

CHAPTER 3

From Longing to Belonging: Attachment Theory, Connectedness, and Indigenous Children in Canada

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A drop of longing says as much about the human spirit as a grand gesture of love or defiance.

—*Allan Wade, 2006*

INTRODUCTION

Many indigenous activists remember the life and death of Richard Cardinal as one tragic example of the systemic neglect and mishandling of indigenous children in a child welfare system (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; Obomsawin, 1986; Carriere, 2007, 2005; Sinclair, 2007). By the age of nine, after being placed in over 28 different living situations, Richard had given up his longing for love, for family, and for dignity. He ended his life, writing, “I just can’t take it anymore” (Obomsawin, 1986).

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Given the gross and glaring ways that Richard's needs went unmet, it is easy to lose sight of the doubtless more subtle longings of his heart. Did anyone hear his longing? Or see it on his face or in his acts of living? And say to him, in word or deed, "I get it"? We have been greatly moved by Richard's life and death because of our personal locations. Richard was connected to Fort Chipewyan, the maternal village of Cathy Richardson, and Jeannine Carriere was involved in the investigation of his tragic circumstances after his passing.

Sadly, the situation since Richard Cardinal's death has not improved dramatically for indigenous children who become involved with child welfare services. While indigenous peoples comprise only 3.8 percent of the total population of Canada (Government of Canada, 2006), their children represent between 40 percent and 60 percent of the children who have been removed from their families and made wards of the state—in spite of already being "wards," according to the Indian Act, if they are status First Nation, as described in *Gathering Strength*, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Government of Canada, 1996). While some improvements have been made, the child welfare community continues to face serious problems with service delivery. Farris-Manning and Zandstra (cited in Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004) write:

While Cardinal's death drew attention to the significant over-representation of Aboriginal children in state care, twenty years later the problem has become far more serious, with Aboriginal children representing approximately 40% of the 76,000 children and youth placed in out of home care in Canada. (p. 1)

In the region of British Columbia where the authors currently reside, this figure is as high as 50 percent in some jurisdictions, despite the fact that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people constitute only 8 percent of the larger population in British Columbia (Government of British Columbia, March 2008). Blackstock (2008) describes these statistics within a context of poverty, stating that over 60 percent of cases of child welfare involvement for Aboriginal children are due to neglect that is directly related to poverty (p. 9).

Sinclair (2007) states that the situation for indigenous families is graver now than it was in the 1960s: "Child welfare interventions that began

in the 1950s, referred to in retrospect as the Sixties Scoop, were the tip of the emerging iceberg of what is now the institution of Aboriginal child welfare" (p. 68). Lauri Gilchrist of Lakehead University notes that, given current child welfare statistics, the "Sixties Scoop" has merely evolved into the "Millennium Scoop" and Aboriginal social workers, recruited into the ranks of social services and operating under the umbrella of Indian Child and Family services, are now the ones doing the "scooping" (cited in Sinclair, 2007, p. 67).

In recent years, due to the influence of research conducted by Fraser Mustard (McCain & Mustard, 1999, 2002), who describes the importance of the first year and crucial aspects of mother/child bonding, attachment theory has been influential in child welfare decision-making. While the idea of a secure mother/child attachment and reliable patterns of nurturing and loving care has much to offer families and human service practitioners in terms of promoting healthy beginnings for children and mothers, the inappropriate application of this theory to child welfare decision-making with indigenous families in Canada is problematic. Arlene Hache, an activist for indigenous child welfare justice in the Northwest Territories, reports that Mustard's research regarding the importance of the first year has been used by judges to influence court cases wherein indigenous children are removed from their parents without their families being given the opportunity to demonstrate appropriate, safe care of their children. Hache notes: "The Mustard report lays the foundation for birth apprehensions in the Territories that almost exclusively targeted Aboriginal women (personal communication, Yellowknife, March 2008). Bennett (2007) reminds us that "very little research exists on Aboriginal mothers' experiences with child welfare" (p. 89), and Crichlow (2002) suggests that Canada's child welfare system "is one that reflects white dominant mainstream ideas and ideals and it has historically been used on Aboriginal peoples in ways that conflict and are inconsistent with Aboriginal people's values and family traditions" (p. 88). Crichlow cites Madame Justice Wilson, who stated in *Racine v. Woods* that "when the test to be met is the best interests of the child, the significance of cultural background and heritage as opposed to bonding abates over time. The closer the bond that develops with the prospective adoptive parents, the less important the racial element becomes" (in Crichlow, 2002, p. 94). Crichlow states that, currently, decisions to support the importance of

culture “are still the exception and not the norm and are usually dependent on the facts of the case” (p. 94). Gonzales-Mena (2001) cautions us that when “early childhood professionals resolve differences about best practices with parents in ways that discount diversity and impose the dominant culture, they tread on issues of equity and social justice” (p. 368).

Examining aspects of validity, cross-cultural application, indigenous and non-indigenous worldview, and issues of human rights, the authors of this chapter consider the implications of using attachment theory in indigenous child welfare practice. It is the perspective of the authors that it is crucial for the well-being of indigenous children, families, and communities to preserve the culture and identity of indigenous children and that practices that encourage extended family care and community connection are more relevant in working with indigenous children and families.

Terminology

Just as the word ‘human’ or ‘mankind’ is said to be an overarching term including women, if women are indeed present, the usage of ‘mother’ in this chapter includes the father where fathers are present. The term ‘indigenous’ is used in place of ‘Aboriginal,’ largely because it is less imposed than terms used in the Indian Act. The term includes First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples as recognized in the Canadian Constitution.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT APPLICATIONS OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

To date, little research has been conducted that reviews cases where attachment theory was used to justify the removal of children from their families. In this absence, we can consider Carriere (2007, 2005) on attachment and connection issues with indigenous children who have been adopted. In an article based on her Ph.D. dissertation, Carriere describes the importance of connectedness in adoption. The term *connectedness* is defined as a feeling of belonging, of being an important and integral part of the world. Carriere states that an adoptee’s sense of disconnection stems from an intrinsic sense that the environment in which he/she has developed has been altered through adoption. Adoption has created a different environment than initially intended by creation. In

turn, this intrinsic sense causes a spiritual dissonance that has an impact on health, which is connected to issues of loss. This spiritual dissonance can explain why an adoptee retains a permeating sense of loss despite a relatively nurturing adoptive home environment or a fairly positive and healthy lifestyle (p. 189). Several researchers have focused on aspects of connectedness and adoption (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Boss, 1999; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Hendry & Reid, 2000; Lee, Lee, & Draper, 2001). In examining connectedness specifically, Borders, Penny, and Portnoy (2000) found that more adoptees than a comparison group were “insecure and fearful avoidant” (p. 416); they concluded that “adult adoptees have meaningful stories to tell, and these stories could greatly inform clinicians, educators, and policymakers, as well as adoptive and birth parents” (p. 416). Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) also explore the issue of connectedness from a psychological perspective. They state that “with the psychological need to separate, pushed by the biological changes of adolescence, the dissonances and differences for the adoptee are highlighted and eventually create, in our view, a driven need to experience human connectedness” (p. 85). This view is supported by Hendry and Reid (2000), who found that connectedness or “belonging to a community of others” (p. 706) acted as a deterrent, in adolescent adoptees, for high-risk indicators such as poor body image, a high degree of emotional stress, poly-drug use, school absenteeism, or risk of injury or pregnancy. Lee, Lee, and Draper (2001) discovered similar findings when examining the relationship between psychological well-being and connectedness. They found that “people with low connectedness often experience loneliness, anxiety, jealousy, anger, depression, low self-esteem, and a host of other negative emotions” (2001, p. 311). These studies reveal that high-risk behaviours are associated with a lack of connectedness to community. Connectedness to family has also been explored (March, 1995; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993; Slap, Goodman, & Huang, 2001). Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993) describe family connectedness as one of the most powerful protective factors in the well-being of adolescents (p. 380). Moreover, Slap, Goodman, and Huang (2001) propose that family connectedness can reduce the risk of suicide among adolescent adoptees (p. 2). March (1995) describes the act of searching as intimate, since it acknowledges and activates the part of self denied to adoptees through non-disclosure, thus bringing this hidden aspect into the light.

This feeling of awakening helps the individual to feel more whole and connected to the rest of the world: "By gaining access to their genealogical and genetic background, searching adoptees neutralize their sense of feeling different through adoption" (March, 1995, p. 74). In other words, the act of searching for family brings to life the adoptee's sense of connectedness and an expanded sense of possibility. Molloy (2002) supports this view by describing a follow-up study with adult adoptees. He proposes that connectedness is a sense of continuity which is completed only by a sense of a beginning and an ending (p. 177).

Boss (1999) addresses health and connectedness through her work with immigrant children. She writes that when "the psychological family is not in accord with the physically present family," a state of ambiguity is created, which Boss refers to as "ambiguous loss" (pp. 3-4). This sense of loss results in frozen grief, which may result in characteristics such as depression, anxiety and/or somatic illnesses, backaches, headaches, and stomach ailments (p. 10). Boss concludes that often when people are separated from their family of origin, the family that exists in their minds is more important than the one they live with.

Boss's conclusion supports Rillera's (1987) assertion that adoptees feel connected to people they do not even know. They go through motions of life with "a cellular consciousness of the experience" (p. 39), similar to the 'blood memory' described by Anderson (2000) and Atkinson (2002), who describe cellular memory and collective consciousness as ways of knowing that connect us to our ancestors (Rillera, p. 87). Explored in a spiritual context, this call of the ancestors enhances the feeling that one needs to search for a missing piece in one's life.

Although Wolin and Wolin (1993) propose that children can rise above disconnection from family and endear themselves to others, Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) point out that this may be a case of attachment, but not assimilation. For Brodzinsky and Schechter, attachment is an emotional bond to the adoptive family, while assimilation is a state of integrating the adoptive family's characteristics and worldview. In other words, children may appear to be well-adjusted and integrated into a family, but they may have a deep internal drive to detach and seek a reason for being, or, as one adoptee in Brodzinsky and Schechter's study explains, "to know I wasn't hatched" (1990, p. 85). This drive to belong points to the importance for adopted children to experience a sense of

balance in their lives through attachment and integration, as well as to the need for adoption policies that encourage these experiences.

The role of kinship and connectedness for First Nation adoptees

From a Western worldview, kinship has been studied and described by cultural anthropologists who have focused on patterns of behaviour, language, and cultural norms. However, two critical questions must be considered: “What is kinship from an indigenous perspective?” and “How can the importance of kinship inform decision-making for indigenous children?” Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Day, Poupart, and Scharnberg (2000) state that family preservation is linked fundamentally to tribal sovereignty and that history and tradition are important components of kinship, which is necessary to the survival of American Indian families. Other indigenous scholars concur (Littlebear, 2000; Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Yeo, 2003). Littlebear (2000) describes kinship as a “spider-web of relations” (p. 79); extended families are interconnected circles based on wholeness with the strength of providing balance. They include social and religious functions, and, “from the moment of birth, children are the objects of love and kindness from a large circle of relatives and friends” (Littlebear, 2000, p. 81). Within this worldview, kinship extends beyond human relationships to include kinship with the natural world. This ecological view of kinship categorizes social obligations such as reciprocity in relationship with plants and animals. Youngblood Henderson (2000) states that within this kinship system “plants, animals, and humans are related, and each is both a producer and a consumer with respect to the other, in an endless cycle” (p. 257). Furthermore, Youngblood Henderson states that this order of kinship “implies a distinct form of responsibilities or rights” and includes the obligation “to provide childhood experiences of collective support and attention combined with self-discipline and responsibilities to create a personality that is cooperative and independent, self-restrained yet individualistic, attuned to the feelings of others but non-intrusive” (2000, p. 260). This sacred order of the universe implies that, as human beings, we have kinship relationships that transcend the Western notion of the nuclear family.

Similarly, anthropological research suggests a kinship hypothesis in which the social roots of adoption are designed to strengthen ties rather than to sever them. De Aguayo (1995) notes that anthropologists have

“found that all societies have terms to address each other, particularly kin” (p. 9) and that kin roles dictate how persons interact with each other. In such traditional societies, “adoption links close families even more closely” (p. 9). This finding demonstrates differing perspectives on adoption in Western and tribal societies. Worldview in a non-Western sense is formulated by experiencing an ecosystem (Bandura, 2003; Bevis, 1985). Based on this assumption, one could argue that the role of kinship connections for indigenous children in state care is to provide balance in their lives by providing them with cultural and ancestral knowledge. Janet Gonzales-Mena (2001) views these issues from a social justice perspective and states that “intact identities of children, not of the dominant culture, is both a goal and an issue of equity and social justice. Identity development of some children can be compromised in cross cultural care if they are immersed in the dominant culture. Culturally sensitive care is a preventative strategy for early childhood professionals to use in order to keep these children rooted in their culture and attached to their families” (p. 368). Bunting (2004), a legal researcher, examined a number of child placement decisions that concerned Aboriginal childrens’ cultural background in the context of ‘best interests.’ She begins her article by stating that “there are no simple presumptions or tests that can capture the complexity and fluidity of children’s heritage as well as their families and communities” (p. 140). Her research of legal cases and statutes is concluded with these remarks:

First the importance of Aboriginal community or collectivist claims in individual cases should be given greater weight. Preserving connections between children and survival can be at risk after years of removal of children from Aboriginal homes. Cultural connections can also be important for children as witnessed by the poor track record for individual Aboriginal children severed from their heritage. (p. 163)

Carriere (1997) addresses the role of community in kinship care. In her interviews with kinship care providers from two First Nation communities, one participant stated that “seeing the community getting healthier” was an important aspect of kinship care, “as opposed to the children being raised ‘out there’ in non-Aboriginal foster homes” (Carriere, 1997, p. 50). Clearly, if the child protection industry cannot contribute

to increasing the health and development of communities, then children will continue to be removed from their families and communities, and the legacy of the Sixties Scoop will never end. Kluger, Alexander, and Curtis (2001) indicate that more children in Canada are living in kinship care arrangements in response to high child welfare caseloads. However, Barbell and Freundlich (2001) warn that kinship care may be restrictive, in that caregivers hesitate to adopt “for fear of undermining existing familial relationships and due to strong cultural resistance to the termination of parents’ rights” (p. 22). Walmsley (2005) states that the support for kinship care is part of family-oriented practice and that the representation of this practice is found among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners; however, “it appears more frequently among practitioners in reserve communities and small towns, where the practitioner and family members have an ongoing relationship characterized by credibility and trust” (p. 130).

To foster a sense of balance, social workers must assist children to know their family and history. Through this process, children may then go on to recognize their place and responsibility in the larger universe, gained through cultural teachings. Importantly, this goal implies that retaining kinship ties is part of overall community health and strength. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) have explored cultural continuity as a preventative factor in the risk of youth suicide and propose that “suicide is a manifestation of failed attempts at sustaining a sense of personal and self-continuity (p. 16). Yeo (2003) contributes to this concept, stating that “the Aboriginal sense of self arises as a consequence of kinship bonds and communal life” (p. 294). As discussed earlier, kinship implies the importance of connectedness to relationships broader than those of the immediate family. Ross (1996) suggests that healing from unhealthy relationships begins with the realization “that life is a relationship and that acting individualistic in defiance of that reality will only lead everyone downhill” (p. 137). Ross implies that the more we realize that connection to others is a natural and healthy dynamic in our lives, the more whole we become. Connectedness may be described as a form of attachment that implies a broader grounding in a person’s total environment than does attachment to one or two central figures. For these reasons connectedness may be a more appropriate term and framework for assessment than attachment in working with indigenous children and families.

Suggestions for practice

To make indigenous child welfare decisions without regard to historical and current social injustices such as the marginalization of indigenous women, the degradation of indigenous cultures, and the misappropriation and imposition of Euro-Western worldviews and practices onto indigenous peoples is to further these injustices.

The following suggestions are offered to assist child welfare workers to consider in culturally sensitive ways how children and their caregivers are being supported in their tasks of becoming attached and connected with each other in the parenting process. It is hoped that these suggestions will be used not only proactively but also as a means to respond constructively to difficulties by developing and strengthening the connectedness of those involved in the invaluable role of nurturing indigenous children's lives and cultures.

From attachment to connection: Dignity across the lifespan

As human beings, we long for the fulfillment of our needs. The basic needs of safety and security exist across the lifespan and take different forms according to age and where we are in the life cycle. The language of dignity may be a more culturally appropriate way of talking about connection between children and caregivers. The following descriptions of the need for human dignity at various life stages may provide workers with a guide to support safety and well-being in families. Richardson (2008) designed a diagram entitled "Dignity Across the Lifespan" as part of an indigenous human development curriculum. Richardson (2005) wrote about dignity and decolonisation in the process of family group conferencing with indigenous families. Richardson and Wade (2008) wrote about the importance of attending to human dignity in a paper entitled *Working with Safety: Response-based approaches to violence in child welfare*. This microanalysis of dignity came from teachings from former political prisoners and residential school survivors who identified humiliation as one of the worst indignities of violence. Many families who receive child welfare services experience this intervention as an affront to their dignity and a reminder of other humiliating professional interactions. As we have discussed, affronts to human dignity tend to interfere with well-intentioned child welfare interventions, and the energy diverted from parents in dealing with authorities may sabotage their chances of demonstrating what they are doing well. The fact that many child

welfare interventions are involuntary means that the importance of dignity cannot be overlooked in the process.

At each stage of life, caregivers such as mothers and fathers need to be accorded dignity so that they can accord the same dignity to their infants and children. Although many parents do offer their children safe and secure relationships despite not having that same dignity extended to them, energy can be diverted away from parenting in times of negative social situations, creating challenges for parents. When parents talk about the challenges imposed by the outside world, they are sometimes seen as complaining, ranting or not taking responsibility for their part in it (for example, they receive a negative social response). This is particularly so for people who are socially marginalized and must deal with affronts to their dignity and autonomy on a daily basis. In parenting, dignity is accorded to children by attending to their daily and longer term needs, relative to the particular stage of development. As philosopher Vartan Gregoria (in Derrida, 1988) reminds us: “Dignity is not negotiable.” Without dignity, people experience what can be called a “social wound,” which may or may not be addressed or restored later in life. Treatment such as neglect, dismissal, humiliation, or abuse constitutes a social wounding, while care, attention, love, and respect (positive social responses) assist people of all ages in filling their being with a sense of worth. This self-worth serves a protective function and creates a feeling of holistic well-being that may then be carried into various life encounters. The preservation of human dignity became one of the main focuses of Richardson and Wade’s work in relation to assisting people to recover from violence (2008).

In infancy, the dignity of the young one is met by responding, in culturally appropriate ways, to calls for love through the offering of physical contact, food, familiarity of voices and scents, cleanliness, and a safe family and community environment. Inuit mental health worker Edward Allan (personal communication, Vancouver, BC, March 2008) reports that Inuit children often identify family as being more important than food. Children have explained to him that if you have family, you are more likely to have food. Ideally, the mother/child dyad needs to be supported by the father and by extended family and community. The mother may need support for breastfeeding, for spending extended periods of time with the infant, and for taking time away from work. She may need financial and other support to provide nurturance in the

form of food and drink, as well as emotional kindness. Mothering can be undermined in varying degrees by a lack of security, such as violence, humiliation, and psychological abuse.

At this stage in the life cycle, fathers may need to be supported in the role of protector, provider, and nurturer of the mother and the child. This support may take the form of flexible employment, support to be away from work for longer periods of time, and emotional support during a time of transition in the spousal relationship. For indigenous fathers, this may mean that society must address the extremely high rates of unemployment on reserves and the obstacles to hunting and food-gathering that exist in Canada. The expansion of the family may mean a change of routine and relationship for all family members.

Older children engage in exploration of their world, and they need safety and support, and trust that the caregiver will still be there when they return from their explorations. Children need the security of extended family, community, and culture to ensure a sense of belonging and to feel a part of the larger group. Children declare their need for dignity by responding intensely to being humiliated or mocked by others. During this stage, the mother's dignity can be supported when she is reminded that she is doing a good job, and when she is given time to rest and keep herself healthy, with good food and loving kindness from those around her. The dignity of the father is supported by being acknowledged for his role in supporting the mother and child, and by experiencing success and esteem in the outer world, as well as in the home. He can be assisted by Elders and other family members who share a perspective about raising children and becoming a parent in a long line of tradition in the family. For both the mother and father, learning about the histories of raising children in accordance with familial and cultural ways may support their unique situation, even more than learning through popular books and television. Of course, the dignity of the parents may be preserved at times by resisting unsolicited advice and doing things in a way that suit the unique child and the parents' own values and preferences.

In adolescence, a sense of safety and security is needed while teens test the limits of their parents' care. While an adolescent asserts her independence and seeks to consolidate her identity, we see the importance of cultural teachers and Elders in reminding her of the good way to live. The teen can experience indignity when asked (often repeatedly) to perform certain tasks—like cleaning her room—that have been assigned by

others. Creating space for adolescents to choose, as much as possible, the ways in which they will contribute to the well-being of the family and household, along with parents both accepting their need for independence and holding the teen within safe parameters and value-based expectations for social interaction, may enhance the teen's dignity. Many indigenous adolescents are already parents and learn about culture and appropriate ways of being alongside their children, ideally with the guidance of Elders and teachers. The dignity of the whole family may be at stake when it faces discrimination, lack of employment, or various forms of humiliation in the social world and when forced to receive service, particularly from outside the community. Today, dealing with the workplace, educational institutions, or government bureaucracies often involves forms of power abuse that result in humiliation for individuals and that harm their personal dignity.

As adolescents move into the realm of young adulthood, and then beyond into mature adults, their dignity is enhanced by their sense of accomplishment and respect in the outer world. Many indigenous adults suffer due to the violence and even torture inflicted upon them in state-sponsored institutions and programs. Supporting healing in the community, in ways that proactively restore dignity and prepare adults for roles of leadership and community governance, simultaneously strengthens their capacity to function as role models for community members and as caregivers to children. Kim Anderson, an indigenous woman on a journey back to a cultural community, describes how the Elders were crucial in welcoming her home. She writes:

The thing that I found most helpful was the way I saw elders look at me. Many seemed to look right through the barriers, the politics, the boundaries and the status debates. Reflected in their eyes, I began to see myself as a granddaughter, a member and a relation. (Anderson, 2000, p. 29)

Many Elders are the keepers of traditional knowledge and hold the important task of teaching, raising their grandchildren and supporting young parents. Yet Elders, too, need dignity, safety, and security to live out their traditional ways of being. Dignity includes having the freedom to extend caring to others, which is what Elders have often done in their communities.

Today, dignity is not always accorded to people in our society, and this lack of dignified treatment is often misread as intrapsychic dysfunction or pathology through the lens of professionals. Realistically, we see that Canadian society is rampant with discrimination against indigenous people and minority groups, and with violence against women and children. An appropriate social analysis must include issues of class, race and gender within the historical context of colonialism and imperialism. To understand the community devastation of indigenous peoples, it is important to become familiar with the Indian Act and how this legislation continues to undermine First Nation, Métis, and Inuit families in Canada. When families are humiliated and destabilized, in both mundane and large-scale ways, they have less freedom or “room to move” in terms of dedicating their energy to their children while being called upon to address social concerns. Many anti-oppression theorists tell us that “whenever people are treated badly, they resist in some way” (Brown, 1991; Scott, 1990; Wade, 1997). Dignity is the central concern in finding ways to preserve family safety and integrity while seeking one’s own (and collective) liberation against violence and oppression.

One tool of intervention for families may be the connection to cultural tradition—but tradition as a living rather than a static entity. Laguna writer Leslie Marmon Silko (cited in Anderson, 2000) reminds us that tradition includes “making do with whatever [is] available” and “adaptation for survival” (p. 35). For service providers and those engaged in assessing families, it is crucial to use tools that seek to discover what is right with people, rather than what is wrong, and that consider the social context and how disrupted dignity skews the results of assessment. The BC Office of the Provincial Advisor for Aboriginal Infant Development Programs offers the following advice for practitioners:

The AIDP office recommends either assessment with the knowledge neither is culturally specific or relevant. Aboriginal children, especially those living in traditional communities, start disadvantaged by many of the developmental assessments used in the ECD field. It is felt by many Aboriginal professionals and parents that the assessment tools do not show accurately what the children *do know*. (Office of the Provincial Advisor for Aboriginal Infant Development Programs, 2008, p. 3)

CONCLUSION

The longing for connection and home brings suffering to many indigenous children, as it did to Richard Cardinal. Like many indigenous children in Canada, Richard lived on “foreign ground” (Kroetsch, 1995, p. 395). The connection that he sought, sadly, remained a longing of the heart, until he could no longer bear its absence.

A better understanding is needed of how the connection between child welfare interventions and human dignity relate to positive outcomes for everyone concerned. More research is needed involving a microanalysis of child welfare court documents and psychological assessments to better understand how indigenous families are construed through the deficit lens of Western psychology, and how these constructions are influencing child welfare decisions. Walmsley (2005) reviewed child protection literature and policy and interviewed child protection workers. He concludes that his research demonstrates that “child protection practitioners with a social work education make little use of scientific knowledge in practice; rather, experience—whether professional, personal, familial or communal—appears most influential in practice decision making. Although experience is arguably a powerful influence in life, little is known about how it intersects with ideas, theories, or facts in the course of a social work education” (pp. 136-7).

The research conducted by and reviewed by the authors suggests that by supporting connectedness and cultural identity for indigenous children and families, service providers may help turn longing into belonging. This spiritual transformation will inevitably help indigenous children to deal with racism, ethnocentrism, and the many social challenges they will meet growing up on the foreign ground of Canadian soil. It is our hope that future social responses to the Richard Cardinals and the mothers of Richard Cardinals in the Canadian child welfare system will actively encourage a sense of dignity and belonging.

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