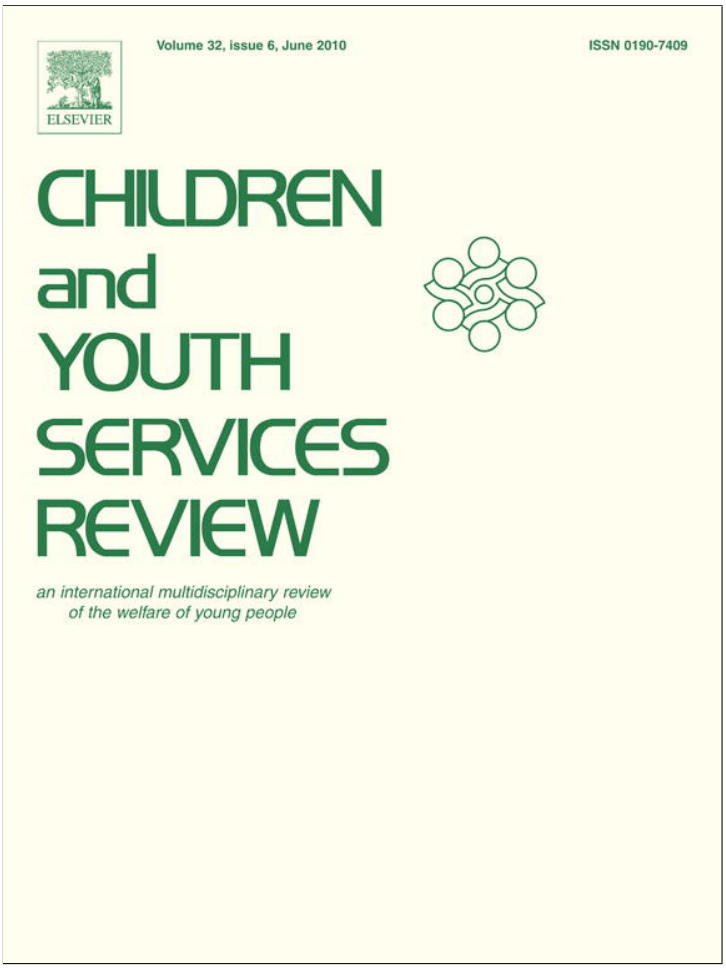

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Fulfilling the hope of ICWA: The role of community context

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that long-term foster care, especially when it is provided within an American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE), may be a culturally-appropriate alternative form of permanency for American Indian children. Administrative data on foster care placements of children from four California counties over a five-year period indicate that children in the county with the strongest AICE had fewer placements and placements that were, on average, significantly longer. Within counties that had recognized tribes, children from local tribes had longer placements. Data on individual placements were available for one county and indicated that children whose home tribes were within that county and who were placed on Rancherias had significantly longer placements than other children. These relationships remained significant when children's demographic characteristics were controlled. Implications for policy and practice related to ICWA are discussed.

1. Introduction

American Indian tribes and communities historically relied on customary practice and tradition to provide for the needs of their children through extended family relationships. Prior to the intervention of child welfare laws and practices beginning in the late 1800s (Downs, Moore, & McFadden, 2009; Martin, 2007; Mason, 1994), American Indian children who were in need of a safe, loving place to live and could not stay with their birth parents would temporarily or permanently live with an extended family member (a relative—aunt, uncle, grandparent, for example—or with a member of the tribe or community who was part of the same clan, for those tribes where the clan system was practiced). Children within most Indian customary tribal practices are considered gifts and their welfare is the concern of the entire community (NICWA, 2005). Children also represent a connection between the past and the future for the entire tribe or community, not just the immediate or birth family. In honor of and respect for extended family relationships, children historically were and to the present are often reared by one or more extended family members.

At about the same time as child welfare issues began to be legislated and their implementation re-located from families and communities into the legal system, many American Indian children were involuntarily removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools. The goal of the boarding schools—funded by the federal government and most run by charitable organizations with the full sanction of the federal government—was to Americanize the Indian based on the concept of "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (Bender, Brown, & Rosenzweig, 2005).

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed in 1978 after the last of the boarding schools were closed in the 1970s to begin to address the ongoing practice of removing Indian children from their homes and placing them with non-Indian families. Although many boarding schools were closed by the late 1930s, the ongoing practice of removing children from their families and communities continued until the passage of ICWA; and, in some measure, continues to the present. With this historical context in mind, ICWA's proponents sought to address the very disproportionate number of Indian children in foster care and the vast preponderance of them being placed with non-Indian families (Hogan & Siu, 1988). By returning authority over their children who were involved in custody cases to tribes (excluding those involving divorce), ICWA was established to help maintain—and in some cases reestablish—ties between Indian children and their tribal communities, practices, and heritage.

To bring this about, ICWA specifically requires that Indian children who are removed from their parents because of abuse or neglect be placed first with extended family and, if that is not possible, then with other tribal members, followed by other Indians who are not members of their tribe and then, only as the last option, with non-Indian foster or permanent parents. The ICWA (federal law 25 U.S.C. § 1902, enacted in 1978 and revised in 2003) also explicitly gives the tribe a voice in the

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decision making process equal to or, in some instances, greater than the voice of the birth parent(s). Part of the impetus behind the passage of the Act was the belief that state-run foster care contradicts the historical traditions and customs practiced by American Indian people by having family and community members maintain the ongoing care relationships for children.

At the same time, the child welfare system, when required by law to remove children from their birth parents' homes because of abuse or neglect, has recognized the importance of finding permanent or "forever" homes for children as quickly as possible (see Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994; Barth, Webster, & Lee, 2002). Finding permanency may mean returning children to their birth parents or finding an alternative, like adoption. Encouraging permanency is seen as essential to promoting the safety, well-being, and stability required by ICWA and other child welfare legislation, such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Because of the federal legislation aimed at permanency, long placements in foster care have traditionally been viewed as detrimental to the welfare of children.

Statistical data document that three decades after the passage of ICWA, Indian children are still placed in foster care at disproportionate rates. One recent estimate suggests that the placement rate is twice the proportion in the population at large (Children's Bureau, 2008; see also Donald, Bradley, Day, Critchley, & Nuccio, 2003). Other research supports the finding of disproportionality and adds that children of color are most at risk for remaining in foster care for extended periods of time (Roberts, 2002). In addition, in 2000 only 31.3% of 48 reporting states had developed systems to give preference to Indian caregivers in out-of-home or permanent placement determinations for Indian children (Brown, Limb, Munoz, & Clifford, 2001). ICWA's goals over thirty years after passage of the federal law are not being fully met since the statistics indicate that American Indian children continue to be more likely than other children to be in foster care, and states have yet to meet ICWA guidelines for those out-of-home foster care and permanent placements.

In this paper we provide an alternative view of what may constitute a culturally-appropriate permanent placement and suggest that a simple examination of these global indicators cannot capture the ways in which American Indian communities may provide ongoing care relationships for children. More specifically, we suggest that long-term foster care, especially when that care is provided by a relative or another tribal member, may be a culturally-appropriate alternative permanency similar to historical practice and custom. In other words, for American Indian children, long-term foster care may be an alternative form of permanent placement that parallels the traditional tribal patterns of caring for children who cannot be with their birth parents. We suggest that a child who experiences an Alternative Permanent Placement (APP) would have both fewer placements throughout his/her life and that those placements would be longer in duration. If the long-term foster care being provided is most often with extended kin or tribal members, then it would seem that concerns about the impermanence of foster care as a long-term placement for American Indian children must be re-examined.

At the same time, however, we contend that community contexts will influence the probability that such alternative forms of permanency can occur and that the foster care experiences of American Indian children may vary from one community context to another. Specifically, we suggest that American Indian children in foster care will be more likely to experience APP when they are in an American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE), one that would be more likely to foster traditional norms of extended kin relationships and community caretaking for those in need.

We test this contention with administrative data from the California Child Welfare System on the foster care placements of American Indian children in four counties within the state of California. This state is especially suited for such an analysis since it has the largest population of American Indian children under the age of 18 (Snipp, 2002) and counties with widely varying cultural, economic, and historical characteristics. While the majority of Indian children in care within these counties were placed in non-Indian homes (thus not fulfilling the goals of ICWA), this analysis is concerned with whether or not an alternative permanency seems to exist for those placed in AICE environments versus those placed in other contexts.

Our sample includes children in two highly urbanized counties with no recognized tribes or reservations within their boundaries, another county that is largely urbanized but has several Rancherias[2] and recognized tribes within its boundaries, and a fourth, largely rural county, with a relatively large reservation. We hypothesize that American Indian children in foster care within the latter two counties will be more likely than those in the other counties to experience the alternative form of permanent placement described above. In addition, we hypothesize that, within these two counties, APP will be most likely to occur for children whose home tribes are within that county, who reside within tribal communities , and who are placed with kin—a situation that parallels the ideal placement specified by the ICWA legislation. Finally, we hypothesize that these relationships will occur for children of varying demographic characteristics.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample and procedures

Our sample included almost 1600 American Indian children who were brought into the foster care system in four counties in the state of California over a five-year span. All of the children were designated as having American Indian ancestry as either their primary or secondary racial identity and were in foster care within the county at some point from October 1, 2002, through September 30, 2007.

Table 1 provides population and economic characteristics of the four counties at the end of our data period. The order in which the counties are arrayed in the table parallels our theoretical construct of American Indian Cultural Environment. On the far left is County A. Almost seven percent of its residents report an American Indian identity as their only race, and an additional 3% report this identity in combination with another group. County B is home to several Rancherias and recognized tribes. Compared to County A, a much smaller proportion of its population identifies as American Indian, but the proportion doing so is larger than in either County C or D. Neither County C nor County D has any recognized tribes or reservations. However, County C has long had a large population of urban Indians and has a slightly greater proportion of its population claiming American Indian ancestry than County D.

Table 1 also includes information on population size, median household income, and poverty rates. County A is located in a rural northern part of the state, while Counties B, C, and D are located in the southern part of the state. County A is geographically much smaller than the other counties and is by far the poorest, with the lowest median income and the highest poverty rate. At the other end of the extreme is County D, with the highest median income and the lowest poverty rate. County B has a population that is similar to County D, but slightly lower median income and a slightly higher poverty rate. County C is the most populous and has a lower median household income and higher poverty rate than either of the other two southern California counties.

Administrative data on foster care placements of American Indian children were obtained from the CWS/CMS (Child Welfare Services/Case Management System) for each of these counties as part of a larger project designed to help recruit American Indian foster and permanent/adoptive parents. Other researchers who have used administrative data such as these report that they provide useful, reliable information on the trajectory of children's experiences within the foster care system (e.g., Barth et al., 1994; Drake & Jonson-Reid, 1999,

[2] Rancherias are the same as reservations in terms of sovereignty; however, the land mass is significantly smaller than a reservation.

Table 1
Characteristics of children's home counties, 2007.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, http://factfinder.census.gov, downloaded October 10, 2009.

	County			
	A	B	C	D
Total population (1000s)	29.1	3001.1	9862.0	3010.8
American Indian/Alaskan Native—Sole identity (%)	6.5	0.7	0.5	0.5
American Indian/Alaskan Native—Alone or combined with other identities (%)	9.9	1.4	1.1	0.9
Median household income (1000's)	33.2	61.0	52.6	71.6
Individuals below poverty level (%)	19.1	11.3	15.4	9.3

Note: Counties are arranged by theoretical ordering of our construct of American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE), with County A conforming most closely to this construct and County D least so. Data regarding race, income and poverty are based on estimates for 2005–2007 and data regarding population size are estimates for 2008. All values were obtained from the American Community Survey of the U.S Census Bureau.

Garnier & Poertner, 2000; Vogel, 1999; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Dilts, 2001; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Hardin, 2003).

2.2. Measures

We measure the dependent variable, Alternative Permanent Placement (APP), by the number of stays that a child experienced and the length of each placement. As detailed above, we suggested that children who experienced alternative permanency (APP) would have fewer stays in foster care, but these stays would be longer. We specifically examine: 1) the total number of placements that a child experiences and 2) the average length of each placement. We were also able, for County B, to examine disaggregated information regarding the length of each individual placement.

On average, American Indian children in the four counties in our sample had slightly less than 4 placements, although there was wide variation (s.d. = 3.8), with values ranging from 1 to 35. Average placement length also had wide variability.[3] On average, children were in a placement for about 13 months (394 days), but values ranged from placements of less than a day to almost 18 years (6493 days).

We used three measures of an American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE). Our first measure was simply the county in which children reside, assuming, as noted above, that County A provides the strongest AICE, while County D provides the weakest such context. As would be expected, given the differences in population size among the four counties, children were not evenly distributed among the four locales. Of the almost 1600 children in the sample, the largest percentage (55%, $n = 876$) were in County C, followed by County B (34%, $n = 542$), and Counties A (5%, $n = 82$) and D (5%, $n = 81$).

Our second measure of an AICE is based on the assumption that children from a local tribe might be more likely than other children to be linked to an American Indian community. Thus, for children in Counties A and B, we differentiate children who claim affiliation with a local tribe from children affiliated with non-local tribes. In County B, tribal identification was given for 266 children and slightly less than half of these children (41%, $n = 110$) identified with a tribe based in that county.[4] In County A, tribal identification was known for 54 of the children. Twelve of these listed a tribe outside of California, but the remainder ($n = 42$) listed a northern California tribe that had historical and cultural ties to the county.

Third, for County B, we had information on the location of a child's placement, and, using the zip code of this placement, we determined if it was on or near a Rancheria. A three category variable was created differentiating: 1) children from a local tribe and placed on a Rancheria (11% of all placements), 2) those from a local tribe, but not placed on a Rancheria (33%) or not from a local tribe and placed on a Rancheria (5%); and 3) children not from a local tribe and not placed on a Rancheria (51%). We hypothesized that children from a local tribe and placed on a Rancheria would have significantly longer placements.

Finally, we had information on the children's gender, whether American Indian or Alaskan Native was their primary or secondary racial identity, whether they also identified as Hispanic or Latino (not available for children in County A), and if they had been certified as eligible for ICWA. Males and females were equally represented in the sample. Almost two-thirds had American Indian or Alaskan Native as their primary racial identity, and one-quarter also identified as Hispanic or Latino. Even though over half noted a primary identity as American Indian, less than one-fifth of the children had been determined to be ICWA eligible. To cast as broad a net as possible and include a sample size sufficient for analysis, this measure included children who were tribal community members, those who had the designation pending, and those who were listed as eligible but not yet determined. This was deemed to be the most appropriate step given the length of time necessary for obtaining tribal determination.

2.3. Analysis

Recall that our first hypothesis is that American Indian foster children who live in counties with a more pronounced American Indian Cultural Environment (County A and, to a lesser extent, County B in our sample) would have fewer but longer placements, which we have described as an Alternative form of Permanent Placement or APP. We examine this hypothesis with simple descriptive statistics and analyses of variance, comparing the average number of placements and placement lengths for children in the four counties.

The second hypothesis focuses on variations within counties that have recognized tribes and suggests that, within these two counties, APP would be most likely to occur for children whose home tribes were within that county and who experienced placements with families residing on Rancherias. To examine this hypothesis we again present descriptive statistics and use analysis of variance as an inferential statistic.

Finally, we hypothesized that the relationship between AICE and APP would be independent of children's demographic characteristics. To examine this hypothesis we used multiple regression techniques, regressing our measures of APP on dummy variables for our measures of AICE and controlling for gender, American Indian identity, ICWA eligibility, and Hispanic identity.[5]

3. Results

3.1. Hypothesis one: County variations in Alternative Permanent Placements

Table 2 reports results related to our first hypothesis regarding variations between the four counties in the foster care experiences of American Indian children. The top panel reports means and standard deviations for each measure of APP for each county and for the total sample. The bottom panel reports the results of analysis of variance tests examining the hypothesis that the mean values in the four counties are equal. As in Table 1, the counties are arranged from those hypothesized to be most likely to have an American Indian Cultural Environment (County A) to those least likely (Counties C and D).

Our hypothesis that children in counties with a stronger AICE would have fewer, but longer, placements appears to have some support. As expected, children in County A had the fewest placements and the

[3] Children still in placement were included in these figures by calculating, separately for each county, the number of days in the placement at the time the data were downloaded. Thus this is an underestimate for those still in placement.

[4] For children in County B seventeen different tribes were listed. A child could list more than one tribe and the largest number of tribes listed by one child was fifteen. For children in County A, 5 different tribal affiliations were identified as local.

[5] We had information on children's birth dates for most cases, and adding this variable to the regressions did not alter any of the results presented here. We did not, however, have consistent data on age at first placement, so we were not able to include that variable.

Table 2
Number of placements and average placement length by county.

	Descriptive statistics				
	Number of placements		Average placement Length (days)		
County	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	*N*
A	2.6	2.0	612	1214	82
B	4.6	4.6	386	724	542
C	3.4	3.3	396	498	876
D	3.3	3.1	202	186	81
Total	3.8	3.8	394	631	1581
	Analysis of variance results				
	Number of placements		Average placement length (days)		
F	15.04		5.86		
df	3, 1577		3, 1577		
Prob.	<.001		0.001		

Note: County A is posited to have the strongest AICE, while County D is posited to have the weakest AICE.

Table 4
Length of placement by AICE of placement, County B.

	Low	Partial	High	Total	*F*	Prob.
Placement one						
Mean	111.5	136.9	590.0	168.1	15.173	<.001
s.d.	238.9	251.3	1096.9	435.1		
N	144	90	26	260		
Placement two						
Mean	245.0	220.1	426.0	270.1	4.91	0.01
s.d.	293.3	260.8	522.3	343.4		
N	114	58	37	209		
Placement three						
Mean	261.8	178.5	281.7	230.4	1.45	0.24
s.d.	364.1	234.4	303.1	313.5		
N	78	62	15	155		

Note: A "high" AICE refers to a placement for a child from a local tribe on a Rancheria, while "low" is a child from a non-local group placed off the Rancheria. Sample only includes children in County B for whom tribal affiliation was known.

longest average placements. Children in County D, believed least likely to have an AICE, had the shortest average placement, almost a third that of children in County A. Results for County B were mixed. Children in this county had, by far, the largest number of placements and average placement lengths similar to County C. The *F*-values indicate that differences between these average values were highly significant.

3.2. Hypothesis two: Tribal identification, location of placements, and APP

Our second hypothesis addressed variation within Counties A and B, the two locales that have recognized tribes and thus, we contended, would be more likely to have an AICE. We examined this hypothesis using our two, more specific, measures of AICE: 1) children's identification with a local tribe (available for children in both County A and County B) and 2) the composite measure of tribal identification and location of placement (available only for children in County B). Table 3 reports scores on the two measures of APP for children who identify with a local tribe and those who identify with other tribes for both of the counties. It was expected that children from local tribes would be more likely to experience APP and thus have fewer, but longer placements. Results for each dependent measure are presented in separate panels of the table. Means and standard deviations are in the first rows of each panel, followed by the results of two-way analyses of variance, with county and location of the child's tribe as factors.

Table 3
Placement characteristics by affiliation with local tribe, County A, and County B.

	County A		County B	
Tribal Affiliation	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.
Number of placements				
Non-local	4.3	2.7	4.5	3.8
Local	2.6	1.7	4.9	4.3
	F	Prob.		
County	3.45	.06		
Local	.86	.35		
Interaction	2.67	.10		
Average placement length				
Non-local	217	152	265	240
Local	794	1538	354	566
	F	Prob.		
County	2.81	.09		
Local	8.11	.005		
Interaction	4.34	.04		

Note: Sample sizes for County A were non-local = 12, local = 42; County B, non-local = 156, local = 110.

The strongest results for the hypothesis occur with the measure of average placement length. In both counties, children from local tribes have longer average stays in their placements than children from non-local tribes. As would be expected, given its stronger AICE, these differences are larger in County A (reflected in the significant interaction effect). The result with number of placements supports the hypothesis for County A, where children from local tribes have fewer placements, but is in the opposite direction in County B, where children from local tribes have somewhat more placements. These trends, however, are not strong enough to be statistically significant.

Table 4 reports results using our final measure of AICE, which was available only for County B. As explained above, this measure utilizes information about children's tribal identity and each placement that they experience, resulting in three mutually exclusive descriptors, ranging along a scale from low AICE to high AICE: 1) child was not from a local tribe and was not placed on a Rancheria (termed "low"), 2) child was from a local tribe, but not placed on a Rancheria; or, alternatively, the child was not from a local tribe, but was placed on a Rancheria (termed "partial"), and 3) child was from a local tribe and placed on a Rancheria (termed "high"). In line with the theoretical discussion presented above, we hypothesized that placements involving group 3 would be significantly longer. Data are given only for the first three placements as the sample size for group 3 became very small at that stage ($n = 15$) and even smaller at subsequent placements.[6]

The results in Table 4 support the hypothesis. Children from local tribes who were placed with foster families on Rancherias had significantly longer average placements than children in other placements. Results are highly significant for the first and second placements, but not for the third, where only 15 children were in the group of children with the highest AICE. The magnitude of the difference in placement length between children in the high AICE group and those in the low group was substantial: over a year (478 days) for the first placement and less than half that time for the second (181 days).

We were also able to examine the extent to which these placements involved children living with guardians and relatives. Such a placement with kin would provide even further evidence that the children were experiencing an alternative form of permanency (APP). Notably, three-fourths (75.2%) of the placements in the high AICE group were with guardians and relatives, compared to only 19% in the lowest category. This comparison was highly significant (chi-square = 185.42, $p < .001$).

[6] The diminishing sample size for cases in group 3 over subsequent placements provides further support for our hypothesis. Because children from local tribes who are placed with families on Rancherias have attained a form of permanency, they are rarely moved to additional placements.

Table 5
Regression of measures of APP on county, gender, primary racial identity, and ICWA eligibility.

	B	S.E.	Prob.
Total number of placements			
Constant	3.10	.44	<.001
County A	−.86	.58	.14
County B	1.58	.45	<.001
County C	.37	.44	.40
Male	−.48	.19	.01
Primary AI identity	.05	.20	.82
ICWA eligible	1.01	.25	<.001
R sq.	0.04		
Prob.	<.001		
Average placement length			
Constant	106	74	0.15
County A	358	99	<.001
County B	146	76	0.06
County C	177	74	0.02
Male	53	31	0.09
Primary AI identity	138	33	<.001
ICWA eligible	54	42	0.20
R sq.	0.03		
Prob.	<.001		

Note: County D, posited to have the weakest AICE, is the omitted category for the dummy variables for county.

3.3. Hypothesis three: Controlling for children's demographic characteristics

As a final step in our analysis, we introduced control variables to see if the relationships between an AICE and our measures of APP persist for children with different demographic characteristics. Using data from all four counties we first regressed the two indicators of APP on dummy variables for each county (with County D, posited to be least likely to have an American Indian Cultural Environment, as the omitted category) and dummy variables for gender, an American Indian primary identity, and ICWA eligibility. The results are summarized in Table 5. In general, the results parallel those reported in Table 2. Even with the children's characteristics controlled, children in County A, with the strongest AICE, have fewer placements and the longest placements on average. Children in County D, posited to have the weakest AICE, had the shortest average placement length. The relative order of the counties on the two measures is the same in the regression results as in the simple descriptive statistics given in Table 2.

We then used data on individual placements for County B (reported in Table 4 above) to regress placement length on the measure of AICE based on children's tribal identity and locale of placement, as well as children's gender, racial identity, ICWA eligibility, and Hispanic identity. Results are given in Table 6 for the first and second placement and provide strong support for our hypothesis.[7] Independent of children's individual characteristics, those from local tribes who are placed with families residing on Rancherias, or in high AICE, have significantly longer placements than other children. Children with placements in the "partial AICE" category also have longer placements than other children, but these differences are not statistically significant.

4. Summary and discussion

4.1. Summary

In this paper we have presented an alternative view of issues regarding the foster care placements of American Indian children. Specifically, we suggested that long-term foster care, especially when it is provided within an American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE), may be a culturally-appropriate alternative form of permanency. We examined this supposition with administrative data on foster care placements of children from four different California counties over a five-year period. The four counties vary in the extent to which they provide an American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE). The county that we believe most embodies this environment is much smaller than the others, is in the northern part of the state, includes a large reservation, and has almost 10% of its population claiming American Indian ancestry. Another county, while having a larger population, incorporates a number of rural areas and is home to several Rancherias and recognized tribes. The two other counties are entirely urban and have a lower proportion of residents claiming an American Indian heritage.

Table 6
Regression of placement length on AICE (identity and locale measure) and child characteristics, County D.

	Placement 1			Placement 2		
	b	s.e.	Prob.	*b*	s.e.	Prob
Constant	76.4	56.6	.18	244.6	63.1	<.001
Partial AICE	11.0	60.2	.85	116.7	70.4	.10
Full AICE	460.0	89.6	<.001	223.2	87.0	.01
Male	43.6	51.5	.40	4.9	58.5	.93
Primary AI identity	57.1	61.7	.36	−9.5	67.6	.89
ICWA eligible	−41.2	57.3	.47	−49.4	64.7	.45
Hispanic	−23.2	64.4	.72	11.0	74.0	.88
R Squared	0.12			0.04		
p	<.001			0.23		
N	264			231		

Note: Placements categorized as "full AICE" involve children who identify with a local tribe and were placed on a Rancheria or reservation. Placements categorized as "partial AICE involve either a) children identified with a local tribe but not placed on a Rancheria or reservation or b) children not identified with a local tribe but placed on a Rancheria or reservation. The omitted category is all other placements.

We examined three different hypotheses: 1) children in the counties with the strongest AICE would be more likely to experience the alternative form of permanent placement; 2) within the two counties with a higher level of AICE, APP would be more likely to occur for children whose home tribes were within that county and who were placed on Rancherias or high AICE; and 3) these relationships would remain when the children's demographic characteristics were controlled. All of the hypotheses received support. Indian children in the county with the strongest AICE had significantly fewer placements and a longer average time in placement than children in other counties. Within the two counties with a stronger AICE, children from local tribes had significantly longer placements than children from non-local tribes. For County B, where we had information on individual placement experiences, children who were from local tribes and placed on Rancherias had significantly longer placements than other children. Finally, these results remained when controls for children's gender and racial–ethnic identity were included.

Support for our hypotheses was less straight-forward with data from County B, a very diverse county with both a large urban population as well as several Rancherias and recognized tribes. American Indian children in this county had significantly more placements on average than Indian children in the other counties. We suspect that these results may reflect administrative practices within the county, which tends to rely more on initial short-term placements in institutionalized settings that may provide the time needed to find the "best" "permanent" situation for a child.

In short, our results suggest that the concept of a permanent placement needs to be situated within the appropriate cultural context. For Indian children living in rural areas, such as those in Counties A and B, a foster care placement may, in fact, represent a form of permanency that reflects the tribal traditions of caring for children within the community. Not only were Indian children in the rural counties more

[7] We were unable to do regression analyses for County A because of the small sample size. In County B we did not do regression analyses for placements beyond number 2 because of the small number of cases in the "full AICE," category 3, for later placements.

likely to experience alternative forms of permanency placement (APP), they were also more likely (at least within County B, for which we have such information) to be placed with kin or extended family within an AICE. These placements with kin or extended family and within an Indian community environment were longer lasting and involved fewer overall placements for these children—an indication of stability and potential enhanced well-being for the children.

4.2. Needed future research

The strength of our findings is striking given the somewhat simplistic nature of our measures and their source in the administrative files of county welfare agencies. While these results suggest the utility of such administrative records, it would be important to examine more nuanced measures of both of our key concepts.

We captured our concept of Alternative Permanent Placement through looking at the number and length of placements. While these measures provide the basis for easy statistical manipulation, they fail to capture the more subjective elements of permanency. Most important in future research could be examining the ways in which both children and caregivers perceive the permanency—or lack thereof—of a given placement. In addition to such perceptions it would be important to examine the extent to which social ties continue as children reach adulthood and to develop measures of APP that go beyond a nuclear family unit to encompass the entire community.

It would also be important to have more extensive and nuanced measures of an American Indian Cultural Environment (AICE). Our measure of AICE that incorporated children's tribal identity and the nature of their placement was probably the most precise of our three operationalizations. Not surprisingly, it also produced the strongest results. With a larger sample and more extensive data base, such a measure could be expanded to include other placement-level indicators such as children's relations with kin and their interactions with community members.

While our analysis included a large number of children and counties with a range of characteristics, more research also needs to be done with a broader range of Indian communities and Indian child placements. The California counties in our analysis may have unique demographic or practice characteristics that influenced our results. Investigation of populations in other states in both urban and rural settings could provide an important test of our conceptualizations and the ways in which APP appears in different cultural settings.

4.3. Fulfilling the hope of ICWA: Practice and policy

Our findings provide evidence that Indian children who are placed in American Indian Cultural Environments generally have both more stable and longer foster care placements. This stability—fewer placements over a longer period of time—helps support the goals of ICWA and ASFA. It also helps assure the well-being of Indian children.

Longer periods of time in the foster care system are often seen as countering the child welfare goal of permanent placement. We suggest that this apparent contradiction can be resolved by placing the definition of a permanent placement within a cultural context. We suggest that our findings may question the definition of a permanent placement as it is currently used and applied, especially across varying cultural settings. Specifically, we suggest that the concept of permanency may need to be expanded to include types of stable placements such as those described in this paper: Indian children who are placed in an AICE setting with kin or extended family members, ones that may not be even recognized within the dominant Anglo culture.

A long-term foster care placement may better meet the conditions for culturally-appropriate permanency for Indian children than other more mainstream conceptions of permanency, such as adoption. As described more fully at the beginning of this paper, American Indian communities have traditionally seen children as the responsibility of an entire community. Rather than continuing to superimpose Anglo-American ideas of permanency on Indian children, their families, and communities, this analysis at least suggests that the definitions of permanency might better serve children and communities when they arise from the populations being served.

Placements for children in the foster care system can range from return home at one end of the spectrum to adoption at the other end. The generally accepted thought has been that adoption is the best permanent resolution for children when they are not able to return home, thus focusing on the two ends of this spectrum. Our analysis suggests that long-term foster care, an alternative form of permanent placement, may be more culturally-appropriate and a more stable solution for Indian children than was previously recognized. In other words, to best serve Indian children it may be wise to focus on the entire spectrum of placement possibilities rather than simply the two end-points. ICWA already encourages and favors placement of children in American Indian Cultural Environments. Policy may need to be re-written to allow practice to better capitalize on the existing law and the evidence provided by this and future analyses.

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