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Introduction: Special Issue on Indigenous Early Parenthood

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Introduction: Special Issue on Indigenous Early Parenthood

Abstract

This introduction underscores many of the points raised and facts presented in the articles of this special edition of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal* on Indigenous Early Parenthood. It briefly mentions the interrelationship between economic deprivation and high fertility rates among Canada's First Nations populations as well as the challenges and consequences of early parenting. While the authors may not make policy prescriptions, they emphasize the need for young parents and their children to receive the supports needed to help break the cycle of negative outcomes, which can be achieved through education, protection, and actualizing the value of ensuring that every child is a welcome and sacred gift.

French Abstract

PRÉFACE DU NUMÉRO SPÉCIAL DE L'INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS POLICY JOURNAL SUR LA PARENTALITÉ PRÉCOCE CHEZ LES AUTOCHTONES

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Résumé

Cette préface souligne bon nombre des points soulevés et des faits présentés dans les articles de ce numéro spécial de l'International Indigenous Policy Journal sur la parentalité précoce chez les Autochtones. Elle fait brièvement mention de la corrélation entre le dénuement économique et les taux de fécondité élevés au sein des Premières Nations du Canada, ainsi que des défis et des conséquences associés à la parentalité précoce. Bien que les auteurs ne puissent pas faire des recommandations de politiques, ils insistent sur le fait que les jeunes parents et leurs enfants ont besoin de mesures de soutien afin de pouvoir briser le cycle des résultats négatifs, ce qui peut être accompli grâce à l'éducation et à la protection ainsi qu'en actualisant l'importance de voir à ce que chaque enfant soit un cadeau bienvenu et sacré.

Spanish Abstract

PRÓLOGO DEL NÚMERO ESPECIAL DE INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS POLICY JOURNAL SOBRE PADRES INDÍGENAS JÓVENES

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Resumen

Este prólogo pone de relieve muchos de los puntos planteados y hechos presentados en los artículos de este número especial de International Indigenous Policy Journal sobre los padres indígenas jóvenes. En él se menciona brevemente la relación entre las penurias económicas y las altas tasas de fertilidad en las poblaciones de las Primeras Naciones de Canadá así como los retos y las repercusiones para los padres jóvenes. Aunque los autores no pueden preconizar políticas a este respecto, insisten en la necesidad de que los padres jóvenes y sus hijos reciban el apoyo necesario para tratar de salir del ciclo de resultados negativos y ello se puede lograr a través de la educación, de la protección y de la valorización de la idea de que cada niño es un regalo sagrado.

Keywords

teenage pregnancy, early parenting, Aboriginal

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Introduction: Special Issue on Indigenous Early Parenthood

The papers in this special issue on teen parenthood address questions of vital importance to Indigenous youth, families, and communities. In the best tradition of research, the authors begin with points of common knowledge and present information that leads readers to look closely at established facts and the context surrounding those facts to extend the boundaries of knowledge.

The common knowledge, at least among those who pay attention to such matters, is that the Aboriginal population of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, is young and growing at rate that exceeds that of the general population. The inferences drawn on the basis of those facts can vary. For example, Aboriginal traditions place a value on large families. Aboriginal people have children at a younger age than their neighbours (Garner, Guimond, & Senécal, 2013). Poverty (also a widely known fact) is not a deterrent to childbearing (United Nations Population Fund, 2008). High fertility rates create an opportunity for economic participation or a burden on human services, depending on your point of view.

Examination of census data, including the more detailed information available from the Aboriginal Peoples' Surveys, has identified patterns in Aboriginal population change. In southern reserve communities and urban centres, the rate of natural population growth among Aboriginal people has slowed, although overall numbers have grown through inter-marriage, parenthood with non-Aboriginal partners, and self-identification of significant numbers of persons of mixed heritage. In communities in more northerly regions, fertility rates tend to resemble patterns of earlier decades (Guimond, 2003).

The Indian Register, which records detail on births, deaths, marriage, and Indian status, provides further insight into fertility in one segment of the Aboriginal population - Registered Indians who are principally, but not exclusively, resident on reserves. Data from the Indian Register reveals that, while Indian women overall are having fewer children, the number of births to teenage mothers has remained at about seven times the rate for all teenagers in Canada (Guimond & Robataille, 2008).

Those are facts that can be gleaned from statistical records that draw on a variety of sources and use different criteria and population bases. Discerning whether the facts should give rise to concern, or to social and policy action, requires a fuller exploration of the context of the numbers and the consequences of such youthful parenthood. Questions about context and consequences have gone unasked until the past decade, despite collateral facts about single mothers, poverty, dependence on social assistance, and rates of children in alternative care. Are there connections among the facts that speak of youthful maternity, parents under stress and children at risk?

Authors are careful to avoid assumptions that pregnancy among Aboriginal teenagers is a reflection of "cultural difference". Such an explanation reinforces the perception that Aboriginal people are essentially "others", not affected by the same forces and concerns as the general population. If Aboriginal youth occupy a separate social-cultural space, then facts that raise public health concerns in the general population can be regarded as normal for Aboriginal people.

Review of research in other countries and comparison with data on teen parenthood among Aboriginal women in Canada show similar patterns of risk for children and continuing social and economic disadvantage specifically for their mothers (Garner et al., 2013; Guimond & Robataille 2008). A few

qualitative studies of limited scope reveal that there *are* cultural differences in the proportion of young mothers who choose to keep their children and reliance on extended families for assistance (see Quinless, 2013). Significantly, many Aboriginal participants in relevant research affirm the view that children are sacred gifts (Anderson, 2002; Eni & Phillips-Beck, 2013; Newhouse, 1998), regardless of the circumstances into which they are born.

Despite such evidence of the value assigned to children and childbearing, two consequences of early birthing stand out. Teenage maternity is associated with leaving school before high school graduation and extended families, with scarce economic resources, are severely limited in their capacity to provide the supports that are sought (Garner et al., 2013). Cycles of under-education, under-employment, and poverty are thus in danger of being repeated with new generations of children, specifically those born to teenage mothers.

In analyzing the facts, the context, and the consequences of teenage parenthood among Aboriginal women in Canada, the authors often stop short of prescribing social and policy responses, although they underline the importance of the issues to Aboriginal families and communities and to public service providers. Research in other countries, particularly the United States, illustrates that public attitudes are often conflicted with respect to sexuality, roles of teenagers, education on contraception, and support for youthful and single parents (Fonda, 2013; Fonda, Eni, & Guimond, 2013). The articles clearly convey the inadequacy of moralizing about teen sexual practices, enforcing hardship on vulnerable mothers and children, or, worse, ignoring that threats to community well-being exist.

This collection of articles draws on quantitative and qualitative research, often led by Aboriginal researchers, to shed light on an aspect of community well-being that has received sparse attention in the past from researchers and policy makers. This beginning discussion gives voice to concerns that have circulated for some time in families and communities on the front line of responding to their members' needs. This special issue of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal* on Indigenous early parenthood makes an important and timely contribution to broadening our understanding of the education, protection, and support necessary for Aboriginal teens to actualize the traditional value of welcoming every child as a sacred gift.

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