THE IMPORTACE OF IDENTITY AND ABORIGINAL MOTHERING

by

LuCinda Ignas

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1988

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Abstract

This study describes how identity development is influenced by culture, family and community and explores how raising children with the MCFD involvement is viewed by seven Aboriginal parents in British Columbia. It presents their narratives as teachings on what relationships families found supported and undermined their efforts to parent.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants as key informants and qualitative research methodology was used to structure interviews. Although the recruitment process for key informants contributed to pronounced diversity between participants, the research findings showed overarching and congruent themes between the experiences of participants. The themes that emerged from the research were situated in two theoretical models for Aboriginal identity development and were used to present the research findings. The primary themes that emerged were the importance of family, community, and culture. However, of greater note is how the overarching themes of responsibility, commitment and accountability to family and community maintain Aboriginal parents' identities.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Aboriginal women have experienced many challenges exerting their right to parent their children in Canadian society. The Western world's imposition of the 'ideology of motherhood' and the Canadian government's policies of assimilation led to the destruction of traditional Aboriginal family structures. These barriers imposed by the dominant culture served to reinforce negative stereotypes of Aboriginal parenting which was used to justify and perpetuate government involvement in all aspects of Aboriginal child welfare. Permeating the dominant culture's ideology of successful parenting is a societal belief that blames Aboriginal women for systemic issues of poverty, child abuse, domestic violence and failing to provide and protect their children.

Purpose

Literature is scarce on successful Aboriginal women and about what constitutes positive Aboriginal mothering. Further, little has been written about how Aboriginal mothers develop their identities as parents or the relevance of identity in relationship to lessening the state's involvement in child welfare. The purpose of my research was to explore, document and analyze identities of successful Aboriginal mothers who had regained or retained custody of their children despite involvement with the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD). This study contributes to the understanding of one aspect of successful Aboriginal mothers, namely, how identity contributes to positive self-determination.

Overview of the Research

My research involved interviewing seven Aboriginal mothers who resided in various locations in the province of British Columbia. The research was designed to give voice to Aboriginal parents' perspectives on how they developed successful identities as parents despite having to navigate within child protective agencies. The research illustrates how specific aspects of culture and family strengthened their parenting identities and proposes their experiences with child protection agencies reflect historical oppressive practices imposed on Aboriginal parents by the dominant culture.

Researcher's Background and Perspectives

By way of a personal introduction, I feel privileged to be a mother of two daughters. Through my experiences parenting my children at each stage of their development, I learned much about myself. By recognizing my under-utilized strengths and my personal challenges to develop new skills, I identified with other parents struggling to parent successfully. On a professional level, I am fortunate to have found my niche working with families. My work has been incredibly rewarding because it has resonated with my commitment to be the best parent to my children and give support to those parents with similar needs and desires. In synchrony with my personal values and beliefs that parenting children is among the most important contributions needed by society, I witnessed similar commitments made by parents who never gave up on their family. As I worked with parents and their children in community, my conviction that families are the best places to raise children was strengthened. Although at times my work led to 'out of home placements' for children, I continue to believe lack of appropriate supports and services for mothers are a greater cause of family disruption than a parent's motivation to keep her family intact and retain her parenting role. This belief guides and humbles me on a daily basis. I

concede families parenting with multiple challenges have more resiliency and hope than I can possibly imagine. I have experienced how child removals weaken the family and cause greater dysfunction, grief and trauma for families. What continues to amaze me in my work is the number of parents who overcome major obstacles such as addictions or other issues that have led to child removals. My practical experience has taught me that being able to parent one's own children leads to a healing journey for parents who are reclaiming their lives. What is astounding are the gifts these parents give back; literally by parenting they believe they have a reason to live. In some cases, their children are the reason they lived and continued to assert their rights to make a significant contribution to society.

As a non-Aboriginal woman I have worked in family preservation programs for the last two decades with both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal parents deemed by the MCFD to be in need of parenting skills. While witnessing Aboriginal women's strengths, resiliency, courage and determination to parent their children, I became aware of the magnitude of personal and systemic obstacles they faced on a daily basis in their role as parents.

Parental development, like child development and adolescent development, is a nonlinear process. Parental development must be understood in terms of psychological vulnerabilities, reflective capacities, individual strengths and compromises such as mental health and substance abuse, family support, history and experiences in parenting and ecological factors. For Aboriginal parents, parenting is complicated by a lack of a culturally relevant agreement on what constitutes successful Aboriginal mothering. Within this state of affairs, Aboriginal parents are judged and evaluated on their parenting practices according to Western conceptions of adequate parenting.

Aboriginal parents deemed in need of support and parenting skills by MCFD are referred to community support programs to acquire the necessary skills to 'change' their world view of parenting practices. In general, parent education programs offer programming in parenting skills and life skills. Family preservation programs typically use Western parenting assessments and Western program materials designed to teach behavior management of children, positive discipline, child development, child health and safety and so forth. The primary goal is often to foster a positive parent-child relationship and help the parent assume a parenting role in which she becomes bigger, kinder, stronger and wiser than her children. Life skills curriculum can include budgeting, home management, nutrition, communication, self-esteem, grief and loss and other related topics. Aboriginal mothers' lived realities and wisdoms are missing from the Western world's ideologies and constituent 'expert knowledge.' For most women parenting their children is both a highly subjective and personal experience. However, little thought is given to the impact of being seen as an inadequate mother lacking basic skills and nurturing capacities. These realities prompted my initial research questions.

Research questions.

- How do Aboriginal mothers repair their sense of competence when their parenting is analyzed, interrogated, silenced, or trivialized and judged inferior?
- How does the removal of children from a parent's care impact their confidence and ability to provide mothering, albeit with restrictions such as limited access or supervised access to their children?

In my experience working with families who had experienced removal of their children, little attention, care and support was provided in the 'apprehension process' that helped parents mitigate their profound loss and disruption in normal life or repair their sense of competence as a

parent. In fact, MCFD social workers attempting to provide support to mothers have few options. In Prince George, British Columbia, social workers rely on support workers from community agencies to support families experiencing child removals. The support workers are typically paraprofessionals ill-equipped to manage the highly stressful and often volatile event. What Aboriginal mothers need in these times is not well known, nor well researched in terms of clinical practice and social policy. Over the course of my career in parenting education and in my formal education, I have not encountered this topic addressed nor am I aware of recommended practice for community workers.

Of further concern is the fact that currently more Aboriginal children reside away from their parent's home than during 1931, the peak of residential schools in Canada (Blackstock, 2003). Although Aboriginal children account for 5% of children in Canada, research by Farris-Manning and Zandstra (2003) reveals that 40% of Aboriginal children are in government care in Canada. In fact, The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect research report compiled by Trocme et al (2008) suggests this trend continues with slightly higher out-of-home placements for Aboriginal children. While responsibility for Aboriginal child welfare is shared between provincial and federal governments and First Nations Agencies, only 8 of 24 Aboriginal agencies have been designated qualified to deliver support and services to Aboriginal parents.

Colonization continues to produce a false consciousness around Aboriginal parenting. Using this reference a negative connotation is attached to Aboriginal mothers. This characterization is pervasive and permeates the identity of Aboriginal mothers held by the dominant society. In my thesis, the identity of Aboriginal parenting is the central construct for

my research. I propose the way we construct and define identity influences our way of making meaning of our experiences.

Hall (1992) suggests we think about identity "usually as a simple process, structured around fixed 'selves' who we either are or are not" (p. 444). In this way identity becomes known and believed true. Like Hall, I believe this definition of identity is problematic being as it is "predicated on the assumption that the categories of gender and sexuality would stay the same and remain fixed and secure" (p. 445). Instead, Hall suggests identity is continuously formed and transformed in interaction with culture and history among other contextual factors.

LaRocque (2010) suggests identity is not contained, fixed or static, but is ambiguous and complex. In fact, LaRocque's analysis of Aboriginal academics writings on Native women suggests reconstructions include deconstructions and romanticizing. As societies undergo structural change, divisions occurs in class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity resulting in a de-centering of our identities. According to LaRocque, "We find a fascinating and sometimes confusing mix of issues that braid together an array of stereotypes, notions of cultural differences and problems of internalization" (p.120).

Part of the challenge lies in how language is used to describe identity. Speaking from an Aboriginal woman's perspective, Valaskasis (2005) asserts that "identities are also constructed in the circling discourse of Native knowledge and experience, including women's relationships to land, to nature and to each other" (p. 147). As with Valaskasis, I believe story telling or the personal narratives we share are representative of our sense of self and community. Through stories we build and express connection between public and private domains, conscious and unknown, past and present experiences. I believe it is important for mainstream society to

understand that Aboriginal parents' stories need to be told, celebrated and brought forward as positive stories.

Lieblich and Josselson (1994) suggest our stories are intimately involved with identity. Because memory interacts with the subconscious and known levels of experience, language, culture and history, storytelling serves to both unify and strengthen identity and empower women. Lieblich and Josselson write that, "If identity is the opposite of anonymity, and if identity is strengthened through the self-narrative, then telling one's story is a means of becoming, just as much as having a story to tell" (p. 215).

It is general knowledge that in traditional Aboriginal societies, mothers were considered keepers of knowledge and teachers of the next generations. In Aboriginal matriarchal societies, Aboriginal women held positions of political, social and economic power. Noel (2006) describes Iroquoian societies as strongly feminine and suggests that "men certainly occupied esteemed positions as chiefs, councillors, warriors and hunters but these were not seen as being more important than the positions women occupied" (p. 85). In traditional Aboriginal societies, mothering was an esteemed role of great importance. Mothering children was considered so essential a service that all community members assumed responsibility for the safety and well-being of the communities' children.

Mothering children is one of the most valuable contributions we make to society. While this assertion may not hold true for all members of a society, according to my values and beliefs it is an overarching goal of society. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women perform mothering tasks daily to ensure both our and our children's survival. Hence, the ultimate truism 'it takes a village to raise a child' is of profound importance.

Approach to the Study

This study into Aboriginal mothering is comprised of five chapters. Chapter one presents an introduction to the topic and researcher's background and the purpose and rationale for this research. Chapter two presents the literature review used in this study, beginning with a definition of identity development, an overview of Western feminist theory and Aboriginal feminist theory, followed by a definition of Western and Aboriginal ideologies of motherhood and representations of Aboriginal women as mothers. Chapter three presents information on the research methodology for the research procedures followed by a definition of a First Nation's approach to research and feminist theory, ethical considerations for this study and introduces the theory and models for analysis. Chapter four presents the data from seven participants and the date analysis models. Chapter five links the research findings with the literature and provides reflections on Aboriginal mothering and child protection practice.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

Originating from the works of Aboriginal scholars, feminist theorists and Western academics a review of the literature used in my thesis was compiled. The literature review is categorized into general topic areas of Identity Development, Western Feminist Theory and Aboriginal Feminist theory, Ideology of Motherhood, Aboriginal Parenting Ideology and Representations of Aboriginal Women as Mothers.

Identity Development

In reviewing the literature it is evident that the term identity has multiple meanings. In summary, the literature suggests that a multiplicity of individual positions and potential identities exist. Several theorists including Rutherford (1990) and Hall (1992) have linked identity to binaries in Western knowledge systems and thus depend upon some originating moment of truth from which our whole ladder of meanings develops. Holland and Lachicotte (2001) define identity as "a concept that invokes and relates theories from various streams of psychology, social psychology, anthropology, sociology and now from such interdisciplinary fields as cultural studies" (p. 4).

Hall (1992) describes contradictions in identity categories, cultural identity, political identity, social identity, dislocating identity once believed to be fixed and secure (p. 280). Hall further postulates that the complexity of identity excludes the development of a singular, overarching and dominant theory of identity. This is partially due to changes in modern society, emerging identities defined by new social movements and erosion of what was once constituencies of race and class.

Holland and Lachicotte (2001) argue identity is constructed socially and culturally and located within hierarchies of power and privilege "that relate fields of activity" (p. 192). From Holland and Lachicotte's perspectives, identity is mediated through processes of distance and instance, general and specific meaning which becomes meaningful practice "only to the extent that it is both" (p. 192). Holland and Lachicotte view identity as a developmental process within people. Identities are formed internally to mediate between extension and intension in social interactions.

Kaplan (1992) investigated the process for self-actualization, construction of motherhood relative to cultural assumptions and personal and social history. Although her work did not include Aboriginal mothers, it suggested that women construct both an alternative identity from their own mothers and an identity that is diametrically different than the Western world's ideology of motherhood. Research by Abbey and O'Reilly (1998) on mothers from differing backgrounds such as lesbian mothers, foster mothers, disabled mothers, single mothers, and interracial mothers, among others, illustrate the problems and challenges of conceiving maternal identity as fixed and stable. Identity is contextually bound and multidimensional.

Bastien (2001) connects Aboriginal identity with tribal identity and nature; as such, identity is transformative and generational. Bastien elucidates the connection between Aboriginal self-identity and tribal identity by defining tribal identity to encompass the collective experiences of interdependent relationships and partnerships within Aboriginal communities. Similar to Holland and Lachicotte's (2001) view of identity, Bastien asserts that identity is closely entwined in relationships being "the basis of life and force through which life is strengthened and renewed, and in which children experience themselves as tribal people rather than as individuals. The collective experience is strengthened and renewed in ceremony, where children are

empowered with the knowledge of the sacredness of relationships, which itself comes with the knowledge that tribal people are connected, in a web, to all of creation" (p.127). Borrowing from Cross (1991), Mihesuah (2003) proposes a developmental model of identity formation is useful in understanding stages of identity for Native peoples and other biracial groups.

Western Feminist Theory and Aboriginal Feminist Theory

An overview of Aboriginal and Western feminist theory follows. They were coupled to guide data collection, interpretation and analysis. Like Western feminist theory, Aboriginal feminist theory is not accepted by all Aboriginal women; however, the Aboriginal feminist perspective presented by several Aboriginal scholars is deemed significant to this research.

The origins of Western feminist theory were established in the 1840's when a small number of women in Britain and America organized to protest against women's exclusion and discrimination in government, law, employment and education. These women founded various philanthropic reforms in prisons, public education, charities and for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Subsequently, their activities led to organizations that advocated and improved conditions for women and children. According to Clements (1990), these organizations would come "to be called the feminist movement, the alliance of various groups seeking the abolition of discriminating practices against women" (p.116). Articulation of universal women's rights became synonymous with feminism. The concept of a universal womanhood remained a strong, albeit a small and elitist, organized movement until the 1920's. Clements outlines possible scenarios for the quiescence of feminism following the 1920's:

1. Gaining the vote left the movement without a common purpose;

2. Feminism as a middle class movement stagnated because of an unwillingness to examine the capitalist economy and middle class;

3. The disasters associated with World War 1 and the fear of revolution in Russia led to a return of the belief that a women's place was in the home.

Although the 1960's are commonly regarded as the rebirth of the women's movement, Taylor and Rupp (1991) suggest the "traditional emphasis of the death of the movement in the 1920's and its rebirth in the 1960's overlooks the continuity of the movement from its origins in the 1840's to the present" (p.129). Taylor and Rupp suggest serious political implications arose in the post 1945 period that burdened the resurgent movement of the 1960's with a legacy of race and class limitations.

Smith (1999) suggests the second wave of feminism challenged the "epistemological foundations of Western philosophy, academic practice and research" (p.166). Equally important were challenges to 'white feminism' from groups of women of colour including Indigenous women who contested the white feminism discourse; namely, that all women suffer from universal oppression articulated and understood by well-educated, primarily white, Western women. According to Smith, issues of Aboriginal voice, visibility, silence and invisibility intersect as do relationships between race, gender and class making oppression a multi-contextual condition of sociological and psychological factors. According to Emberly (1996), feminist theory in the 1980's was based on self-reflective and internal analysis of racism and ethnocentrism which continued to exclude Aboriginal women's cultural and political experiences and denied the agency of those Aboriginal women engaged in resistance and critical praxis.

Paula Gunn Allen (1986) establishes the origins of Aboriginal feminism as dating back to the sixteenth century when Aboriginal women's rights were codified in the Iroquois Constitution and delineated women's economic and decision making powers: "The lineal descent of the people of the Five Fires [the Iroquois Nation] shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of their mothers" (Article 44), (p. 212). Mohawk (2003) notes that the historical accounts of the privileged statues of Iroquois women is supported historically as are different cultural interpretations of Iroquois women's societal roles. Allen suggests the distinguishing characteristics of traditional tribal society included acceptance of a wide latitude of diversity between people, the absence of punitiveness for social control, and the absence of patriarchy among other important societal features.

Green (2007) defines feminism as an ideology based on political analysis. Like Smith (1999), Green suggests Indigenous women have been denied participation in the Western women's movement due to racist mythologies. Green argues Aboriginal feminism provides a social movement wherein the political, social and economic realities of Aboriginal women's historical and lived experiences can be transformed to praxis. According to Green, gender is considered a defining characteristic of feminism, however, it must be viewed as a "social organizing process and within the context of patriarchal society, seeks to identify how women are subordinated to men and how women can be emancipated from this subordination" (p. 21). hooks (1984) advocates that women who have been excluded "from feminist discourse and praxis can make a place for themselves only if they first create critiques and awareness of the factors that alienate them" (p. 9). Similarities between hooks (1984) and Green's (2007) definitions are apparent in that hooks also endorses a broad definition of feminism: "feminism is

a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore it is a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic and material desires" (p. 24).

As cited in Green (2007), Donovan (1990) identifies four "determinant structures under which Aboriginal women unlike men have nearly universally existed" (p. 172): "First and foremost Aboriginal women have experienced political oppression....Second, nearly everywhere and in nearly every period women have been assigned to the domestic sphere....Third, Aboriginal women's historical economic function has been production for use, not production for exchange...Fourth, Aboriginal women experience significant physical events that are different from men's" (p. 172-73). Donovan suggests these determinants establish the position of Aboriginal feminist theory. By comparing the rates of violence against Aboriginal women, or the numbers of Aboriginal children in government care, the impact of residential schools on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples and the under-representation of Aboriginal women in government and other influential positions, it is evident that colonization has been and remains a force that continues to oppress and marginalize Aboriginal women. Carter (1996) suggests colonization advanced the assignment of women to the domestic sphere as notions of the Western patriarchal family were imposed upon Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal women's dependence upon Aboriginal men increased (p. 52). According to Carter (1996), one of the most glaring examples of dependency was established in the Indian Act passed in Canada in 1876, whereby Indian women lost their Registered Status upon marrying a man without Registered Status (p. 53). Although remedied in June 1985 by the government of Canada's passing of Bill C-31, An Act to Amend the Indian Act, this example exemplifies the view historically held by

the Canadian government. Inherent in the loss of Registered Status was women's loss of rights to inheritance, community and home and property.

LaRocque (2007) rejects the notion that Western based economics are relevant for Indigenous societies that historically were land-based and non-capitalist; however, she postulates that as the fur trade increased along with the demand for male labour "women were left to attend to child rearing and other family and home demands" (p. 55). The 'significant physical events' cited by Donovan and experienced by Aboriginal women that differ from Aboriginal men include child birth, breastfeeding, and menstruation (p.173). Although it is important to be cautious with generalizations, I would argue Donovan's 'four determinants structures' hold true for non-Aboriginal women as well as Aboriginal women and that feminist theory is justifiable for Aboriginal women.

Ideology of Motherhood

Glenn, Chang and Forcey (1994) define ideology as "the conceptual system by which a group makes senses of and thinks about the world" (p. 9). For example, hooks (1984) suggests educated, privileged, middle class white women viewed motherhood as a barrier to their freedom. Conversely, African American women viewed racism and other restrictions to employment as greater barriers to freedom than motherhood. In reviewing the literature both historically and currently, Western society views a woman's natural role as that of mothering and motherhood. Thurer (1994) views this ideology as spurious and insensible to women's needs and contexts. Thurer argues that definitions of motherhood are culturally derived and says that "every society has it its own mythology, norms and symbols. Our received models of motherhood are not necessarily better or worse than many others" (p. xv). Thurer suggests

motherhood is reinvented, dependent on the needs of society. While the ideology of motherhood may be applicable for some women it may not be appropriate for women who have chosen to remain childless.

Hays (1996) describes motherhood as a social construction of Western society with changing definitions according to their variance between cultures, places and peoples. Hays suggests motherhood is systemically connected to origins in culture and societal organization. According to Hays, children are an economic asset; therefore, societies develop strategies for caring for children. Cultures select and develop models that promote the wellbeing of the entire community.

Feminist scholars Glenn, Chang and Forcey (1994) challenge state surveillance, eugenics and commoditization of women as central tenets for analysis in motherhood. Hill-Collins (1994) describes other aspects of motherhood such as generatively and community. Hill-Collins argues feminist scholars have ignored social cultural constraints and concerns found within social, economic and political contexts that form the reality for women outside the margins of dominant society. Hill-Collins suggests individual and personal autonomy is less important for women of oppressed racial communities than the wellbeing of their communities.

Kaplan (1992) investigated the process for self-actualization, construction of motherhood relative to cultural assumptions and personal and social history. Although her work did not include Aboriginal mothers, it suggested that women construct both an alternative identity from their own mothers and an identity that is diametrically different than the Western world's ideology of motherhood. Research by Abbey and O'Reilly (1998) on mothers from differing backgrounds such as lesbian mothers, foster mothers, disabled mothers, single mothers, and

interracial mothers, among others, illustrates the problems and challenges of conceiving maternal identity as fixed and stable. Identity is contextually bound and multidimensional.

Aboriginal Parenting Ideology

Hill-Collins (1994) links experience of political conquest and other forms of exploitation by Western society to Aboriginal mothering. She suggests the experiences and ideas of women of colour must be positioned in the center of analysis to yield a different epistemology and valid knowledge base.

Hill-Collins (1994) suggests fundamental issues for Aboriginal mothers are powerlessness within social institutions, over intrusiveness in child welfare and disempowerment of Aboriginal mothers through the historical removal and subsequent confinement of Aboriginal children in residential schools that served to destroy Aboriginal language and culture. Hill-Collins believes Aboriginal women's ability to confront racial and class oppressions lies in their social constructions of motherhood, which is based on Aboriginal culture, as a strong and dynamic entity with alternate values, beliefs and powers.

Cull (2006) postulates Aboriginal women historically have been used for political gain by the Canadian government. The status of Aboriginal mothers has not changed significantly despite efforts to remediate some of the impacts of colonization. Cull suggests motherhood "represents a core aspect of a woman's being and it constitutes a benchmark component of an Aboriginal community's well-being" (p. 141). Motherhood by Aboriginal women continues to be negotiated within what is often critical state intervention, based on ill-conceived notions that Aboriginal mothers are unfit and require state intervention, guidance and monitoring. Cull links the Indian Act of 1876, residential schools and child protection legislation as responsible for

perpetuating the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal mothers. The European patriarchal system, European resource exploitation and acquisition and the Canadian government all maintain racial structures denying Aboriginal mothers their rights to equal participation within Canadian society.

Kelm (1999) links colonization to the discourse of the inadequate Aboriginal mother. The methods for assimilation of Aboriginal children were 'education,' replacing Aboriginal world views with European ones. Kelm points out the early moral movement and social reformers failure to see Aboriginal mothers as true mothers justified their subjugation of Aboriginal parents. Put simply, by judging Aboriginal mothers as inferior, church and government officials felt justified in replacing "themselves as the only appropriate models of parental authority to care for Aboriginal children" (p. 80).

Representations of Aboriginal Women as Mothers

Numerous Indigenous scholars including LaRocque (2010) and Smith (1999) have addressed the historical stereotypes and representations that portrayed Aboriginal peoples and cultures as inferior to Western cultures. Lischke and NcNab (2005) define representation(s) as "the act or an instance of representing or being represented and is also a statement made by allegation or to convey an opinion" (p. 13). Inherent in this definition is the notion of presenting again. Arising from colonial representations, Aboriginal people continue to be constructed through Western eyes. When no alternate version of representation is available, 'othering' becomes grounded as part of your history. Lischke and McNab claim these historical representations continue to define identity both internally through self-reflection and externally as viewed by others.

Representations are important because they guide our understanding of how we make sense of our past and define ourselves for the future. According to Newhouse et al. (2005), through alternative representations Aboriginal peoples can challenge the Western world view of Aboriginal people and establish a new philosophical Aboriginal stance that is grounded in traditional Aboriginal world views and Aboriginal spirituality. In this framework significant parts of Aboriginal history that were omitted and ignored can be rescued, corrected and ultimately restore the humanity of Aboriginal peoples.

Historically, Aboriginal peoples were portrayed in simple dichotomies, good or bad, wild or noble stereotypes. These representations were motivated by social and political acts of Western imperialism. Valaskakis (2005) describes two primary and recurrent themes, dominance and resistance, that are evident in historical Western accounts of Aboriginal peoples continuing into present day. Valaskakis suggests historical and current events blend into "new forms that spiral into personal and political struggles, repositioning, transforming or displacing traditional Indian knowledge" (p. 3) According to Valaskakis, the past continues into cultural, political and personal struggles over power and identity. These dynamics account for the often contradictory and illogical representation of Aboriginal people found in Western literature. In contrast, Aboriginal representations represent commonalities found in Aboriginal history such as land, spirituality and community values.

This review of the literature did not identify any previous studies regarding the development of success identities by Aboriginal mothers; however, I found the work of Aboriginal scholars supported the key themes that arose from my research and proved useful in my research analyses. Further, other studies in related topics indicated a need for research into the nature of Aboriginal child protection investigations in Canadian jurisdictions and into

maternal identity. Finally, because some areas of the related literature are drawn from Western theorists, applicability to my thesis can only be postulated.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

When I applied to enter the First Nations Studies program at UNBC I was asked why, as a non-Aboriginal student, I wanted to pursue a degree in this field. Likewise, the issue of non-Aboriginal students in the program working in Aboriginal communities was sometimes raised as an area for personal examination by Aboriginal guest lecturers and in class discussions. The First Nations Studies program was mostly filled with Aboriginal students and my academic experiences included candid sharing of lived experiences in relation to 'theoretical knowledge.' Further, during my studies as a graduate student in First Nations studies and while completing my literature review I was educated on Aboriginal issues by many Aboriginal scholars. Among these influences my personal journey of introspection began.

Numerous Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars have described the historically negative and fraudulent treatment, portrayal, and betrayal of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal researchers. Being a non-Aboriginal researcher, conducting research on Aboriginal identity raised personal questions as to how non-Aboriginals are viewed by the Aboriginal community. The dilemma I faced was private and challenging. I questioned if it was appropriate for non-Aboriginal people to write on personal subjects like family and parenting and if my contribution would be meaningful and of value unless it contained an Aboriginal world view. I was cognizant of feeling conflicted in many areas; for example, feeling dedicated to my work with families, wanting to demonstrate competency in my research while understanding I bring a different lens to my study as a non-Aboriginal researcher, doubting my abilities to be knowledgeable and capable of understanding the stories from my interviews as a way to honor and respect the women in my study. Both unanticipated and surprising to me, I found I was

examining my motivation and prejudices as to what I would bring to my research. Perhaps because of my Western perspective I had assumed my commitment to my field qualified me to work with Aboriginal families.

As part of the First Nations Studies program I felt fortunate to have participated in a work study or internship. Examining my experiences of living on reserve during my work study I recalled feeling very welcomed by the Aboriginal communities. Like most students, having a positive experience with mentors contributed greatly to my learning from the communities. As an adult working with Aboriginal families in community, my experiences were comparable; that is, generally positive and congenial. This is not to say I wasn't aware of racism in our community; however, as an advocate for Aboriginal women and children my support role has allowed me to confront and challenge racist experiences I have been witness to.

During this time I felt blocked, and as a result stopped working on my thesis to allow for reflection on my thoughts, feelings and questioning –is Aboriginal heritage a prerequisite to conduct and participate in Aboriginal research? In my process of deciding if I would continue on to complete my research I discussed my thoughts with other non–Aboriginal and Aboriginal friends and colleagues and sought out their opinions. I reflected on arguments made against feminist theory by Aboriginal scholars of being unsuitable and inadequate to contribute to analysis of Aboriginal concerns. After much thought I decided to follow the advice given by an Aboriginal elder. To paraphrase, when deciding why you want to work with Aboriginal people, if your work is respectful of people and you show respect then colour does not matter.

First Nations Approach to Research

As a non-Indigenous researcher, this section of my thesis presents a preliminary understanding of a First Nations approach to research within an Indigenous research paradigm. A substantial amount of literature on what constitutes Indigenous knowledge has emerged over the last three decades from Indigenous scholars. Indigenous knowledge systems have been variously described as holistic, relational, global, political, oral and narrative based along with other definitions. Much of this literature suggests that methods of Indigenous knowledge are participatory, communal, relational and experiential.

Research paradigms are based on an ethic that underlies how research is developed, approved and conducted. Indigenous scholars Smith (1999), Castellano (2004) and others advocate an Indigenous research ethic that includes moral and pedagogical principles in alignment with Indigenous self-determination "reclaiming, reformulating and reconstituting indigenous cultures and languages" (Smith, 1999, p. 142). Smith's moral agenda for Indigenous research is a strategically located imperative whereby self-determination of Indigenous peoples "becomes a goal of social justice... involving the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing, and of mobilization as peoples" (p. 116). These interdependent processes function to decolonize methods of inquiry advocated by western researchers.

As suggested by Smith (1999), Aboriginal research is a complex process that requires both moral and ethical protocols and embodies principles of Aboriginal self-determinism among others. These ethics assume Indigenous research creates knowledge outcomes for political emancipation and cultural renewal. Indigenous research paradigms locate community ontologically and axiologically before the individual (Wilson, 2008). On the other hand, western

research paradigms, such as positivism, adhere to an ontological foundation of a single reality. Much of Western epistemology assumes that an objective reality exists and that it is possible to discover the truth. Western research methodologies such as scientific experimentation rely on reliability and validity of data to determine reality. As Graveline (1998) observes, "Through building our connections to our Community we gain insight into the reality that we are all part of the larger Circle of life" (p. 162). This strength of community is seen throughout the history of Indigenous people surviving physical and cultural genocide. These ethics are expressed by Weber-Pillwax (2001) who stated that "if my work as an Indigenous scholar cannot or does not lead to action it is useless to me or anyone else. I cannot be involved in research and scholarly discourse unless I know that such work will lead to change out there in that community" (p. 169). The emergent theme of social justice and political emancipation reflects the present-day sociocultural and political context for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous research. Additionally, it points to the historical rationalization for this pedagogy and practice.

Like positivism, the critical theorist paradigm believes there is a single reality; however, it is dependent on social context, social class and culture. Critical theorists argue that epistemology is context specific and methodology "must reflect the ontology of a fluid reality" (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). Further, critical theory incorporates an ethic that "their methodology is working toward social change" (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). As with Freire's (1970) notion of praxis which requires "reflection and action upon the world to transform it" (p. 51), critical theory espouses social change to improve the conditions for people.

Conversely, Western constructivist theory is premised on the belief that multiple realities exist and that they are socially constructed. As different societies explore these realities "their research methodologies need to find a mutual meaning of what this reality is" (Wilson, 2001, p.

176). Although aspects of western paradigms may be useful in Indigenous research practice, for example, participatory action research, there are major differences between them. One such example is found in the western paradigms' construction of knowledge as an individual entity, gained by the individual and as put forward by Wilson (2001): "therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual" (p. 176). Other differences are noted by Struthers (2001) who suggests "what is known or constitutes proof in one culture may not be considered relevant in another culture" (p. 125). Support for Struthers's assertion is echoed by Duran and Duran (2000) who suggests that "to assume that phenomena from another world view can be adequately explained from a totally foreign worldview is the essence of psychological and philosophical imperialism" (p. 96).

Feminist Theory Framework

The conceptualization of feminist theory as a viable framework for theorizing and analysing of Aboriginal women's experiences of marginalization advanced by Green (2007) and hooks (1984) are echoed by St. Dennis (2007). St. Dennis (2007) states "defining feminism is an on-going process involving responding to changing political and social contests and issues" (p. 35). It is arguable that Aboriginal history has both historically and continues to reflect radical changes from colonization to post colonization. Varadharajan (2000) describes "the nightmare of history for the Indigenous peoples of the world has been one of dispassion and deracination; it has simultaneously been the story of survival and spiritual regeneration – of the power of memory and invention" (p.142).

St. Dennis (2007), while addressing the criticism of prominent female Aboriginal activists and scholars, for example, Emberly (1996) and LaRocque (1996) both reject feminism

as not only irrelevant but also racial and colonial – albeit relying on Western educators and authors to substantiate their discourse, suggests instead that much can be learned from the dominant culture's analyses of feminist theory. From this perspective it is possible to draw upon a diverse, broad knowledge base that can incorporate similarities and differences in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worldviews and develop a shared understanding. Bondi's (2003) description of feminist theory speaks to the importance of relationship, empathy and identification in research. Similarly, Aboriginal researchers Wilson (2001) and Struthers (2001) among others stress relationship as one of the key factors in conducting culturally appropriate research.

Aboriginal research frameworks include cultural, historical, epistemological, and ontological pedagogies. Aboriginal feminist theory was deemed as having the potential to inform identity formation in Aboriginal mothers. However, while conducting this research, feminist theory and perspectives were not voiced by participants in their lived experiences. Green (2007) suggests the literature by Aboriginal women on Aboriginal feminists contains little on Aboriginal feminists and few Aboriginal women publicly identify as Aboriginal feminists. Green attributes the scarcity of Aboriginal feminist literature and publicly declared Aboriginal feminists to the emergence of "a cadre of Aboriginal intellectuals, most of whom were gender-blind or hostile to gendered analysis" (p. 15). While feminist analysis has contributed to and generated knowledge, it has been criticized for its failure or resistance to initiate discourses on racism, specifically by Indigenous women. As the majority of the participants in this research study recalled experiences with racism, this concern must be acknowledged as an insufficiency of Aboriginal feminist theory. However, of equal importance to the participants was their identification with motherhood as a fundamental concept of understanding who they were and

what they strived to be, including activism on behalf of their children. Given that Aboriginal feminist theory was not voiced by the participants in this research it is situated within the following parameters: that each participant has a different history with oppression, including the impact of colonization on mothering.

Research Methods

A selection of qualitative research methods were used for this study. These included structured interviews with seven participants who were purposefully selected. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied to determine the central themes arising from the participant's experience. These methods are described further within this chapter.

Creswell (2005) suggests "a central phenomenon is the key concept, idea, or process studied in qualitative research" (p. 44). Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of giving voice to participants' ideas, beliefs and honoring the different viewpoints of research participants and respecting the individuality of each research participant. Creswell summaries the main criteria for qualitative research as the following: the need for researchers to listen to the views of participants, ask general and open ended questions, and to collect data in places where people live. Finally, that research plays a role in advocating for change and making a positive difference for individuals.

I used particularizing research qualifiers for selecting participants in my case study. This involved purposeful sampling or criteria-based selection of participants. The criteria set out the research qualifiers for inclusion and to determine suitability of participants. The research qualifiers were as follows: they are Aboriginal mothers; they have accessed community supports;

they have had adverse experiences attempting to maintain custody of their children; and their children are in their custody. Purposeful sampling includes the selection of particular settings, persons and events and "are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 1996, p.70). My purpose here was to determine if the concepts of parenting and self-determinism were interconnected and together contributed to forming a positive personal identity.

Elicitations for the Interviews

The principles accompanying Aboriginal research include the ethic of self-determinism for research participants and establishing respectful communication with the research participants; therefore, this was the starting place for this study. My purpose was to deliver a sense of being in a safe environment where participants were emboldened to share personal experiences. Being mindful of the possibility that both negative and positive experiences can arise from research interviews when subjective research topics such as parenting and identity are presented, I wanted to provide a sense for research participants that their stories would be heard with empathy.

There is an implicit assumption that research interviews are inherently separated by the separate roles between the researcher/participant and interviewee/interviewer. However, additional roles exist while conducting Aboriginal research. Being fully physically and emotionally present to hear what is said and not said while listening and processing material and attempting understanding is part of giving back to the community. Understanding what I am hearing requires I stay in touch with my feelings and reflections and is part of being relational.

Following each interview I allowed time to reflect on the impression the interview had on my thoughts and feelings. When transcribing the interviews I assessed how well I had followed the verbal cues of each participant to check I hadn't interrupted an answer and if I was deliberate in giving time and the opportunity to each participant at the end of each question to add or elaborate on their answer. Since remembering and reflecting on what had been said is critical to integrate the interview experience, I presented the questions in a sequential format.

Presuming that as an interviewee you have less control of your presentation and the story you want to share, I listened for incoherencies during the participant's organized presentation of their answers as a means to gauge if the interview had been disconcerting to any participant. Although each participant had been informed about my study, there was a possibility the interview would be different than what they had expected. Given the lack of research in this area, I assumed that there would be an element of surprise present for each participant. Therefore, following each interview each participant was provided with my contact information and asked to call me if they had additional questions about the research project. Participants were advised a list of community resources was available for their use should they wish to talk to someone following the interview. Lastly, I advised the research participants all the information they provided would be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home and that this study would follow the conditions as set out in the research proposal and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Northern British Columbia.

Interview Questions

My interview questions were developed with the assistance of Dr. F. Graveline from the First Nations Studies program. The interview was structured to contain a beginning, middle and

end rhythm. The less reflective and therefore easier questions were positioned first, this being the beginning section. The second two questions comprised the middle section. The middle questions were more personal and required greater reflection. The end section being the last two questions was designed to end on a positive note. My questions called for personal reflections and memories; therefore, I structured the interviews to begin with general questions to orient the participants to the subject of parenting. For example, Question 1 asks - How important is it to you to be known as a good parent? Similarly, Question 2 asks - Tell me how you identify yourself as a parent? I was careful to not use prompts for additional information than what the participant had shared. I focused on staying within the format because my questions were designed to go from broad value statements to more personal values and end with a positive validation of influences. As a case in point, Question 3 asks - Tell me about your experiences being judged as a parent in need of support and education around parenting your children? I believe that parenting is an extremely personal subject; therefore, I was prepared that participants may not find this question as easy as it would appear at first glance. Question 4 asks - How does your First Nations identity contribute to how you parent your children? Again to illustrate the interview design, Question 5 asks - How are issues of MCFD involvement viewed in your family, by yourself and community? While Question 6 asks - Tell me how you created a successful identity for yourself as an Aboriginal mother? Hence, the interviews were purposely structured to discover the participant's state of mind regarding identity, parenting and self-determinism.

By structuring the interviews in this format I tried to ensure the participants were not left feeling unsettled. A metaphor to describe this process could be riding a wave or building a crescendo in music. During the interviews I was conscious of staying within the format and to

avoid influencing any response given by the participants. For example if I appeared greatly interested or dismayed by what I was hearing the participant may have felt obligated to focus more on the event being retold. The interviews took from twenty minutes to an hour to administer. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by me.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are defined as "pertaining to or dealing with morals of principles of morality; pertaining to right or wrong in conduct...." (Wikipedia, 2012). Put another way, morals are principles and ethics are how you behave in accordance with your principles. In everyday language we say behaviors are ethical or unethical. When the interview relationship is intellectualized it speaks to power and position in research practice. Therefore, although ethical and moral considerations are required when conducting research with human participants, it is how you as researchers behave that speaks most striking to ethical considerations.

Aboriginal researchers such as Wilson (2008) call for the researcher to disclose their position and that ethical research must benefit the Aboriginal community, among other important principles. When conducting research, I believe defining position and location must be meaningful to your participants and the research topic. Without thoughtful reflection, position and location can be understood superficially, especially when narrow qualifiers, such as your interests in research, work experience and so forth are put forth as the primary standards for position and location.

Bondi (2003) suggests the interview relationship can be conceptualized in terms of similarities and differences. Understanding similarities and differences in cultures are key concepts in research. The most glaring ethical consideration in this study was my location as a

non-Aboriginal researcher. As a non-Aboriginal researcher, understanding my interactions with Aboriginal women would be different than their interactions with an Aboriginal female researcher. It is difficult to know if this difference was compensated for by research participants or not, or if the research findings would have been different had the researcher been an Aboriginal woman or if the researcher had been male. The possibility of me being a mother could have been an influence in the interviews although this question was not asked by me of the research participants. It was important for me to be aware that non-Aboriginal researchers have behaved (at times) in unethical ways when conducting research and that in retrospect their research is now considered exploitive.

Bondi (2003) suggests that throughout research interviews the researcher can fluctuate between positions of observer (listening) and participant (questioning). In this process the interviewer discovers revelations for both participants "in which affinities and similarities, can be recognized, at the same time retaining a sense of difference and distance" (p.73). In this space empathy comes into play and shifting between positions occurs. Further, Bondi argues "this space is one in which interviewees are able to express themselves relatively freely, and in which they may move beyond familiar and well-rehearsed accounts into spontaneous self-exploration" (p. 73). Again, there is always room for an element of surprise as many of our biases are not known to us; some of our biases operate at an unconscious level. Bondi posits "that the concepts of introjection and projection, empathy and identification, can help us reflect more productively on the richness of research relationships, including their unconscious dimension" (p.73), although over-identification with research participants may potentially result in researcher bias.

As noted earlier, ethical considerations speak to how we behave and the principles guiding our behavior whether it is in research interviews or everyday life. It matters greatly how

research interviews are conducted, therefore I believe it is important the researcher identify and articulate their principles both to the research participants and in their work.

Hart (2002), an Aboriginal healer, recommends principles for ethical practice that are important to reiterate; namely, that when individuals are performing work in Aboriginal communities to firstly remember where you came from, secondly articulate what you offer, thirdly where your heart lies, fourthly to follow the elder's example, and fifthly to endorse the perspective you don't know anything (p. 11-21).

To revisit where I came from, I grew up in a small town in the Bulkley Valley. In my formative years as a young child, my family lived and worked beside Aboriginal families. I have spent two decades in a helping profession and have witnessed firsthand our Prince George community's disrespect of Aboriginal culture, community and families. No doubt both my positive personal and my (at times) negative professional experiences were an influencing factor in wanting to be informed about Aboriginal challenges resulting from longstanding colonization. Being in the helping profession I have always maintained separate roles between my paid work and my academic studies. Therefore, this research project did not involve any aspect of my work, nor was it done in the context of my work.

Data Collection

Borrowing from disciplines such as sociology and statistics, the technique used in this study was snowball sampling. The term 'snowball sample' is thought to resemble a rolling snowball that grows in size through extended associations and whereby the researcher recruits participants through the acquaintances and recommendations of participants in the study. Snowball sampling is a practical method to employ when restrictions may impede the

researcher's access to a larger population of potential participants. For example, some conditions such as having adverse or marginalized experiences can create barriers to recruit participants, such as distrust and reluctance to have further involvement with research involving child protection and parenting. In fact, given the legacy of residential schools and colonization in general, there is a notable lack of confidence in the dominant society's ability to respond to Aboriginal families with respect, empathy, trust and strength based practices.

As with any research methodology there are both advantages and disadvantages that merit consideration. The disadvantages for snowball sampling is summarized by Kirby, Greaves and Reid (2006) who suggest participants living in different locations can present challenges and that this method can be approximate and may produce inexact and mixed results. Consequently, it is difficult to determine if research findings accurately portray the target population. Although snowball sampling requires time to contact the identified possible participants, which can be seen as a disadvantage, this method can expedite the process for researchers experiencing difficulty recruiting participants. Mitigating the disadvantages are the advantages snowball sampling produces. In snowball sampling there is a strong possibility this method will identify participants who have 'expert' knowledge because they come recommended through word of mouth by other participants who also have 'expert' knowledge in their field. Being an outsider requires relying on insider knowledge.

Subsequently, the following method outlined below guided the recruitment of participants for this study.

1. Developing a poster that was representative of the nature of the study;

2. Approaching Aboriginal agencies, community stakeholders to explain this study and ask for contacts;
3. Contacting potential participants and ascertaining if they would volunteer to participate;
4. Continuing to seek other contacts to gaining more participants; and
5. Allowing for diversity in the sample by widening the profile to include participants involved in the snowball method.

As noted by Maxwell (1996), purposeful sampling achieves the goals of "representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals or activities selected" (p.71). Maxwell claims small samples "systemically selected for typicality and relative homogeneity provide for more confidence that the conclusions adequately represent the average members of a population than does a sample of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation" (p. 71). Merriam (1988) asserts purposeful sampling is "based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (p. 48). Participants for this study were selected and invited to participate in this study based on the following criteria:

1. They are Aboriginal mothers;
2. They have accessed community supports;
3. They have had adverse experiences attempting to maintain custody of their children; and
4. Their children are in their custody.

Participant Interviews

The participants in this study were recruited through 'snowball sampling' (Maxwell, 1996) and through word of mouth. I described my study to colleagues working in Aboriginal agencies

in the city of Prince George, BC and to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal colleagues who I thought would be interested in this study. I provided information on my study with my contact information and asked to be contacted by phone or email. After completing seven interviews, obvious themes became apparent although there was pronounced diversity between parents.

All seven parents had self-identified as Aboriginal. Three of the parents were also fostering children (it is important to note these parents identified as foster families rather than foster parents) and one of the parents was caring for one of her grandchildren. Interviews were conducted between February 2011 and June 2011. Two of the interviews were conducted over the telephone because the parents lived in different locations. The remaining interviews were conducted at the participant's choice of locations, either at their homes or at the researcher's private office in Prince George, BC.

Prior to conducting the phone interviews I reviewed the study with the parents over the phone. Each of these participants received a copy of the information letter and consent form by email and were asked to fax or email their consent back to me (Appendix A, Information Letter and Consent Form). The remaining participants were provided the Information Letter and Consent Form in person. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed in entirety, verbatim. Each participant was advised I would provide them with a typed transcript of their interview to verify its accuracy. Further, each participant was asked if they would like to receive a copy of my thesis once completed. All participants were assured their anonymity would be guaranteed and they would be assigned a pseudonym. Participants were reminded that their participation in this study was voluntary and as such they could voluntarily withdraw at any time should they desire.

Analysis

In the beginning I identified themes that were recurring in the interview material. These themes were used to develop a pathway or roadmap for further analysis and reflection. Following the steps identified by Creswell (2005) for coding, my procedures for data analysis are as follows. I began with careful re-reading of the interviews in their entirety to get a feel for the data. Next, I selected my first interview as my starting point for beginning the process of coding. I re-read the interview, this time making notations of my thoughts and questions regarding the interview as to participant meanings on the left side of the document. I began coding by identifying text segments by highlighting and placing brackets around the text. Next I assigned a word or phrase to the text segment as a code. I used "in vido" codes when possible to retain participant voice. Following Creswell's (2005) recommendations, I selected "lean coding"—the first time through a manuscript, you assign only a few codes. In this way, you can reduce a smaller number of codes to broad themes rather than work with an unwieldy set of codes (p. 238). Upon coding the transcript I developed a list of code words. I grouped similar codes and searched for redundant codes. I reviewed the transcript to identify and circle specific quotes from participants that supported the codes. I then reduced the codes to themes that identified major ideas in the transcript. I followed the identical procedure for the remaining interviews. My next round of analysis was to identify what Creswell (2005) calls "ordinary themes, unexpected themes, hard to classify themes, major and minor themes" (p. 243). As suggested, "ordinary themes" are those you might expect such as the importance of relationships; "unexpected themes" are surprising to the researcher (a surprising theme that emerged was the denial of Aboriginal heritage;) "hard to classify themes" are those themes that overlap with other themes, for example, intergeneration losses and gains were related to all categories; and finally, "major

themes" represent the main ideas, for example, parenting emerged as a main theme whereas "minor themes" such as parenting responsibilities may be a physical reaction to a major theme. I looked for themes that had contrary evidence to previously identified themes. The contrary evidence themes were noted for inclusion. I determined I had reached a saturation point in my data because no new themes emerged from coding of interview seven. Lastly, I selected a narrative discussion to provide a detailed summary of the findings of my data analysis. According to Creswell (2005), "there is no set form for this narrative which can vary widely from one study to another" (p. 249). However, the recommendations for narrative discussion made by Creswell suggest the following:

- Include dialogue that provides support for the themes;
- State the dialogue in the participants' native language or in the regional or ethnic dialects;
- Use metaphors and analogies,
- Report quotes from interview data or from observations of individuals;
- Report multiple perspectives and contrary evidence;
- Write in vivid detail; and
- Speculate tensions and contradictions in individual experiences (pp. 249-250).

These recommendations were followed in the narrative discussions in chapter four.

Initially the data was presented in a linear structure; however, using a linear arrangement proved unworkable to illustrate the connections between each answer. I sought feedback and direction from my thesis supervisor. After some introspection I realized my assumption that I

could impose a linear structure on the research was incorrect and that I needed to follow where the research showed me to go.

Responding to Hart's (2002) caution 'I Don't Know Anything' and that "having information and knowing something are very different" (p. 21), I wanted to add a further dimension of legitimacy to my research findings through collaborative analysis. I asked three Aboriginal women who are known in the community as leaders and as having wisdom if they would provide me with comments on the research findings as a further measure of validity: their thoughts and ideas contributed to my understanding of Aboriginal family, parenting and identity.

Conclusion

The need for this study was established by the lack of existing research on this topic, recommendations from related research, the continued over representation of Aboriginal children in government care, the successive investigations of Aboriginal parents for child maltreatment, and for the potential contribution this study will make to planning services for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents.

This study explores how Aboriginal parents develop successful parenting identities. Snowball sampling was identified as being suitable methodology for this study. Interview questions and the interview format were described; feminist theory and Aboriginal research frameworks were explored. The researcher's perspectives as a non-Aboriginal student and ethical considerations were also examined. Chapter four describes the processes leading to the development of a framework in which the voices of the research participants were used to guide the models chosen for data analysis.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

Organization

In this study, gathering, transcribing and analyzing the data was an ongoing and simultaneous process. Fundamental to this process was my decision to follow the voices of the participants. Themes that emerged were grouped according to ordinary themes, unexpected themes, major and minor themes. For example, the theme 'family' was grouped as an expected theme and as a major theme. Similarities included valuing of extended family. Differences emerged when participants were adopted by non-Aboriginal parents. Therefore, themes were grouped for similarities and differences and positives and negatives between categories. Developing a working model became a process that required continuous evaluation as repetitive themes emerged to form areas for further investigation. Analysis took place using two models that will be discussed later in this chapter.

My development of a working model emerged as the voices of the Aboriginal mothers in the study clearly spoke of intergenerational connections, the importance of relationship, their self-reliance, collective responsibilities and the importance of culture in defining identity. Graveline (1998) emphasised the importance of 'self' in relation to identity: "Self-In-Relation is linked to a tribal worldview and is very important in the formation of an Aboriginal identity. A person must first know him or herself and his or her family line, tribal nation and responsibilities to all relations if he or she is to function within an Aboriginal identity" (p. 57).

This chapter gives voice to the seven participants in this research study. It speaks to their accounts of how they identify as Aboriginal parents, their values placed on parenting, their

experiences with being judged in need of support regarding parenting, and significant influences that contributed to a positive parenting identity. Foremost, identity was visible through associations with geographical location, home communities, First Nations language and cultural traditions such as potlatch and intergenerational linkages to children, mothers, grandparents and elders. As no mention was made of the influence of Aboriginal men by any of the study participants, issues of significance to Aboriginal males were not included or part of the data analysis.

Since the research participants had great diversity in terms of locations, Aboriginal heritage, family composition and roles, available demographic information is provided in Table 1. The available demographic information assembled from the interviews was taken from parts of the interviewees' narratives. The demographics contain information that participants volunteered as no specific question asked about participant demographics. Had I anticipated the diversity in my research sample, my interviews would have solicited this information. In retrospect I would have included the opportunity for interviewees to provide demographic information on the assumption my research findings would be more comprehensive.

Next, a summary description of the research participants is provided, along with the first model of analysis developed by Madeleine Dion Stout (1994) as adapted by Graveline (1998) followed by Anderson's (2000) model of Aboriginal identity development. These Indigenous models of human relations are used to frame the research findings. The major themes that emerged from the participants interviews are presented using four domains of Anderson's and

Stout's models, these being self, family, community and agency. These domains are then used to discuss central tenets of this study.

The second model Life Stages, used to illustrate identity formation, was adapted by Mihesuah (2003) from Cross (1991) and consists of four stages; namely, pre-encounter, encounter, immersion and internalization. Each identity stage is related to the process of developing identity and underlies the recommendations presented later in this study.

Demographics

Following below is an arrangement of demographic characteristics. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that will be used consistently throughout data presentation.

Table 1

Demographics

Pseudonym	Roles(s)	Community	Nation
Allie	Birth mother Grandmother	Prince George	Carrier
Emma	Birth Mother	Prince George	Carrier
Rachael	Birth mother Grandmother Foster Parent Elder	Prince George	Metis
Hana	Birth mother Foster Family	Vancouver Island	Caysue Tribe
Gail	Birth Parent	Vancouver Island	Hattesaht

Pseudonym	Role(s)	Community	Nation
	Hereditary Chief		
	Elder		
	Grandparent		
	Foster Family		
Cathy	Birth Parent	Nass Valley	Nisga'a
Joy	Birth Parent	Bulkley Valley	Carrier
	Foster Parent		

By way of a brief introduction to the interview participants, Allie comes from a small community in northern central British Columbia. She lives with her children in Prince George, British Columbia, however often returns to her home community for family visits and to introduce her children to their culture. Emma also lives in Prince George, British Columbia. Like Allie, Emma returns home often so her children know their culture and extended family. Rachel was born and raised in Prince George British Columbia, although her parents come from Sandy Lake Saskatchewan. Rachel is parenting her children and grandchildren. Hana comes from the Columbia Plateau region in the United States. She has lived throughout British Columbia, residing for many years in small northern communities in the central interior of British Columbia. She now lives on Vancouver Island, British Columbia and continues to parent and to serve as a foster parent. Gail is from the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. She has grown children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren along with being a foster family. Cathy has lived primarily in northwest communities and Prince George, British Columbia. She is parenting her children and currently resides in northwest British Columbia. Joy is a parent,

grandparent and is also a foster family. She currently resides in the central interior of British Columbia.

Positioning of Research

Aboriginal researchers Hookimaw-Witt (2010), Mihesuah (2003) and other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars suggest we routinely address multiple audiences from multiple positions. For example, feminist Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal activists communicate on child welfare issues, land claims and language to diverse populations such as government departments like the federal government's Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and national associations, such as the Native Women's Association of Canada. Further, at times we endorse a range of positions depending on belief systems, economical status and so forth.

Negotiating complex situations requires a multiplicity of positions. Bondi (2003) suggests "this positioning invokes processes of identification, or identifying with and dis-identification or identifying as 'other than' or 'against'" (p. 65). Further, as noted previously in the methodology section, full disclosure of location, biases, preferences, and so forth is challenging as aspects of our identities operate unconsciously and at times are not known to us. Bondi posits that the use of empathy and identification in research relationships can be used to understand similarities and differences "is not about rendering the unconscious conscious but about reframing issues of similarities and differences in order to use our ordinary experiences more fully especially in our reflections on fieldwork interactions" (p.73).

Description of Models

This research project asked participants to define successful Aboriginal mothering in relation to themselves, to family and to their communities in terms of similarities and

differences; participants communicated their experiences across a multiplicity of areas. Undoubtedly the model for analysis needed to be an Aboriginal model based on 'self in relation' to human relations.

As cited in Aboriginal author Madeline Stout's model of 'Self-In-Relation' and referenced in Graveline (1998), Stout identifies her model of human relations as being 'multigenerational' and 'transdirectional.' The major tenets of Stouts model are presented as follows:

1. Discovering the centrality of self, especially individual will and ability or 'medicine';
2. transmitting individual power to family through values, attitudes, behaviours and institutions;
3. extending family to the broader end of community and developing agency to connect diverse groups of people;
4. challenging the existing imbalances between the cultural/structural divide of all people of the world ; and
5. recreating self in solidarity with those who are, those who have been and those who are yet to be.

Although Stout's model advances a broader framework than this research project can elaborate on, it is important to include as it is foundational in presenting aspects of an Aboriginal world view.

Anderson (2000) proposes Aboriginal women define and make sense of ancestral traditions as part of the process of actively constructing female identities, "this is an ongoing activity that lasts a lifetime" (p. 193). As described by Stout, Graveline and other Aboriginal

scholars, Anderson's rationale for her model of identity follows the Aboriginal model of 'self in relation' "founded on an Aboriginal model for relationships...to explain how Native women reconstruct themselves, and in so doing, how they define themselves within the family, community, nation and all of creation" (p. 193).

Figure 1. Self in Relation.

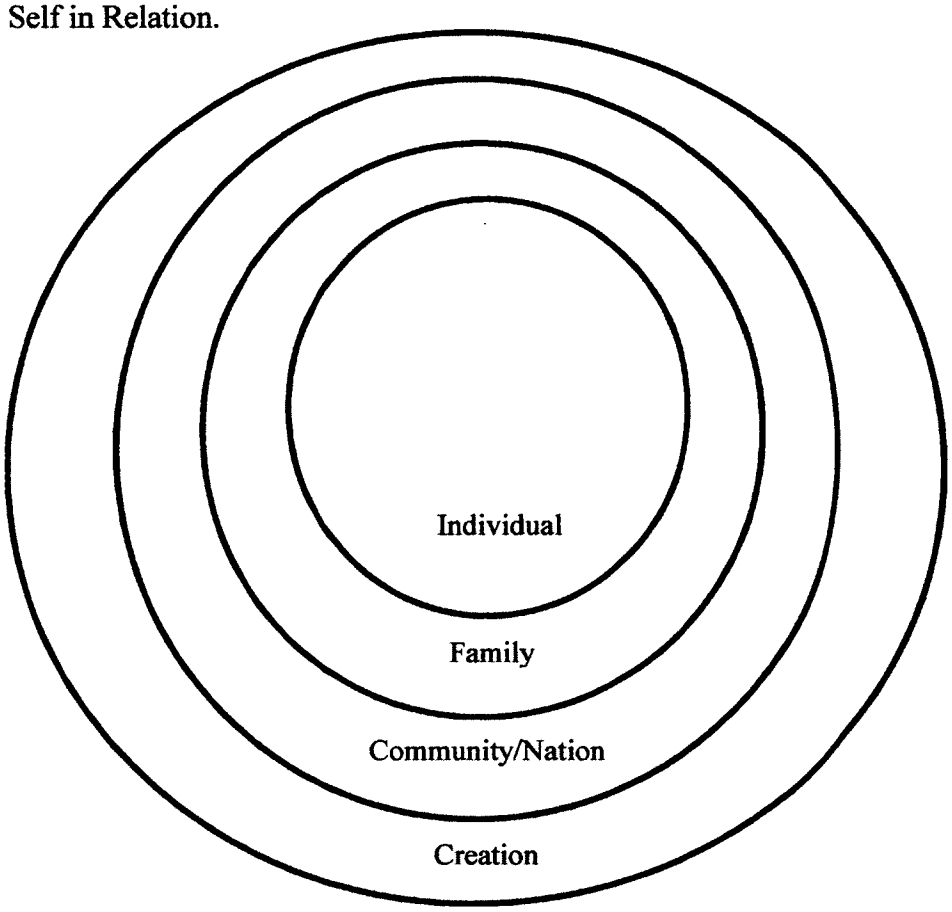


Figure 1. From Anderson (2000: 193).

In the first layer of analysis, because all seven of the Aboriginal mothers spoke of parenting in relation to self, family and community the data is presented using four circle arrow sequential process models. Each process model presents different components of Anderson's (2000) model in relation to the interview data.

Section One describes parenting 'in relation to self', 'in relation to family' and 'in relation to community.' The data is organized to start with Section 1, Question 2 –Tell me how you identify yourself as a parent, to provide an overall introduction to my topic, followed by Question 1 –How important is it to be known as a good parent?

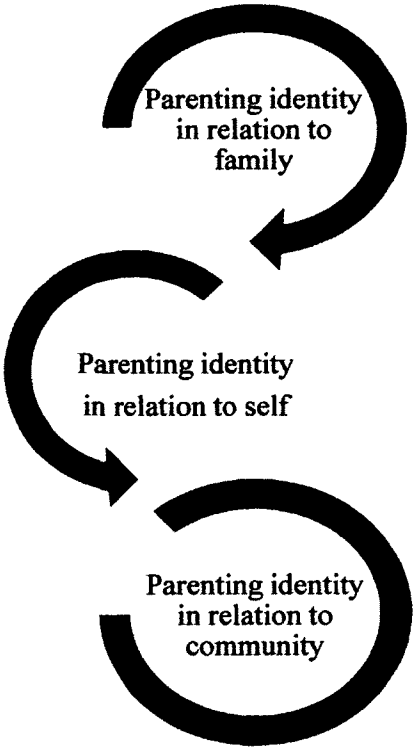
Section two describes parenting judgements 'in relation to self', 'in relation to family,' judgements and parenting 'in relation to community judgements.' Section two is organized around the data from Questions 3 and 5 respectively. Question three—tell me about your experiences being judged as a parent in need of support and education around parenting your children? And Question five—how are issues of MCFD involvement viewed in your family, by yourself and your community?

Section three describes contributions to creating a successful parenting identity in relation to 'self,' 'family' and 'community' as an Aboriginal mother. Section three is organized around Questions 4 and 6 respectively; how does your First Nation's identity contribute to how you parent your child? And, tell me how you created a successful identity for yourself as an Aboriginal mother?

Section 4 reviews Mihesuah's (2003) model of identity development for Aboriginal women followed by the chapter summary.

Section 1: The Importance of Parenting in Relation to Identity Development

Figure 2. Parenting in relation to identity development.



This section reports on the data taken from Question 2 – Tell me how you identify yourself as a parent? The data on this section relates to parenting in relation to self.

Participants spoke about their different parenting roles and responsibilities, the importance of family, the love and protection bestowed on their children, the intergeneration lessons they learned from parents, elders, community and grandparents.

Hana

Hana defines her parenting identity as wearing many hats as a birth parent, adoptive parent, foster parent, single parent and Aboriginal mother.

Allie

For Allie, her parent identity has been shaped due to having MCFD involvement. Along with teaching her children her values, Allie sees herself as "*over protective, very careful, paranoid, always on guard, even with people I don't like my kids to be around anybody it has to be a safe environment for me and my children, if my children can't go then I won't go. Just using manners, being respectful, little things. Because of my past history and the person I used to be, I am very skeptical of what my kids see, there are so many boundaries like we have to stay within my boundaries.*"

Rachel

Rachel locates her children as the central focus that defines her parenting identity, *"I'm behind my kids 100%, I'm there when they need me. I'm there even when they don't need me, I get upset when they don't call"*. Rachel described growing up with physical and emotional abuse and how denial of her Aboriginal heritage impacted her ability to pass her heritage on to her children.

Emma

Emma describes her parenting identity through her grandmother's values and teachings, the unconditional love she received along with the discipline needed to succeed which she plans to pass on to her children, *"my grandmother, she always strived us to do whatever we want in*

life to be a better person and not to judge people, always show our kids love and support the way she loved and supported us. We are only human, she loves and hugs us, she gave us treats all the time, but she showed us the discipline we needed. Like there was a point and if we got away we knew when to smarter up, she always taught us you can do what you want but there's a line, just a grandma thing, but she was like a mother because she was always there, she took care of me a lot because my mom sick a lot growing up with me, she taught me to be independent."

Gail

Interwoven in Gail's parenting identity as parent, foster parent and grandparent is helping other parents who had experiences with residential schools and addictions and being part of community *"to help other people in their lifestyle regarding addictions the residential school syndrome and the negativities that comes with that it's hard to juggle it. I think I do ok with it, I consult my elders when I feel I'm not making progress".*

Joy

Joy is also a parent, foster parent and grandparent. Her parenting identity is constructed through giving back to community and providing safe, loving environments to the children she is raising. Joy's understandings of fostering extend beyond the children who live with her to include their siblings and birth parents. She has pride in helping children feel they belong and have 'family' who care about where they come from, *"we don't just take them into our homes we take them into our hearts, into our lives and that's how they become part of the family. And that's so very true; we have three kids of our own kids who all became foster parents, foster families. We started fostering way back when, and our foster family strives to make a difference in the lives of the little people who come to live with us. And we treat them like family and we*

have expectations of them like family of our own...., and her brother now he feels he has a family to turn to you know. He has people who love him and care about what happens to him and he knows where he comes from and that's an important part of being a person, knowing where you come from and that you're loved and that people know about you and care about what happens to you."

Cathy

As an only child who experienced loneliness growing up Cathy believes having family is very important to being a mother.

This section reports on the data taken from Question 1 – How important is it to you to be known as a good parent? The data in this section relates to parenting in relation to family and community.

All of the participants identified the parenting role to be an important and meaningful part of their lives. Participants spoke of their responsibility to give back to other parents and being able to contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of community; parenting is intergenerational. Parenting is valued for providing the opportunity to be positive role models for their children and others. Participants linked the parenting role to agency; as an opportunity to influence other parents, and are doing so to help other families. As explained by one of the participants not being seen a good parent can be held against you and you are judged as somewhat inferior. The value placed on children is an integral value underlying the importance of the parenting role.

Hana

For Hana parenting is intergenerational and holistic and involves aspects of community, "*Because I need my community to support my children and in order to be an effective parent I want to be recognised as having good parenting practices and skills. If members of my community – elders, friends, extended family, parents and family members of children fostered in my care, school, families of kid's friends, social workers, and neighbours do not see me as a good parent they undermine my ability to parent. If they do see me as a good parent they enhance my parenting and add to my children's success. For instance, social workers who trust me have supported me to include children's parents and other family members who previously neglected or mistreated their children in our family activities. This has allowed the parents to see positive and effective parenting in practice and allowed them to trust community members who can help them to raise their children. Their children then have their parent's permission to trust me making parenting them more possible. And their parent – child connection is maintained. Personally I take pride in being known as a good parent. My parents were respected as good parents, often called on for advice by members of their community. Before I was old enough to go to school I remember women coming to our house and asking my mother about various child-rearing situations.*

Allie

Allie remembers growing up in poverty. Her early experience of being in the care of MCFD strengthened her commitment to improve the lives of her children, for her parenting is *"very important because I have to because of how I was raised that makes me want to be a better parent because I grew up poor and in foster care."*

Rachel

Like Allie, parenting is very important to Rachel, *"really important, makes me feel good when people tell me I'm doing things right, in the past I had ministry I didn't think I was doing anything wrong, I wasn't doing what they were saying I was doing I just, I think I'm a good mother, ministry comes in they put you down, they make you feel they that you're not, that you're not a good parent and not worth anything I try. I try hard."*

Emma

Emma believes parenting is *"really important because it gives influence to show other parents; it is important to show how to be a good parent and to be looked upon as an example".*

Gail

For Gail, being a parent is *"really important the way you walk and talk is the way your children are going to develop because they practice what they see".*

Joy

Joy described being known as a good parent *"as it's not so important to me. I think it's something that's held over people though. That if you're seeking support in any way of looking for supports in any way it's assumed you're not a good parent.*

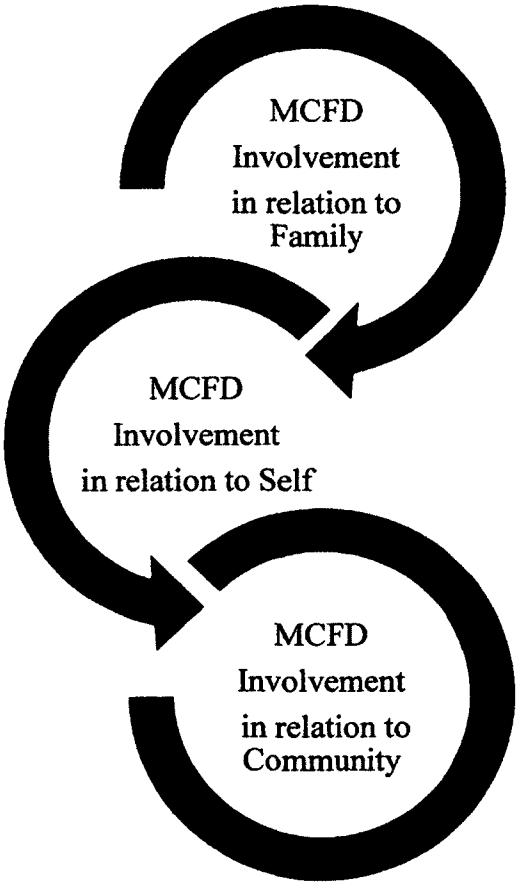
Cathy

Cathy also viewed parenting as *"very important, like I was saying to XXXX the other day, I can't remember what we were talking about to begin with, but I think we were talking about XXXX and XXXX and them losing their kids and I told him that I didn't have kids to give them*

up. I mean I didn't even go live with my own mom until I was eleven but I knew her and every long weekend and vacation that were was throughout the year I was with her. She's the only place I've ever wanted to be."

Section Two: Challenges to Creating a Successful Parenting Identity

Figure 3. MCFD involvement in relation to self, family and community.



This section reports on the data taken from Question Three – Tell me about your experiences being judged as a parent in need of support and education around parenting your children? and Question Five—how are issues of MCFD involvement viewed in your family, by yourself and your community?

Participants described their involvement with MCFD extremely negatively, speaking of both historical and current practices of racism and the legacy of child apprehension influencing their interactions and the damage to both individual and community wellbeing. Participants spoke of their children's anxiety around MCFD involvement. Distrust and fear of the child protection system were visible themes. Cull (2006) suggests removing children from their care, families, culture and community is the most destructive exploitation experienced by many Aboriginal women (p. 143). Further, it is very challenging to participate within a system that has judged you as unfit to parent. In total, two positive experiences with MCFD were recalled. Individual social workers were respected for being supportive by some participants.

Hana

Hana describes judgemental and emotionally damaging conduct directed at her from MCFD social workers who were challenging to her self-esteem and undermined her ability to parent and provide care *"a social worker accused me of causing one child's disability, which manifested as separation anxiety and extreme shyness. Special educators dismiss my knowledge of my children's abilities and limitations requiring that I educate an advocate to negotiate for my children on my behalf. When I have asked MCFD and delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies for needed support and education my request has usually been refused. Most often inadequate and inappropriate support has been offered as an alternate. One example is the offer of behavior modification course in place of a non-violent communication course. Some professionals' especially social workers and educators dismiss my knowledge as the opinions of an uneducated person who would have no way to understand what they know as a result of their professional training".*

Allie

Allie speaks of experiencing profound loss of dignity and respect that remain with her although she no longer has MCFD involvement. *"MCFD is viewed negatively. The way they made me feel, you are another Indian another one who is going to lose her kids who doesn't care, that's how they made me feel so I really had to work really hard to prove them wrong and find different resources to support me. MCFD – you never know when they are coming to the house, it's still like that I have to watch my every move its not so much about trying to stay clean and going to use its like they don't believe in me, but they say they are here to support me, like when I first lost XXXX. They were knocking every two day and its awful like even if they see a beer can in your house, speculation starts they say you need to do a drug test, and you feel like shit working so hard and all of a sudden you are shot down by people who are supposed to be helping you and that's no good they weren't very supportive to me. Like I said it's almost like discrimination".*

Cull (2006) writes of the state's negative approach toward Aboriginal mothers in their parenting role, "Definitions of what constitutes an 'unfit parent' vary but having a child removed from your care or having restrictions placed on your autonomy and privacy as a parent are strong indicators that the state and the public perceive you as being 'unfit'," (p.143). The most explicit indication that the state perceives Aboriginal mothers as 'unfit' has been the over-surveillance and inappropriate state interference in their capacity as a parent. Allie's experiences are resoundingly familiar with Cull's descriptions.

Rachel

Corresponding with Allie, Rachel believes her involvement with MCFD will have a lifelong negative impact on her; *"It hurts, rips something out of you, you are never the same, it is always with you, it makes me want to cry when I start talking about these people even when you ask for help, I was asking for help, reaching out, I was trying to get help for XXXX I went and asked for help and then they were on my doorstep saying they heard my XXXX had a behavioral problem and I said yeah and I went and asked for help and I have people helping me and they went on and on – they didn't help me with my XXXXX when she called the ministry and said there was no food in the house all the stuff was going on, that was her and part of her disability; my kids were removed over hearsay. The kids were stealing money off me and going to buy weed and the social worker, the person they were buying their weed off she was a social worker and she came in and took my kids. They're stealing off me and buying weed off her and she had little kids like I even told them in court I would write up a statement and sign it and stuff so that social worker isn't allowed around me and my family what went on, and that's what gave me a bad name, like I said I wanted to get a Christmas tree so the kids went to the Overwaitea and they stole a tree and they kept the money I gave them and bought cigarettes and weed, I heard the kids fighting over the weed and the cigarettes and I didn't like the tree, it was a handicapped tree, it was 2 trees half way up and I wanted them to take it back, I didn't like the tree, that's how they got caught they had to break down and tell me they can't take it back because they don't have a receipt because they stole it.. It was just stupid things the ministry was involved with."*

Emma

Like Rachel and Allie, Emma remembers how her experiences resembled those of being in an abusive relationship. Fearing she would lose her children, being under surveillance, Emma felt she had few options, except to remain trapped *"MCFD was involved with me and it was scary. Like the first time I got my kid off the plane from XXXX and I remember thinking when I walked off the plane from XXXX they were leaving and they were watching me and I remember thinking there were going to attack me. I was in an abusive relationship but I thought it was not so bad, then when I came back to XXXX they (MCFD) come to the door and were talking to me and I thought I'm not losing my kid and I hid everything but I was in fear.*

The fear, well you can't even speak. You see them if front of you for the first time and you don't know what they are going to do, are they going to apprehend your kid right in front of you and be like wait until you change before they give her back or are they going to give you a warning but still they are part of your life and they are going to watch you like cougars one mistake and you could lose this kid in an instant and I love my kid. It was like a monster keeping us in that situation."

Gail

Gail spoke to being involved with MCFD and Aboriginal Child Welfare agencies. Gail also had negative feedback about MCFD however felt that Aboriginal Child Welfare agencies policies and practices were similar and at times offered less support. Along with personal judgements on her ability as a parent, Gail experienced age discrimination. *"The most recent one was about a year ago, my husband and I were foster parents for 13 years and when the social workers made a statement I was too old school that my house rules were too strict, we had a 15*

year old girl at our home and she ran away and they said that's because you are too old school you don't give her enough rope so needless to say they pulled out her siblings from our home because the girl won't accept my house rules and I am an elder."

Joy

Joy's accounts of needing support were straightforward; Joy recognized that being a social worker can be very challenging. Having to anticipate success for marginalized parents through a 'child protection' lens requires faith in the system that is known to fail children. *"I think working for MCFD is a difficult job just like parenting you do the best you can and I feel for them, for social and ministry workers because it's hard to face strife every day and come away still keeping your faith and believing the world can be a better place. I certainly appreciate, even though I've had some difficult workers they're all doing their job."*

Cathy

Cathy had little prior involvement with being judged in need of support around parenting; however, Cathy recalled an incident when she was extremely sick and where her children were removed from her home on the suspicion she was under the influence of alcohol and experienced racial slurs. *"I went to sleep and woke up around six in the morning, all the lights are on in the house and I'm like what the hell. I look around and I just had that sinking feeling when there were no more kids in the room and I went to the living room, last place to look and there was nobody there and I just knew what happened. When they determined there was no alcohol smell from me they left me there and they were referring to me before that as a drunk passed out a squaw."* Speaking of racial slurs, Anderson (2000) proposes the dominant society's views of Aboriginal women are deeply entrenched: "When negative images of Aboriginal women are so

ingrained in the Canadian consciousness that even children participate in using them it is easy to see how Native women might begin to think of themselves..." (p. 106). Cathy remembers how devastating this experience was for her family and the shame she felt at being judged when her aunt told her "*I just want you to know this, just for my knowledge that nobody in our family ever had to be apprehended by welfare or had welfare in their lives before.*"

Hana

Hana strongly articulate her views on MCFD as follows: *"MCFD is a system is viewed negatively (ignorant, oppressive, arrogant, adolescent, stupid, destructive- perhaps intentionally so) by my community. MCFD advertisements state they are recruiting Aboriginal families as adoptive and foster parents. To me this is ironic because the government has a history of judging Aboriginal families to be substandard and incompetent and removing their children. Why would any Aboriginal family invite scrutiny by MCFD and judgements, acceptable/unacceptable foster or adoptive parents? My community simply dismisses this recruiting and these advertisements or views them as an attempt to disguise MCFD's harmful practices in First Nation's communities. MCFD system is also seen as racist. One example is that our family was judged not qualified to adopt an African Canadian child because – they openly stated this, we are Aboriginal.*

My family fears MCFD. My children recognize social workers before they even step out of their cars, it seems, and they either cling to me or hide. The rest of the family experiences anxiety around MCFD and view social worker's decisions as capricious.

MCFD social workers are generally disruptive to Aboriginal families as most of these social workers have no meaningful experiences with First Nations parenting practices. They have no meaningful experiences of living in poverty or living in a closely knit extended family

which functions as one unit. They are not aware of their biases. They don't know what they don't know. They do not understand that we expect our children to uphold responsibilities. They do not know that raising children requires all of us and that taking children away from their community robs the children of the social fabric they require in order to become healthy fully functioning adults."

Allie

Allie recalls being judged negatively because of her past history and the father of her children's past history. Allie believes there is double standard used to judge Aboriginal parents. In the past she had been deemed unable to care for her child who was subsequently removed from her care only to have her child experience an injury in foster care. *"I'd never give my kids back to MCFD the worry that I went through when I didn't have then was worst my son was hurt in their care."* Allie perceived MCFD as being careless and judgemental, *"when they do have our children in their care and they call us down and unfit parents, yet they place our kids.... and they walk away and they don't have the balls to go back and check on the safety on our children except maybe by phone two times a week maybe that's careless parenting, someone can walk away with your kids like that and put a price on your kid and call it they are doing a better job than us."* For Allie, involvement with MCFD was very traumatic, impacting her identity as a mother and evoking intergenerational suffering, *"You can't be there to cuddle your kid when he's sick, those times were the hardest they just come and take him away, they weren't putting him in loving homes what it says to me, it reminds me of when my mom talks about residential school and how the people took the natives away and shoveled them in a school it's no different that foster care, it's just a different school, I say it's the same, white people are still coming and taking away your kids and that's never changed its just a different way and there really into that,*

they are just scooping them up, I saw the rating on kids in care and it is so terribly high it is unreal."

Allie attributes her experiences with MCFD as destroying her ability to trust and feels this will remain with her over her lifetime. *"I had no trust with no one it took me a long time to trust anyone once I met them, to this day I don't trust anyone I don't just give information about my past my guards are still up, I don't trust anyone I don't like meeting strangers telling people I don't like telling people who I was, what I was, still it will probably be with me for the rest of my life it grew me up it opened my eyes to what they are and they can be which is home wreckers. Well you know what I mean I would say no way, because when I did trust XXXX it back fired they used it against me the time when I cried it on her shoulder she used it against me in court I had to learn to control my feelings I had to be a strong person even though I was weak I couldn't be weak, and that's taking away my human rights they were judging me because I was upset like there was many days I couldn't sleep or eat without my son in my sight and they were telling me it wasn't ok to cry to be human, right there that shot me down, but I used it to my benefit but everything she done to me made me stronger. They could never in anyway say or do anything that would hurt me, not now that power is in my side now I've learned so much and done so much, and I'm still searching. They took everything from me, I couldn't trust anyone, couldn't go to anyone."*

Rachel

Rachel also spoke of the division between MCFD and herself, including tension, distrust, fear and anxiety because her experiences included family members who worked with MCFD against her. *"My mom, she used MCFD, she used them to her advantage, she would tell me*

something and go and tell them something different, she kept my kids from me she had my kids, telling them stories. I fought for my kids they (MCFD) didn't offer me any help they were there to put me under but I didn't back down I just kept fighting it was hard they had my mom as the go between and my mom was telling them things. I've seen it before they use people; I didn't get any help from them. I had to fight them to the bitter end, I had to fight them, I wasn't aware of what was going on. They were just there to take my kids, my mom had my kids and my mom was getting all the help, they didn't offer me nothing. I didn't know what I was supposed to do, I fought any way I could but they didn't believe me. It still hurts, it's still inside, and it's something my kids throw in my face, but nobody was watching, (MCFD) that's why I use my resources I will use all my other resources before I ask them for anything, I have somebody from ASAP (Active Support Against Poverty) to ask them; trust is a big issue, I just started vibrating when they showed up on my doorstep about my grandson."

Emma

For Emma the fear and stigma with MCFD involvement contributed to her decision to stay in an abusive relationship. Emma told of needing support, being unable to ask MCFD for help, being fearful of trusting MCFD and finally being coerced into accepting support when faced with the threat of losing her children. *"The workers gave me a chance to come to XXXX and I was black and blue, my eyes were closed shut. I lied about stuff. I told them I got jumped downtown because I was scared to lose my kids. I said give me a chance, so they said do you want to try something or lose your kids over a guy who is no good."*

Gail

Gail spoke broadly of her community's view of MCFD as an authoritative discourse over-ruling her community: *"Not too many are happy, and that's voices from parents and grandparents, like some grandparents are willing to take their grandchildren and MCFD will overrule, they are the final decision makers."*

Joy

Like Gail, Joy believes having MCFD involvement is viewed negatively by community and, as well, having to have MCFD involvement is viewed negatively by MCFD. Joy suggests a common perception is: *"I think with parents and even with foster parents if you're asking for help you're probably not very good at what you do. So then they (MCFD) kind of take the role of the judge and jury as well as if they are involved there has to be a problem. So if there's a problem it can't be them, it has to be you. And that's the position we're in right now. The little guy they're all trying to figure out who's at fault for that and it's been put on our shoulders and I think that kind of how people view MCFD when they're involved there's got to be a problem and somebody's fault and it's not them."*

Cathy

Cathy articulated the stigma of having MCFD in their lives. *"I think people see MCFD as kind of shameful. You never really see any kids taken off the reserve in XXXX. Families would step in, grandparents would take their grandkids. And when we first got involved with MCFD and they took XXXX for two week he went to a XXXX approved foster home. I felt really guilty."*

Positive Contributions Attributed to MCFD Involvement

Mostly the positive contributions recognized by participants were because of the actions of individual workers. Two of the participants, Hana, and Joy recounted having some positive outcomes from MCFD involvement. The remaining participants did not offer positive attributions toward MCFD's involvement.

Hana

Hana recalled, *"There are individual social workers who are very supportive of our community and family. They are willing to go against protocol and policy to make decisions that support us and other families staying together and getting to be better functioning. They find ways and find money to provide what we need. They stand up with us in other systems such as court and education."*

Joy

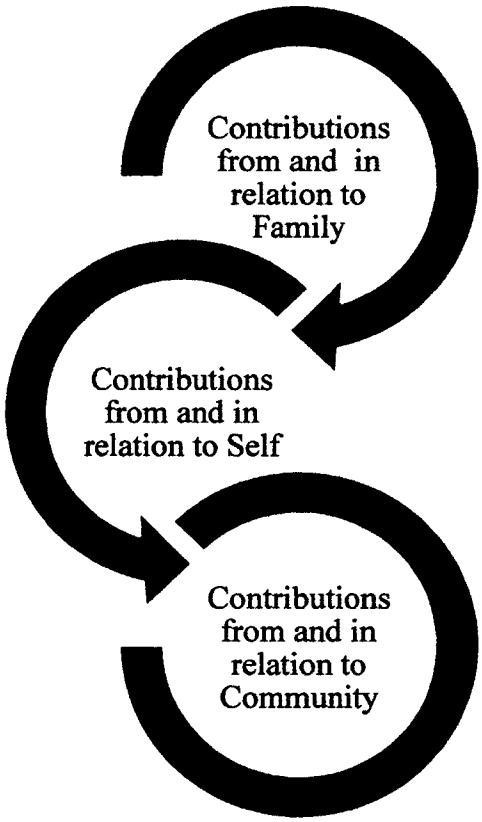
Like Hana, Joy experienced MCFD social workers providing at times a valued support. *"We've gone from every end of the spectrum with that, from it couldn't be better to it couldn't be more challenging. A lot has to with the worker and how open and honest they are, what they can and can't do and what their expectations are. And I find they have so many different people with different skill levels to work with that they don't know how to talk to who. Some foster parents and parents who have no skills and are angry or anxious or whatever and they have to deal with them differently than someone has more skills and is more capable so I find if you have a worker who know how to balance that well then life is good and if you find somebody who comes across as frustrated and unable to cope with it then that been hard because the best, best social worker ever, her name was XXXXX and she was just open and up front and if she wanted you to do*

something she said so and if she didn't care whether it was done or not she's say so and if you'd ask her to so something and she knew she couldn't do it or couldn't find the time she would tell you that too and it was so easy to work with her because you knew what you knew what you had to do and what was expected of you and it was good."

In summary, all of the women I interviewed had negative overt and covert connotations associated with MCFD involvement. It was apparent that historical struggles with racism and oppression are passed forward and continue to be lived experiences for Aboriginal parents. So too is fear of child apprehensions passed down from generation to generation. As parents told of their children's anxiety and fear toward social workers it seems reasonable to expect that the negative relationship with MCFD will continue into the next generation.

Section Three: Contributions to Creating a Successful Aboriginal Parenting Identity

Figure 4. Contributions from self, family and community.



This section describes the data provided by participants from Question Four – how does your First Nation's identity contribute to how you parent your child? And Question Six – tell me how you created a successful identity for yourself as an Aboriginal mother?

In question four, participants described both positive and negative aspects of their First Nations identity as related to parenting. Beginning with positive influences participants identified family, the importance of land, Aboriginal traditional teachings, culture, elders, community, relationships, language, traditional Aboriginal values of sharing and teamwork, tolerance,

compassion, caring for family and community, connection with family to learn Aboriginal culture, respect for traditions, reciprocity and spiritual guidance from the Great Spirit as paramount. Negative influences on identify came from and were attributed to both internal and external forces, for example being devalued as a First Nations person created anger and dis-identification with being of First Nation heritage. The impact of residential schools, racism and lack of alternate supports contributed to the challenges experienced by some participants.

Hana

Hana values and is proud of her Aboriginal heritage as it defines who she is and how she parents. *"Every aspect of our lives is coloured by our First Nations backgrounds. (MCFD views us as an Aboriginal Family as if there were only one Aboriginal culture. However my children are from 4 different cultures, Metis, Liard Dene, Babine Lake Carrier, Barren Lands Cree and I am from Columbia Plateau Peoples. Family and community come first; sometimes we are criticised for missing school in order to attend family or community events which we consider to be more important than school. We work together on all household chores. We do not have a strict division between parent and child activities, i.e. we watch the same movies and television shows. Spiritual awareness (gratitude, relationships with living things and the environment...) is incorporated in all events in the day from our Morning Prayer song to evening play. We emphasise teamwork rather than the competitive atmosphere of mainstream classrooms."*

Allie

Allie related how being a First Nations woman has been a positive and negative experience. She strongly identifies with her culture and plans to raise her children with her family values.

"Being native – influences your history, after being shoveled around I finally got taken in by moms cousin who was a school teacher at the time and he worked in the bush and they lived off the land so I learned my culture and family values from them and that's important cause I took the time to learn my language and I want to pass that on to my kids and I want them to learn how to live and survive off the land and just to have knowledge of how it's like back home, being native we were always judged and that has a big part of me that's why now I strive for my kids to have the best things not to have torn clothes, people always judged us by how we looked, how we talked, you can tell, you know it's different, you hear some nasty things, people being racist, it made me stronger."

Rachel

Growing up, Rachel's Aboriginal identity was denied by her mother, however, her Aboriginal identity was extremely important to her to the extent she went against her family and risked their disapproval to find her Aboriginal heritage. Rachel expressed regret at how she was raised and feels being First Nations was a source of shame to be to hidden. Rachel's encounters with other First Nations families and First Nations agencies helped develop her Aboriginal identity. *"Not so much, If I knew about Kikino before I would have known a lot more, I was involved with them for 3 years and they helped me a lot. The kids and I learned all the time. My family is important and always will be, its different then between mom and me, my mom beat me and all I did was run away, and she had things happen to her that weren't nice, like I said she didn't consider herself native, she didn't tell anyone she was native she would tell us, you're not a fucking Indian yeah, and she told my kids too when she had them, I hung out with native people and I learned things, I sort of went the opposite of what my mom said, she said stay away from*

them I would never stay away from them they were my friends and my family – and my family weren't my family then."

Emma

Emma spoke of being raised in both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture and as such feels she has allies in both worlds. She feels her First Nation's culture has been instrumental in developing a positive parenting identity. As a mother she had positive role models to draw from, such as her mother, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Traditional First Nations teachings were part of her upbringing along with exposure to the social problems on First Nations reserves. Emma's experiences have strengthened her resolve to keep her family together. *"I was brought up to be a really nice gentle person, respect my elders, and listen to my parents. I think every Aboriginal woman has different parenting skills depending on the family they grew up in. I learned from my real mom and my adopted mom, it's all different. My grandma and my real mom are from XXXXX and I'm more like my mom in parenting, even my friends say that. I'm strict but you have to let them have their free will; you have to have routine to get up and go to school, my grandma was like that with me. Grandma XXXX was grown up with my great grandparents who were very traditional, cabins, horses, very old fashioned, granny XXXX is like a Sekani teacher, Sekani language, she use to tell me stories that she had 5 kids she gave up all 4 including my mom and only kept one of her children because back in the day MCFD used to say she wasn't stable enough to parent her kids. She's independent, works her butt off. My real mom she had 5 kids she kept 3 and gave up 2 and them in care so watching those backgrounds when I had my kids I was sure I wasn't going to follow that path. I want to have routine and education. So I experience both directions. In my real family and my adopted family and I was like where am I going to go, who do I want to be and it's like I see my real family have it easy on*

the reserve, they have easy jobs and I accept them as my family. I love them, they accepted me even though there were negative moments, like beat ups. I stood my ground, faced them and I understand their background and heritage, especially with FASD. I understood my life from where I grew up, having kids of my own now, I follow the right direction."

Gail

For Gail, her Aboriginal heritage defines her identity and is the central to who she and her family are. *"I think our aboriginal roots are the structure of our lives and I try to install that into the lives of my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and to believe in our culture and Great Spirit."*

Joy

Joy spoke of her Aboriginal values of interconnectedness and maintaining strong relationships with her family. Joy's sense of self is being part of the larger community; celebrating, sharing and caring are how she maintains her wellbeing. "*Just being accepting. Our daughter XXXXX moved to XXXXX and lived there for 5 years and when she came back we said our family doesn't know how lucky we are. Because we stay connected, and when you are in the city. Our family gathers all the time, every holiday, every spring, every fall, every week we gather and if something touches one of us it touches all and she said in the city it not like that; like people don't get together unless they have to for a reason to, and if you have a problem that's your problem and sorry for your luck. We say sorry for your luck and I wish I could help you out. I know you can do better or things will get better. You just know somebody is there and somebody cares. We just have more tolerance and compassion, less judgement. That's the way we were raised. My cousin once said ...a friend had a family member who had been arrested for*

whatever the cause and I was just a little kid and I was shocked, the cousin was about 10 years older, I was about 6 and I was like 'oh my goodness because you watch TV and you know only bad people get arrested and my cousin turned to me and said anyone can get arrested, it can happen to good people and I went 'oh', and you just accept people for their faults and when they do good you do good and when they don't, you offer them a hg and better luck next time and hope it will all work out for the better. And that trying not to be judgement and trying to walk a mile in their shoes and all that kind of stuff."

Cathy

Cathy was raised within her First Nation's community and extended family. Her First Nation's identity is strongly linked to traditional values of food, the importance of land, language, and relationships among other values. *"For me, we both came from large families but they're so different. And I like the closeness. I know I don't have much family here but I was close with all my family, my cousins, my aunties. And I would like that for my kids but we're not there. But you know the teaching of language and I guess the respect for other people and eating Indian food too. Like my kids they like their fish a certain way, they won't have it any other way, like XXXX likes fish sandwiches. The other kids eat baked oolicans, and they won't eat it if it's boiled and stuff that I try to teach them, plus XXXX's trying to teach them some language, they know words. I know I have to keep the traditional food in their lives. When they get fussy I always say you know, what kind of an Indian are you, but I don't press it. Just say that and walk away, and they just sort of look at me. So language is really important and food is important and knowing where you come from and having family."*

Question Six – Tell me how you created a successful identity for yourself as an Aboriginal mother? Participants identified the following factors: learning about, using and celebrating culture, education, agency, using community resources, support from family and community, spirituality, holding a positive world view, having gratitude and the intergenerational influence of elders.

Hana

Hana identified traditional ways of being in relationship and helping others as tools she used to create her successful identity as an Aboriginal mother. *"Potlatch, clan gatherings, assisting other mothers, bringing our culture into my children's schools. Plus working with families and communities in the field of FASD to enlarge the supportive environment surrounding my and other's children."*

Allie

Allie recognized she has internalized a negative and destructive self-identity because of her exposure to racism and negative stereotyping of Aboriginal women as unfit parents. Allie found education to be a useful tool as well as increasing her knowledge of traditional practices. Allie's resiliency is apparent when she recalls how she overcame her fear and reached out to alternate supports for help with parenting. *" Lots of work, reading soul searching for what I really want, still to this day I look for answers because there is always a solution, you know I deal with a lot like parenting, Healthiest Babies calling the nurses help line, you have to have courage and I didn't have courage I won't even squeak. I wasn't allowed to go out my door when I lived with XXX's father. I didn't know I knew there was something better on the other side of the door but if I left I was beaten or shunned by him when I can back, but when I did get*

out I just it was amazing it was freedom, like a bird learning to fly . I know there are so many caring people out there who will help you and I didn't know how to ask for help and I tried to do things on my own because I didn't want to be judged. What you are going through , it has a lot to do with what kind of parent you want to be, how successful you want to be and what is your outcome in being a parent, like right now I am so overtired it's about what I choose to do, being successful to me is having food in my cupboards, kids are clean, sending them to school living on a schedule, thanking god we have what we have, every day I give thanks to the good lord we would never have this if we didn't get help from different resources that are available like Carrier Sekani, Healthiest Babies, I have been so blessed. Just asking, there have been times I had no food and I had to ask Carrier Sekani, there are places out there for food vouchers. It wasn't ok for me, it had to do with my pride, again it had to do with being native I didn't want to be considered another native, but I had to put my guards down. I think I was being racist to myself, but I grew up so poor and down and out and I vowed never to put my kids through it and they will never know how hard it was for me to get."

Rachel

Like Allie, Rachel's strong commitment to her family helped her overcome many barriers. Education and finding Aboriginal agencies that cultivated cultural practices strengthen her First Nations heritage. *"If I knew then what I know now things would be different, just don't give up on your kids, your families because that's all you have. They don't give the help you need, they don't give the information you need they only know what someone else wants them to know, the informers aren't telling them everything because they think they have heard so many bad things about this person they don't want to hear what you have to say, they go on hearsay, lots of children in care would be with their families if they knew the truth."*

Emma

Emma says her community and family contributed to her successful Aboriginal parenting identity. Having both positive and negative experiences with family and community, Emma recognizes the need for healing to take place in her community. Living on reserve is complicated by isolation, drugs and alcohol coming into the community and lack of support for youth. *"One thing I learned is it takes a whole community to raise a child. That's where I learned to parent by looking after my cousins. The kids are very smart up there, they're great artists and I think they put all their traumatizations into the painting, they had an art show at the NFC and the art was amazing. I think the art help them get their mind off what's going on because every day is the same, different but the same up there, hours away by plane from the closest town and 7 hours by road. They are very friendly people up there, they're very welcoming, they are really loving people but when it comes to negatives like alcohol and drugs it changes people a lot and really opens the eyes of people who never experienced it before. I don't think people really understand what it's like up there. First Nation's give their children a lot."*

Gail

Like Allie and Rachel, Gail attributes her success in creating a successful parenting identity to her values of family and spirituality. Gail overcame many barriers such as addictions. *"I came to the conclusion that my dark lifestyle; that there wasn't going to be a relationship with my grandchildren , and I can remember thinking when I was a teenager I wasn't going to put my children in that situation having seen my parents in their addictions and yet I fell into it, for 8 years I was practicing alcoholic it probably sounds like excuses but I lost my family for two years and I became an angry person to my higher power and I turned to alcohol to kill the pain*

and when my first grandchild was born my daughter wouldn't let me have him because of my alcoholism and that's when I realized I had to stop and I turned to a 12 step program I didn't go to a treatment center because I had noticed there weren't a lot of successful people who had going to a treatment center and now I'm on board of trustees for one of the treatment centers but as times goes on things change."

Joy

Joy's success is about her gratitude for what she has, what she can give back, and being positive. Being useful to others, being strength-based, serving her family and community, role modeling her values and passing them to her children and grandchildren are included in her definition of creating a successful identity as an Aboriginal parent. *"Think, and give to your family and your people and stay positive. As I say it is what it is. We tell our kids now, we have 9 grandchildren and we tell them to ride the wave. There's that saying sometimes you ride the wave and sometimes the wave rides you. And you just hold on and never say anything because you know you can't take it back. So think what you have to think but don't say it our loud unless you know you can live with it forever. Its common sense stuff that my mom and dad passed on to us and we try to pass it on to our kids."*

Cathy

Cathy attributes her success to keeping negative influences away from her family. *"You know what I think it is – we don't have outside interference."*

Self in Relation Model for Identity Development

The conceptualization of identity development provided earlier in this section by Anderson's (2000) model of 'self in relation' establishes a way of understanding how the process of identity can be recognized. Anderson suggests Aboriginal women define identity through responsibilities. Through exploring and examining such questions as 'what is it you have to do?' and 'what is it you are capable of doing?' Aboriginal women create a process that leads to developing their identity. As a result of reflecting on personal responsibilities, Aboriginal women began to process other questions such as 'who am I? ,' 'Where have I been?' and 'where am I going?' to eventually arrive back to what we must do, or in other words, our responsibilities. "The 'who am I?' is therefore inseparable from the 'what is it I must do?' Each understanding feeds the other to construct an identity" (p. 229). Anderson proposes that this understanding of responsibilities to self, family, nation and community generates the processes of developing identity for Aboriginal women.

Self in relation model.

Figure 5. Self in relation to identity model.

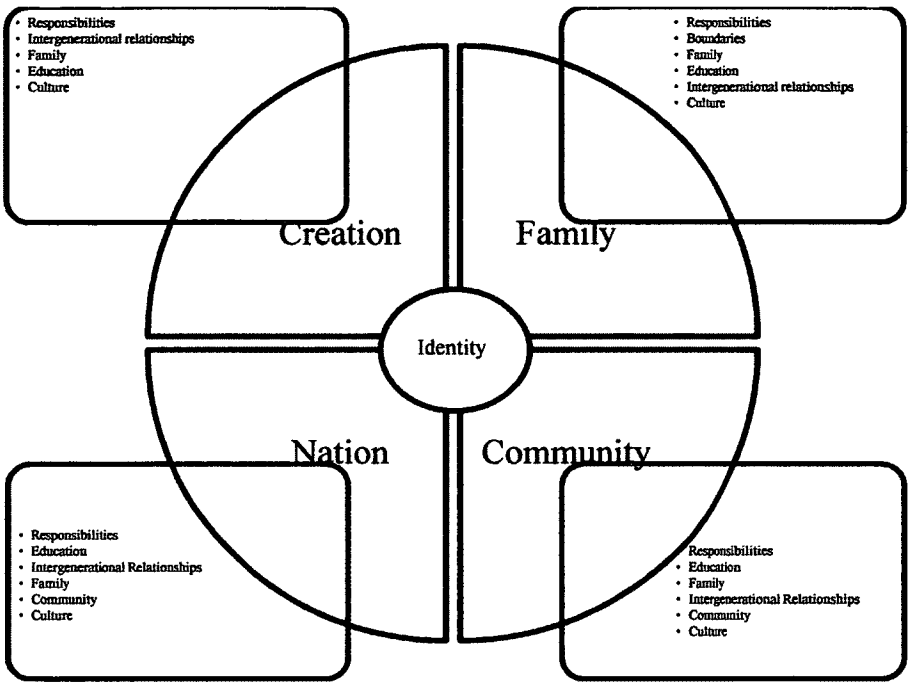


Figure 5. Adapted from K. Anderson's (2000) *A recognition of being: Reconstructing Native womenhood.*

Responsibilities to Family

Evidence for Anderson's (2000) model was provided throughout the participant's data. Although questions did not ask directly, or introduce the notion of responsibilities, the participants spoke freely about their responsibilities to be positive role models in their families, communities and beyond their communities. For example, Hana explains being recognized as a good parent goes beyond her family to her relationship with MCFD social workers who have placed trust in her ability to be responsible for the care of other parent's children. For Hana, Joy and Gail, demonstrating responsibility as a foster family is part of supporting other parents to

maintain their connections with their children, witness positive parenting of children and build trusting relationships within community with parents in need of support. The strong sense of both responsibility to family and responsibility for family members pervades the descriptions of Allie's, Emma's, Cathy's and Rachel's journeys to protect their children. Allie's sense of responsibilities includes having protective boundaries for herself and her children.

Responsibilities to Community

Education was a recurring theme throughout the interview. Participants described their responsibilities to seek out education about culture; to provide education informally by role modelling positive parenting practices and to provide education formally, such as FASD workshops. Participants identified, recognized and valued the education they had received from their elders and grandparents and other community members.

Responsibilities to Nation

Participating in community development and maintaining connections to community are ways Aboriginal women fulfill their responsibilities to their Nation. Although the participants were not asked to describe their community development activities, some examples were provided. For example, Gail volunteers as a board member for a FASD society and treatment recovery society. As well, Joy, Hana and Gail provide care to members of other nation's children. Hana currently is caring for children from four different Aboriginal cultures. While participants were not asked to describe their community development in terms of community agencies they were involved with, many examples were provided. Gail, Hana and Joy routinely advocate for the children in their care with Aboriginal child welfare agencies and with MCFD.

Allie, Emma and Rachel identified their participation with community service agencies such as Carrier Sekani Family Services to better the outcomes for their families.

Responsibilities to Creation

Anderson (2000) suggests Aboriginal women fulfilled their responsibilities to creation when they work with children and teach them how to respect the earth. Hana, Joy and Gail spoke of their spirituality and gratitude for having relationships with all things in the environment. All of the participants felt their responsibilities include teaching their children about their culture. Allie describes her vision of teaching her son traditional ways of living. For all participants there was a clear association with present relationships and future responsibilities to maintain traditional culture as a way of protecting their children's well-being and heritage.

Model for Identity Development in Aboriginal Women

Identity is neither fixed nor static, but rather an ongoing process of change. As suggested earlier by Hall (1990), identity searches are lifelong journeys with continuous learning processes that may (hopefully) result in identity empowerment. According to Hall, "Identity empowerment is the successful outcome of search, research and learning whereby identity is clarified, deepened and strengthened" (p. 4). Moreover, Mihesuah (2003) suggests historical North American government policies of assimilation and colonization have created monumental challenges for Aboriginal women in knowing their culture and history. Ing's (2006) report on Canada's Indian Residential Schools describes the goal of the then Canadian government policy of assimilation as 'institutionalized racism' (p. 158) and emphasizes "coming to terms with one's identity is a long process if denial was the norm. It affects individuals in different ways but it is still devastating

until you can begin to replace the shame and guilt with facts, particularly around a family history" (p. 163).

The Mihesuah (2003) model on identity development in Aboriginal women as adapted from Cross (1991) suggests four distinct stages take place in the formation of identity; these being pre-encounter, encounter immersion-emersion and lastly internalization. Because identity development occurs and is revealed in interactions with others, institutionalized racism and other impacts of colonization and oppressions (such as multiple losses of family and culture) have had overwhelming negative results for Aboriginal families. Allen (1992) writes of the importance of knowing significant family, especially mothers: "Failure to know your mother, that is your position and its attendant traditions, history and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significant, your reality your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost – isolated, abandoned, self-estranged and alienated from your own life" (pp. 209-210).

Figure 6. Life Stages Model

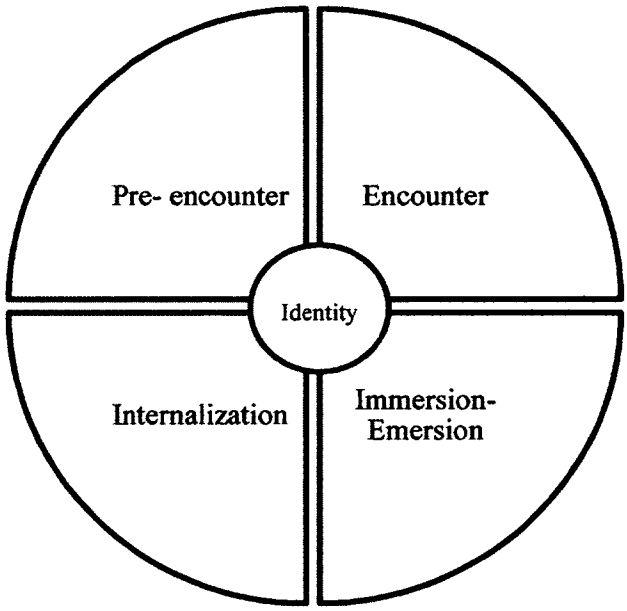


Figure 6. Adapted from D. A. Mihesuah (2003) in *Indigenous American women: Decolonization, empowerment, activism.*

Originating from Cross's (1991) model of Identity Development, Mihesuah (2003) proposes that the Cross (1991) 'Life Stages' model of identity formation is useful in understanding stages of identity for Native peoples and other biracial groups. The commonalities between Native peoples and African Americans are racial oppression and living in a Western dominated society. Both have a major impact on identity formation. Following is a brief summary of Mihesuah's adaption of the 'Indian Life Stages' model.

Indian Life Stages

Stage 1. Pre-encounter.

In the pre-encounter stage native people may be aware of their Native heritage, however, possess little knowledge about their tribal culture and history, or political and economic situation of Native people. While they may or may not identify as 'white' they identity as inferior to white society. It is important to note some Native people may identify as being content with their status in society and as such content with their identity to remain as it is. Our culture and home environment is where we learn about values. Anderson (2000) describes the importance of family and culture: "The guidance that women receive from their mothers aunts and grandmothers shape the way they learn to understand themselves and their positions in the world" (p. 123).

Other examples posited by Mihesuah (2003) are that if our parents only hold a 'white' world view, typically it is during late adolescent or adulthood that they seek out alternative information on their identity. Because native children adopted out to white parents know they look and are different than their white parents they tend to seek knowledge of their heritage as they grow older. Although native parents have knowledge of their traditions and culture they are required to interact with the dominant society to survive. Although racism is encountered in mainstream society, for the most part their early knowledge of culture sustains their identity.

Stage 2. Encounter.

Experiencing either a positive or negative event is frequently the catalyst for evaluating our identity. For example, Mihesuah (2003) suggests for some Native people hearing a speech about Indigenous history may rouse interest in Indigenous culture which becomes the start of a

journey into a different identity. Mihesuah posits that appearance is also a catalyst for identity exploration especially when the family home disapproves of 'being Indian' or denies Native heritage out of fear they will lose their child. While it is recommended that native children retain their culture, some circumstances such as no contact adoptions result in native children receiving little to no information about their extended family and tribal culture. Although unintended, this results in greater marginalization and separation from their identity and subsequent alienation from their culture, beginning a process of deculturation.

Stage 3. Immersion-Emersion.

According to Mihesuah, (2003) this stage of identity formation is often explosive and is fraught with anxiety, depression and frustration over attempts to become "the right kind of Indian" (p. 108). Simultaneously, identity is being constructed and deconstructed into a new frame of reference with few road maps to provide direction. Further, it is at this stage that Native peoples may become engaged in ceremonial activities, protest against injustices, deny non-aboriginal parts of themselves and "become hostile towards non-Natives" (p. 108).

Stage 4. Internalization.

Mihesuah (2003) explains that internalization concerns the resolution of identity whereby individuals become secure and confident with a self-defined suitable, fitting, sense of self. Arriving at this sense of self is an individual internal process with different processes for each person. Conversely, Mihesuah suggests that rejection of one's identity by both natives and non-natives can be linked to internalized oppression. Along with "unfamiliarity with tribal culture and residence away from the tribe, social status of the group and appearance, another reason for Natives peoples' identity insecurities may be that they almost always have internalized

oppression because they often reject a part of their racial heritage that is also part of themselves" (p. 110).

Life Stages – Pre-Encounter

This section describes participants' data in relation to life stages. As described earlier, the pre-encounter stage is characterized by the following: knowing you are Aboriginal but placing little significance on your race; knowing you are Aboriginal and being content with your identity; knowing you are Aboriginal but identifying as other than Aboriginal because of negative internalizations from Western society.

Participants' responses were diverse. However, most participants' responses are reflective of different aspects of the pre-encounter stage. For example, Rachel and Emma were raised without being aware of their Aboriginal heritage as children. In Emma's situation she was raised with non-Aboriginal adoptive parents. Allie spent the majority of her childhood in non-Aboriginal foster homes and did not learn about her culture. Allie described a period in her life where she had internalized racism; for a period of time she chose to identify as non-Aboriginal. Hana, Cathy and Joy were content with their Aboriginal identity when they were growing up.

Encounter.

This stage is characterized by experiencing a life transforming event either positive or negative that forces evaluation or re-evaluation of your status and place in the world. Often in this stage participants are confronted with the reality that their definition of who they are is insufficient to explain or make sense of the life-changing event. In addition, the encounter stage identifies different goals participants engage with. These goals are as follows: becoming an Indian, becoming more Indian, and becoming less Indian.

Seven participants described life transforming events. For Allie, Rachel, Emma and Cathy, losing their children to MCFD was the impetus for change. Hana was accused by MCFD of causing a child's disability while Joy described the traumatic death of a child who was in MCFD care. While it is unknown if Hana and Joy's experiences led to evaluation of their place in life, both of their examples definitely could be the incentive for searching for truths. Gail's life- changing situation was battling addictions and the fear of losing her place as grandmother. Rachel and Emma and Allie described their journeys to becoming First Nations. Their process was evident as they spoke of seeking connections with family, learning about their traditional ways of being in relationship with their lands and learning their language.

Immersion.

The immersion stage is characterized by the yearning to create an all-encompassing Aboriginal frame of reference that supports one's identity. Although Cross (1991) suggests that in this stage individuals may experience much stress, depression and anxiety, when describing their identity journeys participants did not identify these concerns. However, the immersion stage is evident as participants Allie, Rachel and Emma identified their desire to learn and participate in Aboriginal ceremonies. Gail spoke of using her Aboriginal structure for daily living, as did Emma. Hana teaches cultural activities in her children's schools. Joy, Cathy, Hana, Allie and Emma spoke of passing cultural knowledge to their children and communities.

Internalization.

The internalization stage is characterized by being secure and content with your identity. All of the participants described elements of their identity that they felt secure about. For all participants involvement with family was valued as a priority. For many participants being

secure in who they are was evident by their ability to give back to community and family. All of the participants spoke of the importance of being positive role models and felt secure in their ability to be a positive influence for other parents. Although Rachel, Allie and Emma had negative experiences such as racism, family violence and being disowned by their Aboriginal communities and families, they overcame these barriers and developed a sense of a secure identity. Hana and Gail spoke of their spiritual practices, their focus on supporting community and family and the outside world. Joy's values of tolerance, compassion, non-judgement and interconnectedness establish her secure identity. As in all models for stages of development it is important to note that each stage is not fixed; in fact, individuals tend to move back and forth between stages depending on life circumstances and events.

Figure 7. Identity Development and Life Stages Model.

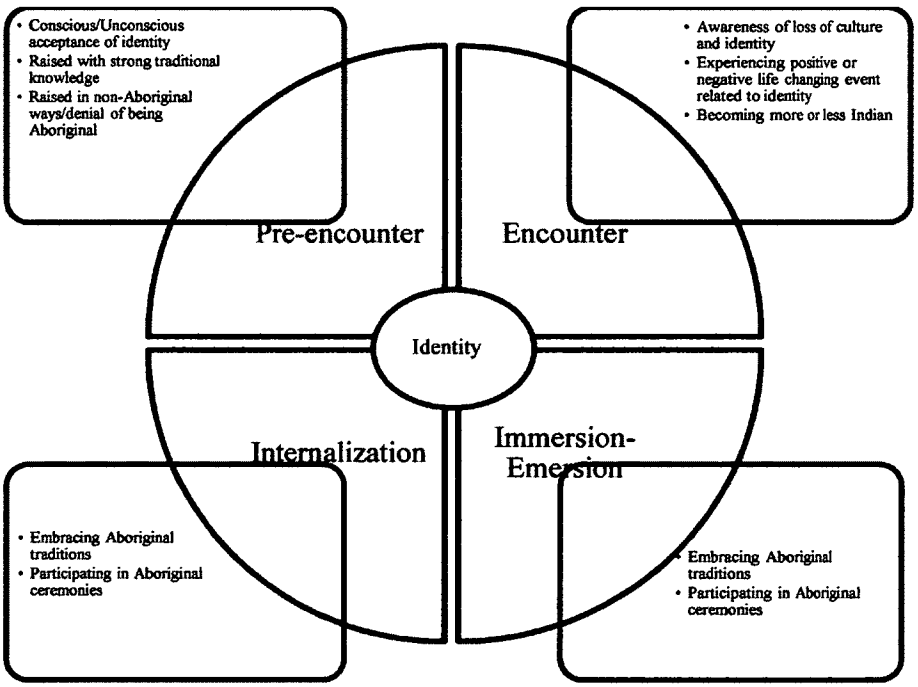


Figure 7. Adapted from D. A. Mihesuah (2003) in *Indigenous American women: Decolonization, empowerment, activism.*

Summary

The voices of participants focused on themes that were central to their processes of identity development. For some participants this journey to identity was punishing and painful. As described by Mihesuah (2003), "Lack of a positive identity or even a concrete identity can result in a variety of emotional and psychological problems for Natives such as spousal and child abuse, turning to drugs and alcohol for anxiety relief and ultimately a lack of respect that destroys cultures" (p. 82). The realities of experiencing MCFD misrepresentations of Aboriginal parents and foster parents revealed participants' thoughts around historical wrongdoings in child welfare practice. Participants spoke of MCFD being unable, unwilling and ill-equipped to provide needed supports to maintain and foster healthy families. Regretfully these negative practices continue for some Aboriginal parents and communities.

Despite many negative experiences Aboriginal women remained connected to families and Aboriginal culture. Collectively, participants described their commitments to maintaining their families and other Aboriginal families, their positive parenting influences from past generations and giving back to community through education and in other roles such as being a foster family. Equally obvious was the participant's commitment to self-determinism, through education and finding cultural resources, to strengthen and develop their identities as Aboriginal parents. Apparent in participants' stories were their strengths, stemming from a desire to live in accordance with Aboriginal traditional values of respect for language, community, land, culture and family.

All of the participants described the importance of relationship in defining identity. The participants' sense of identity was connected to knowing the importance of relationships to

culture and family. Participants identified culture as beneficial to sustaining their identities as Aboriginal parents. Maintaining cultural connections for their children's cultural identity was important.

Creating a positive identity as an Aboriginal woman was found to be intentional and originating from positive experiences with grandmothers and mothers. Participants spoke of the diversity among Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal cultures. Although some participant's faced negative experiences with racism, poverty and other systemic inequalities, these influences did not carry over into their accounts of their cultural identity. In fact, these experiences strengthened and fostered empowerment strategies for Aboriginal parents.

For the interviews with the seven participants in this study, a First Nation's model of human relations was used to explore the four major components of a 'self in relation' model of identity; namely, family, community, nation and creation. Further, a developmental model of life stages was applied to identity formation and was used to analyze the data collected. Chapter five will present further examination of the narratives and final reflections.

Chapter 5: Examination of the Narratives and Reflections

Approach to Examination

Analysis of the interview data in Chapter four involved reflections on the context for developing a parenting identity and the meanings attributed to the questions and answers from participants in their every-day lived experiences. Their constructions of context and meaning had multiple, complex applications for large scale theories such as Anderson's (2000) model and Thomas's (1991) model for identity. Further, it was possible to connect theories to practices from the stories told by participants.

Although the data from the interviews discovered significant diversity among participants, it also revealed congruity in terms of recurring themes. Recurring themes that impacted identity development for all participants are presented as follows: the negative influences of colonization, especially the influence of the Canadian government's policies on child welfare, intergenerational losses followed by positive influences such as the importance of family, the valuing of Aboriginal culture, the importance and influence of community and concluding with identification of identity values; namely, collectivity, connection, reciprocity, commitment, responsibilities and the Western ideology of motherhood.

Respecting the diversity of participants includes avoiding generalizations of the data to other Aboriginal parents. As well, each participant had unique cultural values and different life experience that brought different meanings forward. At best, their stories can be organized to present their voices and recognize their gifts of sharing their experiences. However, when grouped collectively it is possible to recognize parallel, overarching themes that validate the literature and expose the areas where Canadian society has failed Aboriginal mothers.

Negative Influences of Colonization on Child Welfare Practice

Over the last four hundred years the devastating impact of systemic colonialism has been experienced by Aboriginal societies. In 1876, the passing of the Indian Act established the historical and political context for Aboriginal societies in Canada when the (then) Canadian government replicated the United States' model of assimilation. Four years later, the Canadian government mandated the enrollment of all Aboriginal children into segregated Residential Schools. Believing that Aboriginal peoples were inferior, a damaging policy of indoctrination into Christian faiths and education was introduced across Canada. It has been well documented by numerous Aboriginal researchers and scholars including Cull (2006), Anderson (2000), (2010), and Gosselin (2006) that the impact of the Indian Act was especially traumatic for Aboriginal mothers.

The impact of the Indian Act legislation was discussed in different degrees by the participants. Although the participants were engaged with the child welfare system in British Columbia in different capacities, for example fostering children, grandparents as caregivers to grandchildren and biological parents, incidents of negative judgements and racism are evident throughout their stories

The legislative body governing the care and safety of children in British Columbia is the Child, Family and Community Services Act (CFCS Act). Further, MCFD's Caregiver Support Services (CSS) sets out the standards of practice for children in care of MCFD. Evidence of systemic colonialism was perceived as participants described involvement with MCFD.

Along with the negative experiences participants took care to document their positive experiences with social workers who are dedicated to their profession. Participants had an

appreciation of the difficult, complex role of social workers charged with the conflicting mandates of protecting children while supporting parents. However, the examples of valuable social worker support were not presented to remediate MCFD experiences; rather they reflected the attitude of participant's appreciation for the help that was given when it was needed. Nonetheless, their examples were attributed (only) to individual social workers' practice. Given that one of the challenges experienced by MCFD as a system is the lack of standardized policies and protocols across their five regions, the variability in worker response is to be expected. An example of this practice is found in the reflections of foster parent Joy: "*something we have noticed is missing while children of minorities or low income are clearly represented in the system, 'White' children for middle or high income are on their own, as it is assumed those parents must by nature of their status 'know how' to parent and 'couldn't' make any mistakes. We have noted more than one child endure emotional/physical/abuse/neglect only because the ministries can't or don't take them on and/or the public doesn't report it and/or accepts it as the price of wealth. Services are identified as being for 'at risk' families not necessarily open to the public and if the participants aren't low income it is considered that the program missed its target.*"

As a system, MCFD appears to perpetuate the historical climate of deficit based analysis of Aboriginal parenting practices. Participants Hana, Allie, Gail, Rachel, Joy and Cathy recounted examples of being seen and treated as inferior mothers. Along with being seen as inferior, when significant issues concerning the wellbeing of children presented the divergence between parents and social workers, issues of culpability was attributed to caregivers. Hana and Gail were seen as contributing to, or causing the problem that harmed a child in their care.

As a child protection system, MCFD is seen to resemble residential school experiences. Speaking on behalf of communities, participants described an overall negative perception based on fear of having children apprehended. Involvement with MCFD was evocative of residential school legislation in so far as government policy can be applied one-sidedly with little thought to the needs of the community. In fact, examination of the numbers of Aboriginal children in government care reveals that it is now higher than the infamous 'sixties scoop.' Allie and Hana drew parallel comparisons between residential school and MCFD as a system. Their assertion is supported by Cull's (2006) research linking residential schools and the child protection systems as "instrumental tools of assimilation and control" (p. 145).

Intergenerational Losses

Intergenerational losses emerged from the data as a recurring theme. It would be difficult to rank losses in terms of significance for each participant as well as being impossible to include the impact and significance of each loss experienced by the participants.

The loss of children was felt on both micro and macro levels. Having children placed in government care was a profound loss for Rachel, Cathy and Allie, not only being judged as unable to protect and care for their children, but having little faith in the government's ability to provide adequate, substitute care. Rachel and Allie believe these experiences will remain with them over their life time. While the validity of Rachel and Allie's fears are undisputable, because assessments of child welfare risk include historical factors such as having a history of being raised in government care, the irony of this situation is that MCFD's role is not thought significant enough to address.

Similarly, issues of historical trauma occurred for Emma and Allie because as children they were removed from their families and raised in foster homes. Likewise, on a macro level removing children from families and communities raises historical trauma for all community members. As articulated by Hana, the importance of children is still not recognized as being paramount to the wellbeing of First Nations communities.

The loss of culture was well documented by participants Allie, Rachel and Emma due to their experiences of being raised away from family and community and in government care. On a macro level, it has been extensively documented by numerous Aboriginal researchers; for example, Long and Dickason (2011), Mihesuah (2003), Anderson (2000), Allen (1986), among others, that by removing Aboriginal children from their families and communities it was believed possible to prevent intergenerational Aboriginal knowledge and culture to be carried forward.

Loss of First Nation identity was experienced by Allie, Emma and Rachel stemming from their loss of culture. Unwittingly perhaps, the importance of a strong First Nations identity is still not recognized as a major factor that builds community wellbeing. Ing (2006) asserts that "Schools carried out a program of cultural replacement so severe that it forced some of those leaving the schools to deny their identity as First Nations people" (p. 158).

Although the official negative dialogues and practices have discontinued for some Aboriginal parents and communities, unofficially they persist. The negative stereotypes associated with being involved with MCFD result in having to choose as being seen as an unfit parent and accepting that identity or not accepting MCFD's help and losing your children. Participants in these situations of having to choose between these two alternatives are between false alternatives. If you accept help you prolong the denial of your strengths as an Aboriginal

parent; if you don't accept help you are viewed as not caring about your children and confirm the negative stereotype. The experiences provided by all participants told a different story. Collectively, they viewed other Aboriginal women and themselves as their best resource.

Importance of Family

The importance of family, especially mothers and grandmothers, were deeply entrenched in the accounts from all the participants. Although all the participants had different experiences with their families of origin, the value of family resonated throughout their stories. Emma and Allie connected their survival as mothers and who they are today because of their desire to parent their children. Hana, Joy and Gail's definitions of family extended to their involvement with community as foster parents. Hana connected the importance of family to the wellbeing of community. In short, as suggested earlier by Anderson (2000), children bring meaning and make it possible to develop and nurture an identity.

Intergenerational influences such as the role of extended family, elders and grandparents was held in high regard by all participants. In part, the role of older relatives was valued for fulfilling traditional roles as teachers and nurturers of children and for providing positive role models of strength and resiliency.

The research on Aboriginal women from Aboriginal researchers stresses that accountability to family is foremost because the survival of nations depended on women's ability to protect and preserve the family. Evidence in the literature is found with Big Eagle and Guimond's (2009) assertion that "what is astounding is their accountability to their families" (p. 60). On a local level, the accountability to family is seen in examples from Aboriginal mothers' demands for action and justice for mothers, sisters and aunties gone missing or murdered along

Highway 16 in British Columbia over the past thirty years. Their accountability to family spurred local Aboriginal Agencies and community members to demand a full scale police investigation. This investigation began in 2006 and continues to this day.

Valuing of Aboriginal Culture

Evidence of the importance of culture was an over-arching theme, although each participant comes from different communities and had significantly different cultural experiences. Identification of culture was viewed as a significant factor for developing a parenting identity. Identity followed a developmental trajectory for some participants such as Rachel, Emma and Allie. As explained in Mihesuah's (2003) model of identity development for First Nations women, internalization of one's culture can be a lifelong process. Hana's, Cathy's, and Joy's internalizations of culture came from positive intergenerational experiences as they reflected on how they were raised. Their early experiences contributed to their cultural understanding that they had responsibilities to be positive role models.

Rachel's, Emma's and Allie's experiences spoke to Mihesuah's (2003) model as they moved between stages of having little cultural knowledge (pre-encounter), of seeking out their culture (encounter), partaking in cultural ceremonies (immersion/emersion), and adopting their culture (internalization), as evidenced by sharing cultural practices and passing traditional values such as the importance of language and their relationship to their lands to their children.

The importance of culture was evident, for example, when Rachel and Emma's First Nations identity and culture were denied to them, they chose to identify as First Nations women. The importance of culture was apparent in the respect for the diversity in First Nations cultures as expressed by Emma and Hana.

The literature on the importance of culture from Aboriginal scholars and researchers points to the attacks and decimation of culture through North American governments' policies of assimilation. The literature also portrays First Nations women as the nurturers and defenders of culture. As well, Aboriginal scholars and researchers such as Mihesuah (2003) posit "Historically Native women also played a primary role in their tribes creation stories and, therefore, in the tribes religious traditions" (p. 83). Gail and Hana spoke about their connections to Aboriginal spirituality as being the foundations for every aspect of their lives.

The Importance and Influence of Community

Participants' constructions of community included multiple and all-encompassing meanings. Participants' definitions of community are supported by Aboriginal scholars and researchers. For example, definitions of community cited by Hanson (2009) from Ermine (2004) suggests community "refers to a system of relationships within Indigenous societies in which the nature of the personhood is identified by the systems of relationships and not only includes family but also extends to comprise relationships of human, ecological and spiritual origins" (p. 258). All participants identified the significance of family, especially the intergenerational aspects of relationships. Hana recalled the relationships of her mother to community, when community members would come to her for help with problems.

Maintaining ties to community was important for all participants. For example, Cathy and Allie's ties to community included teaching their First Nation's languages to their children. Further, the importance of knowing relatives and maintaining relationships between home and community were articulated by Emma, Cathy and Allie. Some participants like Emma and Rachel endured rejections from their families of origin to find their First Nations community.

Emma withstood physical assaults in her quest to find her First Nations community. Emma recalled these experiences as a requisite (albeit negative) part of knowing and being accepted by her 'real' family.

Bastien (2001) suggests that one of the primary roles for First Nations women includes responsibilities for community wellbeing. Participants Joy and Hana describe caring for community wellbeing as one of their daily routines. Similarly, Joy describes community building through relationships that range beyond the children in her care to their extended family members. Participants such as Hana and Joy included their involvement with social workers as part of their community responsibilities to give back and be a positive influence in the lives of others. As quoted in Graveline (1998) and attributed to Hodgson (1990) speaking about reciprocity within relationships, "Aboriginal cultures' greatest strength is our community mindedness" (p. 56).

Community was also described in terms of spiritual practice, as described by Hana, Joy, and Gail through the Great Spirit, or the morning song, or expressions of gratitude.

It is interesting to note how women find community no matter what, and no matter the circumstances. Being away from their home communities Allie and Rachel found a community of people that would support their needs for family security and learning cultural practices. Ironically, while the Canadian government set out to destroy Aboriginal societies and communities through practices of assimilation, because of their common history and experiences with oppression, commonalities upon which to build community materialized.

First Nations Values and the Ideology of Motherhood

Underlying the themes in the participants stories are the values that support their actions. These values reflect the importance of collectivity, connections between family and communities, reciprocity, commitment and responsibilities, sharing of knowledge and spirituality among other values.

Among the examples provided by participants were their responsibilities to be the best parent possible, to learn about and share their knowledge on parenting practices and other cultural practices, to behave in ways that reflect the traditional ways of communities, to be accountable for family, to nurture community, to transmit Aboriginal culture to the next generation, to reject and challenge negative stereotyping of Aboriginal people and to appreciate the interconnectedness of all relationships. These values lead to the construction of an Aboriginal ideology of motherhood. These values were contrasted and conflicted with the historical Western values of person based on individuality and the subordination of women in society and culture.

Western values of motherhood were experienced by participants in their involvement with the child welfare system. Participants, Hana, Joy, Emma, Allie, Cathy, Gail and Rachel described individualization (as in blaming the individual rather than systemic oppression) as being common practice to judge mothers as 'fit' or 'unfit' to care for children. When problems arose caring for children, or when parents needed help with the care of children, the problem was assumed to lie within the parent's inability to provide care.

Although participants were respected members of their communities, Hana and Gail experienced social workers who deemed their knowledge was deemed inferior, thereby devaluing First Nations caregiving systems. In Hana's case, while asking for a course on non-

violent communication the social worker suggested a behavior modification intervention. Further, as in this situation, although Western interventions conflict with First Nations parenting practices no substitute practice was considered.

Not surprisingly, in social work practice social workers are trained to find evidence of child abuse and neglect in child protection investigations. Social workers are not trained to develop responses for parenting support and to understand different cultural practices. It is of no surprise therefore, when faced with systemic problems, such as poverty, lack of adequate housing, domestic violence and other social problems, social workers are ill equipped to meet the needs of mothers and therefore it is normal to look and to find individual deficits to remedy.

Another challenge exists in the contradictory responsibilities of the two primary functions of social workers to support families and protect children. As evidenced in the narratives of the research participants, MCFD social workers and Aboriginal Child Welfare social workers can find themselves in conflicting roles of adversaries and advocates.

Further, Aboriginal agencies who have authority to manage their own child welfare system will encounter the immense and complex problems that come from colonization. Gail's experiences with one Aboriginal agency found little difference between MCFD and her experience with an Aboriginal child welfare agency.

Other examples provided by participants of individualization and the scrutinizing of Aboriginal mothering were detrimental to participant's children. Hana and Rachel described their children as fearing social workers. Relationships between social workers and Aboriginal women continue to be primarily fear based. Relationships where a power imbalance exists generally lack communication or, at best, their communications are restricted and impoverished. This fear of

being scrutinized and the blaming of individuals affect the communities' ability to fulfill traditional roles of caring for children. As explained by Hana, although the child welfare system is in desperate need of foster homes, because of past and ongoing destructive practices in First Nations communities, community members will not participate with MCFD's recruitment of Aboriginal foster homes. This element of social fatalism is elaborated by Gail's community who knows MCFD is both ultimately judge and jury.

Reflections

As a non-Aboriginal woman my reflections are not intended as recommendations for the Aboriginal communities. Instead they are offered as part of the learning I was fortunate to receive in the course of this study.

Throughout the course of this project it was evident that some Aboriginal agencies and some community agencies are meeting the needs of families. However, because differences in their practices were not articulated by participants it is difficult to know which practices could be incorporated on a wide spread basis to assist families. Much like the fragmentation in the child welfare system with their lack of standardization, community agencies receiving funding from MCFD have no standardized mandate to deliver culturally appropriate services. This is not to say that MCFD does not specify that services should be culturally relevant. The problem arises because a dominant Western ideology rather than a First Nations perspective of services dominates standards, thinking and practice in the delivery of services for First Nations peoples.

The participants is this study came from diverse backgrounds with differences in age, culture, roles and responsibilities, as well as other differences such as where they grew up, who raised them and intergenerational experiences. However, their common experiences with racism,

lack of support, individualizing them as the problem, point to systemic issues in how Aboriginal women, no matter who they are, experience the dominant society when they are caretakers of children. This calls for examination of what is 'in the best interests of the child' as this is the criteria upon which MCFD and the court system's decisions to intervene are made.

Secondly, while it is convenient to view Aboriginal women who have addictions and are unable to provide adequate care for themselves and their children as 'the problem,' participants in this study did not have these problems, however, their experiences with the child welfare system were similar.

It is evident that all participants in this study looked to their past for wisdom and guidance. As such, each participant was able to provide accounts of how Aboriginal women manage the intrusion of the dominant society's values such as individualism yet still retain their Aboriginal identities. Expectedly, the participant's voices expressed what Aboriginal scholars have found over the past three decades of research. For example, Allen (1986), Miller and Chuchruk (1996) and Smith (1999), to name but a few, have identified and documented fundamental practice concerns arising from tradition Eurocentric methods. However, their recommendations are far from being accepted and adopted by governments as standard practice. Although some Aboriginal nations have been able to resolve sovereignty claims, for example the Nisga'a nation in Northwest British Columbia, few Aboriginal Nations have accomplished this level of self-determinism.

Correspondingly, participant's insights for social worker practice have been recorded identified and documented by Aboriginal scholars, for example Anderson (1998), Hudson (1997) and Cull (2006). Whitbeck's (2006) research sets out recommendations that strongly resemble

what participants in this study reported. Briefly, social workers need to reject their role as 'experts' on Aboriginal families and accept the significance of culture when building resiliency in families. Because each Nation's culture is different, social workers can use their approach to practice with different protocols in their different and separate regions and build culturally appropriate practice standards, region by MCFD region. While these are time-consuming processes, taking advantage of opportunities for building some practice similarities can then be generalized or adapted for other Aboriginal Nations. Knowing differences exist in Aboriginal languages, cultural values and traditions, modifications to practices can be adapted accordingly.

Using a strength-based approach means identifying the protective factors within families. The narratives from participants in this study described how colonization continues to affect their abilities to parent. Upon reflection, it was apparent participants were not viewed as equal partners with delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies and MCFD. The divide between the research participants and their experiences with social work practice requires examination of how social workers are prepared, both by the educational institutions and the community agencies that play central roles in mentoring students embarking on careers in social work.

The high population of First Nations peoples in Prince George and the surrounding communities suggests students entering the field of social worker will encounter First Nations families in their practice. Developing a process for evaluating social workers and other service providers practice may appear obvious; however, improved communication is necessary if communities are to share their solutions as to where opportunities exist to improve the relationship between MCFD and Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal communities.

Based on Aboriginal parents and communities recommendations for 'good' practice, MCFD could develop standards for supporting Aboriginal parents. Speaking from personal experience, being able to participate as a student in the First Nations Studies program at UNBC was in invaluable part of my education. If the Social Work department at UNBC in collaboration with the First Nations Studies program developed parallel social worker internships, where social workers specializing in child welfare are required to reside nearby or in First Nations communities and learn about First Nations cultural values, especially the role of the community in caring for children, their practice would undoubtedly become supportive and grounded in the needs of Aboriginal parents and communities. Focusing on social work practice has been a central theme in this chapter, primarily to expose the conjecture that de-colonizing social work has occurred, and to highlight the evidence from the participants in this study and from Aboriginal researchers that this work is still needed because the wellbeing of families cannot be examined in isolation from social practice. Finally, as noted by Anderson (2011), "health and the good life is not something that belong to the individual so individual solutions will not work" (p. 177).

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Appendix A

Information Letter and Consent Form

Research Study: First Nations Graduate Program

Title of Study: Aboriginal Mothering

Researcher: Cindy Ignas

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this study is to help us gain an understanding of how Aboriginal mothers develop parenting identities. You were chosen to take part in this study because you are an Aboriginal mother who has used community resources and who has had experiences with MCFD regarding caregiving of children.

Before we begin there are a few things I would like to go over with you.

You will be asked to take part in an interview that asks about your experiences in parenting. The interview may take from half an hour to one hour. Interview answers will be recorded either digitally or on audio tape.

All of your interview answers will be treated confidentially. In order to ensure confidentiality your name will not appear on any written transcript. Instead you will be given a pseudonym.

The recording of the interview will be transcribed by Cindy Ignas. Each participant will receive a copy of the transcript of the interview. This is so you can confirm the accuracy of the transcript and to notify Cindy Ignas if you wish to have statements added or removed. After the interview has been transcribed the audio recording will be erased by Cindy Ignas.

The data from the interview will be stored in a secure file cabinet at the home of Cindy Ignas.

Only Cindy Ignas and her research supervisor Dr. Ross Hoffman will have access to the data.

Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw freely at any time. If you choose to withdraw your data will be destroyed.

There are no known risks to you for taking part in this study. However, should you experience any emotional difficulties after the interview you may contact Cindy Ignas. You will be provided with a list of community counselling services.

The potential benefit of this study is that developing a better understanding of the relationship between self-identity and Aboriginal mothering will result in community organizations being better positioned to support the needs of Aboriginal mothers.

If you are interested in receiving a copy of the study one will be provided to you. You may contact Cindy Ignas by phone at 250.564.9033 or by email to CindyIgnas@telus.net or Dr. Ross Hoffman by phone at 250.960.5242 or by email to hoffmanr@unbc.ca with any questions regarding this study.

Any complaints or concerns regarding the study can be forwarded to the Office of the Vice-President Research, UNBC at 250.960.5820 (reb@unbc.ca).

I,_____ have been informed of the above information. I agree to participate in the interviews described in the above research study. I will retain a copy of this form for my own purposes.

_____

Name of Participant

_____

Signature of Participant

_____

Date

Appendix B

Research Questions

1. How important is it to you to be known as a good parent?
2. Tell me how you identify yourself as a parent?
3. Tell me about your experiences being judged in need of support and education around parenting your children?
4. How does your First Nation's identity contribute to how you parent your children?
5. How are issues of MCFD involvement viewed in your family, by yourself and your community?
6. Tell me how you created a successful parenting identity for yourself as an Aboriginal mother?