

## ICWA from the Inside Out: ‘Split Feather Syndrome’

Courts and social workers need to hear the voices of Native adult adoptees. Until recently, this kind of research was not done. It now seems to be on the cutting edge of Indian child welfare issues to finally ask Native adult adoptees about their experiences pre-ICWA (1978 and before) in order to learn from the mistakes of the past, for post-ICWA children. Authorities need to consider the long-range best interests of the child as a future Native American adult: is this non-Native placement setting up this child to suffer from “split feather syndrome” in the future as an adolescent or adult?

What is “split feather syndrome?” It was first recognized in the 1980’s informally as a disorder among “expatriated” or “detrribalized” Indians – those raised in non-Native homes – and, later, in a pilot study completed in the mid-1990’s by Dr. Carol Locust, training director for the Native American Research and Training Center at the University of Arizona College of Medicine (and a member of the Eastern Band Cherokee Nation).

She identified unique factors of Indian children placed in non-Indian homes that created damaging effects in these children’s lives. Locust found that: Native children placed in non-Native homes were at great risk for experiencing psychological trauma leading to long-term emotional and psychological problems as adults; that the same clusters of long-term psychological problems experienced by naive adult adoptees were recognizable as a syndrome; and ‘split feather’ syndrome appears to be related to a reciprocal-possessive form of belongingness unique to survivors of cultures subjected to annihilation.

Locust identified the following five major factors contributing to split feather syndrome – loss of Indian identity; loss of family, culture, heritage, language, spiritual beliefs, tribal affiliation and tribal ceremonial experiences; the experience of growing up different; the experience of discrimination from the dominant culture; a cognitive difference in the way Indian children receive, process, integrate and apply new information – in short, a difference in learning style.

Rita Sindelar points out in her master’s thesis that, although Native children may seem well-adjusted in white homes as young children, “it does not address the needs of adolescent or adult Native adoptees when they begin to experience the double loss of Native identity and of belonging in their current families.”

Alcoholism, substance abuse, social disability and psychological problems begin in adolescence when “split feather syndrome” begins to manifest itself. In a 1997 Australian study, entitled, “Bringing Them Home,” these symptoms were experienced by aboriginal adult adoptees, and termed “genealogical bewilderment.” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Report.)

These same kinds of symptoms were identified in Canadian First Nations’ adult adoptees in a 1999 study as “growing up with a sense of being abandoned, not just by family, but by the extended family, to a system and community that really does not accept them.” (Stevenato and Associates and Budgell.) In Locust’s 1998 study at the University of Arizona College of Medicine, an astonishing 19 out of 20 Native adult adoptees showed signs of “split feather syndrome.”

What can be done? Courts and social workers need to be aware of the possibility of long-term disabilities that children are likely to experience as adolescent or as adult Native adoptees, i.e., “split

feather syndrome,” when considering the long-term, best interests of the child. If a child must be placed with a non-Native family, then the foster/ adoptive parents must be willing to provide age-appropriate Native experiences and should be provided with resources through the Department of Human Services for on-going authentic, culturally-appropriate experiences for the child. In addition, courts often do not realize that some tribes will revoke a child’s tribal enrollment upon adoption if the tribe chooses to not contest the adoption. The research completed to date in Australia, Canada and the United States, although not plentiful, has shown that “split feather syndrome” is lessened upon a successful repatriation with the now-adult Native adoptee’s tribe. Courts could work with the tribes to assure that with the completion of an adoption, the child’s tribal enrollment is not revoked as in the child’s long-term future best interest.

### **Sources**

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