being reconnected and healing.” “It's like it's my responsibility,” she added. “I am here because of the Creator, so this is my responsibility to do this work and pay back to my community.”

Included in the passion for the well-being of families is valuing tribal culture and acknowledging a child’s and family’s connection to tribal communities, cultural practices, and ceremonies as healing, validating, and encouraging of healthy families and children. Amy said, “You don't have to believe, but there has to be this recognition that these services are beneficial and useful.” Tribes and tribal partners can sense by a worker’s statements and actions the worker’s attitude about Indian people and their culture. Commitment draws energy, ideas, and creativity into a partnership and a desire to work together for a common good.

Disparities Persist in Public American Indian Child Welfare Despite Belief of Improved County-Tribal Working Relationships

While not arising as a central theme, both Mara and Sofia, in positions of authority within county agencies, lamented that, despite all the changes they had made, negative disproportional child maltreatment and foster-care statistics persisted for their American Indian families. In Minnesota in 2021, American Indian children were about 2% of the state’s population but were 6% of the children reported to child protection (Minnesota Department of Health and Human

Services - Children and Family Services Division, 2023). Also in that year, though there had been a decline in the number of American Indian children in out-of-home care, Native children were in care at a rate 16 times higher than White children based on their racial proportional population (Minnesota Department of Human Services - Children and Family Services Division, 2023). The continuation of racial disparities probably has several causes, such as internal agency characteristics, larger community issues, and systemwide child welfare factors that resist movement toward equity.

Interview discussions touched on positive tribal relationships and strong partnerships but also included comments about pockets of good ICWA practice in parts of county child welfare that implied patterns of less than good work beyond those pockets. Interviews also revealed criticisms of cultural insensitivity during case presentations of by some workers who dealt with American Indian families that ICWA workers could not manage due to high caseload numbers. Also, interviewees mentioned incidents of workers in mixed units avoiding collaborating with tribal workers and making decisions without tribal input. There may have been a lack of understanding of ICWA requirements with respect to the sharing of authority by child welfare staff, or some staff who did not often deal with ICWA-eligible families may have proceeded with a stance of being the primary authority in setting family goals and plans. In both cases such behaviors damaged county-tribal relationships.

Interviews also revealed some indications of pushback against ICWA workers for their deference to tribal opinions and, as well, some questioning of their allegiance to county authority and practice. The effect of such pressure could transform cooperation into antagonism, creating competitive winners and losers as opposed to the constructive resolution of diverse opinions.

Professional jealousies might also have been part of this story; agency provision of extra funding or reduced caseloads to achieve “active efforts” for supporting tribal families may have been seen as offering unfair advantages for Native families and, in turn, as affording special privilege and higher agency value to ICWA workers.

Racism Within the Agency

Several individuals mentioned differing opinions about feelings of racism within the agency. Some said people of the majority culture did not personally experience racism, did not see racism in the agency, and claimed they, themselves, were not racist, while people of color experienced and talked of frequent experiences of racism and microaggressions during their work within the county. Agencies transitioning from mostly White to multiethnic personnel may face challenges they have not yet learned to handle. Thus, one benefit of an ICWA unit is that it can serve as a safe place to discuss experiences both with families and within the agency and also to receive personal and practice support.

Racism in the Community and Larger Child Welfare System

Child maltreatment must be remedied by community involvement; its roots run deeper than any child welfare agency is equipped to address. Racism and inequality in other domains, such as criminal justice institutions and educational systems, affect racial biases in maltreatment reporting, expectations regarding out-of-home placements for children, and court-ordered reunification plans. Not surprisingly, disparities in racial poverty, unequal access to employment and educational opportunities, and a diminished political voice discourage equity in terms of child welfare outcomes. CPS agency child welfare practices are based in county, state, and

federal laws, and are reflected in governmental funding, and thus racism within such institutions and/or practices, as well as their attendant circumscribing of American Indian political input, harms child welfare.

Comparison of Study Findings With Previous Research

There is a wide gap in published academic literature about CPS agencies with specialized ICWA units and especially their working relationship with tribes. There have been no empirical studies of the optimal personnel organization for implementation of ICWA by public CPS agencies. Only a single study exists on the county use of specialized ICWA units (B. Richardson, 2008). That research found the unit had positive effects in outcomes for American Indian families, but it did not specifically assess the working relationship between the public CPS agency and the American Indian tribes of the families.

This exploratory dissertation addressed the above research gap and has advanced both theory and practice for public CPS agencies in their work with tribes. This research was exploratory and not a program evaluations study; it presented two different public CPS agency personnel organization structures designed for implementation of ICWA. One had intake and ongoing CPS functions for American Indian families within the same specialized ICWA unit, and the other had intake functions performed in generic intake units with ongoing services provided by the specialized ICWA unit. Specifically, I examined how agency staff perceived their working relationship with tribes and tribal staff, their efforts to build relationships, and their thoughts on the outcomes of these relationships.

The Holding Space Framework has a strong empirical basis for describing essentials of tribal external relationships in American Indian public health (J. E. Lucero, 2020; NCAI Policy

Research Center and UNR-CHS, 2018). This study used HSF as a guide, and my findings support the extension of this framework to examine tribal external relationships in child welfare. My findings were consistent with and supported the many examples in the literature of the benefit of collaboration of state and county public service agencies with American Indian service providers (Haight et al., 2018; Lidot et al., 2012; Limb & Brown, 2008; N. M. Lucero & Bussey, 2012; Mindell et al., 2003; B. Richardson, 2008).

Answers to Research Questions

Below are findings regarding each of the five research questions generated from analyses of public CPS agency participant interviews. Note that these findings are based on opinions from employees of public CPS agencies without formal input from tribes, although responses do include opinions from tribal members employed by county agencies.

Research Question 1: What Are the Perspectives of County ICWA Staff on the Current Status of Relationships With Tribes (As Defined by the Holding Space Framework and Its Pillars of Governance, Trust, and Culture)?

The participants in this study held a variety of opinions on their county staff's individual, unit, and agency relationships with tribes and tribal child welfare personnel. Responses presented evidence that personal working relationships with tribes varied depending on several factors, including (a) individual attitudes regarding the importance of tribal relationships; (b) their unit's milieu regarding tribal relationships and ICWA practice; and (c) the supervisory and administrative leadership's direction and efforts in building and maintaining positive working relationships with tribes.

Most staff in this study felt that their personal relationships with tribes were positive and that their partnership with tribal staff was very cooperative and functional. In addition, they felt that the ICWA unit's relationships with tribes were cordial, cooperative, and productive and that the unit promoted strong collaboration and partnerships with tribes. Opinions about the mixed units' tribal relationships were that they were mostly positive depending on the individual's attitude toward working with tribes and tribal families. Family assessment intake units supported strong collaboration. The investigation intake unit's support for collaboration depended more on the individual social worker's attitude toward working with tribes. Many workers had strong tribal relationships, and some workers avoided taking ICWA cases and developing tribal relationships (see pp. 96–97).

Participants felt that supervisors had positive relationships with tribes and promoted collaboration with them within their units. Participants' views of their agency's relationship with tribes varied both between the two agencies and among staff within the agencies. Staff from one agency felt their agency gave mixed signals about partnering with tribes while staff in the second agency generally felt their agency made notable efforts to build tribal relationships and improve ICWA practice.

The Lens of the HSF. This section discusses the aspects of tribal–county relationships through the lens of the HSF and its pillars of governance, trust, and culture. As explained in more detail above, the *governance* pillar acknowledges that tribes are sovereign nations with the authority to govern their own people and land. In off-reservation child protection, public CPS agencies and tribes share responsibility and authority in child welfare interventions as prescribed in federal and state rules and regulations (e.g., ICWA, MIFPA, and BIA guidelines).

The *trust* pillar asserts a belief and confidence in the notion that partners will do what they have committed to do. Trust builds over time from observations that partners' actions and manner are consistent with their promises, and it rests on open, truthful interactions while also offering a mechanism to resolve differences as they arise. With CPS–tribal relationships, trust should mean that tribes expect that CPS will, at a minimum, follow ICWA and BIA Guidelines and that CPS will honor the cultural child welfare expertise of tribal staff.

The *culture* pillar for CPS–tribal relationships stresses that family engagement and services be consistent with each family's cultural identity. Cultural sensitivity includes valuing the importance of a child's connection to his or her Native culture and tribe. Cultural assessments of child development and parenting practices accept developmental markers, parenting styles, and service plans that vary from those of the majority culture.

Governance. Program managers explicitly stated it was their mission for the agency to partner with tribes. Supervisors stated they expected workers in their units to collaborate with tribes and make joint decisions regarding American Indian families. Several workers emphasized that engaging in frequent communications with tribal partners and seeking their opinions were central to building and maintaining good relationships. Tribal staff were included at several case decision points (e.g., whether to open a case, creating the elements of the service plan, and whether and/or where to place American Indian children outside of their home).

Interviews revealed incidents of non-collaboration as well. Staff and tribes reacted to an agency decision to change child welfare practice without prior discussion with tribal partners. Interviewees commented on how some social workers in mixed units had not wanted to take ICWA cases and had not collaborated with tribes while intervening with tribal families. One

supervisor discussed the challenge for some workers to share authority. That said, participants generally presented their ICWA practice as one of joint collaboration and decision-making with tribal partners.

Trust. From the agency's point of view, a predominant opinion was that the tribes were experts on their culture and their people. County staff trusted the knowledge and opinions of their tribal partners regarding the dynamics of tribal families, the best engagement strategies, and appropriate cultural practices and resources. Several participants mentioned long-standing relationships with tribal staff and Indigenous and crossover workers bringing those relationships with them and using them in their employment at the county.

Several participants spoke of the need for county workers to know the history of U.S. assimilation policies and historical trauma experienced by American Indian people in order to understand the effects of these episodes on present-day tribal–county relationships and to therefore appreciate the tribes' reticence to trust CPS agency interventions with their families. Some workers spoke about needing to work hard to earn tribal and family trust and to engage in ways that acknowledged and allowed that distrust. One worker was very surprised when he learned that a family revealed to him that they thought he was at their home to take away their children, a reality experienced by many American Indian families during the boarding school era and one that has not been forgotten by tribal families.

Culture. Participants offered strong statements regarding the importance of county ICWA practitioners demonstrating cultural sensitivity. American Indian community members and Indigenous staff stated their desire for the county to hire workers who had American Indian family life experience. Some felt teaching non-culturally aware workers to become aware was

done on the backs of the American Indian families and worked ultimately to their detriment.

Monica Joan said worker cultural sensitivity was as important as communication.

These sentiments initiated county policies for workers to attend tribal events such as powwows on work time and to support tribes with tables at their events. Other culture-building activities were potluck lunches with tribes, having tribal elders meet with ICWA units, and having Native ceremonies at meetings. Staff with ICWA responsibilities attended specialized cultural ICWA child welfare conferences where they engaged in workshops on Indigenous history, language, and spirituality. These culturally enhancing staff policies and activities were enabled by having Indigenous people in positions of authority (i.e., as supervisors and program managers).

A second theme revealed from these interviews was the importance of culturally appropriate service plans for families. Respondents saw the tribes as the best source for cultural services with increasingly more services being offered by tribes and tribal communities. Tribal partners provided cultural alternatives like families or children meeting with tribal elders and participating in tribal ceremonies. Connection of children with their culture was seen as an important developmental step and provided effective mental health and spiritual support. As Amy put it during an interview, “You don’t have to believe, but there has to be this recognition that these services are beneficial and useful.” County staff support of tribal services brought about stronger tribal relationships by validating tribal roles and values, a stance markedly different from racist and colonized child welfare practice.

Research Question 2: How Important to the County CPS Agency Is the Working Relationship Between the Agency and Tribes?

The two county CPS agencies considered in this study were complex institutions that maintained many units and programs and that registered various thoughts on tribal relationships. Differences appeared within the children and family services divisions and between that division and other supporting divisions, such as the county attorney's office and offices dealing with accounting or licensing, for example. Participants in the study, however, were more uniform in stating that positive working relationships with tribes were very important to them, and they presented examples of building and maintaining those relationships. Participants also felt that tribal relationships generally were important to their units as a whole with variance regarding workers within some units who avoided taking ICWA cases and regarding certain workers in non-ICWA specific units who took overflow ICWA cases (cases beyond the capacity of ICWA workers to accept).

Several participants felt that the strongest tribal relationships were those between the specialized ICWA units and tribes; individuals in these units had more opportunities and a greater need for frequent tribal communication in their daily work. Specialized ICWA units also provided a forming and norming group for mutual emotional support, as well as for improving practice by identifying cultural nuances in cases and addressing microaggressions. In the words of Sofia, "There's kind of this group mentality . . . like they hold each other accountable. . . . So, I feel like the relationship[s] amongst them and tribal partners are really good and really, I think, positive."

The mixed units also showed strong examples of collaboration with tribes and were instrumental in building and maintaining tribal relationships. On this, Ann observed, "I feel like the culture of our unit, ICWA, was no longer a separate thing that somebody else does," adding

that, “it is ingrained in the souls that they work with tribes, and they work with families in the way they do. And that's what it needs to look like to really be successful.” Importantly, participants from all three roles (program managers, supervisors, and social workers) gave examples of how their agency promoted collaboration with tribes (see *Research Question 4*, below).

And yet, my research also revealed contrary opinions on the value of tribal relationships to the agency. These difference perspectives included descriptions of the agency implementing practice changes without consulting tribes, delegating meetings with tribes to lower administrative employees, advising workers to rely less on tribal opinions, and avoiding collaboration with tribal staff with respect to certain incidents in case management. In general, though, my investigation located a commitment to working with tribes and tribal members, especially from staff with Indigenous heritage and those with crossover experience.

Several participants stated that commitment to the well-being of tribes and tribal families was an essential characteristic for an ICWA worker. Commitment facilitated the building of trust, the sharing of case authority and responsibility, and the promotion of cultural sensitivity. Some individuals lacking such commitment may have questioned the allegiance of those with commitment and may have viewed them as *anti-county*, untrustworthy co-workers. Situations where county workers or administrators perceived an “us against them” relationship with tribes may have led to staff struggling with building or promoting tribal collaboration. Questioning whether a worker or unit held more allegiance to tribes than to the agency distracted from promoting good practice for the welfare of the family and damaged relationships with tribes. In general, though, through the eyes of the participants, commitment was seen as an essential

ingredient for positive tribal–county relationships. Potential biases are described below in the *Limitations* section, but all of the participants in this study were, by my account, motivated to collaborate with tribes and to seek tribal understanding of how best to assist American Indian families.

Research Question 3: What Are the Perspectives of County ICWA Staff on How Their Relationship With Tribes Affects Outcomes for American Indian Families and Children?

Research results indicated participants felt that positive tribal relationships led to both better child placement outcomes and better experiences for American Indian tribes and families during interactions with public CPS agencies. Participants expressed that positive tribal–county working relationships improved American Indian child county-involved welfare outcomes and spurred achievement of service plan goals. Participants cited examples of avoiding out-of-home placements, higher rates of reunification when placement was necessary, shorter time in placement, and fewer cases brought into court. Those interviewed also mentioned other positive outcomes, such as less recurrence of child maltreatment and a higher rate of American Indian children maintaining connections to their tribes. It must be noted, however, that these impressions regarding child placement outcomes were drawn from the opinions of participants themselves and were verified by neither quantitative analysis of county child welfare outcome statistics nor formal input from tribes.

The second research outcome regarded the experience of families in their involvement with public CPS agencies. Participants noted that when families felt that they were valued, understood, and validated, they had more trust in workers and were more willing to engage in service goals. Families generally welcomed tribal social workers accompanying county workers

and felt supported by their presence. Tribal–county collaboration provided better assessments and clearer goals and tasks for the family. The partnership provided a more culturally appropriate array of services with a better fit for families and offered them a greater opportunity to succeed. Some efforts at improving the experience of families resulted in families reaching out to the partnership when struggles returned.

Annual reports of child welfare outcomes produced by the Minnesota Department of Human Services are quantitative and include numerical data and statistics of maltreatment reports, placements, adoptions, and reunifications; they do not include analyses of family experiences with public CPS agencies. As a result, family experiential outcomes, and their significance in improving family well-being, have often gone un- or under-recognized. Participants in this study, however, emphasized the importance of these outcomes, especially staff of Indigenous heritage and crossover staff with a keen historical awareness of U.S. assimilation policies, an understanding of the impact of historical trauma, and a recognition of tendencies to label American Indian parenting and spiritual practices as inferior. Those wishing to change the family experience hoped to have families pursue help and support when things were bad rather than running to avoid having their children removed, as had been the case during boarding school times.

Research Question 4: How Does a Public CPS Agency With a Specialized ICWA Unit Build and Maintain a Constructive Working Relationship With Tribes?

To build and maintain constructive working relationships with tribes, agencies in this study used a combination of agency-management strategies and worker-level casework strategies while also identifying certain attitudinal characteristics. A common agency strategy was to

establish regular periodic meetings with tribes so as to work together as partners. Meetings were held monthly with tribes with whom public CPS agencies had several families in common and were held quarterly or less often with other tribes. Public CPS agencies traveled to tribal reservations for some of these meetings even though reservations were often several hours away. Agency staff found that visiting distant tribal lands gave them a better understanding of tribal roots and the environments of families from those tribes. Many meetings started with a Native ceremony, which honored tribal culture and set the tone for productive collaborative dialogue.

Another agency strategy was hiring employees with Indigenous heritage, experience, or training, an approach that (a) increased cultural sensitivity in the course of county practice and decision making; (b) embedded county staff into rich, productive tribal relationships; and (c) incentivized other Indigenous candidates to apply for child protection positions. Other strategies included collaborating with tribes on the county Program Improvement Plan (PIP), having tribal staff present at child maltreatment report screenings and other case decision points, having a tribal social worker embedded with county staff, crediting work time for county staff's attendance at tribal events, and participating in other tribal relationship-building activities.

Casework practice strategies for staff included (a) introducing themselves to tribes and tribal workers who had not yet met them; (b) building relationships before getting into serious discussions with tribal staff; (c) continuing to build relationships even if efforts were at first unsuccessful; (d) teaming with tribal staff in family contacts and discussions about families; (e) constantly communicating with tribal staff to keep them fully informed; (f) providing clear and respectful communication to tribal partners; (g) listening to tribal voices when making decisions regarding families; and (h) following through with commitments to tribes.

Attitudes and beliefs that participants felt were essential for working with tribal families and communities were (a) demonstrating a recognition that cultural modalities and connection to tribe are beneficial and effective for American Indian families; (b) showing respect for tribal families when discussing child maltreatment; and (c) acknowledging that all tribes are different and adjusting relationships to meet individual tribal needs.

Research Question 5: Are the HSF and Its Pillars of Governance, Trust, and Culture a Good Fit for Describing the Relationship Between Public CPS Agencies and Tribes?

Early in the interviews, I asked participants to describe their working relationship with tribal partners without defining the term *working relationships*. This required participants to use whatever constructs for the term were already present in their minds. After their responses, I gave them an abbreviated description of the HSF and probed for examples of the pillars of governance, trust, and culture in their work with American Indian tribes and families. This method offered interviewees the opportunity to assess whether the HSF was consistent with ideas of tribal relationships commonly held by child welfare staff, while also giving insight into what enhancements, if any, the framework provided.

The initial descriptions revealed practices that fit within the characteristics of governance, trust, and culture. Considering governance, treating tribal partners as equal case managers, meeting families together, if possible, seeking out their ideas and voice when creating service plans, and making case decisions together was a recurring theme. Considering trust, several participants said that following the advice of the tribe showed trust in tribal opinions with regard to what was best for families. Regarding culture, several participants mentioned and gave examples of culturally sensitive practice and stressed how important it was for county workers to

perform non-colonizing ICWA practice. The presence of the pillars in the initial comments supports the use of the HSF as consistent with common ICWA staff constructs of tribal–county working relationships.

The focused questions about the three HSF pillars in their tribal relationships underscored how prevalent and necessary the three pillars were in their ICWA practice at their agency. An example of the utility of the HSF was that many participants initially responded that regular meetings with tribes were important in building relationships with tribes. The focused questions of the HSF provided a deeper understanding in terms of how to perceive meetings as an opportunity to share ideas and authority (governance), build comity among partners (trust), and provide tailored service plans and county staff learning rooted in American Indian tradition (culture). The pillars offered a deeper meaning and interpretation of relationships with tribes and may have suggested potential paths for improving them.

Probing for evidence of governance produced detailed responses regarding the sharing of authority at intake meetings and at other case-decision points, thus offering another example of the eliciting of a deeper response. Probing for examples of culture produced details of tribal resources and a tribal partner’s role in producing culturally sensitive plans. Using the HSF lens revealed the in-depth descriptions detailed in Research Question 1 above (p. 178) and the responses discussed in Research Question 3, *How to build and maintain working relationships with tribes* (p. 185).

In summary, using the HSF in American Indian child welfare afforded greater depth and fuller explanations of tribal–CPS agency working relationships while also offering direction regarding how to evaluate and improve such interactions and associations. The HSF was

developed to describe necessary qualities in relationships between tribes and outside researchers for successful public health projects for tribal communities. This study demonstrates its usefulness in extending the framework to public child welfare. This is the first study that has used the HSF in that context, and these findings can guide future research oriented toward both evaluating and building (or maintaining) tribal–CPS agency working relationships to achieve or improve American Indian child welfare outcomes.

Limitations

The findings of this research were limited by my inability to obtain tribes' formal input regarding their views and experiences regarding working relationships with public CPS agencies. I approached four Minnesota tribes and requested permission to interview staff about their view of county relationships, but each of them responded that they did not have the staff time to dedicate to this research because they were addressing other tribal priorities. My findings, therefore, were derived—and are thus presented—from the perspective of the service providers only and should not be construed as necessarily supported (nor contested) by the recipients of the family and child welfare interventions within American Indian tribes.

A second limiting factor is that my research sample was not selected at random. Participants were volunteers. The ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous staff in the sample was probably greater than that of participating units overall. The topic of this study may have drawn volunteers who had positive tribal relationships or who wanted to support the practice of building positive relationships with tribes. County staff less attentive to tribal relationships may have not seen value in the outcome of this research and could have, as such, avoided participation. This potential bias could have been compounded by the fact that both agencies expected staff to

collaborate with tribes, meaning that, in answering my questions, participants may have been influenced to respond positively toward tribal relationships because, for one thing, that was their job and, for another, they knew their replies were being recorded and studied even though their identities were hidden. Third and finally, only two counties participated in this study. While such results can provide valuable information, the smaller number can also make it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions.

Implications for Child Welfare Practice With Native Families

This study has presented understandings, ideas, and strategies that other public CPS agencies can use to build or maintain relationships with tribes. All public CPS agencies are subject to the ICWA, and by that legal mandate they have requisite tribal interactions and resulting working relationships regarding American Indian families. This study also supports the notion that public CPS agencies should employ staff from tribes and Native communities and candidates who have experience with Native culture and who have worked with Native people. Some ideas to achieve greater representation of Native peoples in such agencies include (a) sending verbal or written recruitment notices of openings to tribes and community agencies and Indigenous scholastic programs; (b) presenting information about county ICWA programs at colleges and universities; (c) having social workers spend a significant portion of their orientation at tribal offices; (d) creating culturally supportive job classifications that give credit for cultural experience in lieu of academic degrees; and (e) engaging in joint ICWA projects with tribes.

High-level public CPS agency administrators (human service department directors and ICWA program directors at the highest level) should meet with tribal counterparts to become

fully aware of relationship issues and to recognize the importance of the tribe to the county. Put simply, Public CPS agencies should become more *Native friendly*, meaning they should (a) actively promote and support tribal activities and events occurring in their region, (b) have Native artifacts, posters, and symbols in their buildings following the guidance of local tribes for appropriateness, (c) allow Indigenous staff to practice ceremonies within county perimeters, and (d) subscribe to American Indian newspapers and magazines and make these materials available to staff.

Further Research

This research has pointed toward numerous practicable suggestions for improving American Indian child welfare practices. In the future, I hope that tribes might participate in and even lead or co-lead studies such as this one, thus providing input that is essential to revealing a fuller understanding of tribal–CPS agency relationships and the ways such interactions and associations might improve the welfare of tribal families. Other areas of further research might include investigating (a) the effect of specialized Indian child welfare MSW programs on ICWA practice; (b) the experiences of Indigenous personnel in positions of authority in a mostly White county administration; (c) the processes of a mostly White child welfare agency transitioning to a multiethnic orientation in services; (d) best practices for dealing with internal racism within a child welfare agency; and (e) comparisons of the delivery of services between specialized ICWA units and non-specialized units.

Generalizability

Tribes and agencies are unique, as are the relationships that comprise and connect them, and thus these findings might only be generalizable to the extent that other child welfare units

perceive themselves as similar to the study group. No public CPS agency should expect outcomes identical to the participating agencies in this study, but also all public CPS agencies should gain some benefit from these findings in terms of applying them to their working relationships with tribes. Some factors that may affect generalizability are agency size, the population and concentration of American Indian families in the region studied, geographical size, geographical location, ratio of American Indian county staff, specific tribal identities relevant to the regions studied, historical timing and relevance (this study was conducted from 2022 to 2024), and urban or rural setting.

Conclusion

The Problem

The rate of out-of-home placement for American Indian children and involvement of their families in public child protection services has continued to be significantly greater for American Indian children and families than for any other racial group, which indicates that public child welfare is not meeting the needs of American Indian families and children.

Research Results

These results indicate that public CPS agency working relationships with tribes matter greatly in providing culturally appropriate engagement and services for American Indian families and children—and also that they influence outcomes. Indigenous employees and crossover employees in public CPS agencies, especially those in positions of authority, can significantly enhance relationships with tribes and the provision of collaborative cultural services. The HSF provides a lens to better understand tribal and external partner relationships in child welfare.

Contribution to American Indian Child Welfare

This research provides insights into working relationships between public child protection agencies and tribes working with American Indian families and children, and how the HSF sheds light on the important issues of governance, trust, and culture essential to those relationships and can be used to improve ICWA practice. Finally, this study offered knowledge and specific examples and methods for other public CPS agencies to draw on in their efforts to build and maintain their tribal relationships, to achieve better outcomes, and to create better experiences for American Indian children and families.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Statement (given verbally at start of interview)

You are invited to participate in a research study that examines working relationships between county child welfare agencies and tribes. You have been selected because you are a member of a unit of social workers that work specifically with American Indian families and tribes and implement the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

This study investigates the creation of public child protective services ICWA units and their working relationship with tribes in providing positive outcomes for American Indian families. The study seeks information about the sharing with tribal staff of responsibilities, the level of trust, the cultural sensitivity of family plans and services (a framework for viewing relationships with tribes) and the participant's thoughts on resulting outcomes for Native families.

Procedures:

If you consent, your part in the study will include an individual interview regarding your practice or knowledge of agency practice in working with tribal partners in the service of Native families. The interview will last approximately an hour and will be conducted through Zoom software to facilitate interview scheduling, reduce the burden on participants and the researcher, and to be consistent with COVID-19 protocols that may be in effect at the time of interview. You have the right to refuse participation or stop participating at any time. You may have your comments discarded at any point during or after the interview. You will be provided with a transcript within one month of completing your interview for you to make suggested edits. The results of this study reported in aggregate) may be published in peer reviewed journals and used

in future studies. The results hopefully will be used as a guide for other agencies in working with tribal partners. Your identity will be protected or changed to remain anonymous. If I use a quote from your interview, I will make sure that the quote does not reveal your identity. Your interview and study data will be stored on a password protected secure server or separate storage device.

Because of public policy, I cannot offer you money or gifts for your time and participation. I do, though, offer you the opportunity, by being in this study, to be part of identifying optimal ICWA practice and educating other counties about working with tribes for better outcomes for American Indian children, families, and tribes. With your and your agency's consent, you may be asked follow-up questions. You and your agency will be given the study results and may be asked about the validity of interpretations.

If you have questions at any time, please feel free to contact me. My contact information is David Glesener, PhD Candidate, U of Minnesota, (218) 591-2858, dglesene@umn.edu.

If you would like to talk to someone other than me regarding this study or your interview, you are encouraged to contact: The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board, Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, (612) 625-1650, irb@umn.edu. I will provide you with a copy of this consent statement as well as my contact information.

Do you give your consent to this interview and be a participant in this research?

Appendix B

Interview Guide

- 1) Start with the Informed Consent Script (Appendix A) and ask for participant response.
- 2) “Some of these questions might sound similar to one another, so if a question sounds similar, please add anything additional that you have to say.”
- 3) Initial survey questions.
 - a. What is your age?
 - i. Fill in age in years
 - b. How do you identify?
 - i. As a woman
 - ii. As a man
 - iii. Other designation (please describe if you would be willing)
 - c. What is your race? (Choose all that apply.)
 - i. White
 - ii. African-American
 - iii. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - iv. Asian
 - v. Other (please describe)
 - d. Do you have Hispanic heritage?
 - i. Yes
 - ii. No
 - e. Do you identify with a certain ethnicity or culture?

- i. Yes (please describe)
 - ii. No
- f. What is your educational background? Check all that apply.
 - i. No post-secondary degree
 - ii. Bachelor of social work degree
 - iii. Bachelor's degree in a field other than social work
 - iv. Master of social work degree
 - v. Master's degree in a field other than social work
 - vi. Other advanced degree and field
- g. How long have been a child welfare professional in any setting?
 - i. Fill in length of time in years
- h. How long have you been a child welfare professional in this agency?
 - i. Fill in length of time in months or years
- i. (For case workers) how long have you been a specialized ICWA social worker?
 - i. Fill in length of time in months or years
- j. What is your professional role in this agency?
 - i. Enter brief description of professional role
 - ii. Enter formal title
- k. (For case workers) how many American Indian families are usually on your caseload each month?
 - i. Enter number of families

End of online survey questions.

- 4) What brought you to working with American Indian families and the ICWA unit?
- 5) Other than through your job responsibilities, do you have a relationship or connection to an American Indian tribe, community, or tribal culture? If so, please describe.
- 6) In your opinion, how would you describe your agency's working relationship with tribes? How have you come to that opinion? How do you measure the strength of the relationship? If you have different relationships with different tribes, what are the factors creating differences?
- 7) How important is the working relationship between the agency and tribes to the to the agency? What indicators do you see that leads you to this opinion? In what ways is the relationship important to you?
- 8) In your opinion, how does the relationship of specialized ICWA workers with the tribe affect outcomes for Native children and families? What examples have your experienced on your caseload or in the agency that show the impact of the relationship on outcomes?
- 9) In your opinion, what does an optimal working relationship with tribes look like? How does your agency build and maintain working relationships with tribal partners? How do you personally build and maintain working relationships with tribal partners?
- 10) Is tribal voice incorporated into your service plans? How does that work? Who makes what decisions? How do workers and tribes make shared decisions? Which ICWA requirements are the hardest to implement? What advice do you have for other counties on ICWA implementation?

11) How would you describe the level of trust between the agency and tribes, and vice versa?

What are some specific examples where you have observed trust? What are some specific examples where you have observed distrust?

12) How important is cultural relevance in your work? [Probe: How do you (or your staff)

become culturally aware or remain culturally relevant? Have you attended any

Native/Indigenous activities or cultural events? If so, tell me more about that. How often?

What kinds? Which ones? Who attends? What is that like? Is participation encouraged by the agency? What is the impact of such activities on your work? Do you feel that you provide culturally sensitive practices and services to American Indian families? If so, please explain.

What role does the tribe play in ensuring the cultural appropriateness of the service plan?

13) What kind of special trainings or mentoring do ICWA workers receive, if any? Are local

tribes involved in training? How do you become aware of culturally sensitive services and programs? How do you learn which schools, teachers, mental health providers are supportive of native students and culture? Which are not sensitive or supportive? What kinds of such trainings have you participated in? Which ones were particularly effective and why, which ones were particularly ineffective and why?

14) What qualities and characteristics does a specialized ICWA unit need to provide optimal services to American Indian families? How are these qualities and characteristics different from those needed by regular child welfare services?

15. May I contact you for follow-up questions or clarifications? Would you be willing to read a transcript of this interview or a draft of my results section to provide comments later?

Appendix C -- Glossary

Active efforts – a level of service provision required of CPS agencies for families eligible under ICWA. This service level requires greater assistance to families than *reasonable services*, the standard for families not eligible for ICWA

ARMHS – Area Regional Mental Health Services, a service program for adult needing mental health services

Child out-of-home placement – placement of a child into a setting away from their custodians, ex. gr. foster care, group home care, or residential treatment

Colonized ICWA practice – ICWA practice based on a Western world view that included disregard and replacement of Indigenous culture and way of life. Examples are severing an American Indian child’s connection to their family and tribe by placing them in foster care when supportive services could allow the child to remain with family members or, if foster care is necessary, disallowing family contact.

CPS – Child Protective Services, a state or county managed public agency responsible for responding to child maltreatment reports and interventions

Crossover worker – a public CPS agency employee with previously work experience or internship at a tribe or American Indian community agency

FA – the Family Assessment service or the person or team performing this service

HSF – the Holding Space Framework, the theoretical lens used in this resource to discuss tribal-county relationships.

ICWA – the Indian Child Welfare Act or relating to the Act if used as an adjective

IIU – Initial Intervention Units, units that handle intake responsibilities including assignment of programs and conducting initial family contacts. In one county these functions for American Indian families were included in the ICWA unit, while in the other, IIU were the generic units handling all incoming child welfare cases.

Intake – social work position or unit that deals with incoming reports of child maltreatment.

INV – the Investigation function or the person or team doing child maltreatment investigations.

On-going CP – service or social worker or unit providing the service for families involved in child protection services that need longer term services and are transferred from intake workers. These are cases where there is court involvement and/or child out-of-home placement. This process requires more than one social worker in the duration of the family's involvement in CPS. Some innovative counties are experimenting with having a single social worker from start to finish to avoid disruptions caused in plans or engagement by switching workers and/or units.

PIP – Program Improvement Plan, a county improvement plan following periodic state assessments of county child welfare services. Counties are required to obtain tribal input, especially regarding ICWA implementation.

Police hold – In Minnesota, in emergency situations police have the legal power to remove children from their homes. The procedure often includes a form filled out by a social worker describing the situation. The removal is authorized by a signature of the police officer. The officer and social worker usually go out to the home or location of the child together.

Reasonable services – the level of service required to be provided by public CPS agencies to families engaged with child protective services.

Safety Planning – process of setting up a plan for safety of children after maltreatment report.

Screening – The first part of a case intake process where county staff determine whether the allegations in the child maltreatment report meet the legal requirements to open a case in child protection or is eligible for other programs that the agency offers.