ABSTRACT. This paper explores informal fosterage patterns in 98 cases in the Navajo Tribe. It examines the cultural basis of social support offered by grandmothers in issues of substitute parenting. The majority of children in the sample were given to mother’s mother. The precipitating factors in fosterage were: inability of parents to meet the needs of rearing their young, grandmother’s needs, or cultural violations. Fosterage is an important mechanism for integration, versatility and resourcefulness for the tribe.

Key Words: fosterage, adoption, grandparent-grandchild relationships, exchange, reciprocity, Navajo, intergenerational relationships.

PROFILE OF FOSTERAGE AND THE NAVAJO

The family has been characterized as a matrix of intergenerational relationships reciprocally bound (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1985; Kornharber and Woodward 1985; Richardson 1964). Kornharber and Woodward (1985) maintain that the fiber which binds these relationships is established in the earlier generations and woven into the web of subsequent generations through the warp and woof of socialization and kinship. Validation of the worth of the fiber is demonstrated by the grandparents when they assume senior roles as caretakers, role models, historians, mentors and chief adjuncts to their children and their grandchildren. Moreover, in times of crisis and need the most common source of aid is from one’s family support system (Perlman and Rook 1987).

Reciprocity, intimacy and social networks are the interactional characteristics of family social support between generations. An example of this interchange of resources can be seen in the transfer of care of the children from the biological mother to the care of another kin. It is a serviceable and useful process and myriad expressions of this behavior around the world attest to the creativity of families in providing for their progeny in this way. It provides a mechanism by which families can respond to physical needs and limited resources in a manner that meets normative expectations of the culture. One case in point is that of fosterage of grandchildren to their grandmothers.

This paper is a discussion of intergenerational patterns of fosterage found in a sample drawn from Navajo Indians of three locations in the southwestern United States: Torreon and Alamo, New Mexico, and Tuba city, Arizona. It examines the pattern of childrearing in contemporary situations in which grandmothers assume the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren, and the integration of that pattern with cultural values.

The transfer of children to grandmothers in the three widely separated regions
of the 18,000,000-acre Navajo Reservation and its environs, varies in form and process, and in historic precedent within and between sites.

The study stimulated such questions as: given the findings on transfer of Navajo children, what can be known about intergenerational family relationships among the Navajo, and in particular, what is the importance of three-generation breadth and depth in Navajo extended families; What functions does this transfer process serve in Navajo culture?

Fosterage

The concept of fosterage has not yet been fully defined and its use in the literature varies. It has been referred to as transfer, fosterage, adoption, child-circulation, child holding, baby-sitting, and more. For example, Herskovits (1937) referred to fostering as “quasi-adoption”, and Firth (cited in Brady 1976:198) as “quasi-kinship – the simulation of kinship”. Fonseca (1986:15) discusses it as child circulation, i.e., “the transfer of nurturance responsibility for a child from one adult to another.”

Fosterage and adoption have been used as means of sheltering orphans, and providing the childless with progeny and heirs (Goody 1969), improving educational, economic, and living conditions (Fonseca 1986; Stack 1974), and providing a labor force (Cohen 1969) and, as a major survival strategy among some black urban families (Stack 1974). The fluidity of the term muddles the literature, and clouds the child’s status in many societies.

Payne-Price (1981–82:134) differentiates fosterage from the more formal judicial action of adoption, stating that the latter is “a legal process by which a child is taken into a family and raised as a natural offspring; the biological parents give up all rights to the child ... fosterage [is] the raising of a child by people other than his/her natural or adoptive parents ... parents do not give up their rights to the child and may retrieve him/her. There is no permanent transfer of primary parental rights.” In this paper fosterage is used to convey that informal transfer of young children to grandmothers for care.

History of Navajo Fosterage

Fosterage is an established, informal, but culturally validated practice among the Navajo; it occurs in response to one or more needs expressed by either the grandparents or the parents. Although the practice is common, not all children are given to others for parenting, nor are all children in a family given. Grandmothers who have not been asked to rear grandchildren, or have not asked to have them, state that there is no need to because, “my children are doing a good job of raising the grandchildren.”

At the turn of the century, families were sending children to older Navajo to be helpers. Kluckhohn and Leighton (1948) and others (Shepardson and Hammond 1970; Reichard 1938), described how grandchildren served as eyes, ears, hands, and feet for their frail elderly grandparents. The grandchildren were