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Foundations First Nations and Métis Families

Chapter Outline

The purpose of this chapter is to identify, examine, and explain the shattering effect of colonization on Indigenous families before moving into a profile of contemporary families and future directions. The chapter examines the family's historical function with a focus on First Nation and Métis cultures. It further demonstrates how Indigenous family theory and praxis have sustained these families despite the continued attacks they have faced.

Historically, Indigenous peoples in land-based communities lived in extended family units that allowed them to harvest and share resources. These groups often changed in size depending on the season and the resources available. Families were the primary economic unit, directly involved in the governing of communities, and typically approached child-rearing as a shared activity. Examples are provided to demonstrate that although there were similarities in practices there were unique family practices among groups. The importance of the concept of “all my relations” is stressed in this section of the chapter.

Indigenous family systems came under attack from the earliest Indigenous–European encounters. The two most damaging initiatives occurred in the twentieth century: residential schools and the child welfare system. In operation from 1879 to 1996, residential schools decimated whole generations of children, families, and communities. Many of the children in residential schools faced physical, sexual, mental, and spiritual abuse, and those who returned to their communities often found themselves alienated from their families, lands, and cultures. Child welfare authorities then removed the next generation of Indigenous children from their homes as part of the “Sixties Scoop.” By the early 1980s, Indigenous children represented less than 4 per cent of the population but made up 50 to 70 per cent of the child welfare caseloads in the Prairies.

The chapter concludes by examining the socio-economic conditions of contemporary First Nation and Métis families. Statistics show that these growing populations are young, increasingly mobile, and disproportionately suffering from poverty and low socio-economic standing. The chapter also addresses the continued overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care. It also identifies the health challenges faced by this demographic and the impacts that the mobility of these families have on their well-being. A number of positive initiatives have been launched to battle these issues, such as Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) preschool programs, child welfare policy reforms, and the creation of family service agencies. In addition, the role of friendship centres is also highlighted. The key to these initiatives has been Indigenous advocacy to secure the supports necessary for change. Most recently, initiatives to have children who have been in foster care reunited with their families is picking up momentum as First Nations and Métis move towards reclaiming their families.

Learning Objectives

- To understand the importance of the family unit in historic Indigenous societies
- To recognize the implications of residential schools and the child welfare system, in both historical and contemporary terms, on First Nation and Métis families
- To gain an overview of the contemporary demographic profile of First Nation and Métis families and populations
- To understand the initiatives taken by First Nation and Métis communities to attempt to rebuild their families and other institutions
- To understand the diversity that exists within Indigenous families
- To recognize the importance of reconnecting families to their cultures of origin

Study Questions

1. What is meant by the concept of the extended family in a traditional Indigenous community?
2. What role did women play in traditional Indigenous communities?
3. What is a clan and why is/was it important in some Indigenous communities?
4. How was child-rearing approached in traditional Indigenous societies? Were all societies alike in this regard or were there variations?
5. Why did the Jesuits take issue with the way that Indigenous children were raised?
6. What were the short- and long-term impacts of residential schools on Indigenous children, families, and communities?
7. Why are so many Indigenous children placed in the child welfare system?
8. What positive initiatives have been implemented to improve the lives of Indigenous families?
9. What is the concept of *wabkobotwin*?
10. Why is it particularly important to focus on children when rebuilding Indigenous communities?

Additional Resources

Readings

Johnson, Harold. *Two Families: Treaties and Government*. 2007. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Ltd.

Macdougall, Brenda. 2010. *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Mandelbaum, David G. 1979. *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre.

Talaga, Tanya. 2017. *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City*. House of Anansi Press.

Walter, Emmanuelle. 2015. *Stolen Sisters: The Story of Two Missing Girls, Their Families and how Canada has Failed Indigenous Women*. Translated by Susan Ouriou and Christelle Morelli. Toronto: Harper Collins.

Websites

Indigenous Services Canada. "First Nations Child and Family Services Program." <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/hb/sp/fncf/index-eng.asp>

The FNCFS provides funding to promote the security and well-being of First Nations children and families on reserve.

Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada: Family Structures
<https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/youth-and-elders/>

This website provides an overview of Indigenous family structures and practices.

The Vanier Institute of the Family
<https://vanierinstitute.ca/facts-stats-indigenous-families-in-canada-june-2018/>

This link provides facts and statistics on Indigenous families in Canada