

Tribal Family Structure

The extended Native American family, which comprises a complex relational system much larger than is the mainstream nuclear family, constitutes an important part of Native American identities. Many tribes have similar world-views and cultural standards based on common values concerning family structure and kinship ties, on which their communities are based. However, in addition to these similarities, it is important to consider the diversity associated with the fact that there are 566 federally recognized Native American groups in the U.S. (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2014). For example, most of these tribal groups have traditionally been patrilineal, while others matrilineal; these characteristics playing a crucial role in the structuring of Native American societies according to the pertinent lineages.

What extended Native American families have in common is that they include not only spouses and their children, but also grandparents, siblings of parents, and people that are not related by blood. So called cultural families are bonded through clans, ceremonies, and cultural adoption (Day, 2014). Extended family members interact frequently, share daily activities, and express interdependence within their networks, as opposed to the independence that tends to be encouraged with respect to the Anglo-American nuclear family organization. Native Americans consider the knowledge of one's relatives to be in fact the basis of their tribal identities.

In general, Native Americans tend to think of themselves as not only an individual person but also a representative of their family, community, and environment. Personal accomplishments tend to make them feel like they enhanced their group (instead of feeling like a better individual than the next person as a result of one's superior performance). This experiencing is based on the understanding that an individual is never honored alone. Whole groups of people such as

families, clans, or societies are honored when an individual belonging to them is recognized.

This notion is expressed in traditional practices. For example, when an honor dance is dedicated to someone, their family participates in the dance. People who are joining in celebrating the honoree then congratulate not only the person who is being recognized but also the family that dances alongside their family member. This is because nobody is either considered or expected to achieve a distinction alone. Correspondingly, Native American families experience the accomplishments and failures of their members in a special way.

Grandparents often play a significant role in child rearing, and they tend to have a large role in decision making of their family members. The whole family is consulted before an individual makes an important decision, and that even in situations that would be considered personal matters to be decided independently within the mainstream Anglo-American culture. The relationships existing within extended families tend to be expressed in the traditional practice of children calling not only their parents but also their aunts and uncles mothers and fathers.

Correspondingly, tribal persons view their cousins as their brothers and sisters, and interact with them accordingly (Lucero & Bussey, 2014). In some Native American groups it was even common for all the women in a kinship group to care for all the children of their clan (Volo & Volo, 2007). This is because a child was considered related to all members of the same clan, which has consequences for various social connections, including whom one could or could not marry (Day, 2014). Strict restrictions were in place against marrying one's relatives, however distant they may be, and rules against intermarriage were followed by many, although not all, tribes.

As a result of the complex tribal family structure, the task of anthropologists who attempted to describe the diverse kinship ties has become quite involved. They developed six standard kinship

types of increasing complexity, which are based on different classifications of cousins, and which are named after cultures in which each type was first identified. The Hawaiian type is generally based on generations. That is, everyone in the youngest generation is a brother or a sister, while in the preceding generation everybody is either a father or a mother, and in the oldest a grandfather or a grandmother. The Eskimoan type is similar to the mainstream society in that it has separate terms for siblings and for cousins, as well as for parents and for uncles and aunts. The Iroquoian type makes a distinction between siblings and cross cousins, which are the children of one's parents' opposite-gender siblings (father's sisters and mother's brothers). However, since one's male parents and his brothers are all called "father," and one's female parent and her sisters are all called "mother," this Iroquoian type calls parallel cousins (children of one's parents' same-gender siblings) "brothers" and "sisters." In contrast, the Sudanese type makes the fine distinction between not only siblings and cross cousins but also between cross cousins and parallel cousins. The most complex are the Crow and Omaha types, which involve also clans, matrilineal for Crow, and patrilineal for Omaha. In addition to siblings and cousins terms, these types use special transgenerational terms to sort out through which child the clan matrilineage or patrilineage continues (Miller, 2004).

Although Native American societies typically did not share the rigid notions concerning gender roles and conventions concerning matrimony that were historically emphasized by missionaries, marriage was of a great importance not only for the establishment of alliances. High value was placed on chastity in many societies, the Cheyenne being a famous example, and rank was associated with the notion of proper, as opposed to disorderly, members. Stable marriages established before the birth of children, and with the consent of relatives, often marked high status, while casual liaisons did not. The stability of marriage unions within leading families

enabled them to provide havens for those members of their communities that were orphaned and displaced (Miller, 2004). Not only kinship ties but also kinship sanctions and obligations continue to structure many contemporary Native American societies, not only on reservations but also in urban areas. Native American extended families thus continue to enable the transmission of cultural knowledge, and preservation of tribal practices through generations (Lucero & Bussey, 2014).

See also: Intermarriage; Matriarchal Societies; Motherhood; Patriarchal Societies

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Further Reading:

Day, P. A. (2014). Raising healthy American Indian children: An Indigenous perspective. In H. N. Weaver (Ed.), *Social issues in contemporary Native America: Reflections from Turtle Island* (pp. 93-111). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

Lucero, N. & Bussey M. (2014). Preserving Native families, preserving Native cultures. In H. N. Weaver (Ed.), *Social issues in contemporary Native America: Reflections from Turtle Island* (pp. 113-128). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

Miller, J. (2004). Kinship, family kindreds, and community. In P. J. Deloria & N. Salisbury (Eds.), *A Companion to American Indian History* (pp. 139-320). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.

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