

10-1-2005

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### Recommended Citation

Lefler, Lisa J. (2005) "My Boys Act Like Midwives': Changes Across Three Generations of Indian Fathers," *Southern Anthropologist*: Vol. 31: No. 1, Article 3.

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# **“My Boys Act Like Midwives”: Changes Across Three Generations of Indian Fathers**

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As scholars focused on fatherhood have pointed out in recent years, more qualitative research is needed to understand “what makes fathers tick” and how “social processes, among others, shape their roles” (Lamb 1997 and Marsiglio 1995). To try to address these issues among Indian men in Oklahoma, the American Indian Fatherhood Project<sup>1</sup> conducted interviews with Chickasaws, Kiowas, Comanches, and Ft. Sill Apaches about fatherhood in their communities for a year and a half. This project represents the first extensive ethnographic research completed among contemporary American Indian populations to find out more about fatherhood roles. In the 200 interviews considered in this analysis, men and women discussed how fathering has changed in the last several generations. Through this process we have gained a new understanding of men’s and women’s perceptions of Indian men’s roles as fathers and a new appreciation of the issues they face.

Four tribal nations agreed to partner in this study. The traditionally matrilineal Chickasaw Nation, who occupy a thirteen county region in south-central Oklahoma, are seen by themselves and others as a “progressive” Indian Nation, one of the “Five Civilized Tribes” from the Southeast. The Kiowa, Comanche, and Ft. Sill Apache Nations, referred to locally as the KCAs, comprise the other study community. The Ft. Sill Apaches are also identified at the Ft. Sill-Chiricahua-Warm Springs Apache. These latter groups have organized warrior societies which are important and prominent social institutions today (Meadows 1999). They are also seen as more “traditional” than their Eastern neighbors and share a history of “Plains Culture” and more recent incarceration and/or relocation at the hands of the U.S. government. They live predominantly in a contiguous five county area in Southwestern Oklahoma. Men and women from this region both have a greater tendency to marry other Indians, particularly among the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache Nations, than do Chickasaws.

## **Background**

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 designated the Kiowa, Comanche and Apache homelands near the Wichita Mountains in South-Southwestern Oklahoma. With the loss of their land claims in the 1901 Lone Wolf vs. Hitchcock decision, “excess” reservation lands previously allotted by the Jerome Commission in the early 1890s

were opened up to land grabbers. Families could only maintain 160 acres as initially planned by the federal government (Kracht 2005).

The Apaches, relocated from the Southwest by federal troops, had been prisoners of war since the mid 1850s and in 1894 were brought from their imprisonment in Alabama to Ft. Sill in Indian Territory, at what would be the KCA reservation. In 1914, the Apaches were finally released and given the options to return to New Mexico or remain on reserved lands in Oklahoma. A few of the Chiricahua-Warm Springs band remained and approximately 400 of their descendents continue to live there today.

Hunting, warfare, and membership in military societies have traditionally been important in the lives of KCA men. KCAs have historically and in modern times been proud to serve in military endeavors. Their military societies, the Kiowa Gourd Clan and the Black Leggings Warrior Society continue to be very active. These are organizations that welcome back veterans and honor those who have shown courage to serve their people and country. These societies still provide important collegiality and status for warriors. Today, women who have served may be included in many of the ceremonies and performances conducted at community events.

Oklahoma is home to the largest number of Native American tribes in the nation. There are at least 30 different tribes located in what was formerly known as “Indian Territory.” According to the 1990 census data, approximately 8.5% of Oklahoma’s population is made up of Native Americans. Native people constitute 15.5% of Ponotoc county, 23.2% of Caddo county, and 4.1% of Comanche county, three of the counties over which the KCAs have jurisdiction. The Native population of Comanche county is underrepresented by these figures because of the impact of Ft. Sill military base on the county demographics.

The study populations of Native people within these communities are representative of low, middle and high SES categories. The following tables<sup>2</sup> show the populations of the Chickasaw Nation and the Kiowa, Apache and Comanche tribes as well as their income and poverty levels and educational attainment.

**SUMMARY OF MARITAL STATUS, AND INCOME  
FOR THE CHICKASAW NATION POPULATION (1990)  
Jurisdiction Statistical Area for Oklahoma**

Total Population: 6,171

Number of families: 4,994

Married Couple families: 3,715 (74.4% of all families)

with children under 18: 2,182 (58.7% of married couple families)

Female households, no husband present: 962 (19.3% of all families)

with children under 18: 676 (70.3% of female headed households)

Median Income All Families: \$19, 080

Married Couple Families: \$24,019

with children under 18: \$24,528

Female householders, no husband present: \$9,237

with children under 18: \$7,233

**SUMMARY OF MARITAL STATUS, AND INCOME  
FOR THE KIOWA, APACHE AND COMANCHE POPULATION (1990)  
Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area for Oklahoma**

Total Population: 12,979  
 Number of all families: 2,909  
 Married Couple families: 1,817 (62.5% of all families)  
 with children under 18: 1,089 (60.0% of married couple families)  
 Female households, no husband present: 910 (31.3% of all families)  
 with children under 18: 543 (60.0% of female headed households)  
 Median Income All families: \$16,189  
 Married Couple Families: \$21,464  
 with children under than 18: \$21,616  
 Female householders, no husband present: \$8,008  
 with children under than 18: \$6,388

**Table 1a. Income Levels for Families, Chickasaw Nation,  
Chickasaw Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area, 1990.**

Income Level	Number	Percent
<b>Married Couple Families</b>	3,715	100% of married couple families
Less than \$15,000	1,126	30.3% of married couple families
\$15,000 to \$24,999	817	22% of married couple families
\$25,000 to \$49,999	1,269	34.6% of married couple families
\$50,000 and up	503	13.5% of married couple families
<b>Female Householder, no husband present</b>	962	100% of female headed families
less than \$5,000	271	28.2% of female headed families
\$5,000 to \$9,999	232	24.1% of female headed families
\$10,000 to \$14,999	147	15.3% of female headed families
\$15,000 to \$24,999	188	19.5% of female headed families
\$25,000 to \$49,999	93	9.7% of female headed families
\$50,000 and up	31	3.2% of female headed families



**Table 1b. Families Below Poverty Level for Chickasaw Nation, Chickasaw Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area, 1990.**

Poverty Status	Number	Percent
Married Couple Families	690	18.6% of married couple families
with children under 18	540	14.5% of married couple families
Female Householder, no husband present	501	52.1% of female headed families
with children under 18	412	42.8% of female headed families

**Table 2a. Income Levels for Kiowa, Apache, and Comanche Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area, Oklahoma (1990)**

Income Levels	Number	Percent
<b>Married Couples</b>	1,817	100% of married couple families
less than \$15,000	630	34.7% of married couple families
\$15,000 to \$24,999	420	23.1% of married couple families
\$25,000 to \$49,000	597	32.9% of married couple families
\$50,000 and up	170	9.4% of married couple families
<b>Female household, no husband present</b>	910	100% of female headed families
less than \$5,000	232	25.5 % of female headed families
\$5,000 to \$9,999	301	33.1 % of female headed families
\$10,000 to \$14,999	102	11.2% of female headed families
\$15,000 to \$24,999	175	19.2 % of female headed families
\$25,000 to \$49,000	76	8.4% of female headed families
\$50,000 and up	24	2.6 % of female headed families

**Table 2b. Families Below Poverty Level, Kiowa, Apache, and Comanche Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area, 1990.**

Poverty Status	Number	Percent
Married Couple families	450	24.8% of all married couple families
with children under than 18	351	19.3% of all married couple families
Female householder, no husband present	554	60.9% of all female headed families
with children under than 18	513	28.2% of all female headed families

**Table 3. Education Levels for all persons over 18 (13,050 persons), Chickasaw Nation, Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area, 1990.**

Education Level	Number	Percent
High School Graduate	4,346	33.3 % of Population over 18
Some College or Associates Degree	3,111	23.8% of Population over 18
College Graduate (includes graduate degree)	322	2.5% of Population over 18

**Table 4. Education Levels for all persons over 18 (8,055 persons), Kiowa, Apache and Comanche Tribal Jurisdiction Statistical Area, 1990.**

Education Level	Number	Percent
High School Graduate	2,956	36.7% of Population over 18
Some College or Associates Degree	1,892	23.5% of Population over 18
College Graduate (includes graduate degree)	726	9.0% of Population over 18

As Tables 1a and 2a suggest, income levels for married families in the Chickasaw Nation are somewhat higher than those seen for the Kiowa, Comanche and Apache tribes. Female headed households are also a smaller proportion of families for the Chickasaw Nation than for the other tribes. These family status differences contribute to a higher poverty level among married couple families and for female headed families among the KCA tribes (28.4% of married couples and 60.9% of female headed families) than is seen in the Chickasaw Nation (18.6% of married couples and 52.1% of female headed families). Educational attainment is similar for both groups. Surprisingly, given the economic differences between the groups, the percent of college graduates among KCA tribes is higher (9.0%) compared to the Chickasaw Nation (2.5%).

### **Preliminary Findings**

This paper draws from 50 transcribed interviews, and it addresses only the section of the interview that asks men how fathering has changed for their tribe over the years. Women were also interviewed. Women were asked not only about their own fathers, but also about the men who fathered their children. Men were asked about their biological and/or social fathers and any other men who may have acted as a father to them. Almost half of those interviewed were raised by their biological fathers, the rest were raised by maternal grandparents (n=11), stepfathers (n=6), uncles (n=3), mother only (n=3), or non-relatives (4=boarding school and 1=a neighbor). The reason children were raised by maternal instead of paternal grandparents seems to be related to fathers being deceased or having left the home, whereupon the child's mother would either return to her parent's home or need the assistance of her parents in raising the children.

Upon entering the tribal complexes of the each of the KCA tribes, one becomes instantly aware that these agency offices are 90 percent occupied by women. Two younger KCA women and at least two elder Kiowa men mentioned that the "young men were lazy and their women were having to raise their children" and provide for themselves. Approximately 31 percent of KCA families are headed by women with no husband present, compared with 19.3 percent of Chickasaw families. This may also be connected with the responses from men and women concerning the needs of Indian fathers in their communities. The top three responses from both men and women were: 1) the need for more understanding and teaching about their cultural histories, values, and language; 2) the need for more love, affection and emotional support from their family and kids; and 3) the need for more time with their families.

One of the interesting differences in responses between men and women when asked about what they remembered most about their fathers is that men rarely said anything negative. If nothing else could be said, usually the men would say that they remembered their father was a hard worker or provider. Women however, generally had more to say--whether their memories were negative or not--both as they referred to their own fathers and to the fathers of their children. And the language used to characterize their fathers usually carried a different, more emotional tone. For instance, instead of saying their father was a provider, as men commonly responded, some women said their father was "supportive."

### **Changes in Family Organization and Family Dynamics**

Perceived changes in fathering roles fell into two main categories. First, among the KCAs, changes have occurred in marriage within the memory of some interviewees, both in patterns of exogamy and in marriage type (now monogamous, formerly polygynous). Second, for both KCAs and Chickasaws, there have been changes in childhood socialization practices, most of which participants felt translated into a loss of respect for elders, self, and culture. Identified specifically in this category

were four related areas: a) among KCAs, the disappearance of avoidance taboos, b) the erosion of traditional gender roles, especially related to men “going soft,” c) the loss of oral tradition, and d) the children’s inability or unwillingness to learn by example.

The topic of respect came up in almost all of the interviews at some point. One individual placed respect in the broader context of “Indian things”: “Sometimes we do things that are Indian [ . . . ] as the more obvious things like dancin’ and [ . . . ] the food you eat, respect for elders, maybe leadership ideals, things like that.” Most often, the word respect was used in connection with honoring and being humble before tribal elders. In a broader sense, there was some reference to respect for an Indian way of life including “Indian beliefs” and not wasting natural resources, like food and water. There is also discussion, in the KCA interviews, of respect for veterans and those belonging to military societies.

Fifty percent of KCAs said that the biggest change in family dynamics was the lack of respect now shown toward elders, in-laws, and between the genders. Regardless of tribal affiliation, sex, or age, interviewees felt that older generations were more respectful and demanded more respect. Most felt this was an Indian value that was not being perpetuated. Several also spoke of the familial avoidance taboos that were no longer kept which exemplified and taught respect.

We used to have good manners—respect for mothers, fathers, grandparents, daughter-in-laws, father-in-laws, and today it’s not like that. The old tradition is you can’t even look at a mother-in-law, or father-in-law in the eye, or touch each other. That’s how much respect we had for one another. Today, they’re just like white people, they sit together and do things together and it don’t hurt touchin’ one another. But the old tradition, some brothers and sisters [didn’t] stay in one room. (Kiowa man, age 75)

Another said:

The respect that we had for one another, it’s not practiced like it should be. But I know my father was respected by his sisters . . . to the point where sometimes they didn’t even speak to him because they respected him so much . . . for certain men you can tease, and there’s certain men that you don’t dare tease. You know, you have to uphold a respect. (Kiowa, woman, age 58)

Repeating these familial customs, a 52-year-old Kiowa man shares:

The teaching you receive in your upbringing was always that you never called your aunt, or your uncle or your grandpa by their name . . . Because always call ’em by the Kiowa word for uncle, you call him, you know, *segi* (*Uncle*) and *sadau* (*children*), you know that was kind of a [ . . . ] respectful attitude toward them. You never, you never say harsh words or bad words around your sisters or your brothers, and the other is that, the son-in-laws never talk to their mother-in-laws, and neither do the father-in-laws, sit in the same room with their daughter-

in-laws. Most of 'em call 'em "traditional ways," I call 'em the way of our, our Kiowa people because . . . it is something that I think we need to pass on to our younger generation 'cause they're good, they're good morals, you know? They're good morals in that way.

A Chickasaw man (age 35) remembered as a child seeing elders receive more respect. He commented: "Things have changed . . . my grandfather was the first one to eat and the first one to sit . . . yeah, [there was] a lot more respect back then I think."

An Apache elder whose family had been incarcerated at Ft. Sill from 1894 through 1914 explained that during that period, young men and women had been forced to intermarry (within lineages or bands), transgressing traditional protocols for marriage. Traditional restrictions had to be waived during the 20 years of imprisonment. After they were released however, many married into other tribes because it gave them more options. (R.D., field notes, Apache, OK, 7/99).

Others observed that they now could only have one wife, and that the marriages were no longer arranged. A Kiowa man (age 64) told us that both his grandfather and his father had two wives.

### **Changes in Roles and Learning**

Several interviewees mentioned a loss of gender identity for Indian men. An elder explained the changes in roles this way:

Go back a generation. It was demeaning for--not demeaning, but condescending, I guess you would say, for the Indian male to assume some responsibility, the economic responsibilities of the family. When it came to get food on the table and get clothes for the kids, the grandma went out and did that stuff . . . your grandpa didn't have the means to do it and couldn't do it. He was in sort of a role where he had to step back and let her bring those things in. (Kiowa man, age 55)

I asked another Kiowa about this, and he explained:

Women did it all. They cooked, put up and broke down camps and tepees, got wood, honored and served men, and even took care of men's horses on war parties. This was just a generation or two back. The men were expected to be honored by their families. (B.P., (age 55), fieldnotes, Norman, OK, 10/99).

A younger Kiowa man, 35, agreed:

Yea, . . . let the woman take care of almost everything. I mean . . . I always wondered what the guys were doing. You know always have that vision of 'em sittin' around and smokin' a pipe and . . . and tellin' war stories y' know? Oh, that's changed quite a bit, I think.

When asked about how much hands-on care giving they contributed in child-rearing, approximately 75 percent of all men said that they provided a lot. However, there were some differences tribally among those men who said they contributed little or no hands-on care giving. Thirty-one percent of KCAs said they contributed little or none, compared with only 11 percent of Chickasaw men. A 51-year-old Comanche man told us:

I know the modern generation has changed. My boys act like they are midwives or something the way they hover over them little kids. I said, "You guys got a life, you've got a yard to mow, things to do." But they'd rather sit there and play with the baby and change diapers and nurse them and feed them and everything else. I said "That's blowing my mind." . . . Times have changed. My sons coddle their children too much. Maybe my dad didn't coddle them enough, maybe I didn't coddle them enough, but things have changed and whether it's good or bad, I don't know. That is breaking us down from being Indian and just like everybody else. What do they call it? Enculturating us into the society of the whites and the blacks and the Orientals or whatever.

Women often had different views than men did of how men parented their children and the level of "contributions to care" they offered. One elder (Comanche/Kiowa), age 71, had ten children by two different men. She mentioned that the children all lived with her and that she did not have help raising them. She said, "That's why I thank the Lord for givin' me good nerves with all these children." In her discussion of fathers, she felt that men do not show the respect of older generations as they had traditionally.

In talking about change across the generations, some speculate that the loss of language, loss of understanding values associated with traditional gender roles, and loss of time spent with family could be attributed to younger generations not being aware of the lessons and value in traditional tribal stories. The Chickasaws would sometimes refer to the use of traditional tribal stories, but did not specifically identify any. Some KCAs felt that the traditional Saynday and "camp" stories were important in teaching lessons in the traditional way. Saynday stories involve a supernatural being, who called the Kiowa into the world from a hollow cottonwood tree trunk and taught them the culture of the Plains (Wunder 1989:17). Camp stories involve passing down oral histories of what camp life was like, such as families put up tepees during particular times of the year, reminiscent of their traditional, semi-nomadic culture. It is through these stories that children would learn how things happened for their people and what was important to perpetuate for their tribe.

Learning by example is another traditional means of cultural transmission mentioned in the interviews. One quarter of those interviewed said that they had been taught about the Indian way in this manner. As one KCA woman, (age 58) said,

We learned by listening to and watching our parents. It was our place to be attentive and reflect. Nowadays, you have to almost set 'em down and say “This is what I want you to learn,” which is a barrier in teaching our traditional ways.

A Kiowa man (age 52) shared his memories of his father and how he learned to be a man:

He did not use the word “love” a lot, okay. But I knew . . . that my dad loved me. From the way he lived. And the way he acted and talked in front of us, okay. Uh, even though he didn't say that, I knew that he cared a lot for us. And . . . he would always try to do . . . for the children . . . what he thought was best! You know, we always wanted different things but . . . he would only do what he thought was best for us, for the need, you know. And as far as advice was concerned, he was not really a person that was outspoken a lot, you know. He just, he just kind of uh . . . did it. Rather than talk about it, he just did it and showed you, you know, that he cares.

### **Beliefs about Family Life and Fatherhood**

All but two of the 50 said that there had been changes in fathering over the last several generations. Of these, 20 individuals, without prompting, offered explanation for changes. The factors interviewees identified fell into four main categories. In order of most to least common: nine referred to assimilationist institutions, such as federal laws and boarding schools, as being the primary cause of change; five cited technology, especially television; five said that cars led to people being gone more and spending less time with their families, especially among the young; and two cited abuse of drugs and/or alcohol as the major factor in change.

A 58-year-old KCA man summarized the influences by saying:

It's changed quite a bit I'm sure because of the technology now. I remember back when I was a child . . . my dad would have . . . we'd have people come to the house and set around and tell stories. The peyote drum, sing peyote songs, [we] all set around. But [you] know it seems like the parents don't have the time to even do things with their kids anymore. And it's largely because of the TV. Or you know the kids have cars. The kids get in the cars and take off. There's hardly not that much communication anymore . . . That was our time to get together as a group, was at the dinner table. And I remember back when I was a child we done the same thing. I guess that was just one of those things that's just passed on and on . . . That's where me and my kids, every evening we set down at the dinner table and we discuss things. But yeah, technology has ruined a lot of families.

All but two of the interviewees who attended or whose fathers attended boarding school mentioned the negative impact that the men's absence from their families had on their parenting skills. A KCA man (age 60) explained:



In a way I was denied [a family] when I went to school. I felt like an orphan. I was lonesome for a family . . . even though I had two other brothers and two sisters, we weren't together. You don't have anything. You don't have a dad, you don't have a mother, you don't have your grandfather.

Boarding school for most brought memories of being separated from siblings and family while being forced to give up all that was familiar. One of those schools, the Bloomfield Academy, has a long legacy among the Chickasaws. Its presence in Chickasaw territory lasted from the mid 1800s till 1949, first being a mission school, then a tribal school, and finally a federal boarding school. Those women who remember it during the federal boarding school period provide a fascinating look at the role the Academy played in their education. Amanda Cobb's (2000) *Listening to our Grandmothers' Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852-1949* provides essential context for understanding the perspectives of women who attended there. One of the elder Chickasaw women who spoke with us (age 84), remembers her experience:

The only experience I had much when I was a child was when I went to Bloomfield and then they were trying to make the Indian children to become more like the white children . . . 'cause you had to conform to the way of the whites.

Several Chickasaw men talked about how their experiences and the experiences of their parents have provided them with important lessons that have improved their own ability to parent.

So the kids were taken away from the parents and you know they were abused . . . so if you're in a boarding school how do you develop parenting skills? How do you learn from your folks? I try to think about things like that. I understand my dad's [alcoholism] . . . and I know the most important gifts a Chickasaw father can give to a child is love, understanding, and be there when they need you." (Chickasaw man, age 44)

Another KCA female (age 54), spoke about the boarding school creating such a vacuum in her life that she had been unable to reconnect with her own siblings. She told her daughter,

You don't need to have children. You don't know how to be a mother, because I didn't know how to be a mother. I never learned. I was never able to see how that was done by my mother, nor by her mother. The boarding school has taken that away from us.

Absence from home and from other family members came in many ways, through boarding schools, through incarceration, through premature death of a parent or parents, and by having to leave and find work far away. A 27-year-old Kiowa man spoke about growing up away from Oklahoma, but being taught



traditional things and recognizing the importance of those things as part of the Kiowa way of life when he came back to his homeland to live and work:

I would say when I was a lot younger, that really, um, a lot of that stuff really went to the wayside. I guess when I was growin' up my parents just had me so much into, getting an education, getting into college, and you know I really, growing up [outside of Oklahoma] I really didn't know much about being Indian an' as far- when I was a lot younger, boy, I really, I really didn't know much when I came back to Oklahoma. And, just by seeing all my cousins and how different they were and how they were raised. Um, my father, y' know, he always stressed always bein' educated but he always taught me things here and there about y' know what you should do y' know only, when we went hunting, he taught me how to shoot, he's like, don't kill anything that you're not gonna eat, or you're not gonna use. Y' know don't just kill somethin' and just leave it there. If you're not gonna do it, you're not gonna y' know use it anyway, y' know don't shoot it so. A lot of the traditional things I got from my father y' know were just like little sayings an' y' know a lot of stuff that stuck in my head, 'specially 'bout bein' respect[ful] to nature and feeding certain things.

He spoke of his father in an almost reverent way:

A lot of my friends who don't have fathers y' know, really like my dad . . . an' uh, like how he is. I'd probably say I'm pretty respectful of him when I think about him . . . being a man of very little words he wasn't a very warm person to be around. But, y' know that's just my dad's way . . . the loving and caring for and emotion were all something that my mother showed, and that my mother was supposed to give to us, not my father.

This young father remembered when his dad left a very well paying job and came back home to take care of his mother when she became ill. The agency he worked for couldn't transfer his job so he worked at a blue-collar job outside everyday in the heat to provide for his family.

Y' know jus' one of those terrible jobs you have to get, I guess to support your family. But one thing he told was that uh, don't ever except anything from anybody, don't ever ask anybody for anything. If I can't give it to you, and it's somethin' you don't need, then you don't need it at all. Y' know if I can't give it to you an' it's somethin' that y' know. He said, you have a house, you have a roof over your head, you have your own room, you have food to eat. He said you don't need anything more than that and if I can't give it to you then don't ask for and, don't- don't ever ask anybody for anything.

He also felt that fathering had changed since his dad's generation:

I think it's changed a lot. I think they think, like I said before they y' know, they were more of . . . they got around a lot more, back in those days. [He had spoken

earlier of the “tradition” of Kiowa men having babies with many women.] I would say now, uh definitely, the view of the father has changed. Y’ know as far as being there for their children, I think a lot of fathers these days, a lot of my friends are there for their children, when their fathers weren’t. I see that a lot. And, I dunno, maybe it was due to being raised by women. I have no idea. Resenting what their fathers did to them, I dunno.

A 72-year-old Comanche man whose father died of tuberculosis when he was five was sent to live with his maternal grandparents on their farm. There he said, he learned the Comanche language and way of life, and joined the peyote church [Native American Church]. He had three wives (serially), who bore him eight children. He proudly speaks of his fourteen grandchildren and the lessons his grandfather taught him about treating his family with gentleness and working hard to provide for them. He also laughs that at 72, his only health concern is finding another woman. He shared with his interviewer his thoughts about changes in parenting since his grandfather’s generation:

Oh yeah, a lot [of change has occurred]. I’m, no-not speakin’ for myself, but watchin’ the other people ’n’ they just, excuse my language, they just don’t give a damn about their children. They don’t even try to help ’em, is the reason why a lot of our Comanche children are in jail an’ in prison, because the fathers don’t try to correct ’em in any way.

Another Kiowa man (age 52) agreed that fathering had changed since his father’s and grandfather’s time (both of whom had been sent to boarding schools):

I think it’s changed . . . because of the laws. That changed. It changed a great deal. Because today if a father . . . were to discipline his child as my grandfather did or my dad did, he would be hauled off to jail! And he would be put in jail or put in prison for a number of years. Ah . . . so I think, in the various ages and the changes comes . . . according to the changes in the law. And—that, the law today has taken a lot . . . taken away a lot of . . . fatherhood, and parenting, and has placed it in the hands of the government, or somebody else, who is not even a part of the family.

A Chickasaw man (age 38) reflected on his experiences with both his biological father and his step-father. He felt that in his case, Chickasaw fathering had improved for his generation. He felt that neither had “been there for him” or “provided a good role model.” He also said he had no role models or traditional examples to provide guidance for his parenting. When asked what made him want to be a father, he responded, “To have one [a child] and give her the things that I’ve never had, being raised without a father.” He went on to explain that he thought fatherhood for him was different than for his father, because he was around for his child and he and his child were “extremely close.” He commented further that the most important things a father could give his children are, “Love, understanding, and guidance.”

In summarizing his thoughts about changes in Indian fathering, a 56-year-old Chickasaw man reflected on the experiences of his own father and grandfather.

Yes, it's changed a lot in outward appearance, but my grandfather raised a large family with twelve kids and of course he had stepchildren too, but he did what he could to provide for his family and take care of them. He was always respectful to his children. There was never any harsh punishments and he didn't put his children into a bad situation. He didn't create an atmosphere that was unhealthy, mentally, physically, or emotionally . . . and my father, there was ten kids in our family, nine of which he raised into adulthood. My father said to me when I was very young, eight or nine years old, that the best mark of a man was his ability to accept responsibility, to be a responsible person, and yes, there was also affection. And not a day goes by that I don't hug or kiss my [own] kids. Yeah, all I can really do for my kids is love 'em.

Another Chickasaw man (age 42) spoke of his father teaching him the Indian ways:

You know, like, when it's goin' up and down in the cost, you know, we never, we never waste anything, you know. If we, like if we cut down a tree for firewood, we would use basically use every bit of that tree because he [his father] said that's the way the Indian people do. He was teachin' us this, you know. We never, never waste anything. And, you know, he used to tell us things like that if we go fishin', you know, he said don't catch more than you're gonna eat, you know, if you're gonna throw it away don't catch it. Because the Indian people never waste anything. So that's why we always had things to come back on. And, you know, he taught us that and he taught us some of the, of you know, like, we had a medicine man that could turn themselves into certain animals, you know? And, let me think, some of the things that he taught us . . . he always taught us to be, you know, to be proud of ourselves. You know, especially bein' Chickasaw, he said that, you know, back in the old times that they were a pretty feared nation before I guess the, they were really taken over by the white people. They never lost a war, and he was always tellin' us, you know, if you're Chickasaw you be proud of yourself.

He continued to talk about his father and his feelings about him:

I'm proud of him. He's . . . he's a good man. Uh, love him so much, you know, he's got cancer now, and, I know I'm gonna lose him real soon an' I'm scared o' that but, uh, (pause) I'm proud of him because he did a lot of good for us when we was growin' up. (Softly) Wouldn't starve. We wouldn't go hungry. That's . . . that's the way I think of him.

This thought was sustained as the man explained his father's teaching them how to live and then commenting on the change in fathering from his father's and grandfather's generations:

He was teachin' us how to be, you know, to survive, I guess, he's teachin' us how to plant a garden, you know. Things that we needed to know. Always, you know, and how to help around the house. Like when we turned, uh, thirteen years old? We got, got a twenty-two [rifle]. I think we shot a twenty-two that, he got me and my brother too so when my other brother got older and, uh, turned thirteen, he got a used, you know? This is how we learned to shoot that rifle, you know. You know, he showed us how to shoot it and be careful with it. [He had] other two brothers. And then we got, like, I don't know, about sixteen years old, he was always tellin' us, you know, I think the oldest one can take him and have him a summer job, you know. Workin' for the county. And he did each one of us that way. To get us started in the field of workin' . . . and not bein' late for work, you know . . . taught us if you can be thirty minutes early, be thirty minutes early . . . [he taught us] all the way up to eighteen years old.

[Being a father] I believe it's gotten harder. To the times, you know, about everything, and people not as close as they used to be. You know? Go-go-go-go-go. Yeah, doin' whatever, you know, working or whatever. They're not . . . close like they used to be.

### Conclusion

These interviews reflect various changes that have taken place over the last three generations of Indian fathering. One of the most compelling differences between generations seems to be represented by the interviewees' discussion of loss of respect. Interesting in these narratives is that this discussion, by men or women, seemed to refer specifically to a loss of respect for men. Several commented on role reversals and loss of traditional role expectations for men or women in their families.

Many of the interviews did not reflect concern about changes in fatherhood as a social practice, but rather focused on barriers to good fathering or changes that impede good family cohesion. Examples include the mobility of family members, such as men working away from home, which leads to lessened family cohesion. Also mentioned was the absence of fathers due to premature death, substance abuse, or incarceration.

In terms of difficulties that men have in dealing with their children, most seem to express that fathering is harder in recent generations due to a lack of good jobs and adequate income. When many spoke of their fathers' and grandfathers' lives and their relationships to them, they said that processing how they felt and what they could remember about the topic of "fatherhood" was something they had never done before. Talking about fatherhood prompted them to examine those relationships and the relationships they had with their children and grandchildren in a new and different way. Memories about the good times and questions about the difficult times generated discussions about both "fatherhood" and "Indianness." For example, there were stories that alluded to the pressure to become more "white-like," while holding on to Indian ways, and how that was difficult to juggle. One Kiowa father and grandfather (age 52) expressed his beliefs this way:

Based on our traditional beliefs, I guess on some of the upbringing, there has been a great move to I guess Americanize our Native Americans to the point where the European is thought [to] be the highest quality of all. But my belief is that, as Native Americans, we have a great heritage. And we ought to be proud of it. And I think our children ought to know that. Rather than them being robots to different types of societies and governments and say, you know, "Well, yes sir and yes sir." But they'll be an individual, and knowing that they are Native American, that they're Kiowa, and they can be proud of that. So, as far as, not following Indian ways . . . I don't think it's detrimental to anybody, who is Kiowa, but I think it's more of a, it's more of an improvement of that, of a person's character who is Kiowa, to let somebody know that, "Hey you know, uh, we're a people just like anybody else." And the thing is, is that, once they begin to think that they're somebody else or . . . [more] what we would call *thaukau* [Kiowa word for "White person"], than they are . . . Indians, then, it's uh . . . you kind of lose everybody, you lose everything. And today, it's always a move to try to be who you are—not, who you can be or who you ought to be. But who you really are right now, and I think that that's important. Rather than thinking about our peyote churches or our peyote meetings, a Native American Church, versus that of the, what we call a "white man church," or a "cowboy church," or whatever. But, I don't think that there needs to be any kind of a barrier there. I think each one of us ought to be able to exercise our beliefs, as we believe.

The stories that these Indian men and women shared were powerful, moving, and humbling. Those who worked on this project and were fortunate enough to meet these people have been forever enriched by their experience. Our thanks and gratitude go to all who allowed us to understand just a small portion of the rich legacy and diverse heritage of these nations.

## Notes

1. This paper represents a sub-study of the American Indian Fatherhood Project, funded by a grant from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau [grant MCJ-400827].
2. The data in the tables that follow come from the 1990 U.S. Census (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1990).

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