Chickasaw Native American Adolescent Mothers: Implications for Early Intervention Practices

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ABSTRACT. Twenty-four adolescent mothers completed a cultural identity questionnaire and met with an observer in their homes to complete the HOME Scale. Analyses utilizing Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients found a significant relationship between high identity with the Native American culture and lower scores on verbal responsibility and on provision of material goods. These findings were expected given the Chickasaw values of quietness, reservation, and few worldly possessions. This study illustrates why cultural sensitivity is important for training and in practice when providing community services, such as early intervention.


Adolescent parenting practices have been found to differ when compared to older mothers, especially in the area of responsiveness and verbal interactions (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Palkoff, 1991; Culp, Ososky, & O'Brien, 1996), and stimulation in the home environment (see Luster & Mittelstaedt, 1993, for a review). In this regard, early interventions in home visitation have targeted first-time adolescent parents and have found effective results in better maternal perception of empathic understanding toward children and increased understanding of adult roles in parenting (Culp, Culp, Blankemeyer, & Passmark, in press). Additionally, children of adolescent mothers benefit from early intervention by nurses in the areas of reduced rate of child maltreatment, fewer accidents requiring emergency care, and better health throughout childhood (Olds & Kitzman, 1993). These findings have led many communities to implement early intervention programs for adolescent mothers. However, there is little research on cultural differences that may affect the appropriateness and effectiveness of the intervention programs. Early intervention practices could continue to be refined by assessing the cultural identity of participants and consequently engage in intervention practices within cultural contexts.

Many Native American values and beliefs define appropriate behavior by quietness, reserve, noninterference, and cooperation; and silence is a customary prac-

tice of the American Indian (Ho, 1984). The Native American relies upon indirect communication: eye contact is avoided as a means of showing respect (Burgess, 1978; Chisholm, 1983) and jumping into a conversation is considered offensive (Ho, 1984; Ryan, 1992). The Native American culture values controlling emotions. The traditional demeanor is one of poise and self-containment.

Although children are taught to observe rather than react, they are ever present at most social gatherings, and time spent with children is more important than buying material goods for them (Burgess, 1978). Native American parents teach their children by participation and observation rather than by actual instruction and by buying materialistic goods. Verbalization of needs, wants, feelings, and intentions is not encouraged because the needs of the group are more important than one's own needs (Ho, 1984).

Very little research specific to the Chickasaw tribe is available. However, the cultural characteristics of the Chickasaw individual has been documented: (a) the individual uses nonverbal communication through body language, sign language, facial expression, silence, and respects personal space; (b) time is now and ever flowing, there is no need to hurry; (c) respect for elders and other adults (teachers) is shown not by looking into their eyes, but rather, by glancing away; and (d) lack of belief in ownership—resources are to be shared among each other, not kept from those in need; a low emphasis on personal material wealth (Chickasaw Tribal Cultural Center, 1994; Milligan, 1976).

A study of Navajo mother-infant interaction measured consistent differences in comparisons with Anglo American mothers. It was found that during the first year of life, Navajo infants vocalized less than Anglo American infants, interaction with the mother was shorter and mothers talked to and touched their infants less than Anglo mothers (Chisholm, 1983). The diverse language background and de-emphasis of verbal interaction practiced by Native Americans may hamper the development of language skills needed to succeed in the majority culture's public educational system (Ho, 1984). Early studies on achievement (reviewed in Burgess, 1978) show that the educational potential of Native American children and non-Native American chi-
is equal at the school entrance level. Around the th grade, Native American children fall behind non-Native American children on achievement scores. Education researchers often attribute this phenomenon to teaching style which encourages verbal assertiveness (Burgess, 1978). This lag in achievement may be partially due to speech production. Knowing a tribal language and learning English as a second language may cause Native American children to use shorter sentences, omit adjectives, and use the English verb incorrectly (Burgess, 1978).

Ivey (1969) sampled 185 Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole children in an Indian residential elementary school to determine the influence of language upon reading and speech development. This study found a relationship between speech competency and reading ability. The results showed that the students were deficient in reading, and the major contributing factor was defective speech. Guilmot (1977) found that Navajo children speak half as often as white children in the classroom. This lack of speech in the classroom may be related to poor academic achievement. Teachers reveal a bias toward children with limited communication abilities (Rice, Hadley, & Alexander, 1993). When asked to assess a child’s attributes (intelligence, social maturity) by listening to an audio tape, they judge the children with limited communication abilities to be less capable than children without communication abilities, when, in fact, they are not.

In summary, adolescent mothers are at risk for poor parenting practices, and many communities are providing early home visitation intervention services to them. The expectation is that children of parents enrolled in intervention programs will experience healthy development: physically, cognitively, socially, and linguistically. However, adolescent mothers who identify with the Native American culture are likely to be a challenge for intervention professionals because they may be quiet, avoid eye contact, and communicate in an indirect way. This kind of communication may affect how the home visitor approaches the young mother. In addition, the mother’s quietness may influence her child’s language acquisition and production, which, in turn, may influence school achievement.

This study investigated the relationship between the degree of cultural identity and the conditions of the home environment of adolescent mothers. The variables of the home environment were verbal responsiveness and provision of materials to children. We hypothesized that high identity with the Native American culture will relate to less maternal verbal responsiveness and to low provision of manufactured learning materials in the home.

Method

Participants
The sample consisted of 24 adolescent mothers of which 16 were Native American, seven White, and one African American and White. Of the Native American mothers, 13 of the mothers were Chickasaw and 3 had close tribal affiliations.

All the mothers were less than 19 years of age at the time of their first child’s birth. Eighty percent of the sample had annual incomes of less than $18,000; 55% did not have high school degrees; 55% were not married. The children were less than 3 years of age with 80% less than 1 year old; 58% of the children had an older sibling.

Procedures
Mothers were recruited through parenting programs in rural southwestern United States. A staff member who worked with the families described the study to the mothers and received consent for the researcher to meet them for a 90-minute visit at a time convenient to the mother and when the child was awake.

Measures
In addition to a basic demographic information form, two assessment instruments were used: The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) and the Orthogonal Model of Cultural Assessment (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991) were used.

The HOME Scale is an observation/interview measure of the quality of the social, emotional, and cognitive support available to the child in the home. The 45-item measure was developed for infants aged 0–3 years with each item scored in binary (yes-no) fashion. The 45 items are divided into six subscales: two of which were used in the study: (1) Emotional and Verbal Responsivity of the Mother, and (4) Provision of Play Materials. Reliability and validity of the HOME Scale have been well documented. The scale is respected as a standard measure in the field of early environmental research with high predictive validity with studies predicting school-age social and cognitive development (Bradley & Caldwell, 1976a, 1976b; 1984; Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988). While administering the scale, the researcher attempted to put the parent at ease and care was taken not to ask questions in a threatening or judgmental manner.

The Orthogonal Model of Cultural Assessment measures the degree to which an individual perceives his or her link with a particular culture. The measure allows for high or low identification with a particular culture, or any combination of bicultural identification. Six questions each require an answer for each culture that is numeric and ranges from 1 (a lot) to 4 (none at all). The questions cover information on special activities that take place every year at particular times (such as holiday parties, special meals, religious activities, trips, or visits); cultural rules followed in everyday family life and with the self; and if family success as well as their own future success exists in the culture. For the purpose of this study, only those scores relating to the Native American culture were used to calculate
the single Native American culture score. A score close
to 1 is very high identity; a score close to 4 is very low
identity. Reliability and validity studies have been car-
ried out by Oetting and Beauvais (1991), and they re-
port high concurrent validity among a sample of Native
American youth and another cultural identity measure.

Results

190 Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients
were used to analyze for relationships between cultural
identity and the scores on verbal responsivity and pro-
vision of play materials. The Emotional and Verbal
Responsivity Score covered 11 items, 7 of which were
specific to conversation and verbalizations, 5 of which
reflected the child receiving positive attention while
the visitor was there. The possible range of scores was 0 to
11. The data in the study ranged from 2 to 10. Recall
that a low score on the culture measure signifies high
identity and a low HOME scale signifies low responsi-
ivity and provision. The results show a significant
positive correlation (both scores are low). High Native
American cultural identity relates to low verbal responsi-
vity \( r = .60, p = .001 \).

205 The Provision of Play Materials score had 9 items
which related to available toys: toys for muscle activ-
ity, for music, for simple eye-hand coordination, com-
plex eye hand coordination, cuddly or role-playing
(toys. This scale had a potential range of 0 to 9 points.
The data in this study ranged from 1 to 9. The results
show a significant positive correlation between Native
American cultural identity and learning materials, \( r = .47; p = .01 \).

Discussion

215 The purpose of this study was to investigate the re-
lationship between Native American cultural identity
and the home environment of Native American adoles-
cent parents. The results of this study show significant
support for the hypothesis which related high Native
American cultural identity with low verbal responsivity
and the provision of learning materials. Adolescent
mothers who identified with the Native American cul-
ture had homes in which verbal initiations, responsi-
vity, and spontaneous conversation with their children
were low and the provision of manufactured learning
materials was low. Since the research literature had
documented that Native American children do not per-
form as well in school, it could be suggested that the
study variables may have an important influence. Be-
cause the Chickasaw Native American mothers respect
the values of their culture, it is of no surprise that
scores on verbal responsivity and material possessions
were low. This is a reflection of their cultural identity.

230 These data should be given serious consideration by
community providers of intervention programs for Na-
tive American adolescent mothers. As indicated by Ho
(1984), Guilmet (1977), Burgess (1978), and Ivey
(1969), there is a concern for Native American chil-
dren's language skills and academic success in school
and how teachers perceive low-level language users.
This concern puts great emphasis on the need to inter-
vene into the children's lives early. However, the inter-
vention should be placed in a cultural context in which
cultural identity is respected. Native American parents
are concerned about school achievement. The parents
worry about how much to compromise their cultural
values and teachings (Burgess, 1978; Ryan, 1992). To
facilitate the children's success in the majority culture
public education system, community agency providers,
educators, and parents need to share and discuss the
information gleaned from Native American research
studies and early intervention studies in which the spe-
cific parent-child activities are described that positively
influence school achievement. Once this information is
laid out in a clear way, the community service provid-
ers should listen and reflect what the Native American
parents understand the studies to say. Parents should be
given the time to explain how the information fits into
their belief systems and if they might have methods
that could be considered for implementation. The ideas
generated by the parents could be used as a guide in
developing creative ways to implement an early inter-
vention program for the community Native American
families. Service providers that are culturally sensitive
will help ensure the program's success.

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