

# Grandparents of the community: Lakota elders' view of intergenerational care

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## Recommended Citation

Dennis, M., Kepple, N. J., Brewer, J. (2017). Grandparents of the community: Lakota elders' view of intergenerational care. *GrandFamilies: The Contemporary Journal of Research, Practice and Policy*, 4 (1). Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/grandfamilies/vol4/iss1/9>

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*Research Article***Grandparents of the Community: Lakota Elders' Views of Intergenerational Care**

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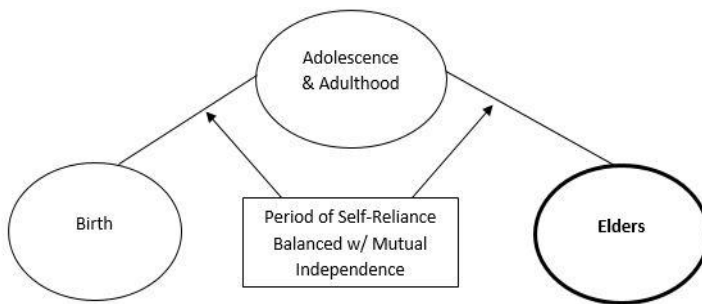
Joseph P. Brewer II  
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Lawrence, KS**Abstract**

This exploratory, qualitative study provides insight into the traditional concept of *tiospaye* (extended family and kinship to these relations) by Oglala Lakota elders in the modern context of the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota. The authors reframe the modern implementation of these traditional practices of kinship as *community grandparenting*, in which the elders extend the role and responsibilities of grandparenting behaviors to all youths in the community. This study employed Indigenous methodologies, which allowed the 25 elders to share their stories in a culturally tailored, relational manner. The study uses thematic analysis to identify three themes associated with community grandparenting: (a) providing parental guidance and resources, (b) offering cultural and spiritual teachings, and (c) modeling their Lakota values. The authors present implications for culturally relevant research and clinical practice.

*Keywords:* American Indians, elders, Lakota, community, Indigenous Methodologies

### Background

Historically, the American Indian concept of *kinship* has been misunderstood. For elders specifically, constraining their role as a grandparent within a Western framing diminishes the wealth of strengths and resources of intergenerational caring that occurs in Indigenous communities. Red Horse (1980) provides a framework for American Indian families that he refers to as the extended system model, which spans three major developmental periods defined by familial and cultural roles based in mutual obligation to each other: (a) being cared for; (b) preparing to care for; and (c) assuming care for (see Figure 1). In this model, *care* is globally defined as cultural and spiritual maintenance in addition to provision of emotional and material needs. For this study, the authors focused on the third period (by elders) when individuals assume care for others in their family, clan, or tribe. Specifically, elders take on a responsibility to care for not only their blood-related kin but for the broader community (Red Horse, 1980; Schweitzer, 1999). Building on prior work that explores the many ways Lakota elders described their experiences of and views on custodial and noncustodial grandparents (Dennis & Brewer, 2016), this study provided an in-depth exploration of a particular theme on community grandparenting enacted by Lakota elders. Using the extended system model, the authors assert that Lakota elders act as grandparents of the community, as their stories demonstrate their investment, emotional closeness, and willingness care for all the youths in the Pine Ridge community.



*Figure 1.* Extended system model (Red Horse, 1980) with emphasis on elders' role as caregivers for younger generations.

Highlighting the resource potential of community elders is critical, as the demand for intergenerational caregiving in Indigenous communities has increased. Modern forces have exposed these communities to stressors such as unemployment, interpersonal violence, child maltreatment, substance misuse, and adult morbidity and mortality, which in turn negatively affect the functioning of individuals, families, and social structures that support child wellbeing (Brennan & Cass, 2014; Fuller-Thomson, 2005; Fuller-Thompson & Minkler, 2005; Mutchler, Baker, & Lee, 2007). These issues are not unique to Indigenous elders (Brennan & Cass, 2014; Cross & Day, 2008); in fact, the reasons for taking on caregiving roles parallel those identified by grandparents raising grandchildren in mainstream Western and non-Western societies (Conway, Jones & Speakes-Lewis, 2011; Kelley, Whitley, & Sipe, 2007; Nyasani, Sterberg, & Smith, 2009).

Those prior studies have focused primarily on custodial grandparenting and/or the provision of resources to blood-related kin. This Western conceptualization of

intergenerational care may be too limiting when applied to Indigenous communities that have a tradition of collectivist kinship networks, defined by familial ties extending to members of the wider community who may or may not be biologically related to the person giving care (Yeo, 2003). Western frameworks often discuss families and communities as separate entities (Coleman, 1990; Tang, Jang, & Carr Copeland, 2015). For example, family processes (e.g., informal caregiving by grandparents) are often rooted in concepts of ties to blood relations, emotional intimacy, and cultural preservation (Tang et al., 2015). Although community concepts like social capital include intergenerational transactions between adults and nonrelated youths (i.e., intergenerational closure, child-centered social control), they view relational transactions as dependent on reciprocity, trust, and cooperation (Coleman, 1990; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). In other words, community concepts do not include an emphasis on the role of personal investment and responsibility of an elder toward a nonrelated youth. The application of Western frameworks may not be appropriate in light of traditional Lakota views of kinship, which view relational transactions between “family” and “community” as rooted in similar processes (Deloria, 1944).

The empirical literature on grandparenting in Indigenous communities is limited. The specific roles of Indigenous grandparents can vary between and within cultures worldwide, including but not limited to (a) provision of custodial care (Gaskins, 2006; Weibel-Orlando, 1997; Whyte, Alber, & Geissler, 2004), (b) leading and imparting the importance of cultural values through ritual and public ceremonial displays (Van der Geest, 2004; Weibel-Orlando, 1997), and (c) exposure of cultural ways of life for the purpose of intergenerational transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and practices

(Ofahengaue Vakalahi & Taiapa, 2013; Weibel-Orlando, 1997). Weibel-Orlando (1997) identified six grandparenting styles among American Indians, including the role of “fictive grandparents” among North American Indians, where elders who have no biological grandchildren take on the grandparent role for nonrelated children. However, these studies have focused predominantly on familial or custodial models and ignored the broader role of elders in these communities.

Definitions of kinship networks vary by geographic and tribal contexts, requiring researchers and practitioners to understand how and to what extent each tribe may embody the extended system model (Red Horse, 1980). For example, Lakota people have defined kinship by the immediate family, the extended family, and the *tiospaye*, described as the extended blood and nonblood relations within the same community (Deloria, 1944; Oswalt, 2009). However, there is a limited understanding of how traditional Lakota views of kinship persist in light of a long history of traumatic assaults (i.e., massacres, genocidal policies, and forced removal of children to White boarding schools) compounded with contemporary stressors facing the Lakota people residing on Pine Ridge reservation (Evans-Campbell, 2008). This modern landscape can be imagined without hope: the third-poorest county in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), 89.5% unemployment, 53.2% living below the federal poverty line, and 60% of children under the age of 18 living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). To challenge this bleak image, this study explored the extent to which traditional collectivist kinship practices have persevered in modern times to provide insight into how Lakota elders’ role as “grandparents of the community” may counter or offset the compounded effects of historical trauma and modern stressors.

### **Method**

This study used Indigenous methodologies, which are particularly important for populations such as the Lakota, who are often viewed through a non-Lakota lens (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This study used these methods to be vigilant in letting the story of Lakota people emerge, allowing for diverse Lakota perspectives and a more contextually accurate portrayal of Lakota lives. This method emphasizes the everyday lifestyle choices and ways of being that show a strong obligation to the core values of a Lakota society that has matured over thousands of years on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and is interwoven within the experiences handed from elders to youths (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

### **Sample**

Lakota elders living on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation participated in this qualitative, descriptive study approved by the tribal research review board and the university IRB. Purposive sampling was used, because the first author had established relationships with elders and community members over the course of five years (Creswell, 2013). This core group of elders referred their friends, family members, and acquaintances for participation in the study (Weiss, 1994). Additionally, elders were recruited directly from the senior center/elder congregate meal site in each of the nine districts on the reservation. The first author visited each site, building relationships with the elders and allowing the elders to vet the research. Snowball sampling was also used with elders who recommended others to the study (Sudman & Kalton, 1986).

Twenty-five Lakota elders who met the inclusion criteria of (a) age of 55 years and older; (b) enrolled in the Oglala Sioux Tribe; (c) having lived on the reservation; and (d) were English-speaking participated in research

conversations that were recorded and lasted between one-and-a-half to nine hours in length. The study sample was composed of 20 women (all widowed or divorced) and five men (three married, two single). All but three participants were over the age of 70 years, with ages ranging from 55 to 98. Each elder had been born on the reservation, attended day school or the reservation boarding school, and were currently living on or near the reservation at the time of the study.

### **Procedures**

The elders participated in in-depth, face-to-face, individual conversations or interviews conducted in a private, quiet, and convenient space, usually in the elder's home. The interviews were open-ended and exploratory with questions regarding their life history (e.g., Where were you born? Where did you go to school? Do you have children?). All but two of the elders had provided custodial or material support to their blood-related grandchildren. They readily shared their experiences and relationships to grandchildren, as they often lived in multigenerational homes and wanted to convey the importance of grandchildren in their lives. Initially, the elders were not directly asked about their intergenerational relationships, but it became a predominant aspect of their lives that arose during the interviews. The significance of grandparenting underscored the value of this important element of their lives.

### **Indigenous Methodological Framework**

Methodology and research design must respect the cultural and social position of the Lakota elders, whose status and societal roles may vary across cultures, to truly elicit culturally unique dimensions of grandparenting, such as collectivist kinship networks (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Guided by Indigenous epistemology (Kovach,



2009), these research methodologies emphasize the importance of Indigenous relationships and involve sharing of knowledge through an informal and formal dissemination of oral history and storytelling that is co-created within a relational context to all living and nonliving things (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

This study utilized the Indigenous Methodology known as the conversational method because this approach provides a cultural platform for an elder, similar to how they would share information and wisdom with younger generations (Kovach, 2010). The elders can then share stories directed towards the questions in a manner that is comfortable and familiar. The researcher and elders were able to question each other to gradually create a mutual understanding of the topic or idea. In sum, the conversational method offered the elders greater control over what they shared; thus the method acknowledged, incorporated, and operated within the parameters of their cultural norms (Kovach, 2010).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then manually reviewed for reporting patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used to identify the themes related to community grandparenting experiences in Lakota elders. The first author verified the accuracy of the transcription and extracted pertinent data by identifying all interview data related to grandparenting, grandchildren, and the community's grandchildren.

Thematic analysis involves six phases: (a) Familiarizing yourself with the data. The authors reviewed the pertinent interview data and field notes related to community grandparenting. (b) Generating initial codes. We developed a list of initial codes separately and then met to generate an initial list of codes (e.g. *offering*

*parental guidance, offering resources, and intergenerational cultural teachings*) that were used to label the data and refined as analysis continued. (c) Searching for themes. Over a series of face-to-face meetings, we coded and discussed the data together, refining the codes, and creating new codes. (d) Reviewing themes. We sorted the codes into broader themes. For example, data segments labeled *non-familial grandparenting* and *concern for community grandchildren* comprised the theme *parental guidance and resources to community grandparenting*. We ensured that each theme and its description represented the full range of variation in the elders' experiences. In addition, we aimed to satisfy Patton's (1990) dual criteria for creating themes: internal homogeneity (i.e., data informing each theme cohere in a meaningful way) and external heterogeneity (i.e., clear differences between themes are evident). (e) Defining and naming themes. We discussed the "story" each theme told and how it fit into the overall "story" of grandparenting in the community.

Throughout the analytic process, dependability and confirmability were two points of interest in the overall consideration of rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each author was given ample time and space to analyze the data, and varying opinions among the authors were shared and discussed in order to enhance as well as test the validity of the story emerging from the data. All data were stored in a single file to support the accessibility and continuity of the research. (f) Producing the report. This report highlights one theme—grandparents of the community and subthemes—that arose from the process and defined the caring role of elders in a unique way.

### **Findings**

Woven throughout the elders' life stories was a dominant theme of caring for the community's grandchildren as their own. In a traditional Lakota sense, grandchildren comprised blood and nonblood children. Grandparents, or any member of the community, for that matter, had a responsibility to the child's wellbeing. The elders in this study are dedicated to teaching the children in their *tiospaye* about their culture, history, and traditional spiritual teachings. In contemporary times, the elders bring forward these traditional ideas to their lives, and they spoke of their role as grandparents of the community in the following ways: (a) directly offering parental guidance and resources to community children, which is offering guidance to children who are in the community through informal care, emotional support, and mentoring as a way to support children in need of parenting, (b) offering cultural and spiritual teachings, which is sharing knowledge of their traditional culture and history to children and youths in their community, and (c) through leadership community, modeling the practice of their Lakota values and showing love and understanding for the children and youths of the community as they make mistakes through their behavior, thus reinforcing and imparting the cultural lessons.

#### **Parental Guidance and Resources to Community Children**

One elder woman described valuing the tight-knit community, offering assistance through informal care and emotional support by directing the children in her community in the absence of parental monitoring. She shared:

*... We all know each other, and we all take care of each other. That's what I like about here. I know everybody that lives*

*here, and if I lived in the town, I probably wouldn't know my neighbors; I probably wouldn't know who lives next to me. But I know who these people are, and we're not, when anything happens, I make sure I go over there and check up on them. Even when I live here and I hear something next door, I go and holler around see what's going on. Then, I see kids running around at nights, I tell them to go home and go to bed. When you are in a place like this where there isn't much money, you can't do much anyway... (E09)*

It is understood that social and economic conditions on the reservation are dire. One elder whose house was broken into was considering solutions to some of the break-ins in her home and other crimes that were occurring in their community. She told how an elder utilizes public media to provide guidance to parents and offered an example of a family in need of parental influence:

*And then these older boys are going around putting sugar in gas tanks. See? How can you stop that? And then [Name of a respected elder] talk and somebody can, and when she goes to KILI. She talks on KILI and tells these young parents to sit down and maybe they are looking for attention, and this one woman had like nine kids and she died of lung cancer and her kids are out there and trying to live and they aren't doing it the right way. Terrible! (E22)*

Noticing the absence of parental guidance, the community of elders stepped in to provide the informal care and understanding needed to help the children and youths address the grief around the loss of a primary caregiver. The prior example demonstrates how the community engaged one of the most respected elders on the reservation to speak on the radio station and offer some Lakota teachings so that the entire community can benefit, which can potentially influence community-level change.

Similarly, another elder stepped into the emotionally supportive role of a non-familial community member in the absence of a biological parent. Among the Lakota, familial titles and terms such as “nephew” and “uncle” were used when describing these relationships, despite not being blood relatives. He stated:

*These are some of the things that I learned as an elder. Now I counsel young men who don't have fathers or were brought into this world by a dad who is drinking and drugging. My nephew came here and my cousin [Name]. They always look at me as a close uncle and the other day...he said, "You are the only one that listens and helps me. You know my other two uncles never do. Is it ok when I have a hard time that I come and talk to you?" I said, "Yeah!" He's an orphan now working in Rapid [City], his mom died. That's what being an elder is—being there for others.* (E17)

Among these elders, the role of providing informal caregiving to one's grandchildren often extended beyond one's blood relations and residential home. We see the ideology of *tiospaye* come full circle in this elder's

interpretation of his responsibilities to this young man and to further the community where he lives. The elder's focus was on helping to counsel young men who lacked parental guidance; the quote simultaneously recognizes the young man's need for counsel or advice and the elder's action that helped to address this need.

### **Offering Cultural and Spiritual Teachings**

The elders expressed a need to create the space for the exchange of information, which can be challenging in the fast-paced modern world. The most respected elder on the reservation placed a high value on the Lakota language and encouraged the younger generations to learn and speak their language. Additionally, this elder provides teachings about tribal history and culture. He said:

*... So like yesterday I was at Manderson and I talked to their 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th grade children on our treaties, what our treaties with the federal government mean and what their role is going to be in it after they get past high school. It's a little early [yet]. They're at the age where, uh, uh, I couldn't care less who the President of the United States is...(E02)*

Not only does this elder value the language but is committed to teaching the history of the tribe in a way that demonstrates how it is a part of the student experience and a learning tool in relation to future opportunities for the tribe. One elder also wanted the younger generation to know the laws in association with the treaties and Lakota culture because "... We have to teach our young ones to step up to the plate—not only to learn the culture but all the laws and stay ahead of the game and that's why I'm on the [tribal] college board." Both elders seemed to feel a

common draw to share or transmit knowledge in a way that is central to the survival of the tribe as a distinct nation with its roots in the very landscape where they live. In other efforts to instill confidence and self-esteem in younger people, he also described offering the younger generations reminders of who they are and where they come from. He shared:

*... And it made me more aware of our traditional belief system and whenever I talk to younger people and if they want to talk about traditional stuff. I just remind them who they are and they like to hear that, when we do this historical trauma grief recover work and if we do it here or with any other Indian nation – [I tell them] don't forget what runs through your blood, you are all warriors every one of you and you are also medicine people, you are also healers and whatever you need to do you can do because you have that power. You don't know where it is at yet, it just comes to you. (E21)*

Similarly, a highly respected elder formally taught the community's children and believed in the children and their ability to overcome adversities. This elder described her belief that through cultural knowledge and living their values, the youths can live a good life. The elder said:

*I think we need to teach the younger generation. That's what I'm trying to teach here. I have a room [in the school], I have all the elderly pictures and so forth and then they [ask], "Grandma, what is that picture? What is going on in the*

*picture?” and I sit them down and I tell them, “You know grandmothers had a really hard life, just like me, you know that massacre and the takeover and all they went through it was hard. You know to see that happen to my people and they had a hard time taking care of you so you can be happy in this way so you respect,” and let that respect build back up....In Lakota way they understand and I just went to a Sundance<sup>1</sup> ...and they were passing out t-shirts and they gave me one, with the four colors and said, “Be the change.” I wish I could make some t-shirts for the school. The change—the change for better, for something you can do and be proud of. That’s what when they come in, I say you just need to respect and honor yourself and honor others to make a better life for yourself. (E22)*

Although elders recognized the importance of history both colonial and cultural, each elder acknowledged and elaborated on the tribe’s and tribal member’s ability to begin a communal healing of themselves through community outreach. She encouraged other elders to participate in the same program where they can work in the school classrooms, called colloquially the “foster grandparent” program. Several of the elder women in this study worked in the program as they are Lakota speakers and assisted the children with language and school lessons.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sundance is a sacred ceremony that takes place in the summer months, and the community can attend and support those participating in the ceremony.



### Modeling Lakota Values

The elders discussed the importance of transmitting their values to younger generations in ways that went beyond the traditional extended family model and beyond teaching through words and stories but by showing how to put these values into action through their interactions with members of their community. A male elder served the broader community based on his Lakota values. He stated:

*The most important part of being an elder is being a roving angel. Do you know what a roving angel is? . . . you help people, you feed people, you take care of children and elders and when you see a down and out person you give them a couple dollars. Once that money leaves your hand, it's not yours and it doesn't matter if they eat or drink it but you are doing your share of what you are supposed to do under god. That's how I teach people now. I have [a nonprofit organization] that I feed people here on the rez<sup>2</sup> and all the elders give out turkeys and feed people because I didn't have much growing up and we were very poor and we were never given anything from the government and never did accept anything. (E17)*

For this elder, putting his teachings into practice by being generous to others shows the youths how to enact the Lakota values in their community. Speaking at the dedication of a newly built senior center, the tribal

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<sup>2</sup> *Rez* is a colloquial term used for the word reservation.

president gave a speech that was directed towards the elders:

*She went to a meeting in Rapid City and the youth from Pine Ridge were there said that they don't feel respected by the elders, so they don't respect them. She said that the elders have a lot of wisdom that needs to be shared, and that they need to teach us right from wrong; the wisdom and knowledge is probably the most important aspects of kids' lives. We need to get kids away from being adults when they are really small. The parents aren't around and the kids need support and we need to bring them back to the positive. She said that it's up to the elders to start building that bridge. (Fieldnotes 6/17/09)*

The children have asked to be cared for by the elders, and the tribal president was reminding the elders to reach out the children and offer them their Lakota values of respect and love through their actions. One elder does this by honoring the youths and allowing them to earn a few dollars. She does so despite the warnings of her community members. She said:

*... I have a lot of respect...some of those boys [in the community] —there was one here who was asking what he can do. I said, "I have some tall weeds that need to be cut" and I gave him a little [money]. It's my daughter that always pays them, "Thanks for helping Mom [or] Grandma." You know and they come back and they [ask] "Can we do something for Grandma?" so you can teach them that*

*they have to do a little of something good to get paid, you know and other children some children why do you accept them in your home they are naughty they might break in your house. I said no my daughter pays them a little of what they can, you know. (E21)*

She modeled and received respect and love through her interactions with the youths, defying stereotypes of delinquency and trusting the youths would not abuse her or her home as they helped with chores. This example serves as a counter-narrative to a common non-Lakota conception of child delinquency and other deviant social labels placed on children growing up within this context. Not to ignore the fact that serious social issues exist in Pine Ridge, but this quote exemplifies how elders can use a cultural model of inclusion that works with the child's interests while simultaneously modeling essential values of Lakota life ways. It is a model that has been tried and tested over millennia, a Lakota model.

### **Discussion**

In this study, Lakota elders told how they transcended the challenges of the modern social and economic context of the Pine Ridge reservation through cultural values focused on grandparenting the community's youths (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Our findings build upon the extended system model (Red Horse, 1980) by demonstrating how the Lakota elders practice traditional values of the *tiospaye* in modern times, speaking to a broader conceptualization of grandparenting (Deloria, 1944; Oswalt, 2009). Many of the elders reflected these values, speaking about the youths living on Pine Ridge with the same sense of closeness and responsibility for their wellbeing as their own

grandchildren. It is an example of how the human spirit and connection with others can provide opportunities to heal and to keep traditional culture and values alive. Beyond that, it is also important to recognize, acknowledge, and honor the ongoing commitment elders maintain to Lakota teachings and how these teachings are being adapted and reshaped to fit the contemporary issues they face.

The elders' stories demonstrated how concepts of family and community are interwoven in an Indigenous context. Lakota elders described interactions that parallel community processes, such as child-centered social control (e.g., provision of parental guidance) and intergenerational closure (e.g., community outreach activities); however, many of the elders' descriptions convey a concern about the need to provide guidance, monitoring, and resources to the community's children and youths in ways beyond transactional processes of reciprocity, trust, and cooperation. In fact, these quotes often reflected language conveying responsibility, closeness, and commitment that parallel how Western views of grandparenting frame their responsibility to their blood-related kin (Rankin, 2002; Tang et al., 2015). Contrary to prior findings by Weibel-Orlando (1997), we also observed these behaviors being directed towards nonkin youths by elders even with the presence of biological grandchildren. This finding may be due to the different contexts of the elders interviewed in each study. Specifically, Weibel-Orlando (1997) interviewed individuals who identified as Sioux or Muskegean (some of whom were originally from Pine Ridge); however, they had all relocated to West Coast urban centers or rural areas over 500 miles from their home reservation. In contrast, our study focused on only Lakota elders who have resided on or proximal to Pine Ridge reservation for the vast majority of their lives.

This study's theme focused on offering cultural and spiritual teachings among the Lakota mirrored prior work with the Maori that discussed the transmission of cultural life ways but extended the concept from a focus on family-based intergenerational relationships to community-based intergenerational relationships (Ofahengau et al., 2013). In addition, the elders' discussion of modeling Lakota values highlighted the importance of a bidirectional relationship (or mutual caring) between elders and youths that is built on respect, love, and trust, which we often attribute to familial ties (Ofahengau et al., 2013; Rankin, 2002). Yet, within the Lakota context, these moments of mutual caring may be necessary to sustain the community as a whole, suggesting the existence of a broader social network that can provide support for Lakota children and families.

The current study also demonstrated how Indigenous research methodologies helped provide the space for unique cultural and social perspectives of the Lakota grandparents and elders to emerge (Kovach, 2009). The Lakota elders consistently described their investment in youths in the larger community in ways that parallel the extended system model, which the authors' describe as *community grandparenting*. These life ways suggest there are other tested ways to define the role of grandparent. For some communities, we should not assume traditional Western perspectives that treat families and communities as separate entities. Specifically, the social distance indicated in community-based theories of intergenerational closure or child-centered social control does not make sense within a Lakota context (Sampson et al., 1999). For the Lakota elders in this study, traditional collectivist views that extend the concept of family to community members persists. In other words, family and community are the same; there is only separation between the two within recent social, economic, and capitalist

structures that try to establish themselves in the communities. Lakota elders were not acting as “fictive kin” as described by prior work on American Indian/Alaskan Native populations (Weibel-Orlando, 1997) but rather felt and viewed themselves as “kin” regardless of blood ties. This philosophy is how they see their life ways surviving in the modern world.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, it was conducted with tribal participants from one reservation in South Dakota, and results are not transferable to other Indigenous contexts and should not be attributed beyond this group. However, the findings can inform the practices and future research on reservations that are geographically close and have similar social and cultural contexts. Second, the elders were not asked directly about raising grandchildren; the information they shared emerged indirectly, which speaks to the importance of the relational Indigenous methodologies that facilitated this important cultural and social dynamic in this American Indian community. Third, this study used convenience and snowball sampling, and elders may have passed along the opportunity to participate to others who were similar to them in terms of life experiences. As with all non-randomly selected samples, we cannot conclude that the elders who shared their stories in this study are representative of the broader reservation community.

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

When conducting research with Indigenous and/or non-Western communities, methods should incorporate stages to understand and explore how the community conceptualizes key concepts, such as *grandparent* and *intergenerational caring* (Kovach, 2009). Indigenous research methodologies discussed in this article provide

one example of approaches that help us capture the richness and diversity of how elders contribute to the well-being of their children, families, and communities. Our findings also indicate that Western theories may not fully apply to non-Western populations when conducting research with Indigenous and potentially international populations. Overall, more work highlighting these alternative life ways is necessary to modify prevailing theories guiding research, practice, and policy.

In addition, our findings suggest theories focused on adult-child interactions and their applications may need to be modified to reflect cultural-specific understanding and practices. The Lakota context would benefit from a theory that builds upon the extended system model and blends family and community theories, such as a theory integrating intergenerational closure and care. For example, elders are responsive to needs of community youths through provision of care (defined by parental guidance, emotional support, and material aid) and community outreach activities. This obligation to the broader community is based in transactional processes of investment in and emotional closeness to these youths.

When working with many Indigenous communities, the consideration of the wellbeing of the community from multiple community perspectives is imperative. In the Lakota language and prayer, they say *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which in translation means “we are all related.” Kinship is central to Lakota culture and is part of their identity as it relates to interconnectedness of the tribe, their family, and all living and nonliving things. The elders consider the children and youths in the community as their own—they mourn their losses and celebrate their accomplishments. Western notions of kinship and nuclear family relationships need to be expanded and considered when working with Indigenous people as they are affected by events occurring in the community.

Practitioners should also be mindful of the stress and strain that elders may be shouldering when they live in impoverished community contexts. Elders often sacrifice their own needs for the benefit of the younger generations and may overlook their own need for support. When deaths or traumatic events occur in communities, outreach to elders is a key component for their own wellbeing as well as incorporating them more holistically in emotional and psychological interventions. Community-level interventions are essential for Indigenous communities, and innovative, culturally centered yet multifaceted approaches (such as incorporation of local cultural and spiritual practices and ceremonies) are necessary for addressing the complex issues in tribal or Indigenous communities (Evans-Campbell, 2008). As evidenced by the speech from the tribal president, the elders also live in a changing cultural context and may need to be reminded of the importance and gravity of their role in their communities.

Furthermore, developing policies and programs that integrate intergenerational relationships and offer cultural transmission may support the well-being of both the young and the older adults. For example, three of the elders or grandparents in this tribal community participated in the “foster grandparent” program, which is the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) funded through the federal government that allows low-income elders to work 20 hours a week and supplement their incomes (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). On the Pine Ridge Indian reservation, the elder women in this program worked in the schools with the children, assisting with homework and speaking the Lakota language.

In sum, the findings from this study speak to a need to rethink how practitioners and policymakers describe kinship in Indigenous communities and possibly



even in other communities of color. Although there are benefits of understanding general models, the diversity in these communities suggests the importance of specific knowledge around family and cultural norms attributed to distinct geographic and tribal contexts. With the changing social and economic context over time, it is apparent that the cultural norms of the elders filling the role as grandparent to the community is ever present and serves as a major resource for children in these communities. Narrowing the concept of *grandparent* will limit the resources available to members of the community who are caring for children and youths. Human services practitioners can provide more holistic care and supportive interventions to Indigenous families by including elders—the community grandparents.

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