

AT ISSUE:

The Key to Indian Country: Lessons Learned From Front Line Professionals

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Introduction: The Importance of Considering Front Line Experiences

In the years we have traveled the country, even the world, working with front line child protection professionals, we have been moved repeatedly by the efforts of those who give their lives to children who are not their own. The experiences of front line professionals have deeply influenced our own teaching and writing, and we are convinced that these experiences must play a greater role in the work of all who address child abuse at a national, regional, or state level.

Sadly, the mantra of “evidence-based practice” often means that if there is no research study to support a certain situation, an individual or collective experience is discounted. This “intellectual snobbery” is so prevalent that, in some instances, researchers have designed and published studies allegedly for the benefit of front line professionals, but research by those who are not active in the field often does not reflect actual front line experience. Individual experience in the field is important and should guide us in concert with evidence. Researchers need to take the time to fully understand the area they are studying. Otherwise, research will never impact front line practice because it will, in many instances, remain irrelevant. As one scholar noted,

individual experience must be considered more carefully, analyzed more crucially, and elevated in importance...[T]he formalized, doctrinal style of argument that characterizes much contemporary legal writing can too easily elude the realities of human experience. (Ogletree, 1993, p. 1244)

The importance of experience for researchers is particularly critical when considering the work of Native American child protection professionals. Because many of them work in the very tribal communities where they grew up, it is not unusual for these professionals to assist victims, offenders, or others they have known for years. These and other dynamics are difficult to put into a research study, but a large body of anecdotal evidence can assist us in incorporating such factors into our training and other work in Indian country.

In this spirit, we recount some of the experiences child protection professionals in Indian country have shared with us in recent years. It is not possible to detail in one article all the challenges to addressing child abuse in Indian country. Instead, we intend simply to highlight a handful of recurring themes that we hope will crystallize the challenges of this practice. The lessons learned from the following eight snapshots from the front lines may not be fully accounted for in peer-reviewed literature—yet that does not make them any less instructive.

Lesson #1: The Importance of a Key

In describing the challenges of conducting a forensic interview in Indian country, a tribal law enforcement officer told us there was a forensic interviewing room on the reservation—a room with all the modern bells and whistles. Unfortunately, he lamented, the federal government controlled the room and was unwilling to provide a physical key for the facility even to sworn officers working on the reservation. As a result, the officer explained, sexually or otherwise violated children on the reservation had to wait weeks to receive a forensic interview.

This delay in the interview process predictably resulted in a needless loss of evidence. In many instances, the delay in conducting a forensic interview also meant an extended delay in receiving medical and mental health services. In addition to forensic interview training, simply providing this officer with a key would have greatly improved his ability to respond to instances of child abuse and perhaps profoundly improved the lives of the children with whom he worked.

Lesson #2: The Importance of a Sled Dog

Various national bodies promulgate standards for forensic interviewing, the delivery of medical and mental health care, the conducting of peer review, and completing other necessary components of an effective multidisciplinary team. Unfortunately, many national leaders have worked primarily in urban settings and often fail to understand the unique dynamics in rural communities, including the reservations and villages that make up much of Indian country. On more than one occasion, colleagues

in Alaska have reminded us that much of their population cannot be accessed by any road and that, in some instances, only a sled dog could reach a village.

Likewise, something as simple as preparing a child victim for court can be much more cumbersome in outlying areas. Those of us working at a national level must be much more vigilant in understanding unique characteristics of smaller, geographically diverse communities and willing to adapt our recommendations for national standards accordingly.

Lesson #3: The Importance of Oral Tradition

In one of our forensic interview training courses, students are required to take and pass an essay examination. In one class, several child protection professionals from Indian country shared the importance of oral communications in their culture. Instead of a taking written test, they asked to be questioned orally; and through the telling of stories, they articulated how a forensic interview could be conducted. Although we had learned the importance of oral tradition as early as our college days, it was this concrete example that solidified the lesson for us.

Lesson #4: The Importance of Sharing Materials in Advance

Most of us who provide training to front line child protection professionals know it is important to share our slides and other materials in time for the local conference organizer to make copies and so on. When training in Indian country, this is vital for another reason—the critical need of getting local input. Uniquely positioned tribal courts can have a profound impact in how trial strategies workshops are taught. Also, lack of resources can influence how investigative or other tactics are discussed. For example, a vicarious trauma workshop offering suggestions such as a visit to the spa may not work for professionals who have little income and no spas on the reservation. Similarly, discussion about child protection history is remiss if it does not mention the singular history of child protection in Indian country.

Stated differently, we must realize how little we know and ask our friends in Indian country to assist us in adapting our work to their needs and cultures. In addition to sending the materials in advance, it is also important to arrive early or to stay late, or both. The more a presenter learns about the challenges faced in Indian country, the more effective the outcome will be. In our experience, some national experts have not understood that the reason their training or other work in Indian country has been of limited effect is simply because they failed to take the time to appreciate their audience.

Lesson #5: The Importance of Spirituality

Professionals in Indian country have often asked us to speak on the subject of spirituality. A large and growing body of research



discusses the importance of spirituality to many abused children and how frequently offenders consciously distort the child's spirituality as a means of gaining power over the victim (Vieth, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising when front line professionals ask presenters to address this topic. What we have learned from colleagues in Indian country, though, is that spirituality here is more diverse and often combines multiple traditions. Accordingly, it is important to understand the unique spiritual dynamics in the community where one is interacting. This happens only by asking questions and otherwise making a concerted, conscious effort to expand our cultural awareness.

Lesson #6: The Importance of Recognizing Abilities

While training on a reservation, a doctor within the community approached one of us on a break and scolded us for the detail of the information we had been providing. According to this doctor, the local child protection professionals in Indian country lacked the skills to handle a complex case of child abuse. In giving them so much information, this doctor reasoned, many of these professionals would now attempt to do things that exceeded their capabilities. His was not a comment we had ever heard before, even when instructing off-reservation MDTs, many of whom also lack significant training on complex cases of child abuse.

In our view, the doctor's comment reflects a lack of respect and trust for the capabilities of professionals in Indian country and an inflated sense of the abilities of those of us from the outside. We are not suggesting that all professionals working in Indian country hold views of this type. However, the fact that this sort of thinking exists at all inhibits all professionals, both Native and non-Native, from working effectively in Indian country.

Lesson #7: The Importance of Understanding the Depth of Pain

Several years ago, a Native American woman who grew up on a reservation told one of us about her childhood. She said that at least three male relatives and numerous other men had sexually abused her. Often she wore her clothes at night to make it harder for men to rape her. She said that at least 10 friends on the reservation had committed suicide or been murdered. Like so many of her friends and family, she took solace in drugs and alcohol. She said she had never dreamed of rescue—a meaningful intervention was simply not possible in a community with so few resources. Her only hope was to get through life one day at a time.

This is not an isolated anecdote and reflects a level of pain perhaps unequaled in any other community in the United States; however, many national child protection leaders so frequently and shockingly ignore this type of situation. This needs to change. Simply stated, every national child abuse organization needs to make a concerted effort to expand its outreach into Indian country in a manner that is more than lip service. We believe APSAC can play a critical role in this process.

Lesson #8: The Importance of Learning

In failing to spend time in Indian country or otherwise growing our knowledge of the unique cultures of these proud peoples, we not only limit our ability to work effectively in Indian country but also fail to learn from such dedicated professionals. For example, the dignity and respect often accorded a child abuse victim speaking in a tribal court is something from which attorneys and judges practicing in state and federal courts should learn.

Many MDTs and CACs continue to place child abuse into categories. Indeed, many CACs respond only to cases of child sexual abuse, ignoring the large and growing body of research documenting that when one form of abuse is present, multiple forms of abuse are often present. The Native American communities we have worked with understand the concept of poly victimizations to a much greater extent than many MDTs and often have a much more holistic approach to a family's and community's needs. In sum, it is not just what we can bring to Indian country but what child protection professionals in Indian country can bring to all of us that should be at the heart of our collaboration.

Conclusion: The Face Behind the Statistics

According to data statistics, Native American children suffer higher rates of abuse than children in the general United States population (US DHHS, 2011). Further, the distrust of federal authorities likely results in underreporting of abuse in Indian country (Fox, 2003). In the end, though, these figures are only numbers on a page. To really understand the pain of the children in Indian country, it is necessary to regularly break bread with the child protection professionals who spend time with families. It is also critical to learn from these professionals, and to listen and respond to their needs and the needs of the children who are depending on us. That is the key to helping abused children in Indian country.

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