



## The Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies: Systems change through a relational Anishinaabe worldview

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### ABSTRACT

The dramatic overrepresentation of Indigenous families in North American governmental child welfare systems remains one of the most pressing and neglected issues facing Tribal Nations, child welfare policymakers and practitioners today. This paper is the third in a series of three papers (Authors) presenting an ethnographic study of the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies in the Department of Social Work, University of Minnesota – Duluth. The current paper focuses on the perspectives of the Center's staff and allies, which is grounded in an Anishinaabe worldview, on the process of systems change in child welfare. It draws upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 participants with diverse roles and extended relationships with the Center. Participants provided knowledge and wisdom on how to create and sustain trusting, collaborative relationships within sovereign Tribal Nations, county and state child welfare systems. They described how Center staff members are then able to create bridges (mesosystems) across Indigenous communities and child welfare systems with the trust built within each of those systems. These mesosystems are sustained over time through continued opportunities for engagement and collaboration. These processes are illustrated through several case exemplars of change affected by the Center, tribes and their collaborators: state legislation to strengthen ICWA, implementation of statewide continuing education for child welfare professionals, and an innovative ICWA court. The primary barrier to system change noted by participants is structural racism. Advice for those motivated to support systems change includes establishing close links with Indigenous communities.

### 1. Introduction

At the end of the day the overarching thing is the broken system. It's hard to work magic when everything's broken. There's so many barriers, not just for families, but for workers who are trying to do good practice. And then you throw in a person of color into this broken system with systemic racism. It's just like that hill turned into a mountain with an avalanche coming down at you and you're still at the end of the day just trying to do good practice and work with families on what's best for them (Jane, Indigenous social worker, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) supervisor).

Child welfare is so adversarial. The structure is so compliance-based. It doesn't get to how things are happening and why they happen. I've met very few if any social workers who ever became social workers because they just really wanted to exercise their power. But the system itself? There's a whole bunch of really good people who want to make a

difference in people's lives, and they're trapped in a system that isn't structured for them to be able to do that (Ellen, white ally and retired social worker).

Despite the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, the persistent, dramatic overrepresentation of Indigenous families in North American governmental child welfare systems remains one of the most pressing and neglected issues facing sovereign Tribal Nations, child welfare policymakers, and practitioners today. A primary goal of the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies (hereafter, "the Center"), located in northern Minnesota, is to reduce these disparities by strengthening child welfare practice with Indigenous children, families and tribal communities, and building tribal capacity. Their work includes the education of future social workers (Haight et al., in progress), and continuing education of current child welfare professionals (see Haight et al., 2019). It also includes addressing the system barriers noted by Jane and Ellen that impede their students' and colleagues'

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effective practice, and harm Indigenous children, families, and communities. In this paper, we focus on the relational, Anishinaabe perspective of the Center's staff and educators on the process of systems change in child welfare through developing and sustaining collaborative relationships across tribal, county and state system boundaries.

### 1.1. Background: Settler colonialism

Indigenous scholars have argued that the current disparate involvement of Indigenous families in child welfare reflects and perpetuates settler colonial goals of Indigenous erasure (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Sinclair, 2004). Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism where settlers come to stay, destroying Indigenous life and replacing it with their own structures, ultimately for land possession (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2011). Since settler colonialism is centered on land possession, the "elimination of the Native," including physical elimination, cultural erasure, and assimilation (Veracini, 2011), is required for uncontested settler access to Indigenous land and resources (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006).

Beginning in the early 1800s and continuing well into the 20th century, U.S. and Canadian governments attempted to forcefully and brutally assimilate Indigenous people. Implementation of official policies disconnected children from their culture and kinship networks through forced removal from their families, displacement from tribal homelands, and mandatory, carceral boarding school attendance (see Bussey & Lucero, 2013; Adams, 1995). The goal was to sever Indigenous children from their families and communities via off-reservation boarding schools so that they could more easily coerce them to adopt the ways of Eurocentric culture (Adams, 1995). During this time, children were not only deprived of the care, nurturance and protection of traditional tribal child rearing practices, many experienced abduction and then emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in militaristic schools. While some children survived, many died from disease, malnutrition, and harsh conditions (Adams, 1995; Child, 1998; Lomawaima, 1994; Smith, 2004).

The forced removal of Indigenous children practiced in the boarding school era, and currently by government child welfare systems, has resulted in widespread historical trauma, that is, the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations... which emanates from massive group trauma" (Brave Heart et al., 2011p. 283), and which continues to affect Indigenous families and communities today. Settler replacement of Indigenous systems and parenting role models, coupled with personal trauma histories, poverty and racism have traumatized generations of Indigenous families (see Bussey & Lucero, 2013). These experiences have seriously damaged both the capacity of many Indigenous families to trust government child welfare agencies and staff members (e.g., Horejsi, Craig & Pablo, 1992), and the capacity of non-Indigenous child welfare agencies and staff to understand the harm settler colonial structures continue to cause to Indigenous communities.

### 1.2. Effecting change in child welfare systems

There is a robust literature on effecting systems change in child welfare. The establishment of shared professional understandings of policies and practices is an important theme in previous change efforts. At the agency level, introducing new practice models (conceptual maps) has clarified and aligned organizational ideology with how the agency's employees, families and stakeholders work together (Annie E. Casey, 2015) (see Sanclimenti, Caceda-Castro, & DeSantis, 2017). At the jurisdictional level, children's outcomes have been improved when collaboration occurs among professionals within the multiple systems serving them, for example, child welfare and juvenile justice (e.g., Cusick, Goerge, & Bell, 2009; Haight, Bidwell, Choi & Cho, 2016; Herz & Ryan, 2008; Nash & Bilchik, 2009). At the agency and jurisdictional levels, introduction of practices associated with implementation

science, such as developing inter-organizational networks, have shown promise for child welfare system change (e.g., Lambert, Richards & Merrill, 2016).

At the national level, systems level change in child welfare has included passage of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) (U. S. Public Law 95-608) in 1978. This law was passed at the insistence of sovereign tribal nations to reduce the involvement of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, halt the removal of Indigenous children from Indigenous communities, and sustain their cultures. ICWA is based on the political status of tribes as sovereign nations, not as ethnic or racial groups. It focuses on Indigenous family preservation as integral to tribal sovereignty and reparative justice (Red Horse et al., 2000). It recognizes that the removal of Indigenous children from their families is devastating not only for those children and families, but for Indigenous communities and nations as a whole. Maintaining Indigenous children in Indigenous homes or extended family foster homes ensures continuation of Indigenous communities for future generations. Yet, contemporary settler colonial child welfare systems continue to remove Indigenous children from their families and communities at alarming rates (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

### 1.3. Conceptual framework: Indigenous social work

In this paper, we consider systems change through the lens of Indigenous social work. Indigenous social work involves implementing knowledge, theories, and practices based on foundational Indigenous worldviews and practices. (See foundational scholarship in Indigenous social work by Absolon & Absolon-Winchester, 2016; Baikie, 2009; Baskin, 2016; Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2003; Bruyere, 1999; Clark & Drolet, 2014; Dumbrell & Green, 2008; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007; Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird & Hetherington, 2013; Greenwood & Palmantier, 2003; Hart, 1999; Hart, 2009; Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Poupart, Scharnberg, 2000; Sinclair (Otiskewapiwske), Hart (Kaskitemahikan), & Bruyere (Amawaajibitang), 2009; Tamburro, 2013; Weaver, 2016; Yellow Bird, 2008; Yellow Bird, 2013.) It requires a deep understanding of Indigenous worldviews including beliefs and practices related to helping relationships that have existed for thousands of years. In contrast to "parachuting" in social work interventions designed based on Eurocentric knowledge and practiced within other cultural groups, Indigenous social work develops relevant, community-guided, community-centered social work (Greenwood & Palmantier, 2003).

The Center's work exemplifies Indigenous social work. It is grounded in Anishinaabe worldviews, knowledge, and practices in existence since before the colonization of Turtle Island, and applied to contemporary professionals practicing within western dominated institutions. In papers 1 (AUTHORS, 2019) and 2 (AUTHORS, in progress), we described how these worldviews and practices shaped the Center's work in education. We described the focus on sustained partnerships with tribal communities, drawing especially on the Anishinaabe wisdom and knowledge provided by elders and communities. Their Indigenous worldview emphasizes the importance of relationships, connection, and interdependence with one another, Mother Earth, the cosmos, and all of Creation (Day, 2014; Wilson, 2008). Grounded in this relational worldview, the Center approaches all students and colleagues as "relatives" who are imperfect human beings with good intentions, motivated to do their best and with the potential to grow. Their practices include engaging the heart as well as the head, and clear eyed recognition of the aftermath of the genocide of Indigenous people including historical trauma, continued colonization and western governmental child welfare policies. Importantly, the Center's approach privileges the strengths of Indigenous families and communities including spirituality, culture, language, and land. (AUTHORS, 2019)

#### 1.4. Current research

In the current paper, we examine the Indigenous social work perspectives of Center staff and allies on the process of systems change in child welfare at the tribal, county and state levels, and then illustrate those processes through 3 case exemplars. We consider 4 research questions through thematic analyses of interviews with Center staff and allies: (1) how can systems change be affected in child welfare with Indigenous children and families? (2) What are case exemplars of systems change impacted by the Center? (3) What are barriers to systems change? (4) What advice do participants have for others motivated to affect child welfare systems change?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Setting

This study was conducted in Minnesota. In Minnesota, the disproportionate involvement of Indigenous families in child welfare is reflected at multiple levels of system involvement. Nationally, Indigenous children are 1.9 times more likely to be subjects of alleged maltreatment reports than are white children (Children's Bureau, 2018). In Minnesota, Indigenous children are 5 times more likely than white children to be subjects of an allegation of maltreatment in a Child Protective Services (CPS) accepted report. This disproportionality is even higher than that of Black children who are 3 times more likely than white children to be subjects of maltreatment reports (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2018). Nationally, Indigenous children are 3.2 times more likely than white children to be placed in out of home care. In Minnesota, they are 25 times more likely than white children (Children's Bureau, 2018). Finally, Indigenous children in Minnesota have the highest rates of re-entry into out-of-home placement within 12 months following family reunification (27.3% vs 21.7% for white children). (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015).

As described in paper 1 (Authors, 2019), the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies is located in northern Minnesota in an area surrounded by tribes. The 2010 U. S. Census listed the Indigenous population of Minnesota as 1.1% (60,916 people) of the state population, 11% higher than the national average of 0.09 percent. In Minnesota, there are 11 sovereign Tribal Nations. The four Dakota tribes are: Upper Sioux Community, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, Prairie Island Indian Community, and Lower Sioux Indian Community. These Dakota nations are the original inhabitants of the Minnesota area and are currently spread throughout the lower half of the state along the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. There also are seven Ojibwe Bands including the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond Du Lac Reservation, Grand Portage Band of Chippewa Indians, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, and White Earth Reservation. These tribes are spread throughout the northern half of the state, many on large lakes (Lake Superior, Upper and Lower Red Lake, Lake Mille Lacs, Leech Lake, Lake Vermillion). In addition, many of the state's urban centers in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth have Indigenous families and communities from tribes centered in the Dakotas, Wisconsin, and Canada.

The Center was officially created in 2005. It evolved from various projects and collaborations of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, Social Work faculty and tribal communities dating from the 1980s. The purpose was to increase the capacity of tribes in the areas of child and social welfare, and teach Anishinaabe culture, language, and history. The Center currently administers Title IV-E Child Welfare stipends, educates future and current Indigenous and non-Indigenous child welfare professionals, and engages in community and tribal outreach efforts. Through their work, Center staff identifies and addresses system barriers to respectful and appropriate practice with Indigenous families and communities. Center funding has included major grants from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, the State of Minnesota

Department of Human Services, Bush Foundation, and Casey Family Programs to research and improve child welfare practice with Indigenous families.

### 2.2. Participants

The 13 participants in interviews were purposely selected because of their diverse roles and extended relationships with the Center. They are tribal elders; Center administrators, educators, and researchers; Indigenous and non-Indigenous former MSW students; and a judge presiding over the ICWA court. Some participants have had multiple relationships with the Center over a period of years. Center staff nominated them as knowledgeable about the Center's history and work, and all nominated individuals participated. With the exception of Professor Priscilla Day, who was the Center's director at the time of this study, all participant names are pseudonyms.

### 2.3. Research team

As described in paper 1 (AUTHORS, 2019), members of this research team have various professional and life experiences that enrich and strengthen the credibility of the research. Our methods include a deliberate integration of insider and outsider perspectives, i.e., "creative understanding" as described by Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Team members of Ojibwe, Oneida, and Mohawk Nations provided Indigenous perspectives. Insider cultural knowledge and experiences provide a necessary context for identifying appropriate research questions, crafting culturally appropriate methods and procedures, gaining access to and establishing rapport with participants, and understanding their responses. Team members of European American heritage provided outsider perspectives which are important for identifying constructs taken-for-granted by insiders (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Team members also have decades of insider experience in child welfare education and training child welfare professionals in working within Indigenous communities. In addition, they have practiced as child welfare workers, ICWA supervisors, and mental health clinicians. Several team members have held major roles within the Center.

## 3. Procedures

Full ethnographic methods including participant observation and document reviews are detailed in (AUTHORS, 2019). In this paper, we focus on interviews. We conducted 13, in-depth, semi-structured, audio recorded interviews lasting from one to two hours. The interviews were conducted at private locations chosen by the participants. All interviews were conducted by an Indigenous and non-Indigenous researcher with the Indigenous researcher typically taking the lead, and the non-Indigenous researchers asking follow-up questions or questions of clarification. Participants were invited to describe the Center's goals and work, and their involvement with the Center. Follow up prompts included questions about the Center's ways of working with stakeholders in the tribes, counties and state, challenges and lessons learned.

### 3.1. Analysis

As described in paper 1 (Authors, 2019), interviews were transcribed verbatim and paralinguistic cues affecting meaning (e.g., joyful or reserved tone) or intensity of emotion (e.g., crying) were systematically noted. Following transcription of the interviews, participants were invited to edit the transcriptions to best reflect their thoughts, and communicate any additional ideas. Using analytic induction techniques (Schwandt, 2014), Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the research team read and re-read transcripts to develop a conceptual framework describing participants' perspectives. They next applied this coding system to interview transcripts resolving any disagreements through discussion.

## 4. Results

In this section, we describe participants' experiences of systems change through sustained relationships and capacity building; and then through linking tribal, county and state systems in cooperative efforts to effect positive change. Next, we provide three case exemplars of this systems change process through implementation of: a state law to strengthen ICWA, a statewide training for Department of Human Services (DHS) workers, and an ICWA court. Finally, we include some brief thoughts from participants on challenges to systems change, and advice for working for change.

### 4.1. The process of systems change

Participants stressed that lasting change occurs through developing and sustaining relationships, and building capacity. As Don, a retired tribal child welfare supervisor explained, "More gets done by relationships than structure. You have to have the structure and budgets, but developing relationships is how any change happens." Likewise, when asked for advice to others who might emulate the Center, Judge S., a community partner and ICWA court judge, emphasized that effecting change requires attention to the Center's process of relationship building:

I would certainly listen to everything that the Center [staff] has to say. I'd particularly pay attention to not only *what* they're saying, but *how* they're saying it and *how* they're doing it. It is the relationship building that's the key in my opinion. The information is fantastic, but without the relationship building and the trust and the respect that you gain from that, there's always [skepticism], "I don't know if I buy that."

#### 4.1.1 Sustained relationship building and consultation with tribes/elders

Participants stressed that system change begins by building and sustaining trusting relationships and collaboration with tribal communities and elders. Jack, an Indigenous elder and retired Center staff member, described effective change efforts:

I'll tell you where the real collaborations come from, they come from your relationships. We go to tribes. We can go to these tribes because we're from those tribes. People know Priscilla; they know me; they know Cory. We are from there, have family there. And then once we start doing the work, we do very good work, and form really good partnerships that keep going. It starts with those types of strong relationships. There's a sense of trust there. I know this person. What you say you're gonna do, you're gonna do. Something comes up, they're gonna let me know. You don't get blindsided. You work together.

Likewise, Betty, an Indigenous elder, educator and retired social worker, emphasized the importance of relationships within tribal communities:

What happened was because of Priscilla's and the others' knowledge of the tribes in Minnesota and neighboring states, they had names of people—they knew they could call on Betty over here, they could talk to Lilly over in Leech Lake. People who are respected, and are willing to invest their time, their energy, and their knowledge. And selecting those people, and I say selecting because they wanted and they got people who were respected in their home community so they became the promoter of this program. "I know about this program and if I don't I can go and talk to Priscilla." ... the spiritual people, they come up through the ranks with their attitudes, their ways of getting along with one another, their openness to learning, being less argumentative, but still able to ask the right questions and get the right answers. There would be families that are well known for being respected.

#### 4.1.2 Ongoing relationship building with county and state professionals

Participants also described the importance of sustained relationship building at the county and state levels. Beth, an Indigenous MSW alum and Center staff member, described relationship building with county child welfare workers from her Anishinaabe perspective:

If you have a relationship that's built on some semblance of trust, then you can move forward in a different way. That's connected to some of those Anishinaabe values. Listening to someone to understand what they're really experiencing. How hard it is for them [county child welfare workers] to do their job right now. Listening to understand, and not just to respond. One of our fundamental assumptions that we operate from, and sometimes we're proven wrong and it stings, is that human's want to be allies with each other. Humans want to have better outcomes and we want to have a better system for our kids. Folks who are working in this — we aren't dealing with people who are managing hedge funds on Wall Street — these are folks who are working with very vulnerable people. So let's look for the shared humanity, and go from there. It makes a difference. And I think people know when they are really understood and heard, or if they are just talked at or shamed. You can't shame someone for not knowing what they don't know. Or they'll put a fist around their heart like this [makes fist].

Sharon, a white MSW alum and educator stressed the importance of anti-oppressive practice in building relationships and working towards common goals.

So if you're trying to promote anti-oppressive practice, if we're going to try to move toward that, we don't get to say well, the police are never going to get that, or the judges are never going to get that, or the white child welfare workers are never going to get that. Priscilla just operates from a space and place that everyone can work together if you can figure out what each stakeholder's need is and then work toward that need, toward a common goal. So for me, I left [the MSW program] with a great sense of responsibility. But also a sense of, I don't get to say this group doesn't get it so I can just ignore them or these constituents aren't important.

#### 4.1.3 Capacity building

Participants also described sustained tribal, county and state capacity building as integral to systems change efforts. Sharon described a model of capacity building as one of emergent leadership which draws on the strengths of people to work towards change. She also characterized the model of capacity building at the Center as rooted in culture.

Capacity building work's an example of the work itself being rooted in culture ... part of that capacity building and community building is also the way that they have mentored and nurtured students through the program because those students are going to be part of that capacity-building, some of them in their home communities.

Beth, an Indigenous MSW alum reflected on how the Center supports the development of Indigenous leaders.

I think part of what is helpful is if an entity has a lens or a view that looks forward a little bit and has this grow-your-own model of leadership development. In my mind, people in leadership positions are charged with cultivating leadership in other people, not having power and authority over them. That's what I experienced. I did not see in my own self, my capacity. It's a good thing that what I believed about myself didn't actually happen. [laughs] You know what I mean? Because I really would have sold myself really short. So you're doing that with your students intentionally, finding out what they're really, really good at and then cultivating that... And a lot of the folks that we work with in [County] and statewide and nationally, are graduates of our program. So it's all one web.

Don provided an example of the results of capacity building from his own professional experience:

[County] has not been known as being friendly to the Indian community. But it happened... the graduates of this program, they have infiltrated [County]. And so that set a stage, and it's not just today. It's going to be 5 years, 10 years down the road. And [there is a large] number of supervisors down there that went through this [Center] program. It's not just [County], people have come from all over the country to come to this program, and then they go back to their parts of the country.

#### 4.2. Case exemplars of child welfare systems change: Linking tribal, county and the state systems.

Participants described using their relationships developed within tribal communities and county and state child welfare agencies to create linkages between these systems. Jack described the challenge: "A lot of practice within the American Indian Community wasn't the practice of how your social workers interact with [Indigenous] clients as [much as] how the tribal social work program interacts with the state. Or the county. And how do we get these [systems] working together?" In this section, we provide 3 brief, case exemplars of the process of system change. Don, a white, retired ICWA supervisor described the design and passage of a state law to strengthen ICWA. Priscilla, Center director and professor, described the design and implementation of a statewide training for DHS workers. Judge S. describes how her work with the Center resulted in the implementation of one of the first ICWA courts in the U.S.

##### 4.2.1 Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act

Participants pointed to the Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA) of 1985 (re-codified in statute in 2016), which expanded and strengthened ICWA to better preserve the cultural ties of Indian children, as an exemplar of systems change. Don explained, the "Center expanded beyond academics to have a voice in Indian politics, at DHS and in front of the legislature." In particular, he described Priscilla's and Jack's role in state and national politics.

She [Priscilla] wasn't a political factor within each of the reservations, but she was really trusted by the reservations that she would bring back their message [to the state] — what they really believed and wanted to do. And she also was instrumental in having those communications with the tribes. And Jack too. To be meeting with the tribal elders. And so they would go to the reservations and speak with elders there, but also bring elders from various reservations together to speak. And identifying who would be good voices and getting them on various committees. There were a couple of big committees or groups. The first was that MIFPA committee to strengthen Minnesota's involvement with American Indian families. And it was stronger than ICWA. She [Priscilla] speaks well, but she speaks for far more than herself. It's not just her ideas. It really is the Indian community's ideas. And she's very good about being able to pull those together. And about the historical trauma that has happened and is happening and needs to be taken into consideration. The Indian point of view when dealing with Indian families is contrary to many feelings in white society. ICWA itself speaks not only to the wellbeing of children, which is of course central, but it also speaks of tribes, the importance of tribes. The strength of the tribe directly impacts the wellbeing of children. The preservation of tribes is a really important factor. And so there's a difference in attitude and feeling of let's save these children from their abusing parents. Of course children should come first, but by breaking that bond you are hurting that child. There are many strengths within that family that parents give their children that need to be strengthened and brought forward. That's a shift and a different way

of doing (county) social work.

##### 4.2.2 Bridging our Understanding: American Indian Preservation Training

Participants pointed to the "Bridging our Understanding: American Indian Preservation Training" for Department of Human Services (DHS) workers as an exemplar of positive system change affected by the Center. Bridging our Understanding is a 3-day child welfare training for DHS social workers designed by Center staff, hosted on tribal lands by tribes, and funded by DHS. The training includes ICWA, historical trauma and rich cultural content. Priscilla provided background on the process of creating linkages between the tribes and DHS necessary to the success of the training.

We were getting feedback and really people were concerned about the disparities of American Indians in the Child Welfare system, and that it really wasn't changing much. So I met with a tribal judge and a person who was the Director of American Indian Projects [at UMD] at the time. And we went in front of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, which are the tribal leaders in Minnesota that meet to look at issues jointly across the state. And that includes all the tribes so it includes the Dakota tribes as well [as the Ojibwe tribes]. So we went in front of them and talked about the disparities and they asked us to work together with the state to develop a training to train county workers to be more effective with Indian children. So I worked then with a group of tribal directors and someone from DHS and this tribal judge for two years and we developed our "Bridging Our Understanding: American Indian Preservation Training" for DHS.

Priscilla went on to describe how the training, itself the product of connections between the tribes, counties and state, works to create further connections between counties and tribes:

At almost every one of our trainings, counties are surprised at the resources and the efforts that tribes are making around family preservation. Because there aren't usually opportunities to talk about those things. And often times when counties and tribes get together it's adversarial. And so to have really the luxury of two or three days to see your colleagues in a different way—to see them as colleagues and have conversations about how you can co-manage these cases, what kind of resources are available, both ways, and kind of join together instead of being adversarial. Most people go away appreciating an opportunity to engage in those conversations. I think part of it is setting the environment. It's presenting information. I think it's trying to get at both the head stuff but also the heart stuff for people. But overall I think we've had some extraordinary conversations. And I think in part because I really believe and I think we really impart to people that everybody's trying the best they can. This isn't about blaming, you know, pointing fingers at people. This is about people are really trying to do the best work they can in an incredibly challenging environment of being under-resourced. And that's true for counties as well as the tribes. But to really begin to understand each other better without feeling like you have to defend yourself and I think meeting multiple days really helps... I think caring about people and believing that things will be better when we all do better. It's about looking for opportunities to really partner and engage with people in meaningful ways so that we can all do better for our families and our communities.

Priscilla also stressed the importance of providing positive Indigenous models, and presenting the strengths of Indigenous peoples:

Part of it is thinking—we tend to assume, as human beings, that everybody thinks about things the way we do so when you run up against somebody who is hitting you with a different perspective, it's like, "Wow." And in particular a faculty member, an American Indian professor, I think is kind of revolutionary for some people. ... when your primary interaction with a group is people who have

deficits, it's kind of mind blowing to see somebody who at least looks successful, educated, articulate—that really makes you have to do a mind shift. So even that I think was a part of some people's experience. And then, I just think, talking about strengths in our communities because they mostly hear about the bad stuff. Pretty much any negative indicator, you know, American Indians, if they are not leading, they are right up there in at the top three, and so to learn about the strengths of Indian families, to learn about extended Indian families, to learn about cultural families and communities and natural support systems for some people they just never had that exposure.

#### 4.2.3 ICWA court

Participants also described the emergence of one of the first ICWA courts in the U.S. as an exemplar of positive child welfare system change affected through the Center. Judge S, a white ally and ICWA court judge, described the origins of the ICWA court:

So, there was this project where Masters of Social Work students were given a form. They would come and watch ICWA cases and they would keep track [of items that] were on this checklist, whether they were happening or not. After a year they came back and reported to us. And it was quite evident that there were 8 different judges in the building, and there were 8 different ways of handling ICWA cases. I worked with Beth [Indigenous, Center staff member], and we decided that some training would be really a good thing.

And it was an absolutely awesome training with several judges attending, county social workers, tribal representatives, tribal social workers, guardians ad litem, parents' attorneys, county attorneys. It was moving. People shared their stories. It was outstanding. And after that, I felt like I wanted to keep the momentum of that going and so I talked to Beth about can we invite some of those folks that were there: tribal representatives, county and parent attorneys, and guardians, to meet and talk about what we could be doing collaboratively. From there it really took off. A lot of people attended the meetings. There were representatives from several different northern Minnesota tribes, the county social service agencies, the supervisor was there, county attorneys, guardian ad litem coordinator. We had representatives from all areas of child protection. So we started meeting, and we started meeting quarterly. We talked about what we could be doing differently, how we could get more tribal involvement with cases, how we could make the process feel more collaborative and culturally appropriate. That's kind of the long story of how things got started.

I really don't know that the ICWA court would have happened [without my relationships with the Center staff] to be frank about it. I just didn't have those connections [with tribes], myself. And I don't know that I would have been viewed with trust from the various tribes. I was just one of these judges in the Duluth Courthouse when this started. And tribal workers that came to court, they rarely said anything during the court. I've always called on everybody in the courtroom to make sure people's voices are heard, but often, much more often than not, it was, "Nothing to add." "Nothing to add." "Nothing to add." Now, they actually speak up... And again, they [Center staff] certainly made it easier for me to get this done because they had these relationships already and they had credibility and they had respect. You know if you're going to meet John, and you don't know John from Adam, but your good friend, Susan, knows him well, now you've got a connection with John [and] at least you're coming into it knowing a little something about him. So I think that their relationships with all these other people, we could build on that.

Judge S went on to describe the ICWA court:

So, for starters, the courtroom looks different. We set up the courtroom. We bring in some extra tables and we create a large

square. It would be a circle if the tables were circular but we're working with rectangular tables so it's a square. And I sit in the square. I do not sit on the bench. When you walk into the courtroom, if you can kind of picture you would be facing the bench but in front of the bench and in front of the court reporter is this square. The closest tables are the usual counsel tables and then I'm sitting closest to the court reporter. And I'm the only one on my side of the square. The other parties are sitting all the way around it. All of the parties are sitting around it, the county attorney, the social worker, the tribal social worker, the guardian ad litem, each parent's attorney, and each parent, the child if the child comes and the child's attorney. So, it kind of goes in that order. In kind of a traditional way, I start on my left and move around the circle and talk to each and every person at the table. That includes the parents, and the parents' attorneys. But I've always done that where I talk to the people directly. I'm not asking them anything that's going to affect their case in the future, I'm more asking them, "Are there any barriers to your success? Are there any things that you think that the social worker should be providing, or that anybody could be providing? Anything you want to talk about? That's a success or a particular concern for you?" And then, "You're doing a great job." I try to encourage them to remark on the things that they're doing well. And if they're struggling, then I try to parse that a little bit. You know, I kind of get that. If somebody told me I had to do 15 things to get my kids back and I was already struggling with mental health or chemical use issues, I would be struggling with, "Which one should I do first?" And so, I try to parse that a little bit for them in terms of, "Well, what do you think would be the best things, the top three things, that you should do ..."

And there's a table in the middle of the square that has [traditional, Indigenous] medicines on it. And then as you walk in on the bar, as you cross the bar, there are two large shells that contain tobacco and sage. And so people can take some tobacco as they come in if they want to and hold it. The people in the collaborative, the tribal representatives offer them. They bring them. One of the tribal social workers actually made the cloth that we've put over the table and then we put the medicines on top of that. So she made those. She brings us tobacco when we're out. We've had parents who have taken the tobacco and said, "Thank you for providing this." I do think that it matters to people to have that there.

So it feels a lot more collaborative to me but I'm the judge—I've heard that the parties feel that way too. The tribal workers and the guardians ad litem would often comment in the courtroom that we used to do things in, there would not be room at the table for them. There was only room at the table for the county attorney and the social worker on the one side and the parent attorney and a client and maybe another parent attorney and a client but if it got beyond that, any additional parents and attorneys would have to sit behind the counsel table as well. So people were talking at people's backs, had to stand to talk, or they had to talk extra loud or move. And courtrooms [are] stressful places even for people who are in them frequently, as professionals.

I think sitting at the table. They feel heard. If a parent or a tribal worker tells me that a parent needs a car seat, I turn to the county social worker and say, "Well, when are you going to get the car seat?" [laughter]. So they're heard. And we're going to deal with it today. I think the attorneys now prepare their clients for the fact that the judge is going to ask them these questions. I represented people in divorce cases, and I always prepared them for court, by saying it's a scary place. You're not in here very often. You're not in here for a good reason, generally. And so I want them to feel comfortable, and I do take particular care with county workers and with tribal workers and with parents and guardians to make sure that they feel like, it's ok to talk. It's ok to ask for things. It's ok to be verbal.

### 4.3. Barriers and advice for achieving change for Indigenous children and families

Participants' reflections did not emphasize barriers. Several participants, however, did discuss structural racism within white institutions as a barrier to achieving change. Don reflected:

A major challenge had to do with [County] moving from an all-white institution to a more diverse institution, and the meaning of racism: what it looks like and bias, and the rest. And how people can be living within the same organization and experience two completely different things. And the stories that I would hear in our meetings about what they [Indigenous workers] faced everyday was so different [from white workers], that when you talked to the white folks, "What do you mean? There's no racism here." They haven't experienced racism, and they did not intend to be racist. Everybody is depending on their own experience and they are very, very different. I just remember one small but really important incident. One of the [Indigenous] workers in my unit, she was an MSW professional, was in the elevator and another employee at [County] came in and said, "Oh, can I help you, ma'am?" Because she was Indian they assumed she was a client and must need help. And here she had far more education than the person asking did. So, was that racism? It really was because of the assumptions this person made about that person in the elevator. Things like that happen every day.

When asked for advice, Priscilla emphasized:

Make sure you are linked to the community. I am a member of the tribal community, Beth's a member. We've had other people who are community members. That makes a huge difference. I think it's really hard for outsiders, and I don't mean that in a negative way, that's a descriptor, to really understand the needs of the community, to make deep connection with the needs of the community. It's really helpful if you already have those connections and you can maintain those. I think that is the central piece. The other thing is that you have to fight for what you believe in. You have to be able to ruffle a few feathers now and then. You have to be able to be honest and hopefully do so in a way that doesn't close doors to you. So you can't just be a critic. I think it is about creating relationships and looking for opportunities to continually build or take it to the next level. It's not something you can just be stagnant about... And then it's listening to your values. "Is this going to benefit the community?" That's really a value for us. And then you just have to have good people, people who are passionate about they do, care about what they do, who can work with others in a way that supports your values in a collaborative way.

## 5. Discussion

The Center's work reflects a larger effort towards decolonization within social work and social welfare systems (Absolon, 2019; Koleszar-Green, 2019). Using Anishinaabe knowledge and ways of helping, Center staff members collaborate with sovereign tribal nations, and county and state child welfare professionals to strengthen child welfare practice with Indigenous children, families and tribal communities. Overall, their practice is a model of Indigenous social work in which a deep understanding of an Anishinaabe worldview and practices provides the foundation for strengthening families and communities (e.g., Day, 2014; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird & Hetherington, 2013; Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Poupert, Scharnberg, 2000; Weaver, 2016; Yellow Bird, 2013).

The first paper in this series (AUTHORS, 2019) described the Center's Anishinaabe-centered educational model to address Indigenous child welfare disparities through the education of those who will be, or who are, working within the system (MSW students and professionals participating in continuing education). The second paper examined the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous alums, many of whom have gone on to practice within tribal communities, and to affect

positive change in a variety of other contexts (AUTHORS, in progress). The third (current) paper focuses on the Center's efforts to affect tribal, county and state child welfare systems.

Whether describing systems change within or outside of the context of formal education programs, participants characterized the process as fundamentally relational. They provided knowledge, wisdom and models of system change through the creation of sustained, trusting, collaborative relationships. Within formal education programs, participants described the importance of accurate information on the continuing legacy of settler colonial government structures on Indigenous Peoples, Anishinaabe culture and language, and relevant child welfare policies and practices; and also the formation of deep emotional understanding and spiritual connection. Center staff described seeking "relatives" with whom to collaborate to affect positive change (Authors, 2019).

Likewise, when describing systems change efforts at the tribal, county and state levels, participants stressed relationship building. They described first building relationships within sovereign tribal nations and governmental child welfare systems. They respectfully engage Indigenous peoples who have important knowledge to impart regarding supporting vulnerable families within their communities. They begin with the assumption that non-Indigenous colleagues are doing their best given what they have been taught, or not taught. All have the capacity for learning, developing and enacting systems change. Center staff intentionally nurture these relationships over time to build capacity within tribal communities, and county and government child welfare systems.

Center staff are then able to create bridges across Indigenous communities and child welfare systems based on the trust built within each of these systems. In other words, they create mesosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) between tribal communities, and county and state child welfare systems. These mesosystems are sustained over years as Center staff invite and accept opportunities for continued engagement and collaboration across system boundaries. In this third paper, participants provided several examples of successful system change affected by the Center, tribes and their collaborators: state legislation to strengthen ICWA protections, implementation of statewide training for child welfare professionals, and the creation of an innovative ICWA court. Our hope is that others can build on the model provided by the Center to support positive change for Indigenous families within their own communities.

## 6. Limitations and future research

This study has a number of limitations. Participants provided knowledge, wisdom, and models of developing and sustaining relationships across the boundaries of Indigenous and dominant/white systems. Systems change clearly is a multifaceted process involving other aspects that were not examined in this paper. It may involve the passage of national legislation (e.g., ICWA), building infrastructure to support change (e.g., Lambert, Richards & Merrill, 2016), technical assistance to staff (see Sanclimenti, Caceda-Castro, & DeSantis, 2017), and navigating the sheer complexity of affecting change to multiple, changing and interacting systems (e.g., Chuang & Wells, 2010; Darlington, Feeney, & Rixon, 2005) with differing resources, mandates and priorities. In addition, our reliance on interviews in this third study restricts our understanding to those aspects of participants' systems change efforts of which they were consciously aware, and able to articulate in a single interview. Future research should extend the use of Indigenous research methods to contexts in which Indigenous child welfare system change efforts are navigated. In addition, future research should examine, quantitatively, any changes in disproportionality, for example, in the county in which the ICWA court is located, and in Minnesota as a whole as "Bridging our Understanding" is fully implemented. Finally, future research could examine the extent to which the Center's approach to child welfare systems change for

Indigenous peoples may facilitate positive change for other groups, especially African American and Latinx, who also are disproportionately involved in child welfare systems.

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