

## Indigenous Child Foster Care Disparity: Applying the Lens of Critical Race Theory

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*The critical race theory (CRT) concentrates on social issues experienced by American Indians; they are referenced in this work as Indigenous Peoples. The theory provides a framework to examine the current disproportionate placement of Indigenous Peoples' children into foster care. The placement of Indigenous children outside their cultural communities result in losses of ethnic culture, heritage, spirituality, values, traditions, and languages of Indigenous Peoples. The result of foster care placement further extends into a loss of self-identity and extinction of this minority population. These losses are too often left unaddressed. The Indian Child Welfare Act is utilized as a policy example and raises the discussion on the disparities of Indigenous children placed in foster care. The policy's intent is to maintain Indigenous heritages by limiting the practice of removing Indigenous children from their families. Enhanced professional service delivery is warranted and direction is given to the ongoing disproportionalities of Indigenous children in foster care. It is necessary to increase skills in cultural competence delivery with Indigenous Peoples specifically in the areas of social work, research, practice, and policies. This is possible by increasing awareness of 'self' and the dominant social paradigm relative to biases, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Charged professionals must actively utilize culturally competent skills and engage in reforming the culturally inappropriate decision-making practices that negatively affect Indigenous Peoples. The CRT leaves the door open for continued examinations of the social disparities experienced by Indigenous Peoples.*

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Peoples children, culture, foster care, decision-making, cultural competence*

Centuries have passed since Indigenous Peoples (*American Indians*) experienced the destruction and turmoil of deprivation and separation. The losses resulted in forced family displacement, children being removed from their homes and placed into boarding schools. The hierarchical social structure disallowed cultural practices and traditions. Further, the Indigenous languages and use of their native names were forbidden. Unfortunately, these losses are just a mere example of the pain and scars experienced by a population often forgotten in today's headlines and social structures.

Considering the significant decrease of the Indigenous Peoples population from an estimated 60 million pre-colonization (Koch, Brierley Maslin, Lewis, 2019) to the current representation of 5 million, which is approximately 0.9% nationally (U.S. Census, 2020), it is easy to forget the social issues and the past and present experiences. Albeit unacceptable, one may assert feasibility to look beyond the historical occurrences and move forward. The error in such assertions rest in that the preceding destructions of Indigenous Peoples have continued the harmful effects of deprivation and separation of historical and cultural trauma. The mirror of historical trauma highlights social concerns of disparity among the Indigenous Peoples. Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2019) and the Behavioral Health Services for Indigenous Peoples, as reported through the Substance Abuse Mental Health and Substance Use Association (2019), substantiates the disproportionality that is evident in mental health and substance use rates among Indigenous Peoples compared to the non-Hispanic white population. The same rings true regarding the rates of alcohol use (Indian Health Services, 2014; NSDUH, 2019). Curtin and Hedegaard (2017) as reported by Garcia (2020) further assert that Indigenous youth ages 15-24 share having thoughts of suicidality more than any other race or ethnicity in the United States. The historical and generational trauma alongside cultural and self-identity loss are underlying factors of mental health and substance use issues that stemmed from forced colonization (Skewes & Blume, 2019; Vast & Collin-Ve'zena, 2019). Recognition that forceful removal from family, land, culture, and all things known to

Indigenous Peoples into the unknown is immensely horrific. When coupled with falling prey to victimization of mental abuse, physical violence, neglect, and death heightens the meaning of oppression and eradication.

The health and wellbeing of a people was further dismantled through forced removal of innocent Indigenous children from their native families. Indigenous children fell prey to physical and verbal punishment solely for being who they were born to be. The purpose of the reprimands was the receipt of demanded acceptance of imposed indoctrination into a 'civilized' way of life, which resulted in cultural trauma (DeMarni Cromer, Gray & Vasquez, 2018). The placement into unfamiliar boarding school environments was detrimental to the sanctity of human life, particularly the lives of the marginalized Indigenous Peoples (DeMarni Cromer, Gray & Vasquez, 2018; Garcia, 2020). Upon acceptance was the inevitable - colonized assimilation and the disconnect from the native Indigenous cultural identity.

Since colonization and the boarding school era, children of Indigenous Peoples are placed into foster care homes unknowing of native cultures; these placements lead to the continual loss of cultural identity, trauma of separation, and distrust (Hanna, Boyce, & Yang, 2016). The cycling effects deserve wide attention to address overrepresentation and oppressions depicted in social reporting. Many professionals state that it is difficult to research and understand Indigenous Peoples' social issues due to their small population size. Such statements often reflect connotations of little concern by the majority. Moreover, it leads to a misguided message of disregard and nonexistence of these social issues that are prevalent in our society. Therefore, it is imperative to raise these concerns by being vigilant in finding ways to examine, discuss, and address them.

In assisting with the examination, is a wealth of treaties (laws), and policies formulated with the promise to render healing. Unfortunately, treaty promises fall privy to the 'forgotten' files, while policies may take a band-aide approach to healing. The scaring is beyond the surface; it is much more profound. Fortunately, some scholars have provided an opening to discuss Indigenous social concerns and trauma. It is also important to note that to adequately address the concerns, a heightened awareness and understanding is essential. Increasing awareness and understanding comes through active involvement in learning the historical markers that led to the development of laws and policies; within the contents history becomes reality. The issues of colonization and intergenerational trauma are detrimentally real for the Indigenous Peoples (Johnson, O'Connor, Berry, Ramelmeier, & Pecora, 2012; Hanna, Boyce, & Yang, 2016; DeMarni Cromer et al., 2018). The critical race theory addresses disparities and westernization constructs while discussing opportunities to equalize the current imbalanced representations of Indigenous Peoples' social concerns.

Indigenous policy reviews, constructions, and reconstructions become possible and create feasibility from a positive lens. Delgado's critical race theory arose in the 1980s (Trevino, Harris, & Wallace (2008). CRT opens the door of enlightenment to Indigenous Peoples' disproportionate oppression rates. The critical race theory has been commonly known and recognized by scholars for decades. The critical race theory addresses the structuralizing of nuances such as policies and laws that lend themselves to an imbalanced social system. Professionals can successfully address these nuances and social imbalances by gaining knowledge in their service delivery. Further, active discussion can raise the importance of enhancing cultural competence in specific service to Indigenous Peoples. Hence, this work applies the critical race theory in the discussion on disparity rates of Indigenous children in foster care and the consequences for removal. The discussion elaborates on increasing attention to cultural competence with Indigenous Peoples through social work, research, training, and policy. In expressing the connection of

critical race theory, let us first introduce its importance in Indigenous child disparity and follow through the historical development.

### **Critical Race Theory: Historical Summary**

Understanding the disparity rates of Indigenous child removal from Indigenous populations' homes (Abril, 2007; Bussey & Lucero, 2013; Daftry, 2020) requires a shift from traditional and empirical views of research. Delgado supplies a pivotal shift through his critical race theory. Of course, scientific knowledge emerges from curiosity and exploration; it gives privy to enlightenment through inquiry. Such inquiry uncovers information needed to understand the social structure. Critical race theory draws attention through principles that examine the presence of race, racism, oppression, and social inequities, while further challenging the dominance/hierarchy that is inherent in the social order. It is a theoretical framework that explores the historical presence within hierarchical social structures that exude imbalances through established laws and policies (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Daftry, 2020). Additionally, CRT addresses the issues of social injustices while actively acknowledging the importance of bringing voice to the minority/subordinate. As a shifting theoretical framework, the critical race theory improved epistemology in its purpose of challenging the social order. The CRT tenets are later discussed in further detail. Now, let us take a glimpse into its history.

The historical paradigm shift occurred when theorists set out to challenge hierarchical structures and their ways of thinking (Higley & Pakulsi, 2012). Marxism theories began during the period of empiricism, which was when scientists believed all knowledge required statistical referencing (Higley & Pakulski, 2012; Spencer, 2012; Higley, 2018). The standard alterations reflected the relationships between race and social interaction (Higley & Pakulsi, 2012; Walker, 2012). The neo-Marxist perspectives concerned the dichotomy between having too much focus on traditional ways of knowing versus the restricted presence of open-minded reasoning (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Angers, 2013; Seal, 2016). As theorists began to critically examine the social interplay between the majority and minority populations, the critical theory emerged and shifted paradigmatic thinking.

The emergence of structural linguistics, such as Levi-Strauss, expressed that social structure requires a definitive explanation to deal with the social system from diverse views (Berting, 2012; Sprenger, 2013). According to structural linguistics, all systems (individual, educational, social, and political) undergo changes at which behaviors, perceptions, predictions, and analysis become affected (Levi-Strauss, 1958; Berting, 2012; Rusu, 2013). Observations and cumulative information become the justification of events and the acceptance of "facts" becomes a reality. However, since structural changes occur on different knowledge levels, there is room for contradictions in perspectives (Levi-Strauss, 1958; Cappiccie; Dawson & Cameron-Kelly, 2010; Chadha, & Snyder, 2012; Sprenger, 2013). The social structure and the presence of bias is significant and therefore, it remains necessary to have broader and deeper open discussions. Unrestricted communication increases awareness and knowledge while lowering contradictions. These discussions further elicit understanding while declining biased views.

German neo-Marxists recognized that a real understanding of the social structures required an examination of beliefs about society. The examination called for a critical perspective (Yosso, 2005; Abrams & Moio, 2009; Angers, 2013; Seal, 2016). The critical perspective moved positivism from its neutral position of knowing (Angers, 2013). The view of science was objective. The neutrality position provided that all ideas were acceptable for a challenge and exploration (Brincat, 2013). Each one was considered equally valid, value-free, and without justification by culture or individuality. The objectives expanded through inquiry.

Michel Foucault described discourse in post-modern structuration, sharing that discourse considers an individual's ability to remain an objective observer of the work and refrain from bias (Howarth, 2010). For Foucault, discourse can increase personal views and opinions, manifesting in assessment results (Boschetti, 2012; McLaughlin, 2013). The premise of Foucault's work on discourse asserts that reason relates to human perspectives, values, and justification (Boschetti, 2012; Howarth, 2010). Consequently, to expand knowledge through reason, it is necessary to adopt a role that limits the presence of biased feelings or emotions thereby strengthening the representations of truth, power, and knowledge (Bell, 2012; McLaughlin, 2013). Of course, one must first acknowledge that each person has opinions and perceptions likewise, every individual has conscious and unconscious biases (Ortega & Faller, 2011; Thibeault, 2019). In so stating, is a movement toward self-awareness and practice toward establishing a professional mindset. Foucault's statement regarding biases remains present in the current professional dialogues and practices. Additionally, the critical theory retains active and public dialogue on dissolving inequity barriers through intellectual exposure (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Constance-Huggins, 2011; Pivorienė & Ūselytė, 2013; Yosso, 2005). An open exchange thereby directs accountability practices.

Finding the right and accurate information in context can be complicated in understanding observance fully; this leads to distorted interpretation (Wolfreys, 1998; Skowronski, Sedikides, Heider, Wood, & Scherer, 2010; Douglas, McCarthy, & Serino, 2014). Interpretations may result in partial and inaccurate information, thereby increasing misguided assessments based on the lack of understanding of the social structure (Bennington, 1993; Bell, 2012). Misunderstandings create biased interpretation and negatively affect human lives (Nissen, 2014). In moving ahead, the emergence of critical theorists expanded into broader observances through the critical race theory.

### **Critical Race Theory and Rational Technocratic Thinking**

Critical theorists aimed at understanding society from a naturalistic viewpoint, meaning that societal presence, actions, behaviors, and results were impinging on various dynamics of human and ecological interactions. Every individual is affected by their engagement in and between systems. Therefore, each social interchange results in either a positive or negative occurrence dependent on the visible or nonvisible forces. The goal of critical theorists led to the development of critical race theory (Brincat, 2013). Although the ideological concepts of critical theory did not hold a secure place in the positivistic concepts, it intended to develop a more intense level of understanding of the social world than was traditionally established in the Marxist period (Daniel & Quiros, 2010; Mittwede, 2012; Trevino et al., 2008). As critical theory strengthened, additional opportunities expanded into specific areas such as race, oppression, and the interaction with the dominant discourse during the structuralism period (Boschetti, 2012 & Sprenger, 2013). Interestingly, theoretical frameworks strengthened power differentials such as viewed through critical race theory. In its intent, critical race theory challenges the social system to “analyze, deconstruct, and transform” (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 250). Taking a step toward equitability and socially just representation implies a commitment to raise attention to the existence of biases and dominance.

Critical race theory considers opposing ideas as a challenge. As declared by Abrams and Moio (2009), the law cannot be both neutral and objective. For example, oppositional thinking implies that by dominating to get a specific goal, one can find any means possible in bringing the goal to fruition (Mittwede, 2012). The culmination found and secured by any means makes accomplishing what is known as rational technocratic thinking (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Bell, 2012; Song & Ma, 2012). An example of rational technocratic thinking expresses the view of the Jewish

torture encampment in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was a place and time wherein the Jewish population suffered near eradication. This event was reflected as rational/logical but was not a reasonable goal (Dosso, 2012). Likewise, for the Indigenous Peoples, the "eradicating of the Indian to protect the elite" (Abril, 2007, p. 3) was an insensible logic.

Further, the rationale of intent to "kill the Indian and save the man" alluded that on some level, the goal was logical. Ultimately, their goals became possible through extermination, the forced assimilation, and victimizations of both Jewish and Indigenous Peoples. The elimination of their self-identities and external disconnections resulted in cultural deprivation and trauma. The allusion to procreate better societies while depreciating populations of these peoples was irrational.

Let us specifically view the authoritarian practices that intended to diminish Indigenous Peoples. The elitist forced assimilation by removing Indigenous children from their families, which led to their loss of Indigenous identification. Indigenous children endured forced assimilation leaving them to identify with the European/westernized culture (Cooper, 2013; Wolfe, 2006). The technocratic thinking and actions in the past remain today but are less apparent. Indigenous peoples and their children struggle to reconnect with their cultures and have difficulty safely securing their self-identity. Critical race theory addresses minority oppressions such as the attempted eradication of Jewish and Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, opening the lens of critical race theory raises discussions around the social disparities of Indigenous Peoples.

### **Critical Race Theory Applied**

The intent of critical race theory is the supply of a focal lens into individual and systemic issues that exhibit unbalanced or inequitable exchanges through the mechanisms of policy and law. The development of CRT was the result of social injustices imposed on minority and oppressed populations by the majority power structures. CRT asserts that the power structures have the resources to make decisions based on their own best interests which further multiplies their resources, assets, and societal structures (Abrams & Maio, 2009). Such multiplicity arrives through policy and laws with an agenda to accumulate ongoing hierarchical influence while decreasing the minority status quo. In its address of power differentials through law and policy, CRT calls for the inclusion of subordinate minority voices while actively pressing forward to increase leveling of social infrastructures (Daftary, 2020) between the majority and minority constituents. Six tenets embedded within the CRT are delivered in the forthcoming discussion to substantiate CRT's applicability lens in examining Indigenous child foster care disparities.

The first theoretical tenet for discussion asserts that race is socially constructed, as determined by hierarchical systems. This construction results in the continuance of racial divides across society while adding strength to authorities. Such human assignment then builds on the permanency of racism experienced by oppressed populations. A thoughtful examination of disproportionality captures awareness and attempts to secure solutions that will equalize the social imbalances. The perspective of the critical race theory contends that there is an intertwining of knowledge and power. Therefore, working through institutional knowledge increases the understanding of social systems (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010; Constance-Huggins, 2011; Dawson & Cameron-Kelly, 2010; Mittwede, 2012). CRT provides a lens to examine overt and covert social inequalities, oppressions, and suppressions principally those occurring through an historical context (Daftary, 2020). The diaspora and separation of Indigenous Peoples and their families have historical presence.

Historically the Indigenous Peoples were invaded by elitist European groups intended on conquering territories for expansion of power and gain. The goal was to gain control by any means possible. Little attention was given to understand and respect the Indigenous Peoples view of land (Mother Earth and her resources). However, the Europeans knew the value of land mass, its treasures, and the purpose of conquering to acquire. Therefore, with their use of technocratic thinking native diaspora occurred thereby weakening the Indigenous structures. Critical race theory contends that imbalances of resources and needs are the result of structuralizing social issues. Likewise, the establishment of barriers can block individuals from social balance and aspirations to reach their fullest potential. The forced colonization of Indigenous Peoples created familial, social, environmental, cultural, and spiritual barriers once present and vibrant in their lives.

A second tenet of CRT stresses that racism is inherently ingrained and sometimes reflects an ordinary unconscious occurrence. For the minority groups, racism is an ongoing factor in their daily lives while the majority group may not see the activity of its presence and the effects on marginalized groups. Examining this factor requires an openness to the reality of racism and the impending effects of racial classifications. For example, although the federal government's expressed intent may be to strengthen Indigenous family units, there remains a disproportionate number of Indigenous children removed from their homes (National Indian Council on Aging (2017; Kids Count Data Center, 2020). Race is not a colorblind categorization and therefore lends itself to political and legal interests. The federal government provides funding to the Department of Health and Human Services to assist in the placement and care of Indigenous children and further suggests that native children become involved in or exposed to Indigenous cultural events.

A third tenet of CRT, materialism, emphasizes the need to challenge the social and political order. Communicating between institutions and peoples with intent and purposeful reasoning is required to minimize bias (Thyer, 2009; Trevino et al., 2008; Wang, 2012). Previously stated, little attention is given to the social issues existing within the populations of Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, lack of attention leads to continued gain of resources for the hierarchal structure while minimizing the voice of the marginalized groups. Unfortunately, constrained knowledge exists in understanding the best approach needed for breaking down the barriers, which lead to ongoing unrest and risks to displacement of Indigenous children from their native cultures.

A fourth CRT tenet accentuates dominant discourse in racial differentials (Bell, 1995; Abrams & Moio, 2009; Daftry, 2020). This tenet signifies that racial minority views and presence are often overlooked and/or excluded. Such signification legitimizes decision-making of power structures through justification. On the other hand, in serving to acquire beneficial gain by including minority presence, the dominant structures may consider adaptation of policy and law (Daftry, 2020). In the focal lens of CRT, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) has presence. The policy provides that Indigenous children removed from their homes should first be considered for placement within their own native cultural environment. A point of controversy is the involvement of Department of Social Services before contact with the tribal governments. The ICWA has been debated consistently (Bussey & Lucero, 2013; Atkinson, 2019) by the hierarchal structures since its inception. Additionally, the ICWA is interpreted as being applicable only to federally recognized tribes, which are ultimately overseen by dominant power structures within the federal government. Bual (2018) concurs the best interest of the Indigenous Peoples remains in opposition.

The stated conflict of ‘best interest’ leads to the fifth tenet of CRT, which symbolizes the presence of intersectionality (Hanna, Boyce & Yang, 2017; Daftry, 2020). The concept of intersectionality was coined by Kimberle’ Crenshaw in 1989 in which she implies the uniqueness of individualism, perspectives, and the interdependent systemic actions that result in continued oppression and discrimination. This theoretical concept connects with CRT regarding that recognition of dynamic power structures is not enough; there is a need to actively engage in social injustices through law and policy (Abrams, Moio, 2009; Daftry, 2020). The roles within the hierarchical structures must lend themselves to establish agreements in the realities of oppression that extends to the exclusion of marginalized populations. For example, the disparity rates of Indigenous children in foster care homes that exclude native cultures and practices is a call for moving beyond suggesting to rather requiring documented cultural inclusion. As asserted by Bell (1995) CRT pushes toward the inclusion of relegated populations in understanding historical, cultural, social, and political divides; inclusion rather than exclusion bridges that social divide. Intersectionality poses that whether privileged or marginalized each have multifaceted (Daftry, 2020) experiences leading to individual worldviews. Resolutions are impingent upon the establishment of agreement.

The final CRT tenet of discussion is the inclusion of voice, which shares place in intersectionality. As stated earlier, biases are inherent within every individual due to unique experiences and world perspectives. Working toward decreasing social imbalances requires a unified approach. Collective voice experiences increase the power dynamic among marginalized groups. Unifying groups toward commonalities and goals may reflect coalition-building strategies to navigate the hierarchal structures for greater resolve. An example relative to disparate foster care placements may be an integration of Indigenous Peoples with other minority populations experiencing disparate issues.

From a historical standpoint, the tenets of critical race theory permeate a keen attention toward increasing cultural competence with Indigenous Peoples. Shedding light on the presence of Indigenous Peoples and their oppressions includes revisiting historical markers that continue to permeate across the disparate spectrum. Some specific markers of oppression are the ongoing 1. child removal from their homes into foster care, 2. mental health disorders with thoughts of suicidality, and 3. substance use. These markers are concerning. As initially shared, there is a need for examinations in the areas of social work, research, training, and policy reviews. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) is one example for discussing the disparities of Indigenous children in foster care. Thus, critical race theory provides a dialogic lens for addressing the disproportionate representations.

### **Addressing Policies and Law**

In considering the intent of examining specific Indigenous disparities, it is essential to view their historical experiences. Historically, Indigenous Peoples had no voice or choice in the European/Westerners' decisions to remove the children from their ancestral/native homes. Children were forcibly removed and placed in boarding schools to eliminate Indigenous cultures while impinging westernized assimilation. Unfortunately, throughout history, Indigenous Peoples' children have been the most vulnerable population, often being a disenfranchised minority with their voices unheard (Cross, 2008; Hancock et al., 2012). Increasing culturally competent skills and knowledge of the disproportionality of foster home placements alerts professionals to the ongoing dispositions of Indigenous Peoples. The alert further brings critical thought to the continual occurrences while incorporating diverse perspectives.

Critical discussion includes the history and experiences of disenfranchisement that resulted in separation and loss of a people. The Indigenous population drastically declined as centuries passed due to colonization (Koch, Brierley Maslin, Lewis, 2019). Furthermore, after colonization, the forceful removal of Indigenous children from their biological homes was occurring at phenomenal rates of 25% to 35%; rates were higher than other racial ethnic groups (NICWA, 2015; Low, 2019). More alarming is that children were removed by state officials without cause in return for substantial monetary gain provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Fletcher, 2009). To address the high disproportionality, the Child Welfare League and Congress collaboratively addressed Indigenous children's displacement (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). Active work was evident through policymaking. Fortunately, in 1978 ICWA was put into place to decrease the number of Indigenous children removed from their native homes while also intending to maintain the cultures and the family integrity of the tribal nations (U.S. Department of Interior, 2016). Since that time, ICWA has gained some success in maintaining healthy Indigenous family units, despite its countless challenges. Due to ICWA, the rate of Indigenous children removed from their homes decreased roughly from 25% to 12%; this is a good improvement. On the flip side, ICWA remains challenged, as reflected in acknowledging the lack of understanding ICWA compliance due to diverse perspectives and interpretations of ICWA. The general noted reasons were vagueness in the intent of ICWA and ambiguity in adequately complying with the policy. It is essential to consider that it took approximately 37 years to bridge some of the vagueness and ambiguity before resulting in the 2016 Guidelines for Implementing the Indian Child Welfare Act. During that time gap, Indigenous children were disrupted and removed from their native families; they continue experiencing separation and foster care placement at 2.5 times more than other populations.

The National Indian Council on Aging (2017) shares that Indigenous children, in some states, are placed in foster care at 14.8 times more than the general population. Research compiled from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS, 2011) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (2018) indicates disproportionate representations at 2% of Indigenous children in foster care. Moreover, the Kids Count Data Center (2020) reflects that 2% of non-Hispanic American Indian children are in foster care. The table below serves as an example and provides a comparative glimpse of the current disparities.

**Disparity Rate Comparison of Children in Foster Care**

United States				Total Population
				328,239,523 (+,-)
State	Race and Ethnicity	Children in Foster Care	Race/Ethnicity % Population	Total
<i>Alaska</i>				731,545 (+,-)
	American Indian	45%	15.8%	
	White	24%	64.2%	
<i>Montana</i>				1,068,778 (+,-)

	American Indian	31%	6.3%	
	White	50%	88%	
<i>North Carolina</i>				10,488,084 (+,-)
	American Indian	2%	1.2%	
	White	51%	68.1%	
<i>North Dakota</i>				762,062 (+,-)
	American Indian	34%	5.4%	
	White	43%	85.8%	
<i>South Dakota</i>				884,659 (+,-)
	American Indian	55%	8.6%	
	White	23%	84.1%	

Source: Kids Count Data Center; U.S. Census (2020).

Research by Carter (2010) and Crofoot & Harris (2012) substantiate the data; such data raises the alarm to Indigenous children's representation in foster care placements. A red flag is particularly elevated since Indigenous children only make up 1% of the total number of children in the United States (AFCARS, 2018; Bohn, 2003; Carter, 2010; Cooper, 2013). Concerns of their removal and placement into foster care exists due to ongoing reports of such disparity. For instance, Indigenous Peoples are less likely to be reported for physical abuse than Whites (Dakil, Cox, Lin, & Flores, 2011). Moreover, physical abuse is more prevalent among Whites while physical neglect is more prevalent among Indigenous Peoples (Carter, 2010). The total number of Indigenous children in foster care may not be reflected due to the likelihood of Indigenous children not being identified and recorded as Indigenous Peoples. For example, undocumented reports share that case workers often omit the inquiry of Indigenous status; this may indicate training needs in policy compliance. Reviewing the statistics on Indigenous child disproportionality and reporting are steps forward in increasing awareness, knowledge, and professional skills. The review seems to indicate apparent needs to address these disparities through active efforts focused on enhancing the individual (micro), group (mezzo), and societal (macro) knowledge bases.

The tenets of critical race theory reveal 1. race is socially constructed, 2. racism is inherently ingrained, 3. materialism, 4. racial differentials, 5. intersectionality, and 6. voice. The critical race theory acknowledges the placement of race, racism, suppression, hierarchical power, and the necessity of collaboration to strengthen the volume for the oppressed voices (Cappiccie et al., 2012; Daniel & Quiros, 2010). The Indigenous voices deserve a listening ear, and their suppression calls for active and sincere

policy interventions that display awareness, knowledge, and skill, which are necessary components for examining the current chaos and challenges of Indigenous oppression in disparate systematic child placement. When social systems become chaotic, oppressive, and challenging, it signifies a time for tackling social injustices (Nissen, 2014). Actions can occur through transformative social work in applying the lens of critical race theory, which supports acknowledgement, action, and innovative efforts. Addressing the disproportionate rates of Indigenous children means delving into policy and law practices by applying the critical race lens.

### **Revisiting the Problem and Moving to Action**

Indigenous Peoples continue suffering pains and afflictions resulting from historical trauma. Unfortunately, there is a lack of knowledge associating the past and present circumstances. The removal of Indigenous children from their native cultural heritage is not new, but such actions call for critical review. The importance lies in the reality that such removal expands into the loss of self-identity and the unending detriments among Indigenous Peoples. The determination of removing Indigenous children from their homes and placing them outside of their cultures can be damaging. The absence of knowing, understanding, or practicing their Indigeneity results in continued harm as expressed by the children's loss of connection to their cultures, spirituality, values, traditions, and language (Ahktar, 2013; Carter, 2010; Cooper, 2013).

Further still, such placement eventually leads to the extinction of the Indigenous Peoples population (Bussey & Lucero, 2013; Hall, 2012). It is suitable to declare that continuing the story of eradication is thereby reflected. It is not in the best interest of the Indigenous Peoples or that of global society to pursue efforts toward extinction of Indigenous cultures. For example, the Indigenous ways of practice through the medicine wheel is unveiling its importance in the overall health and well-being. Although reformists confer ways to demystify the imbalance among populations, the fight for equality and balanced representation continues. The repetition of historical disconnections should stimulate the questioning of Indigenous child disparities in foster care. It is an attention-grabbing issue and necessitates movement from questioning to actions geared toward decreasing disparate representation.

The disparity rates warrant the need for an in-depth examination of the decision to remove a child from their cultural environments (Ahktar, 2013; Cooper, 2013). The decisions partially derive from current policies within child welfare, and ICWA, and reflect a deficit in Indigenous cultural knowledge. It is imperative to improve decision-making practices of child abuse and neglect principally since researchers have found that the national academic institutions teach social work from within a westernized lens of child abuse and neglect. Additionally, the institutionalization of child welfare policies and training support the westernized view (Bolea, 2012; Hall, 2012; Willis, DeLeon, Haldane, & Heldring, 2014; Pinderhughes, 1997). Practices such as assessment measures are based on a one size fits all approach and further exhibit case worker-perceptions. Decision-making practices can be improved through inclusion of an Indigenous scope.

Speaking to this cultural knowledge deficiency means vigorously and carefully filling the knowledge gap. The following discussion provides five examples for policy efforts (implementation and revision). Further, conversations lean toward researching their removal practices and policy effectiveness. Policy implementations and revisions discussed within this work are presented on a small scale and are non-exhaustive. Moreover, sensitivity in the scope of this work is established; the tenets of critical race theory are embedded in the following dialogue.

The first policy suggestion is revisions within the Department of Social Services and ICWA policies. ICWA should hold presence in the provisions of Indigenous children at risk of being removed from their homes. ICWA states that the tribal government should be contacted first to ensure child safety and if necessary, secure placement within the child's own native cultural environment. This point is addressed due to recognizing the ongoing controversy regarding child removal by Department of Health and Human Services Child Welfare divisions before contacting the tribal governments. It is expected that DHHS and Child Welfare be involved but not have the lead. A procedure within this policy would also mandate ICWA have applicability to all Indigenous children regardless of federal or state recognition and move further into non-recognized tribes. Within this implementation could be procedures that move beyond suggestions and press toward requirements. Additionally, it should be established between the policy entities the requirement for specific training and adequate resources within the tribal governments. Indigenous Peoples are the only population that must "prove" their racial status as "Indian". These policy suggestions speak to CRT's first tenet that race is socially constructed, the second tenet that racism is inherently ingrained, the third tenet of materialism, and finally the fourth tenet, which accentuates dominant discourse in racial differentials.

The second policy illustration is implementation focused on building awareness, knowledge, and skill. For example, implementing policy procedures requiring successful completion of social work course/training modules specific to Indigenous Peoples, their cultures, and disparities. The development modules would have precise learning objectives and course/training outcomes established within the social work competency and practice behaviors. It would be essential to include a pairing of circular and linear methodology to the course/training. Circular methodology entails teaching through an Indigenous/circular lens exemplifying the realism of social issues inherent within Indigenous Populations. Content delivery would include theoretical perspectives specific to histories, oppressions, trauma, assimilation, decolonization, and social programs. Participants would assess and evaluate selected policies. Further, participants would apply selected theoretical frameworks for developing interventions for analysis. Such teaching requires the instructor to adapt course/training delivery in a way that challenges participants to integrate the importance of social belonging that would connect with the Indigenous lens through the inclusion of the four quadrants of the medicine wheel. Participants would complete oral deliveries of case studies and self-reflections of learning modules; this thereby reflects circular methodology. The westernized/traditional lens would consist of lecture/facilitation, writing, and grading rubrics. This policy implementation highlights CRT's fifth tenet of intersectionality, which declares the need for awareness and knowledge of oppression and discrimination. Upon acquiring the needs is the recognition that active engagement is necessary to address social injustices and the dynamic powers through law and policy.

Successful decisional practices should come through the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and their cultures. As previously stated, current child abuse and neglect assessments apply a linear structure based on westernized conformity measures. Thus, the third model is policy revision that would potentially consist of revising assessment measures reflective of cultural competence skills; this could be a meaningful inclusivity approach. Inquiring about Indigenous cultural practices of parenting in assessment revisions applies a circular approach. For example, examining cultural Indigenous parenting practices and those learned through westernized assimilation could offer beneficial information in reviewing assessments; the reviews may accentuate revisions. Solely applying the westernized/linear view of correctness for the Indigenous Peoples rests in the disruption of the population (Bolea, 2012; Dumbrill & Green, 2008) and eliminating the value of its cultures. Conversely, the incorporation of circular measures could prove beneficial in assessment practices. Using a broader Indigenous/circular

perspective exemplifies cultural competence. This standpoint of knowing embraces the theme of unity, survival, and existence from an individualistic approach (Bender et al., 2010; Geron, 2002; Jackson & Hodge, 2010; Kirmayer, 2012; Paris, 2012; Danso, 2018). While respecting the current child safety measures, inquiry into circular/cultural measures would include stakeholders such as Indigenous families, their communities, tribal elders, social workers, and policy leaders. Together, this reflects the decision-making practices of inclusivity agreement for revising current neglect and abuse measures and their definitions.

A fourth model for policy implementation could deliver procedural requirements for parents and caretakers training to increase skills in child development, parenting practices, and best practice interventions. Additionally, conducting deliberate qualitative and quantitative research on the policy efforts with Indigenous families, children, social workers, and policy leaders may echo the importance of cultural identity. Involvement in such stated examples could result in decreasing foster care disparity rates while increasing overall health and wellbeing.

Intentional inclusion for questioning and reviewing the disproportionate number of placements impinges on the provision of culturally competent practices. Decisions affect the future of Indigenous children. Culturally competent delivery protects and preserves self-identity and cultural vitality. In return, this delivery decreases the effects of traumatization. The tenets of critical race theory aim toward bringing balance to current disparities and decreasing ongoing social oppressions through active engagement of policy and law. Opening and building the conversation impinges on reflective cultural competence in social work practices. This policy suggestion speaks to CRT's tenet of voice.

A fifth suggestion includes research of outcome measures established in policy implementations and revisions with a focus on social work competency and practice behaviors. An examination of decision-making processes for placement of Indigenous children in foster care deserves the incorporation of cultural-specific competence in social work training (Collins, Kim & Amodeo, 2010; Jackson & Hodge, 2010; Jackson & Samuels, 2011). These examinations can also occur through research, policy reviews, and cultural-specific assessments embedded in the course/training modules. Question-raising research efforts specific to social work cultural competence and practice with Indigenous Peoples could provide further light on its existence and attainment of culturally competent skills and practice with this population. This final suggestion connects with CRT's tenet of intersectionality. Applying a critical lens and accounting for intergenerational trauma sheds light on the social imbalance and long-term displacement effects.

It is necessary to amplify attention to displacement, cultural heritages, historical experiences, and disparate social issues. Based on research, disparity rates of Indigenous children in foster care calls for a unified focus, which suggests a heightened delivery of cultural competence standards. Social work institutions acknowledge the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Standards of Cultural Competence. The current tools of social work assist in understanding the ecological perspectives. However, resource tools to better equip workers in their assessments of Indigeneity are limited (Collins et al., 2010; Ortega & Faller, 2011). Therefore, the concern resides in raising cultural competency with Indigenous Peoples. Inadequate education and training constrain individuals and results in unintended oppression through the sole reliance of the westernized/linear view. Contrariwise, addressing the concern increases Indigenous children's opportunity for internal self-identification and cultural connections by challenging the hierarchical structure. Current challenges reside in the absence of Indigenous case study perspectives and problematic maltreatment assessments.

These challenges raise the potential assertion of one's values and beliefs that result in biased decision-making. Thus, these biases may place Indigenous Peoples at higher risks of social problems. On the other hand, enhancements could decrease potential bias and improve service delivery outcomes. Improvements could positively impact systemic structures and social exchange. Capturing the context of cultural competence in decision-making is manifested by the inclusiveness of Indigenous Peoples' traditions, beliefs, and values. (Ahktar, 2013; Williams & Ellison, 1996; Wilson & Kelly, 2010), thus reflecting value-based knowledge.

Again, there is a knowledge constraint in social work practices, research, training, and policy efforts with Indigenous Peoples. Particularly concerning is the lack of research on examining social work levels of cultural competence with Indigenous Peoples (Bolea, 2012; Hodge & Limb, 2010; Leak, Potter, Lucero, Gardner & Deserly, 2012; White, 2017; Thibeault, 2019). In essence, due to these existing limitations, decisions may be based on a family's cultural characteristics or ethnic appearance (Ortega & Faller, 2011; Thibeault, 2019). Often, people may not be fully cognizant of their biases during assessments. Unfortunately, the limitations and biases negatively affect Indigenous children's lives before and during assessment reporting (Johnson, O'Connor, Berry, Ramelmeier, & Pecora, 2012). There is room for research in evaluating child abuse and neglect assessment tools and policies. The concern is the need for cultural competence service delivery and its specificity to and inclusion of Indigenous Peoples' cultures. It is imperative to have cultural competence effectively delivered in service practices. Doing so increases success, while decreasing misjudgments of cultural Indigeneity.

Inclusion of Indigeneity through dialogue increases the presence of empowerment to Indigenous Peoples while diminishing the cultural violations experienced by their families (Bolea, 2012; Atkinson, 2019). Critical race theory asserts the importance of voice inclusion. One of the core themes of professional practice is empowerment, an inseparable inclusion of diverse human groups (Bolea, 2012; Leak et al., 2012; Akhtar, 2013; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Cultural competence skills are the building blocks of empowerment (Johnson et al., 2012; Nybell & Gray, 2004; Willis et al., 2014), preservation, and embodies culturally infused policy interventions. These interventions integrate healing (Flint, 2015) and professional expression across the spectrum.

Excellence in practice delivery evolves by erasing distorted perceptions of culture that results from misguided views. The perception of reality is programmed into the mind and the social order (Carr-Ruffino 2003; Secchi & Bardone, 2013; Song & Ma, 2012). Therefore, critical assessments include deeper self-awareness and understanding of race, values, attitudes, and beliefs, all these being integral elements of the social condition (Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013; Prasad 2001; Williams & Ellison, 1996). Cultural competence reflects the desire to change misrepresented realities through creativity, innovation, and purpose. Positive change comes through inclusionary approaches actively engaging with Indigenous Peoples using skilled practices. Open forums discussing historical contexts from the Indigenous Peoples perspective provides an avenue for increasing awareness of their cultural loss (Ahktar, 2013; Cooper, 2013; Mama, 2002; Weaver, 1999). Although policy within agencies has spoken to the disproportionality of Indigenous children in foster care (Hall, 2012; Fletcher, 2017), it could be beneficial to review current measures.

The dialogue can be strengthened through the five policy actions discussed in this work. Although the suggested policy actions appear brief in this venue, the conversation is at least an additional move toward in addressing the ongoing Indigenous child foster care disparity rates. The position in this work is further supported through the six mentioned tenets of critical race theory. Heightened cultural competence brings

balance to assessment measures, which are vital in professional practices. Indigenous Peoples have earned the right to preserve their cultural heritages and therefore deserve the receipt of skilled culturally competent service delivery.

## Conclusion

Critical race theory provided a discussion on the social issues of Indigenous Peoples. The theoretical lens specifically addressed the disparity of Indigenous children removed from their native homes and placed into foster care. Such removal is the loss of self-identity, cultural disconnections, and the cycling effects of intergenerational trauma. Critical race theory provided a lens to discuss the imbalances and disparities while opening the door for future works using a more defined approach. The theory discussed Indigenous Peoples' social issues and suggested the addition of circular approaches in efforts to demystify their social and structural imbalances. Such practice vitalizes critical decision-making practices. Recognizing cultural competence as thematic is crucial; it clearly accounts for the differences of others. The professionals' stance must consist of self-examining attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Danso, 2018). While embracing the individualistic approach may be challenging, such a mindset moves us toward an increased competence and success. The Indigenous Peoples' health and well-being are concerning and results from the experiences too often left unaddressed. It remains imperative to be vigilant in raising concerns to actively address their needs. Furthermore, the enhanced attention increases the likelihood of inclusion and acceptance of Indigenous Peoples rather than the exclusion and extinction of a people and their cultures. Ultimately, working to bridge the cultural competence gap improves professionalism and accountability across the board.

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