My People Will Sleep for One Hundred Years:

Story of a Métis Self

Sylvia Cottell

August, 2004
My People Will Sleep for One Hundred Years:
Story of a Métis Self

By

Sylvia Rae Cottell
B.F.A., Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design

A thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

© Sylvia Rae Cottell, 2004
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without the permission of the author.
"My people will sleep for one hundred years when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back."

Louis Riel
ABSTRACT

As a result of the current political debate that surrounds the definition of Métis, the issue of Métis identity on both community and individual levels is often challenged in a public forum. Métis people outside of the areas considered the main hubs of Métis culture are likely to be faced with a myriad of different factors that impact their identity, including lack of community connections and limited contact with Métis cultural influences. There is a need to openly voice the diverse experiences of being Métis in order to affirm the experiences of many Métis people. This autoethnographic study aims to provide an account of an experience of being Métis and to salvage a sense of identity after many generations of assimilation. Autoethnography provides the freedom necessary for the representation of cultural values that are beyond the traditional assumptions of academic discourse (Spry, 2001) and aims to engage the reader on an emotional level. A purpose of this study is to validate the experience of many Métis readers and to enhance the level of culturally relevant practice provided to Métis individuals and communities by counsellors.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iv
Table of Contents v
List of Figures vii
Acknowledgements viii
Dedications ix

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Chapter One 1
Historical perspective 3
Defining Métis 6
The Inquiry 8
Purpose of the Study 9
Definition of Terms 10
Assumptions 12
Summary of Chapter One 12

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Chapter Two 13
Narrative Identity theory 14
Ethnic Identity 15
Multiracial Identity 16
Aboriginal Identity 19
Métis Identity 24
Summary of Chapter Two 28

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Chapter Three 29
Ethical Considerations 29
General Approach 31
Autoethnography 32
Instrumentation  
Data Collection  
Procedure for Data Analysis  
Summary of Chapter Three  

CHAPTER FOUR: PERSONAL NARRATIVE  
Story of a Métis Self  

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS  
Introduction to Chapter Five  
Narrative Identity Literature  
Ethnic Identity Literature  
Multiracial Identity Literature  
Aboriginal Identity Literature  
Métis Identity Literature and Additional Thoughts  
Implications for Counselling  
Therapeutic Considerations in Review  
Narrative Therapy with Métis Clients  
The Importance of Validation  
The Importance of Community  
Additional Considerations for Counselling  
Ethical Considerations for Future Research  
Suggestions for Future Research  
Conclusion  
References
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Acculturation Continuum (Little Soldier, 1985)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cultural Infusion (1996)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Disconnected Roots at K’yuusdaa (1998)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Amnesia (2002)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>First Self-Portrait (1990)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Questions, Judgments and Encouragements (2004)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a</td>
<td>The Final Measure (2004)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b</td>
<td>The Final Measure detail (2004)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Commitment (2004)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Infinity Symbol of Métis Identity (2004)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Coast Salish people of Musqueam, Songhees, Esquimalt and Saanich for allowing me to be raised and live on their territory. I would like to acknowledge my family, Donna, Phil, Deanna, and Daniel. You have all been an incredible source of support, encouragement and, at times, a good swift kick in the butt. Thanks for your patience and your love. My thanks and appreciations also go to my second cousin Vicki for paving the way before me and answering my many questions. Thank you to my Great Uncle George for his willingness to share. Thank you to Roger John for your welcoming spirit, your love, and your encouragement. Your words have often helped me stand tall and have confidence in who I am. Thank you to Heather Steel for the good walks, your endless support, and your generosity. Thank you Paula Murphy for sharing your journey and for walking with me through mine. Your courage has inspired me to have a voice. Thank you to Wil George for your understanding words and your support. To Cathy Richardson, thank you for witnessing my transformation and encouraging me in the pursuit of my identity and my academic goals. Your work is inspirational. I would also like to thank my committee members, Honore France, Blythe Shepard and Bill Zuk, for bringing a creative spirit to their work that has allowed this study to take place.

Thank you to all the teachers who have come into my life, even before I was ready to learn.
DEDICATIONS

This project is dedicated to my family, my ancestors and my community.
Chapter One

Introduction

I remember a day when I was six years old. My grandmother, sister and I were sitting in a triangle on the floor of the farmhouse in Agassiz, in the Fraser Valley. The southern bay window framed Mount Cheam in the distance and provided the only light in the room. I’m not sure what we were doing that day, but in my memory, the image of my grandmother remains very clear. Her hair was out from under her wig and her long dark braids caught my breath. I remember being awed by how “Indian” my grandmother looked, but even then I knew this was not something to speak about.

I was raised white and middle class in a wealthy neighbourhood in Vancouver. At that time there were few indications of the multicultural city that was developing around me and even fewer signs of the people who had been living on that land for thousands of years before. As I grew up, I took dance and music classes, ate in fancy restaurants, and even travelled to Europe for the first time when I was twelve. Yes, I have been privileged.

These days I can’t help but think a large price was paid for this comfort and position. My ancestors had to give up so much to keep up the image and avoid persecution, allowing my generation to achieve the status we now hold. For this status I have given up the knowledge of my history. I am Métis. In other words, I am of mixed First Nations and European heritage. There is a significant amount known about the men who colonized this land now called Canada, but very little is known about their wives. It is the stories of the women in my family that have been lost. My relatives of my grandmother’s generation remember some of this history, but most of it they will not tell.
This silence is becoming even more profound as those who know are quickly dying off. Despite this silence, a rumour still lingers. Everyone in my family has heard that we are 'part Native,' though I do not know if we have ever heard it spoken. Hanging in the air, the ancestors stay around, whispering in the ears of both those who listen and those who don’t. They make sure they are never completely forgotten.

As difference in ethnicity is increasingly being met with less discrimination, many people are more openly seeking and expressing an understanding of who they are and where they come from. The Métis people are no exception to this phenomenon. The latest Canadian census data shows a dramatic increase in the percentage of respondents that self identify as Métis (Belcourt, 2003). Specifically, the statistics report a 43% increase in the Métis population, increasing from 204,120 respondents in 1996, to 292,310 in the most recent census. Currently, the Métis population represents 30% of the reporting Aboriginal population in Canada (Belcourt, 2003). When one takes into account these numbers, it becomes obvious that the Métis community is going through a restructuring and a renegotiating of community identity. This is particularly the case due to the wide diversity and dispersion of those who self-identify as Métis throughout Canada.

It is very difficult to understand Métis identity without knowledge of Métis people’s role in history, particularly in relation to the colonization of the land now called Canada. Therefore, for the purpose of this autoethnographic study, I believe it is important that I take the time to briefly introduce the history of the Métis people in Canada and also to discuss some of the political factors that influence the definition of Métis today.
Historical perspective

Almost immediately following the arrival of Europeans in North America, the intermixing or “Métissage” of European and Aboriginal peoples began (Peterson & Brown, 1985). Often Aboriginal communities saw these marriages as a way to secure relations with the Europeans and, in turn, the Europeans saw these marriages as a way of securing trade relationships within the “new” country. Before European women were permitted to immigrate to Canada, colonizers often had Native “country wives” and their offspring formed a mixed race of people who began to develop communities with unique customs and ways of life (Dunn, 2002). When European women began to arrive and settle in North America, many of these Aboriginal women and their children were then abandoned (C. Richardson, 2002).

Some Métis communities developed distinctive cultural traditions and identities unique from both First Nations and European Nations (Peterson, 1985). For instance, in some communities, Métis people developed a language referred to as Michif, which is a blend of Cree, French and English. The Métis sash also became a unique cultural dress, along with the development of the Métis jig and a unique style of beadwork (Dunn, 2002). The Métis flag, still an important symbol for Métis people today, bears a horizontal figure-eight, or infinity symbol and represents the creation of a new people who have roots in both Aboriginal and European cultures and traditions. The Métis also played crucial roles in the economic development of Canada by providing furs and food to the Hudson’s Bay and NorthWest Companies. Also, because of their multi-lingual abilities, it was not unusual for Métis persons to act as interpreters between European and First Nation’s peoples (Peterson & Brown, 1985).
There were various Métis settlements that were established in the 1800s; the most long-term and recognized one being the Red River area, now known as the Province of Manitoba. Métis families moved to Red River between 1821 and 1825 with the help of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Though this community flourished for the majority of the 19th century, in the 1880s it came under the threat of the Canadian government who began surveying land occupied by Métis for the purpose of European settlement. As a last resort, the local Métis community took up arms against the Canadian government and were defeated in the Red River Rebellion led by Louis Riel in 1885 (Payment, 1996). Riel, who was and continues to be, a significant figure in the identity of many Métis communities, was subsequently tried for treason and executed.

As the Métis were mandated to leave the land they called home, some families went further west, while others went south to the United States (Peterson & Brown, 1985). The Métis people were not recognized as status “Indians” by the government of Canada and also were rarely accepted into white society because of their Aboriginal ancestry. As a result, some Métis people established small independent communities where their traditions and culture continued to be fostered, though poverty and low access to education were and still are critical issues (Campbell, 1973; Dunn, 2002). Conversely, some Métis families moved to the cities and were assimilated into white culture. These Métis who adapted to Euro-Canadian society have been called “acculterated Métis” (Dunn, 2002). As the younger generations married into white society, their Aboriginal ancestry continued to become less visible and therefore more easily denied. The shame that was associated with being mixed-blood or Métis was in part due to Euro-Canadian society’s prejudices against Aboriginal people, but also influenced by the perception of
Métis people as traitors to Canada. The span of time between 1885 to 1960 has been called the “Forgotten years” (Dunn, 2002).

In the 1960s, after many years of silence, there came a “political and cultural awakening” in the Métis community (Dunn, 2002). Under the light of new research came a restorying of Métis history and a questioning of the perception of Louis Riel and Métis people as traitors to Canada. Dunn writes:

Today, many people are critical of Riel’s trial, and compelling legal arguments have been made that his trial and subsequent execution were carried out unjustly; laws were incorrectly applied to Riel’s case, Riel’s counsel disregarded his directions, and the appointment of the Queen’s counsel, the magistrate and the jury were all biased and served a political agenda. Today, due to the role he played in promoting Manitoba to provincial status, Louis Riel is now referred to as one of the founding fathers of Canada. (p.7)

As a result of this more favourable interpretation of history, increasing numbers of Métis people identify openly with their history and cultural roots. It is becoming more culturally acceptable and safe to be Métis in Canada, though many prejudices still stand in the way.

As mentioned earlier, due to the extent of written records that link Métis people to the Red River settlement, there has been much focus on this community and a disregard, if not denial, of hybrid cultures that developed elsewhere in Canada. For instance, Dickason (1985) points out that the invisibility of Métis people in the Eastern part of Canada has been assisted by the common practice of historians to write as though these mixed people never existed, while in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta there has been historical acknowledgement of people of mixed Aboriginal and European heritage. Dickason suggests that this racial mixing was equally, if not more, evident on both the East and West Coast of Canada. Peterson and Brown (1985) refer to
this debate as an indication of the truly complex nature of the history of people of mixed Aboriginal and European heritage in Canada. Debates over who qualifies to identify him or herself as Métis continue today.

*Defining Métis*

The word Métis is derived from the Latin word "miscere," meaning to mix. This term was originally used to refer to the children of Native women and French men, along with other terms, such as Country-born, Black Scots, and Half breeds (http://www.Métisnation.ca/MNA/defining1.html). As previously mentioned, beyond the dictionary description of the word Métis, the process of defining what it means to be Métis becomes less clear. Today, the whole question of who is Métis is swaddled in disagreement and political agendas. It is hard to separate the individual experience of identity from the national debate that continues to be waged over who qualifies to call them self Métis and who does not.

The definition of Métis has gone through dramatic changes since the 1960s and 70s. Initially, the requirements for membership for most organizations that represented Métis people did not distinguish between Métis or non-status Indians, or between Métis with ancestry from Red River and Métis groups with roots elsewhere in Canada (Sawchuk, 2001). Sawchuk explains that “contemporary characterization of the Métis tends to amalgamate the separate histories and separate populations of English, French and Scottish “half-breeds” into a single entity known as Métis” (p.76), but this definition is currently under fire from particular Métis organizations.

The more recent challenges to the definition of Métis are, in part, due to the inclusion of the Métis as one of the three recognized Aboriginal peoples under section
35(2) of the Constitution Act of 1982 (Sawchuk, 2001). This inclusion has resulted in two significant conflicts between various Métis groups, specifically, the dissolution of the long standing political alliance between the Métis and Non-Status Indians, as well as the increasing divide between the “Historic Métis Nation” with roots in the Red River basin and Métis groups in Ontario and other areas in Canada. Various Métis groups have recently sought to redefine who is Métis and some organizations have, in fact, altered their original definition (Sawchuk, 2001). For example, the Métis National Council (MNC) has recently changed their definition to read as follows: “‘Métis’ means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of Historic Métis Nation ancestry, and is accepted by the Métis Nation.” The MNC continues by explaining that “‘Historic Métis Nation’ means the Aboriginal people then known as Métis or Half-breeds who resided in the Historic Métis Nation Homeland” (http://www.Métis nation.ca/MNA/defining1.html). To further clarify, the “Historic Métis Nation Homeland” is assumed to refer to the geographic region, including the Red River settlement of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in Western Canada, and Montana and North Dakota in the United States (Sawchuk). This recently adopted definition is new in its addition of the requirement that one trace their ancestry back to this specific geographical area.

As a response to this limiting definition, Sawchuk (2001) feels it is important to highlight that the MNC is an organization that does not represent Métis people on a national Canadian level. Conversely, their name is only reflective of their representation of the “Historical Métis Nation.” Another perspective is discussed by Martin Dunn, a former researcher for the Native National Council, the Ontario Métis and Non-Status
Indian Association and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples (Sawchuk, 2000). Dunn (2000) suggests the answer to these problems and disagreements about definition can be cleared up quite easily:

It seems reasonable to me that we should begin with an examination of the intent of those who placed the term “Métis” in the Constitution. The question then begins to focus on who those Métis people referred to in the Constitution are and what they had in common. There are three factors that can be identified very quickly. All of these people had both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry. All of these people publicly identified as Métis. And all of these people were recognized as Métis within their respective community (p.8).

Therefore, the debate that surrounds ‘who are the Métis’ continues, with some communities aiming to limit the definition of Métis with others aiming to keep the definition more inclusive.

As one becomes acquainted with some of the disagreements between various Métis communities, it becomes apparent that the issue of Métis identity on both the community, as well as the individual level, is often challenged in a public forum. As a result of the attempts to limit the use of the word Métis, the creation of a new set of “disenfranchised Métis” who are not seen as reputable members of the “Historic Métis Nation” has ensued (Sawchuk, 2001). These individuals and communities have begun to take on the status of the “other Métis” in light of exclusive definitions.

The Inquiry

Métis people outside of the areas considered the main hubs of Métis culture are likely to be faced with a myriad of different factors that impact their identity. These factors might include a lack of a collective sense of identity, limited contact with Métis cultural influences, and assimilation into mainstream society. Kirmayer, Brass & Tait (2000) note:
The development of a collective identity has posed particular problems for Métis, who have suffered from ambiguous status. In this situation, the writing and dissemination of a group’s history takes on special urgency: to be effective, the expression of collective history and identity requires a public forum.” (p.611)

It is this lack of collective identity and the need to have the stories of Métis communities heard that has inspired this study. Through my own experience, I have been made explicitly aware that there is a general lack of understanding about who Métis people are and what it means to be Métis. I have spoken with many Métis individuals who are faced on a daily basis with a struggle for self-definition and a search for a sense of belonging.

C. Richardson (2003) contends, “the creation of the Métis self through the sharing (hearing, telling, retelling, and living) of Métis stories will help the Métis write themselves back into existance, both individually and as part of the Canadian historical and social narrative” (p.26). There is a need to openly voice the experience of being Métis in order to validate and affirm the experiences of many Métis people.

Purpose of the Study

This autoethnographic study about Métis identity aims to provide an honest and thorough account of my own experience of being a Métis woman as I have been fighting to salvage my identity after many generations of assimilation.

Another goal of this study is to increase the awareness of helping professionals, alerting them to some of the challenges and celebrations of being Métis in contemporary times. It is hoped that this increase in understanding and empathy will enhance the level of culturally relevant practice provided to Métis individuals and communities by counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and other social service providers.

Through conducting this autoethnography, I intend to add to the literature and discussion about Métis identity from a Métis perspective. It is my hope to engage in a
dialogue with the reader/viewer about the topics of identity and the general experience of striving to define oneself as a whole being. A guiding question for this study is, “What is my lived-experience as I continue to move out of a position of assimilation in mainstream Canadian society into asserting my identity as a Métis woman?” Through the use of personal exploration through written and visual text, this autoethnography shares my experience, demonstrating that the search and embodiment of a Métis identity is not a linear process, but one that takes unexpected twists and turns, doubling back on itself or taking flight when one least expects it. This study also encourages the reader to reflect on the similarities and differences between my personal narrative and their own identity and cultural heritage, whether Métis or not.

Definition of Terms

To ensure greater understanding throughout the discussion of Métis identity, various terms that carry particular importance to this study need to be clarified. The following definitions will be supported throughout the study and several will be discussed in more detail in later sections.

Aboriginal: The three Aboriginal peoples identified under section 35(2) of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis (Sawchuk, 2001). In addition, Non-status Indians are also considered to fall under the definition of Aboriginal.

Acculturation: The outcome of contact between two or more cultures by which change happens in both cultures as a result (Garrett & Pichette, 2000).

Assimilation: A particular type of acculturation that occurs when one culture changes much more than the other and in time comes to appear the same as the other.
This type of acculturation is likely to be imposed through force for the purpose of maintaining dominance over a colonized people (Garrett & Pichette, 2000).

Bicultural identity: A level of acculturation within which an individual has the ability to move comfortably between two cultures, integrating values of both while maintaining a consistent sense of their own identity (Garrett & Pichette, 2000; Little Soldier, 1985).

European ancestry: The aspect of an individual’s ancestry or heritage which stems from any part of Europe, particularly in reference to ancestors who came from Scotland, Ireland, England and France and formed unions and/or had children with First Nations women.

Ethnic Identity: Alipuria (2002) defines ethnic identity as “the degree of involvement and quality of the relationship with the ancestral group(s) of one’s parents including the sense of belonging to those group(s) and affirmation of the culture(s)” (p.9).

Identity: An internalized and evolving life story, explained as a “particular quality or flavouring of people’s self understandings, a way in which the self can be arranged or configured” (McAdams, 2001b, p.102). This evolving life story is particularly significant in identity formation.

Identity Formation: An integration process where one organizes his or her life in the form of a culturally meaningful story. A process said to begin in late adolescence or early adulthood (McAdams, 2001a).

Métis: A person of Aboriginal and European ancestry, who self identifies as Métis (Seaborn, 2003).
Multiracial: The genetic descendent of parents who stem from two or more ancestral groups who have been characterized as racially different (Root, 1994).

Assumptions

There are assumptions I carry with me as I engage with the topic of Métis identity and assimilation that are important to address. As I enter into the process of conducting this autoethnographic study I assume that my identity and experience of being Métis is influenced by my physical characteristics. I also am aware that everyday changes in environmental and social context can have an effect on how I relate to my Métis heritage. I also carry the assumption that the history of the Métis communities across Canada and the socio-political climate surrounding the definition of Métis influence my identity as a contemporary Métis person. I am also aware that the findings of this research are reflective of my own experience with being of Métis heritage and cannot be generalized to Métis people and communities in all parts of Canada.

Summary of Chapter One

This research is intended to represent a beginning academic discourse about the experience of navigating the changes in and challenges to identity that occur when one moves from a place of assimilation in mainstream society to a place of acknowledging and standing solidly in his or her Métis heritage. Throughout this introductory chapter I have begun to present a personal, historical, and political context from which we will begin the exploration of Métis identity and assimilation. In addition, I have begun to introduce the proposed autoethnography and have discussed terms that are at the heart of the following discussion. In the following chapter I will explore literature that is relevant to the discussion of Métis Identity.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

I have been hungry for information. Looking for understanding in places that could only give clinical facts and an outsider’s view of what it means to be me. What it means to be struggling for some sort of resolution and understanding. A place to celebrate who I am, without being shut down by judgments or fear.

Introduction

Driven by the need to understand my experience and heritage, my path of exploration has guided me towards many sources for information. As part of this process I have explored numerous areas of research and theoretical concepts related to the concept of identity. I have discovered that, while some theories have a relevance to Métis identity, other theoretical frameworks have fallen short in characterizing this experience. In this chapter I will introduce significant areas of academic research related to identity with a particular focus on the relevancy they hold in relation to my experience of being Métis. I will present identity as conceptualized by narrative theorists and explore some models of both ethnic and multiracial identity. In addition, I will present studies and theories related to Aboriginal identity with a particular emphasis on the influence of acculturation. Finally, I will introduce literature that highlights specific factors that impact contemporary Métis identity.
Narrative Identity Theory

Throughout the 20th century, there have been various well-recognized theorists who have conceptualized identity development as a developmental process that follows a relatively sequential and linear path throughout the life-span. An illustration of such theories of identity can be found in the psychosocial crises illustrated by Erikson (1950; 1968; 1982). More recently, such perceptions of identity have been questioned in their applicability beyond the population of Caucasian men who formed the original reference group from which such theories were conceptualized (Josselson, 1987).

Over the last decade there has been a movement that has increased in momentum which views identity in terms of a life story, set within a culturally relevant process of meaning creation (McAdams, 1996, 2001a, 2001b; Polkinghorne, 1988). Specifically, identity is seen within the context of an individual's life narrative and personal histories are said to be evolving constructs that bring together many different aspects of the self to create a degree of unity, purpose and meaning (McAdams, 2001a). McAdams (2001b) explains the process of identity formation as an integration process where one organizes his or her life in a culturally meaningful narrative. McAdams sees the process of identity formation as engaging in late adolescence or early adulthood, while stating that identity work continues throughout adulthood.

Polkinghorne (1988) also explores personal identity in terms of narrative and explains, "narrative enrichment occurs when one retrospectively revises, selects and orders past details in such a way as to create a self narrative that is coherent and satisfying and that will serve as justification for one's present condition and situation" (p.106). An individual's personal story/identity is a "recollected self" and the more whole
the narrative that is formed, the increasingly integrated the self will become. McAdams (2001b) clarifies that identity includes the “construction of a future story that continues the ‘I’ of the person” (p.107).

This way of seeing identity as a life narrative resonates more closely with my experience as a Métis woman through the discussion of how one perceives their identity in relation to their past (including ancestry), present, and future. With this in mind I feel it is important that the dialogue about identity in this study be further expanded to include the experience of identity in relation to ethnic heritage.

**Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity has been explained as the degree of one’s involvement and the quality of one’s relationship to the ancestral group(s) of his or her parentage and his or her sense of belonging within these group(s) (Alipuria, 2002). There are various perspectives that are discussed by theorists who explore ethnic identity. For instance, Rodriguez, Cauce and Wilson (2002) present a model that outlines phases of ethnic identity development that begin during childhood and continue into early adulthood. Firstly, the authors suggest that childhood is marked as a time of relative awareness, when a young person is able to recognize race or ethnic differences. These individuals are aware of what race or ethnicity he or she is a member of, but race or ethnicity is not seen as an important part of life. Secondly, an emerging awareness begins when a child or adolescent starts to understand the social significance of race or ethnicity. The individual then moves towards exploration/identification, when the person starts to build an understanding and appreciation of how race or ethnicity is personally significant in his or her life. Finally, the young person moves into commitment when they come to a positive
commitment in their membership in their racial or ethnic group. This phase is also marked by the individual’s acceptance of both the negative and positive aspects of his or her own group, along with those of other groups.

Rodriguez, et al. (2002) note that young people of colour who are members of less stigmatized ethnic groups or individuals who possess more “white-like” appearances may proceed through the early stages in the model at a slower pace. Thus, this model is limited in its ability to reflect the ethnic identity experience of individuals whose physical appearance may more closely resemble the majority culture. As a result, the phases of ethnic identity development discussed by Rodriguez, et al. are limited in their relevancy to the experience of many Métis people. Specifically, it would be unusual for a Métis person who has been assimilated into mainstream Canadian culture to move through these phases in a linear fashion and at the childhood developmental stages suggested. In addition, factors such as physical features and/or their level of connection to a Métis community have a significant influence on one’s ethnic identity development. Thus, the above model of ethnic identity development illustrates some elements regarding identity but falls short in its representation of Métis identity. In addition, the above model does not provide a space to negotiate the experience of being of both First Nations and European heritage or the experience of being multiracial.

Multiracial Identity

While striving to develop a whole and integrated identity, multiracial individuals are often confronted with distinctive challenges. Root (1990) discusses that developing a positive self-concept and fully integrating a multiracial heritage is a complex and long-term process influenced by various socio-cultural, political, and familial pressures that
impact the unique experience of each multiracial person. For example, mainstream North American culture has an investment in the “us and them” mentality of racial categorization (Nakashima, 1992), therefore even the existence of multiracial individuals challenges societal norms and “mono-racial” categorizations. Due to these societal pressures, a multiracial individual may feel forced to choose an identity that does not fit with their self-perceptions. In addition, a multiracial person may experience only conditional acceptance or face rejection from both (or more) groups that combine to create their racial heritage (Root). Root highlights that racial identity conflict is particularly poignant as multiracial youth move away from their family, increases their dependence on peers and begins to date. In summary, the lack of a clear and distinct racial reference group, coupled with society’s unwillingness to see racial identities as equal leaves a multiracial individual automatically assigned to “other” status (Root).

In his model of Biracial Identity Development, Poston (1990) outlines a series of stages that he views as representing the process of identity development as experienced by biracial (or multiracial) individuals. His sequential model consists of five stages: personal identity, choice of group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration. The first stage, personal identity, occurs in the early years of a multiracial person’s life. Poston explains this as a time when the multiracial child’s identity is mainly based on self-esteem and when their self worth is supported within their family. The following stage, choice of group categorization, follows as a child faces a “time of crisis” when they are likely to be encouraged to choose one ethnic identity over another. The child may interpret this time of choice similar to choosing between their parents. Thirdly, the stage of enmeshment/denial most often happens in adolescence when the multiracial
youth may feel confused and guilty because of their earlier choice of an identity that does not recognize the full scope of their racial background. An adolescent’s movement toward the fourth stage of Poston’s development model, appreciation, involves the successful navigation of all previous stages. Despite this new stage of appreciation, it is likely that participants will continue to identify mainly with one racial heritage over another until they enter the fifth and final stage, integration. According to Poston, this final stage is characterized by valuing the full scope of one’s racial heritage along with attaining a sense of wholeness.

In opposition to the final stage of Poston’s (1990) Biracial Identity Development Model, Root (1990) challenges the concept of a single positive outcome to identity resolution for a multiracial person. Specifically, Root suggests that there are four possible positive outcomes to a multiracial individual’s search for identity. These include; identifying with a racial identity which has been assigned by society, identification with all racial groups that combine to create the individual’s racial heritage, identification with a single racial group, or identification with a new racial group (i.e. identify them self as multiracial). Through providing these four possible outcomes to successful identity resolution, Root advocates a more flexible and less prescriptive theoretical framework for multiracial identity development.

In agreement with the flexible view proposed by Root, I continue to be hesitant about simplifying the process of identity development through isolating stages that are meant to describe the experience of a large diversity of people. In particular, despite the multiracial heritage of Métis people, the model described by Poston (1999) does not provide the flexibility to represent the full extent of this experience. Once again this
model assumes that an individual will progress through the stages along with childhood developmental tasks and that the individual is in an environment where they are provided information about the full scope of their ancestry. Métis people raised within assimilated families who have only become fully aware of their aboriginal heritage in adulthood are likely to integrate their multiracial heritage differently than suggested by the above model.

Aboriginal Identity

An understanding of the experience of Métis identity also requires that one reflect on several aspects of Aboriginal identity in general. Aboriginal peoples constitute an incredibly diverse group of communities with numerous distinct languages, values, and cultural traditions (Kirmayer et al., 2000). Due to this diversity, it is incorrect to generalize one construction of identity to reflect the experience of these individuals and communities. Simultaneously, due to centuries of colonization that have worked towards the destruction and eradication of Indigenous cultures (Little Soldier, 1985; Kirmayer et al., 2000), there are certain elements which continue to impact the collective and individual identities of all Aboriginal people in North America. The impact of colonization continues to be evident on both community and individual levels.

Through their research that focuses on suicide among Aboriginal youth in British Columbia, Chandler and Lalonde (1998) find support for the link between the strength of a given Aboriginal community and the health and sense of identity of their youth. The authors reflect on the concept of “self-continuity,” or whether or not an individual perceives themselves as connected to their past and future, and how this perception influences a young person’s investment in their continued existence. Specifically, a risk
of suicide ensues when an individual is unable to see them self as continuous in time (i.e. possesses a sense of self-continuity). The authors explain that if “the grounds upon which a coherent sense of self is ordinarily made to rest are cut away, life is made cheap, and the prospect of one’s own death becomes a matter of indifference” (Chandler & Lalonde, p.193). In order to successfully navigate adolescence, individuals of all backgrounds need to have a sense of personal and cultural persistence (Chandler, Lalonde & Sokol, 2000). The importance of culture as a guiding source of knowledge about identity becomes critical in adolescence when one’s sense of self-continuity can be unclear. As a result of the dramatic changes in Aboriginal communities and culture since the beginning of colonization, Indigenous youth can be faced with added challenges in identity development.

In response to the important role of culture, Chandler and Lalonde (1998) have explained cultural-continuity as a significant factor contributing to the mental health of Aboriginal youth. The authors connect cultural continuity to the degree to which a given community has control over their own affairs, along with the level of connection between the members of each community. The authors demonstrate the number of “markers of cultural continuity” in a given community coincide with a significant drop in the rate of youth suicide (Chandler and Lalonde). In particular, the communities that are engaged in the active process of the rehabilitation and preservation of their culture are the communities where the youth suicide rates are significantly lower. These implications of the importance of community cohesion on individual identity present a particular disadvantage for Indigenous peoples such as the Métis (Kirmayer et al., 2000) who have
had their communities fractured and scattered to various part of Canada over the past few centuries.

In addition to the impact of colonization on the health of Aboriginal communities and individuals, Indigenous individuals frequently have to navigate their place in a world dominated by a majority culture whose values frequently conflict with and often minimize the values of their own community. Aboriginal people may experience feeling torn between two cultures as they attempt to stay connected to their ancestral culture and at the same time live within mainstream society. Garrett and Pichette (2000) agree that cultural values and the influence of acculturation are critical factors in the identity development of Indigenous people. The authors explain acculturation as the outcome of contact between two or more cultures by which change happens in both cultures as a result. Garrett and Pichette highlight that there is a particular type of acculturation, better known as assimilation, which occurs when one culture changes much more than the other and in time comes to appear the same as the other. The authors note that assimilation is often conducted through the use of force for the purpose of maintaining dominance over a colonized people. This concept of assimilation more closely resembles the experience of Indigenous peoples and, therefore, the extent to which an Indigenous individual and community is acculturated is inseparable from the history of oppression that has been the legacy of European colonization (Green, 1997). The resulting effects of assimilation are often a dislocation from community, culture and a sense of history.

Attempting to meet the demands of two very different cultures can be challenging and can result in stress and some times failure. Conversely, if an individual is able to negotiate successfully between these cultures he or she is likely to enjoy a sense of
competence and stability (Beauvais 2000; Garrett, 1996; Garrett & Pichette, 2000; Little Soldier, 1985). As a result, an individual and community's experience with acculturation moves to the forefront when discussing issues of identity.

Little Soldier (1985) has presented a model entitled the *Acculturation Continuum* in which he suggests possible levels of acculturation of Indigenous individuals (see figure 1).

![Acculturation Continuum](image)

*Figure 1. Acculturation Continuum (Little Soldier, 1985)*

At either end of the continuum lie the two mono-cultural extremes, one end representing those individuals who are full immersed in their traditional culture and the other symbolizing individuals who identify solely with mainstream society. Little Soldier explains the indicated “danger zone” as a likely area of identity confusion. Specifically, some Indigenous individuals may lose their connection to their culture of origin and find themselves caught in between traditional indigenous culture and dominant society. The danger zone is characterized by a lack of comfort with either of the cultural influences the person may be exposed to and this zone is said to be “fraught with conflicts” and may result in a “serious identity crises.” At the center of the continuum lies the level of acculturation Little Soldier presents as “bicultural.” This area of the continuum
corresponds to those individuals who are comfortable moving between both cultures. Individuals in this area are likely to attain a sense of mastery and clarity of identity.

Garrett and Pichette (2000) have elaborated on the Acculturation Continuum developed by Little Soldier (1985) and discuss five possible levels of acculturation of Indigenous individuals in relation to mainstream North American culture. These levels are: traditional, marginal, bicultural, assimilated and pantraditional. The traditional level of acculturation is explained as referring to individuals who, for the most part, speak and think in their native language and may have some understanding of English. A person in this classification would possess a worldview constructed by traditional values and would practice only traditional tribal customs and spirituality. The second level of acculturation is termed marginal and is associated with Little Soldier's "danger zone" described earlier. This level of acculturation is characterized by individuals who may speak both their Native language as well as English in their home. These individuals may not accept the traditional cultural values or practices of their Nation and, at the same time, are also not able to accept mainstream values and culture. This marginal identity is said to be at the highest risk for unsuccessful coping behaviours (Garrett, 1996; Garrett & Pichette, 2000; LaFramboise et al., 1990; Little Soldier, 1985). The third level of acculturation, which also has been discussed earlier, is bicultural. This category represents individuals who generally are accepted by members of their ancestral nation, as well as members of mainstream society. They are able to move between and subscribe to the behaviours and values of both cultures concurrently. Bicultural individuals are viewed as possessing fewer personal, social and academic problems (Garrett & Pichette, 2000) due to their ability to respond to changing environmental and social demands.
addition, biculturalism is thought to lead to increased cognitive functioning and self-actualization (LaFramboise et al., 1990). The fourth category of acculturation is assimilation and is characterized by an individual who is accepted by dominant society and lives only by mainstream cultural values and behaviours. This category may consist of those who have been separated from their culture through forced assimilation, those who are unaware of their indigenous ancestral heritage (C. Richardson, 2000), or those who have chosen to abandon the values of their culture of origin and associate themselves solely with mainstream society. The fifth and final category of acculturation, according to Garrett and Pichette, is pantraditional, which is characterized by Indigenous individuals who were previously in the assimilated category and have made a conscious choice to reconnect with their ancestral traditions. These individuals may speak both English and their traditional language and are also generally accepted by mainstream society. When working with terms that describe how acculturation effects identity, Beauvais (2000) notes that culture is not static and one should avoid placing oppressive limitations on what defines “traditional” Indigenous identity.

Through this introduction to the varying levels of acculturation of Aboriginal people, the diversity of experiences with mainstream and traditional indigenous culture becomes increasingly clear. The influence of one’s experience of acculturation and/or assimilation carry considerable weight in the development of an individual’s identity and must been considered when discussing Métis identity.

Métis Identity

Through the exploration of Métis history presented in chapter 1, one begins to develop an awareness of the multitude of issues that combine to influence the identity of
Métis individuals and communities. Due to the historical fragmentation of the Métis population, there is a lack of clearly defined Métis communities in many parts of Canada. C. Richardson (2001) explains, “Our identity and culture has been so rocked by the histories of dispossession that there have been many repercussions on identity. The process of reclaiming pride and identity is going to be a long one” (p. 175). Though a collective identity is growing, currently a Métis individual may feel a poignant disconnection from any community with which to identify. Due in part to the many implications of not having a specific land base to act as a “geographical homeland,” the process of self-definition is difficult yet crucial in that “one’s sense of Métis self serves as a psychological homeland” (C. Richardson, 2003, p.23). Therefore, the process of developing a clear sense of cultural and ancestral identity is of particular importance in the lives of Métis people.

The Métis of today have been called the “Invisible People” (C. Richardson, 2002; Richardson & Seaborn, 2002). This term reflects the lack of historical recognition of Métis communities by mainstream Canadian society, as well as the myriad of physical characteristics that may surface through the mixing of people of different ancestral backgrounds. By virtue of this mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry, within the context of Canadian history, Métis people are said to embody both the “oppressor and the oppressed” (C. Richardson, 2002). A possible result of these dualistic identities is a tension within the self that requires a continuous process of reconciliation and incorporation. In her discussion of Métis identity, C. Richardson (2003) notes, “identity building can be problematic at the best if times; it can be all the more complex when historical, sociological, and cultural dynamics interweave to create uncertain and non-
static identities on the mainstream Canadian landscape” (p.26). Due to such complexities, it becomes understandable that there are many different life stories that fit under the umbrella of Métis experience. As a result of the relocation and fracturing of Métis communities, the varying paths of one’s ancestors often dictates the extent to which a Métis person is exposed to, or even aware of, their cultural heritage.

The environment that a Métis child is raised in plays an enormous role in the identity they develop in adulthood. In her Model of Four Métis Categories of Childhood Experience, C. Richardson (2000) explains some common environments within which Métis children may be raised. These four categories are; “Culturally Aware,” “Assimilated,” “Adopted,” and “I’m not Métis.” The experience of an individual in the culturally aware category is that of being raised in a Métis community and possessing a solid cultural identity. They are likely to be proud and aware of their family background and may also be encircled by an extended Métis family. Those who fall into this category are likely to be accustomed to being the recipients of prejudice and racism. The second possible category of a Métis childhood experience is assimilated. These individuals are raised in a Métis family and the family itself is assimilated into the dominant culture. In other words, they are raised as Euro-Canadian and their family values reflect those of mainstream culture. In this category there is likely to be minimal or no identification or participation in Métis culture. These individuals are likely to find out about their Métis ancestry in adulthood, may feel a tension between “their inner and outer reality,” and experience changes and fluctuations in their identity. The third Métis childhood experience category is adopted and refers to Métis children who have been adopted into non-Métis families. These children may not be aware of their Métis ancestry and, in fact,
may not know of their adoption. Similar to the assimilated Métis, the adopted Métis identity may exist in a state of constant change and they may have an inner sense that they are somehow ‘different’ or ‘don’t quite fit in.’ C. Richardson discusses how the connection of these individuals to their aboriginal roots may express itself unconsciously through their attraction to objects or ways that are traditionally Aboriginal. C. Richardson has titled the final category of Métis childhood experience “I’m not Métis.” As is reflected in the title, an individual in this category does not identify as Métis. This may be due to a lack of awareness of their Métis ancestry or could signify a deliberate denial of their Métis and/or Aboriginal heritage.

In addition to the influence of family experience, Métis people are impacted by views held by the larger social system in Canada. The oppression experienced by Métis communities has been devastating and continues to be covertly and overtly perpetuated today. For instance, people of mixed Aboriginal and European decent are often faced with subtle and not so subtle challenges to their identity. Brant (1994) discusses that “for those of us who do not conform to a stereotype of what Native people ‘look like,’ claiming our identities as Native people becomes an exercise in racism: ‘Gee, I didn’t know Indians had blue eyes’” (p.20). Not having the physical appearance that many people in larger society expect an Aboriginal person to look like can be a confusing and distressing experience for someone who feels a strong internal connection to his or her aboriginal ancestry (C. Richardson, 2001).

There is a complex mix of backgrounds, experiences, challenges and ancestries that construct the various identities of Métis people. Despite the challenges faced by many individuals of combined European and First Nations ancestry, the option to identify
oneself as Métis provides a space for an integrated identity that incorporates both aspects of their heritage. This has been described as a third space for identity development where one recognizes oneself as connected to, but distinct from both elements of his or her heritage (C. Richardson, 2003).

**Summary of Chapter Two**

In this chapter I have highlighted some of the literature that is directly relevant to the understanding of Métis identity. By exploring narrative concepts of identity along with ethnic, Aboriginal, and multiracial identity development, one begins to develop a foundation for understanding how these concepts combine to influence a Métis individual's experience. In addition, through the introduction to some of the unique challenges that face Métis people today, we have begun the dialogue about the experience of embodying a Métis identity. In the following chapter, I will discuss ethical and methodological considerations and the autoethnographic approach of this study will be laid out.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Where can I find a place in this process? How Do I Represent? How do I
tell the story so it will be heard without objectifying... Disconnecting?
How will my community benefit?

Introduction

Throughout the creative process of developing this study, many transformations
have taken place on both conceptual and structural levels. This metamorphosis has been
influenced by ethical considerations and personal intuitions that took shape and grew in
magnitude as I strove to find a voice for my experience as a Métis person within the
constraints of academic discourse. It became increasingly evident that to stay close to my
own values, and epistemological, and ontological views, I needed to search further for
methodologies that pushed the bounds of traditional research and were open to other
ways of sourcing knowledge. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the ethical
considerations when engaging in research in an Indigenous context, provide a brief
introduction to qualitative research, and discuss the choice of autoethnography as the
methodology employed in this study. In addition, I will introduce the instrumentation to
be used in this study, how data will be collected and how the results will be interpreted.

Ethical Considerations

From the onset of my interest in exploring Métis identity in a research context
various ethical considerations have lead me to ponder questions on many levels. "What is
the most ethically appropriate approach to exploring the lives of a very diverse collective of Aboriginal people?” and “How can I approach this project in a way that will be informative and expansive, while emphasizing that generalizing the findings to all Métis communities and individuals is inappropriate?” While pondering these questions and exploring methodologies, I have looked to the writings of other aboriginal researchers and authors in an attempt to gain insight into how they have negotiated these issues. For example, Graveline (2000) discusses how her Métis ancestry and teachings from Elders inform her epistemological position. Specifically, she explains that a different view of the source of knowledge must be addressed in research in Aboriginal communities, noting “to Elders only those who have Experienced an Event are Empowered to Speak about it [sic]” (p.362). Therefore, the knowledge of an experience lies in the awareness of those who have experienced the phenomenon first hand, and the voice of the person with the experience is considered above the voice of the objective observer. As a researcher and as an individual, I share the belief that knowledge is sourced from lived experience.

When engaging in research within any Aboriginal community, ethical issues in relation to method must be addressed explicitly. Graveline (2000) discusses how the use of positivist approaches in research have historically denied Aboriginal people voice and have presented Indigenous cultures as “uncivilized, vanishing, disadvantaged and disposessed” (p.362). Walker (2003) continues this discussion, stating, “all modes of scientific thought are culturally based, including Western science, yet many Western researchers continue to conduct research as though the cultural foundations of their paradigms and methodologies are universal” (p.37). Therefore, the placement of previously considered “bias free” methods at the top of the hierarchy of methodological
techniques is in the process of being challenged, suggesting evidence of a shifting tide in academic inquiry (Dillard, Abdur-Rashid & Tyson, 2000). Dillard et al. note that these changes are partly due to an academic environment that is moving more and more towards the inclusion of individuals historically excluded, specifically those who are not considered to be part of the majority culture. The cultural worldview of the researcher influences what she or he considers acceptable data sources and credible methodological approaches (Walker). Therefore, the inclusion of more researchers with diverse cultural worldviews is likely to encourage further questioning of beliefs and rules regarding what constitutes rigorous research. For instance, “a growing number of Indigenous scholars maintain that valid research involving Indigenous peoples must be based in research paradigms that are congruent with Indigenous realities and ways of knowing” (Walker, p.40). Therefore, in accord with the ‘changing tide’ of research and the necessity to move beyond the limitations of many existing methodologies, the research environment I have chosen is one that emphasizes the lived-experience of being Métis, aiming to provide a space free of oppressive and/or assumptive research traditions.

**General Approach**

As an overarching research approach, qualitative research in general strives to “interpret, understand, explain and bring meaning” to a phenomenon within its natural context (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). Anderson and Arsenault explain, “a fundamental assumption of the qualitative research paradigm is that a profound understanding of the world can be gained through conversation and observation in natural settings rather than through experimental manipulation under artificial conditions” (p.121). The qualitative research approach has been described as an umbrella under which there are various
unique, yet related designs that carry their own set of assumptions, characteristics and methods of inquiry (Anderson & Arsenault; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and it is assumed that each researcher comes from a particular perspective influenced by their socio-economic class, gender, race, culture, and ethnic community (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Therefore, the perceptions and lenses held by the researcher are acknowledged to have an intricate relationship to the topic being studied and an influence on the research findings.

As with any approach to research, there are both challenges and rewards involved in the use of a qualitative approach. Elements that are not with the purview of qualitative research are the need to generalize beyond the participants of the study and the need to isolate the views of the researcher from the topic being studied. Strong incentives to the use of a qualitative approach is the potential for an in-depth view of a particular phenomenon within its natural environment and the acknowledgement of the influence of the researcher's various lenses and influence on the study.

**Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a methodology with roots in the reflexive writings that have emerged in the practice of ethnography in the later part of the twentieth century (Davies, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Despite this connection to ethnography, autoethnography has developed into an independent form of inquiry in its own right. Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain, “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p.739). Therefore, this methodology provides a space where the personal narrative of the researcher is offered to the reader as a guide, leading them through the lived experience
of the topic being explored. Autoethnographic texts are usually written in the first person and appear as short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, social science prose (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and visual art (Ellis, 2002). Therefore, this methodology allows for the expression of personal experience through many forms and on numerous levels.

L. Richardson (2000) contends that both creative arts and analytical science have their own lenses with which to view the world and autoethnographic researchers “see best with both lenses focused and magnified” (p.254). In addition, in his discussion of the use of visual art as a tool for autoethnography, Slattery (2001) clarifies that arts-based autoethnography takes the narrative text of the researcher further through the direct engagement with the unconscious. The author continues by explaining, “the researcher as artist working within explores the autobiographical context of his or her lived experience first and then allows the unconscious to direct the creation of an aesthetic text that represents symbolically these experiences” (p.389). Therefore, the inclusion of both narrative and visual text combine to strengthen and expand the rigor of an autoethnographic study.

Along with the use of various forms of personal texts, the concept of valuing the subjective experience of the researcher as a main source of knowledge is a diversion from traditional academic research. Richardson and Lockridge (1991) explain, “we know from our own lived experience that life as subjectively experienced is the key to understanding the cultural and the sociological” (p.338). As a result of valuing subjective experience, Russel (1998) describes autoethnography as “a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic
subjectivities” (p.2). This methodology challenges the level of worth placed on silent authorship prevalent in many approaches to research (Holt, 2003) and creates a space where those previously studied as the ‘other’ can present their own cultural stories and identities (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography provides the freedom necessary for the representation of cultural values that are beyond the traditional assumptions of academic discourse because within the methods employed, “the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (Spry, 2001, p.711).

Emphasizing the subjective in narrative texts of all forms also stands in the way of the widespread urge in academia to abstract and explain (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Slattery (2001) clarifies that autoethnography “resists the positivist urge for universal and unalterable objectivity, contending instead that we can come to understanding through experiences that evoke rather than simply represent and replicate” (p.384). Therefore, this methodology challenges the reader to avoid overarching generalizations and emphasizes the emotional engagement of the reader.

A significant philosophy behind autoethnography is its resistance to strict, overreaching methodological criteria (Bochner, 2000). Bochner explains, “alternative autoethnography is a blurred genre of discourse in which investigators are liberated to shape their work in terms of its own necessities rather than according to received ideas about what must be done” (p.269). Therefore, one of the purposes of autoethnography is to open research to possibilities that may be restricted by or beyond the scope of more limiting methodological approaches. This resistance to guidelines which govern practice comes from an awareness that methodological criteria pose as being “beyond culture,
beyond ourselves and our own conventions, beyond human choice and interpretation when, of course, they are not” (p.267). Thus, those who practice autoethnography are hesitant to lay out strict guidelines with which to assess this genre of research (Bochner, 2000; Clough, 2000; Ellis, 2000; L. Richardson, 2000).

Despite the collective hesitation to identify criteria by which to structure and evaluate autoethnography, there has been some discussion regarding how autoethnographic researchers discern the strength and success of studies that are conducted using this methodology (Bochner, 2000; Clough, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Holt, 2003; L. Richardson, 2000). For example, L. Richardson (2000) has outlined five criteria that she employs when assessing the success of an autoethnographic study. Firstly, she reflects on the **substantive contribution** of the study, questioning if the writer demonstrates “a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective” (p.254). Secondly, L. Richardson suggests the importance of **aesthetic merit** or the artistry of the text as a consideration. Specifically, “does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses” (p.254)? Thirdly, **reflexivity** or the author’s relationship to the text must be considered both in the role as researcher and as subject. Fourth, the **impact** of the story or how the reader is affected both emotionally and intellectually by the text is considered. L. Richardson ponders whether the text generates new ideas or inspires the reader to write, try new research practices, or moves him or her to action. Finally, Richardson reflects on how well the text **expresses a reality** or if the text seems to be a “credible account of a cultural, social, individual or a communal sense of the ‘real’” (p.254).
Ellis (2000) also has discussed the importance of an autoethnographic text's social contribution. In the critiquing process, Ellis considers the question; "what have I learned from the story about social life, social process, the experience of others, the author's experience, my own life" (p.275). Ellis also sees the significance of critiquing how the story is written, considering various questions, such as; "Does the author show instead of tell? Does she paint vivid pictures? Smells? Feelings? Does the conversation feel real to life" (p.275)? In addition, Ellis reflects on the goals of the researcher and the level of success of the study in meeting those goals. She also explores whether the goals themselves seem worthwhile, considering what readers might take away from the story.

In addition, both Ellis (2000) and Bochner (2000) emphasize that their review of autoethnographic texts involves looking for a high level of ethical self-consciousness on behalf of the researcher, including the level of consideration and care for how the people in the researcher's story are portrayed. In addition, the underlying moral convictions that have inspired the study are considered and are expected to reflect ethical perspectives that underlie self-narrative research. For example, the researcher who holds a feminist, communitarian value system is expected to operate from an ethical perspective that values elements such as community, empowerment, mutuality and narrative transformation (Denzin, 1997). Ellis also reflects on the suitability of her role in critiquing the text, asking if she is the proper reviewer for the study due to her familiarity with the style of writing and mode of presentation.

Through introducing some criteria seen to be symbolic of a successful autoethnography as well as exploring the foundational concepts of this approach to academic inquiry, the intentions that underlie my choice of methodology continue to be
made explicit. Specifically, my choice of autoethnography is guided by what Smith (1999) describes as an Indigenous Research Agenda. This agenda demands a place in academic inquiry that “privileges indigenous concerns, indigenous practices and indigenous participation as researchers and researched” (p. 107) and highlights key concepts such as healing, decolonization, spirituality, and recovery. It is my belief that the inherent flexibility of autoethnography and its recognition if diverse modes of personal expression as legitimate ways to convey knowledge will honour the multi-layered experience of being Métis. The use of autoethnography is also intended to challenge the tendency of the reader to generalize the findings of this study to all Métis people and to engage the reader in a way that evokes emotion and empathy. Through this discussion of my ethical and methodological considerations a solid background has been painted for the discussion of how I will conduct this research study.

Instrumentation

The source of data for this study will be my personal journals and reflections on my experience of being Métis. I will engage with this topic through systematic sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991), an internal reflective process that works to access the emotional aspect of the experience being studied. Ellis explains, “it is possible through introspection for people to acknowledge emotions that they might not be willing to admit to under other circumstances” (p. 34). This process involves dialogue with the self and can be represented through fieldnotes and/or narratives. Engaging in systematic sociological introspection will allow the description and exploration of powerful and subtle feelings as I simultaneously observe and experience the transformations of my identity.
Data Collection

Data will be collected during my engagement with the topic of assimilation and Métis identity over the course of one month. The data will include both historical and current accounts of my experience of identity, resourced from personal journals written over my lifetime, and recollections of significant experiences. I will also incorporate previously created visual artwork that has been inspired by my shifts in identity. In addition to historical information, I will include current personal written and visual text in order to convey my present experience and some of the daily challenges and celebrations of being a Métis person. In the process of communicating my experience, I will use many mediums including, writing, painting, drawing, photography and sculpture. All of these forms of data will be considered “self-introspective interpretive materials” (Ellis, 1991) in the final presentation of the results.

Procedure for Data Analysis

Due to the focus autoethnography places on the power of the text to communicate experience, the final presentation of the data will be in a form that remains close to the original state of my narrative. Specifically, the written text and visual art will be presented in a “layered account” (Ronai, 1995). This type of account draws from multiple points of view and represents a lived-experience that is then presented to the reader. Ronai clarifies,

The layered account offers an impressionistic sketch, handing readers layers of experience so they may fill in the spaces and construct and interpretation of the writer’s narrative. The readers reconstruct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it, and taking more away from it (Ronai, p.396).
Therefore, the narrative is presented in a layered fashion that sketches out the lived experience of the researcher, while leaving room for the reader to engage with the narrative in a way that sources their own experience.

Summary of Chapter Three

The instrumentation and mode of data collection and analysis chosen for this study reflect the fluidity of the autoethnographic approach to research. In this chapter I have provided an outline of this methodology and have discussed the ethical considerations that have guided my selection of this approach for the present study. I have also demonstrated the consistency between the philosophies that underlie autoethnography and my own epistemological and ontological perspective.

The following chapters will include an account of my experience as a Métis woman, followed by a discussion of the implications for the helping professions. In chapter four I will present the written and visual narrative of my movement from a place of assimilation towards living my life as a Métis woman. I will braid together the strands of my experience in an attempt to demonstrate in an integrated way the multiple influences I have encountered and continue to be challenged with along this journey.
Chapter Four

*Personal Narrative*

As my grandmother has pointed out, I am the only "dark" grandchild she has. It seems that my brown hair and the slight olive tint to my skin are a faint reminder of some of those who came before me. I guess the genes are like the rumours, you never really know when they will surface again. I have often been asked about my background. I have been mistaken for Spanish, French, Mexican, Portuguese and Jewish, depending on my tan and what setting I am in. In the past, it seemed that my identity was flexible and this has often left me feeling hollow. I have searched for my identity and a sense of connection in many cultures and have repeatedly come up empty.

*****

Figure 2. Cultural Infusion (1996)
I constructed this self-portrait approximately three years before I began to wake up to my Métis ancestry. The television is symbolic of where I received cultural influence beyond my family as I was growing up. The medical gown speaks to the sickness of my spirit and the IV represents the need for healing and an infusion of culture and identity. The shoes I am wearing are for Flamenco dance and symbolize how I have looked to many sources to explain and satisfy the hole in my spirit.

* * * * *

Spending a summer working at a fishing lodge, I am about as north as you can get in the Haida Gwaii. The land here is strong and tells me things. One day, I get dropped off across Parry Pass at the village site of K’yuusdaa. As I step out of the boat onto the shore the land enters through my feet and fills me with a feeling I have never known before. In the forest, I relish in the thick blanket of moss that covers everything, including the holes in the ground where the longhouses once stood. Lying on the ground, I look up under a moss-covered log and come face to face with a character on a totem pole.

I am walking with a friend I have recently met at the lodge. As we moved through the forest we talk about many things. At one point he looks at me inquisitively.

“Sylvie, are you part Native?” he asks. I wonder briefly what I should answer. I have no hard facts to tell me I am Native. At this time, I don’t know what ‘Métis’ means.

“No,” I quickly answer. I hear a thunder in my ears and my body tells me I have lied. I quickly correct myself, “Well, there has always been a family rumour.” This answer seems to satisfy us all.

* * * * *
I photographed this upturned tree at the village site of K’yuusdaa on Graham Island in the Haida Gwaii. Two years later I incorporated this piece into a show of some of my photographs and gave it the above title. This image represents my lack of knowledge of my Métis heritage as I was visiting these Islands. It represents my lack of grounding in and dislocation from my ancestry. When I chose this title two years after I photographed the image, I was coming into an awareness of my family roots and feeling pain from that disconnection. Though I did not openly explain the inspiration for the title in the show, it was the first step in openly acknowledging my history from my maternal line.

* * * * *

At the end of a warm day in August I am at my parent’s home for dinner. We are all seated around the table and enjoying the good food and making jokes. My aunt and
uncle are visiting from the mainland, making for energetic conversation. We talk about many things, but what stands out to me is when my uncle starts talking about our Native ancestry. I continue to eat and pay attention. After a moment my aunt looks straight at me.

"If I had such a background, I would want to know more about it," She says with conviction. Her words hit me. I had never thought that I would have the power to ask more questions about my family history. I had thought this was up to those in the generations before me. I had never thought it was my responsibility too.

* * * * *

There is a talk that is being held up at the university that a new friend has told me about. It is about Aboriginal perspectives on spirituality and I am very excited to attend. My friend and I meet up at the campus and make our way over to the building where the talk is being held. Along the way I tell her about my conversation with my uncle and aunt. I tell her that I have Native ancestry. She is surprised and supportive. I tell her that this talk has another layer of significance for me.

We enter into a room full of people and find some of the last seats near the back. The presenter has tried to form a circle with those who have attended but the room is too small. I am secretly relieved that I can hide in the back. My heart is racing and I am questioning my intentions for being here. The presenter, an impressive man approximately in his mid fifties, asks everyone to take a turn to stand up and state their intentions for being here. My palms start to sweat. My mind is trying to figure out what I will say. I notice I am too far away from the door to make a smooth exit. Once the circle gets around to me, I stand up quickly.
"I am just interested in spirituality." I say. The elder looks at me with a puzzled, questioning look. I quickly sit down again, returning to my hiding spot. It is not comfortable to be visible yet.

* * * * *

It is February 2002 and these days I don’t hesitate to tell whoever asks me that I am Métis, but beyond this I am still insecure. I have not yet found my voice and sharing any details of my identity is still something I hold close to my chest. This is because I do not know what is mine to claim. If I embrace my heritage and openly acknowledge my spirituality, do I take from the voice of First Nation’s people who do not have the privileges I do? I often wonder who I think I am. I am a middle class girl from the west side of Vancouver. Who am I to speak loudly of my family’s history? Am I just a “wanna be Indian”? On the other hand, by keeping silent am I only perpetuating the cover up and helping many people forget the history of the Métis people? Helping along the denial of our existence?

* * * * *

My grandmother felt she needed to hide who she was to avoid persecution and to live a better life. Because of her lighter skin, she could choose this path. In a way I need to honour the choice she made. I am sure I would not have the same opportunities I have now if she had not kept our family history secret, but as I mentioned earlier, at what cost?

Nonetheless, my spirit knows who I am. I am beginning to understand how this country’s history of oppression has denied me my right to know my origins. This repression has bred a shame in my family that tries to stifle any pride that may begin to grow. This stands in the way of my grandmother’s stories and leaves very little for me to
embrace as my own. I believe this family shame keeps me in my place, for to ask questions outright would not illicit answers, just more walls.

Despite the code of silence that surrounds our heritage, there are a few family members that have begun to ask more questions. Through their support I have felt encouraged to explore for myself. I guess it is beginning to feel safer now to acknowledge our ancestors. I have begun to scratch the surface of what it means to be Métis.

Figure 4. Amnesia (2002)

This is a mixed media painting that combines portraits of my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother and myself. The darkness in the image speaks to the shadowed part of ourselves, our hidden history. The portrait of myself found in the top
left corner illustrates my attempts to acknowledge this forgotten past as I look towards the future.

* * * * *

During a visit to my second cousin’s home I find I am asking many questions. It is okay to do that here. My cousin is very interested in bringing to light our Métis heritage. As we are sitting over a cup of tea, she hands me a photograph. I have never seen a picture of my great-grandmother before. My eyes are glued.

“Do you recognize the eyes?” my cousin asks me.

“They are the same as mine.” I say. I am transfixed. This woman is Native. There is no question in my mind. More pieces are coming together.

*I examine your face for a sign of our lost story, hoping that over the years I will begin to understand the language it takes to truly know.*

Later that same month I am at my great uncle’s home. I have the photograph with me and he confirms that the woman in the photograph is my great-grandmother. He shows me other photographs of his life. There are layers of information here and messages that I pick up on. He tells me that his brother found out that we have ancestors who fought along side Louis Riel. The pieces continue to come to me. I am excited to be getting more information about my family history. A proud history.

* * * * *

I have been in front of my mirror for longer than I’d care to admit. I have been looking hard. Examining my face. Dissecting my appearance. I look for signs in my facial features. Signs to confirm and measure the legitimacy of my growing identity as an Aboriginal person. I wish I looked differently. That way I would not be questioned. If my
skin was just a little darker and my hair was straight then would I be greeted with a smile rather than a look of suspicion?

I part my hair in the middle and put braids on either side of my face. Can others see "it" in me? Can I see "it" in myself? My braids are too short and I need a tan badly. I continue to look. I feel obsessed and a little stupid. My heart feels heavy. I must be missing the point.

* * * * *

My belly is full from a good lunch and I am walking through the Student Union Building on my way outside and then to class. As I weave my way through the lunchtime crowd I spot an information table. It is set up with many pamphlets and I notice that they are all from different Aboriginal agencies in town. This seems so ironic because it is only so recently that I have been thinking more about who I am and questioning this "Native part" of me. I am drawn to one pamphlet in particular. At the top is a question, "Do you have both Aboriginal and European ancestors?" I immediately want to pick it up, but I am nervous. The man who is minding the table notices my interest and tries to catch my eye. I smile, take the pamphlet, and leave. Feeling a little silly, I hope next time I will actually have the nerve to say something.

* * * * *

I am visiting a family member's home and, with some trepidation, I bring up what I am discovering about our ancestry. The tension in the room rises. I begin to stifle my excitement and to not speak as directly as I would normally. This is a tricky dance and a dangerous area of family secrets to be poking around in. After only a few moments, the
tension in my stomach tells me I have gone to far and I can see the anger building in my relative’s face.

“Everyone’s family has skeletons in their closet!” she says. “Why don’t you just leave this one alone!” Her comment shakes me and clarifies how ingrained this secrecy is. I feel more determined. Being Métis is not something that should be seen as a skeleton in the closet. I am very aware that this journey is not getting any easier.

*****

Through a class that I am taking at school, I have met a woman with whom I feel a strong connection. A connection that is not easily described. Despite this, I have not had the time to really sit and talk with her for any length of time. One day we are asked to bring in something to the group that speaks of who we are as individuals. Janet brings in a small poster that I have not seen before. The poster shows the faces of two boys. One boy has fair skin, blue eyes, and blond hair and the other boy has dark eyes and brown hair. The words on the poster read, ‘The Invisible people. We are Métis.’ Janet speaks of her Métis ancestry and uncovering this aspect of her identity. She says how this is something that is changing her life, though it has not been easy.

I am floored when I hear her speak. I am amazed that someone I know has a similar history to me and is telling other people about it... out loud! I feel so excited to talk to her about this. She is a source of inspiration for me. More fuel is placed on the fire, pulling me further out of the shadows.

*****

I have read the Métis Community Services pamphlet from cover to cover and back again. I am dying to find out more information. Nervous, but determined, I decide to
stop by their office. I easily find the downtown building and make my way up the stairs
to the reception area. The woman at the counter is welcoming and gives me more
information about their services. I consume anything she throws my way. I meet with
another Métis woman at the same office and I layout my family history, my personal
experience. I tell her of the family secrets and the lingering rumours. I tell her about my
experience in the school system and that I used to tell people that I was French when
asked about my appearance. I tell her about my anxiety and my unstoppable drive to
uncover my identity. She listens quietly and holds an understanding smile throughout our
meeting.

“Your experience is very typically Métis,” She says and I feel these words
through to the tips of my fingers and toes. With every step I am getting closer to home.

As my awareness grows about my heritage I am learning about how my ancestry
is part of who I am and who I have always been. Missing puzzle pieces have finally been
found and the picture of me is beginning to make more sense. Everything from my
appearance to the way I perceive things has begun to be explained. Experiences that I
have had in my life which were previously hard to understand suddenly are clear. I feel
validated in so many ways. I know myself better and I am falling in love with myself in a
way that I could not have done before.

* * * * *

Knowing what I know now about my ancestry, I have begun to make more sense
of my experiences as a child in school. I have learned that the way my mind works is
influenced by my background. Circular thinking is a strong and valuable way to perceive
the world. From the onset of my school experience I was faced with a school system that
did not know how to accommodate a diversity of learning styles. My way of thinking did not fit the linear format that I was being taught and, as a result, I was labeled learning disabled. There was little expectation that I would be able to continue on and do well in school.

As I worked my way through years of school, I stubbornly began to shake off the limitations that I had learned when I was younger. All along I have believed that I was actually not smart, I just worked hard. Recently, I realized that I might be intelligent enough to move further in school and attain a profession that had always been in the realm of fantasy.

* * * * *

Figure 5. First Self-Portrait (1990)
This figure shows my very first self-portrait. I took this picture while still in high school and developed it during some of my first explorations in the darkroom. The image is of me sleeping in a tunnel with spirit shapes moving around me. From my perspective now, this image speaks to me of my awareness of the presence of my ancestors and my approach to spirituality. This has always been a part of my life, but it is since I have connected to my community that my experience has been validated.

* * * * *

Driving even just for an hour on this hot summer’s day has left me feeling restless and I am happy when I see the marker at the side of the highway. The painted Métis flag with the infinity symbol is on a sign that reads RED RIVER WEST. I know I am in the right place. I pull off onto a dirt road and follow the signs to the main parking area. There is a young Métis man who directs me towards one of the few remaining spaces close by. I organize my things and head off up a short hill towards were I suspect the main festivities are.

I am feeling a little awkward about being here alone, but I can’t imagine whom I would have dared to invite along with me. Definitely not any people from my immediate family yet. As I crest the hill I can hear a fiddle playing and see the teepees setup in a circle. “Do I really belong here?” I ask myself. I try and look as relaxed as possible and make my way over to an information table. There is a young man and an older woman who are deep in conversation with a girl who is standing close by. I take the opportunity to check out what they have there; a list of events, information about camping, and an assortment of Métis sashes for sale. The thought crosses my mind and before I know it I have bought my first Métis sash. I fold it up nicely and put it in my purse. I see many
other people wearing sashes around their waist or over their shoulder, but I am not ready for that yet.

I continue to poke around and watch the opening ceremony that is going on. I see faces everywhere that look like members of my family. Some with blond hair and blue eyes like my sister and I see some men who are the spitting image of my uncle. “Yep, we would fit in here for sure.” After a while I am relieved to see my cousin sitting on a bench outside of the main cabin. I approach her and she greets me with excitement. I notice the sash around her waist.

“Here, come with me,” She says as she takes my arm. “I have someone I want to introduce you to.” She takes me across the field and to the other end of the circle of teepees.

“This is my friend Claire,” She says as she gets the attention of a young woman clearly on her way to something pressing. “Claire, this is my cousin Sylvie.”

“Nice to meet you,” She says. It is obvious she does not have much time to talk. She pauses for a moment and takes a hard look at my face. “You sure do *look* Métis,” She says with conviction. I am surprised by the comment and I give her a big smile as she rushes off.

Later that afternoon I have gathered with the only three people I know at this event. We are four women sitting on the porch of the main cabin that houses the kitchen and the fiddlers. It has been a few hours and I have had time to settle in to being here. I decide to put on the Métis sash that I bought earlier. Encouraged by the others, I wrap the sash over my left shoulder and fasten the two ends at my right hip. All three women give me a loud round of applause. My heart is light. My ancestors are smiling.
I feel so behind in my knowledge about my people. I feel ignorant and clumsy, wishing I knew more and could learn faster. “Things take time,” I tell myself. “You will get the information as you need it.” Through conversations, experiences and stories I have started to piece together a story of a people who are neither Native nor European, but occupy a space in between that is diverse and whole in itself. I have also heard stories of people with no recognized rights and an immense fighting spirit. I am at the beginning of my journey and know there is much to be uncovered and celebrated. I move forward with a growing knowledge of my ancestors and I will support those who come after me, knowingly.

* * * * *

As I first set out to get clearer on my heritage and what it was all about to be Mètis, I took some chances and attended events put on by the Native Student’s Union at my university. I had to begin to prepare myself days in advance and had to talk myself into attending all the way to the door. I was so uncomfortable and self-conscious that each time I felt lightheaded and thought I would be sick to my stomach. With all this anxiety I am surprised that I continued to attend these events. There were rarely any Mètis people at these events and I found the understanding of our history was and still is very limited at best. But, despite this lack of understanding, I persisted. As a result, I have met a few Aboriginal individuals who have been pivotal to my development of more confidence in my identity. They are people who did not doubt me or question the credibility of my identity despite their own lack of understanding about my people. It is
partly because of these individuals that I have continued to put aside my self-doubt and have moved towards a sense of confidence and acknowledgment of my Métis heritage.

* * * * *

It is a cool day in February and I am spending another term taking undergraduate courses at the University of Victoria. I have been seeing signs about ‘Aboriginal Awareness Week’ in a few places on campus. I have been thinking about attending, continually mulling it over in my mind. ‘Tea with the Elders’ sounds interesting and I wonder if I should go. I fight with myself as I question my intentions for attending. Again the critical question rings in my head, “Am I a ‘wanna be Indian’?” As my internal battle goes on I feel a tightening in my stomach and my spirit drops a few beats closer to the ground. Thankfully, there is another part of me that does not think so critically and does not have such a harsh opinion. This voice tells me that I need to support myself in this journey. This voice says that I need to be kind and honour that which I am doing. I am told this is important. “You can always leave if you are uncomfortable,” I say to myself. I continue to quietly negotiate between these voices right up to the door of the room where the tea is to be held. As I go to open the door I notice a sign written in bold letters on a piece of paper, ‘Room change for Elders tea.’ My anxiety gains in power and I start preparing for the bailout. I tell myself that this must be a sign from somewhere. “I am obviously not meant to go to the tea.” I say to myself as I start to turn away. Before I can make my escape I run into a young man who greets me with a smile.

“Are you here for the Tea?” He asks.
“Yeah,” I say and stand there at a loss for words. He nods and offers to show me to the room where the others are setting up. There are no elders in sight, but the others are sharing stories and trying to occupy those who have shown up.

****

Figure 6. Questions, Judgments, Encouragements (2004)
Some of the questions and comments I have received in regards to my physical characteristics and my identification as a Métis woman are presented in this series. The words are shown intertwined with my hair to symbolize the impact that both negative and positive comments have on my personal power.

****

I feel the sharp heat of anger sneak up my spine. It floods into my neck. Moves into my face. How easily people judge and make comments about the legitimacy of my identity. Discredit my experience. Quickly and without thought, many move to silence my experience. Silence my ancestors who have been kept quiet for so long. Do you see my experience as trivial, inconsequential? A silly white girl with a thing for Indians? What gives you the right to challenge my identity? Give some thought to your intentions.

****

I guess I still don’t know where I stand. Am I Aboriginal, White, Métis, biracial, multiracial, or mixed-blood? All these categories, do I really need them? What a relief it would be to just be me. Not to have to prove that I am anything else than just that. Me. I want to be free of being affected by the negative perceptions of other people. I want to know and trust who I am. That’s it.

****

It is a hot day in August and I have just made it back into town after a family gathering that took me up the Island. I was hoping to catch the tail end of the First Peoples Gathering downtown. I walk from my home and arrive into a sea of Aboriginal people gathered in front of the BC Museum. I am pleased and relieved to run into a friend in the crowd and visit for a while. I have not known him for long and we have a short
conversation. I excuse myself and move into the crowds that surround the stands where people are selling Aboriginal art and jewelry. I am hoping for a pair of beaded earrings, but find a beaded hair clip that calls my name.

I chat very briefly with the woman who’s selling the jewelry and move back towards where I spotted my friend earlier. He is visiting with about four other people, some of whom I recognize from previous gatherings. He greets me again and introduces me to everyone. One man smiles at me.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

"I grew up in Vancouver," I respond. He gives me a questioning look. What he is asking me is what community am I from, not where I grew up. I realize that this answer will not do and I continue, "Well, I am Métis, but I grew up away from my community." He gives me a big warm smile.

"Well, we didn’t all grow up on the Rez you know!" he says. The acknowledgement he gives is a new experience for me. I walk away with a feeling of acceptance and a clearer, happier swing in my step.

***

I am sitting here in the aboriginal student’s office working on the proposal for my master’s thesis. I have been plugging away for hours and I only now have paused to look around and really notice where I am. The significance of this location. The significance of being here and writing my story about my Métis heritage. Awareness hits me on a deep level. I pause and take another look around. Everything has gone silent. No tip tap of the computer keys. I take a deep breath and feel the awareness travel down my spine
and let the oxygen fill my blood. I am stunned, overjoyed. The ancestors are smiling too. I feel at home. We are getting closer to home.

Tears have filled my eyes and I feel nervous that my friend will walk in and find me teary eyed and nostalgic about a world I have not known. Quickly, I wipe the tears away. She probably wouldn’t understand, no matter how supportive. I feel self-conscious. I realize I have lost the moment. No one has walked in.

***

Opening wide the box of secrets that was never fully closed, I think of how I had no idea what I was starting. I was persistent, despite feelings of trepidation. Now, I am facing more challenging situations. I am choosing to be open about my experience. Once in a while I wonder what it would be like to move somewhere else. Somewhere where there is no one who knows me and I can go back to pretending that I am only White. To never again be questioned so aggressively about who I am. Never face the eyes that say, ‘You don’t belong.’ This is not an easy road. Then I remember the words of a storyteller, ‘Words that are spoken can not be taken back.’ I don’t think my heart could take the pain of denial. It would not be an easier road and my spirit would die in no time.

***

Something is pushing me to tell my story, to speak openly about my heritage and experience. The ancestors will not leave me to sit in silence anymore. They are asking me to stand up and to have a voice. As I speak, I am full of questions about who I am and where my family is from. I wonder how much being Métis has shaped my life. I need to be confident and clear and not give in to my knocking knees or chattering teeth. The
nerves are temporary. My Métis heritage occupies the past, present and future. I will no longer ignore my spirit.

* * * * *

I see her from across the room and I recognize her from other gatherings. She first grabbed my attention with the sash around her waist, an obvious sign of someone who is proud of her Métis heritage. I have never talked to her before, but I feel it is important to approach her and risk a little insecurity in order to build community. I wonder how it would be to have a stronger community voice in this town. How it would be to continue to become more recognized as a community in general.

I see my chance to introduce myself. Since I am not wearing any signs of Métisness, I am sure she would not think to approach me.

"Hi, your name is Tracy, isn’t it?" I say and I receive a nod of affirmation mixed with a look of mild confusion. I offer my hand. "My name is Sylvie. We have never met before, but I have seen you at various functions and I thought I would introduce myself. I am Métis as well."

"Nice to meet you." She answers pleasantly, but still looks a little confused. I am a little nervous.

"I am a counselor in the community and I work with many Métis clients," I say. I find it hard to read the expression on her face.

"Oh, yeah," She says. "Are you registered?" she asks. I feel a little confused about what she has asked me and I hesitate for a moment.

"Oh, you mean," I say, little surprised "You mean... Well, yeah, I have a Métis identity card," I respond hesitantly.
“Oh, great.” She says with a smile. She does not move to continue the conversation. I feel as though I have just barely passed her credibility test. I am still stunned. The conversation is over.

“Nice to meet you,” I say. She briefly smiles back at me as she leaves. Only a few months ago, before I got issued my Métis identity card, I would not have been able to say yes to her question. Does the little laminated piece of paper mean I am more credible than I was back then? Does it somehow make me more credible than my good friend whose family documents are harder to trace? How much must we rely on a paper trail for evidence?

* * * *

Please give me some proof. Something considered tangible by those who question me. Something to show them I do have roots. Something to show that I do know who I am and that, according to their rules, I have the right to speak. My family stories, my family’s oral history is not considered valid without a piece of paper.

It is easy to lie on paper and yet paper is considered validity. I am waiting for my piece of paper. Until then I will not speak very loud. I will not be as confident or as proud of who I am. I will wait to fully love myself and my heritage. I will wait to connect with my community. I will wait to support others in their search, in their lives. I will wait as more people forget and remain quiet. I will wait as my family history repeatedly gets silenced. I will wait for my piece of paper.

* * * *

As the months and years go by, I feel less oppressed by rules and regulations by which I have previously allowed myself to be defined. For instance, throughout my time
in academia, I have gotten very adept at meeting the standards that have been laid out for me. I have become very skilled at fitting the mold that is desired by the institution. I have learned to negotiate this cultural environment.

Recently, I have begun to wake up and to take notice of what I have been doing to my spirit by continuing to measure myself by these standards. I no longer take my success in school as a sign of my intelligence. All these years I have been working hard to prove that I am not disabled. I have been trying to show that I do have potential. I am finished trying to prove I am good enough by their standards. Now I am aware that my way of thinking could not have been measured by simplistic and linear learning assessment tools. There are cultural assumptions that influence the way children are taught in the public school system and, historically, there has been very little acknowledgement of this. There are different ways of thinking and different cultural traditions that surround learning.

* * * * *
Figure 7a. The Final Measure (2004)
This piece reflects how my growing strength from my awareness of my cultural background. The increasing clarity of my identity has influenced my willingness to be measured by standards that are not reflective of my cultural beliefs. This piece is illustrative of moving away from measuring my intelligence in the way I was taught by the culture of the mainstream school system. It speaks to my movement towards a holistic view of intelligence. This piece also speaks of my letting go of the limitations and comfort of linear beliefs, and accepting the complexity of bringing connection and spirituality into my daily life.

* * * *

One thing that I am super tired of these days is thinking about being Métis. I am so tired of thinking about it and I just want to get on with things and live it. I am fed up with the insecurities that hit me in certain situations. I am tired of doubting who I am. I
am tired of having to explain and tired of feeling anxiety about how my ancestry will be accepted. Exhausted of trying to prove that I am a legitimate person, with a legitimate family, with a legitimate history. The past four years I have been pulling my Métis self out of the shadows. Now, I want to live my life and not be thinking about “identity this” and “identity that.” I am bringing this time of scrutiny and introspection to a close. Now, I want to learn more. To be open to the teachings as they come my way.

“There does come a point when you need to stop thinking about it and live it. You may not think that you are living it right now, but you are. Being Métis. There comes a time to stop thinking and just live it.” He affirms my thinking.

*****

I now work within the Métis community. This has offered me the opportunity to develop a new level of confidence and a sense of belonging. Currently, I respond differently when my identity is challenged. I do not get pushed quickly into internal turmoil and self-doubt, though I am not completely free of these moments. I have an increasing number of people around me who support and encourage me. We are in this struggle as a community. I recognize my experience in discussions with others and this makes me stronger.

My family has changed too. There are still those who deny our background and would rather I was not so loud about it, but there are also many family members who are opening up to our heritage. This is a piece that is really making a difference in the security of my identity and I feel so blessed to have family who are joining me on this journey. They truly have made the anxiety and turmoil worthwhile.

*****
As I become increasingly aware of my history and more knowledgeable about my heritage, I am becoming clearer and more confident in who I am. This piece speaks to my increasing security, the grounding of my identity in my ancestry, and my commitment to living my life as a Métis woman. The cement in the image also acknowledges my experience as I strive to remain connected while in an urban environment.

*****

Making art and spending time writing has helped me braid together the layers of experience that have made up my history. My story. Who I am. A long road of learning has begun and the ancestors are not done with me yet. There is a purpose to this journey that I can hardly begin to foresee. One thing I do know is that I will no longer ignore my spirit.
Chapter Five

Discussion and Implications

*Bringing my thoughts and experience together, I am hesitant to*

*compartmentalize my narrative. Confronted with the task of bringing*

*completion to an incomplete story, I sit down to write.*

*Introduction*

Following the process of narrating my experience of assimilation and identity development as a Métis woman, I am stepping back and taking another, more distant look at my story. As I sit down to compose this final chapter, I am reminded of foundational aspects of autoethnography. For instance, through autoethnography’s emphasis on the subjectivity of experience and avoidance of universal objectivity, this methodology resists the desire of academia to abstract and explain a phenomenon (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Slattery, 2001). Rather, this research methodology strives to generate rich descriptions of experience and engage the reader by drawing him or her into the researcher’s personal narrative (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner). Through this engagement with the lived experience of a phenomenon, feelings of empathy and understanding are evoked towards the narrated experience. Therefore, it is the narrative itself that is the central focus of this type of inquiry, rather than an abstract discussion of findings. It is up to the reader to decide what they will take away from the text.

For the researcher, autoethnography demands that one move between the role of participant and investigator in the context of one research project. Engaging intensely
with an element of one’s lived experience and producing text that communicates that experience, demands a level of vulnerability and a willingness to confront difficult emotions (Sparkes, 2002). The researcher who employs autoethnography as a methodology strives for balance between the personal intensity of the topic being addressed and the environment of academic inquiry.

As I move away from narrating my experience and assume the perspective of researcher in the following discussion, I will revisit the theoretical constructs and models of identity introduced in chapter two. In addition, I will discuss some implications for counselling that have arisen from the narrative, ethical considerations for research in the Métis community, and suggestions for future research. Reflecting on the relationships between the constructs presented in chapter two and my personal narrative, I will explore how the theories of narrative identity, ethnic identity, multiracial identity, Aboriginal identity, and Métis identity resonate with my experience as a Métis woman.

**Narrative Identity Literature**

While reflecting on the story of my evolving sense of ancestral identity, McAdams’ (2001a; 2001b) view of identity as a life narrative within which an individual arranges his or her life in a culturally meaningful story takes on particular relevance. For instance, my identity went through a transformation when I realized the existence and importance of my Aboriginal ancestry. Specifically, the narrative of my identity was completely rearranged in a meaningful way that recognized the full extent of my cultural background. The concept of narrative enrichment described by Polkinghorne (1988) successfully illustrates the process I continue to go through as I gain more information about my ancestry and develop more experience openly identifying as a Métis woman.
As I integrate and develop new awareness of myself, my family, and Métis history, I continue to develop a clearer and richer view of the story of my identity.

In summary, a narrative view of identity (McAdams 2000a, 2000b; Polkinghorne, 1988) allows for evolving self-knowledge to influence and enrich one's view of oneself. This theoretical framework provides a space for my process of completely re-assessing my life experiences and personal characteristics with a new awareness of the full extent of my ancestry. In addition, the narrative theory of identity appeals to my Métis worldview, as it does not insist that I conform to a sequential pattern of identity development and acknowledges relationship between past, present and future.

*Ethnic Identity Literature*

When reflecting on how the ethnic identity development model, as conceptualized by Rodriguez, Cauce and Wilson (2002) relates to my experience, it is obvious that there are elements between the two that do not correlate. For instance, due to the secrecy that surrounded my family's Métis ancestry, I did not progress through the stages of ethnic identity development during childhood. I was not consciously aware of my ethnicity before adulthood and most elements that would have informed me about my ethnicity before that time had been actively silenced. On the other hand, despite the childhood focus of this model, it contains certain elements that do carry relevance to my experience. For instance, the stages of *emerging awareness, exploration/identification, and commitment* do reflect aspects of the process that I went through when I began to actively engage with and explore my ethnicity in adulthood. Specifically, a part of my *emerging awareness* of my heritage and through the process of *exploration and identification*, I began to understand both the personal and social significance of my Métis ancestry. In
addition, the stage of commitment does illustrate the recent solidity and clarity in my identity as a Métis woman, including my awareness of both the positive and more challenging aspects of what this identity entails. Therefore, despite the limited usefulness of this model’s focus on the developmental stages of childhood, Rodriguez, Cauce and Wilson’s model of ethnic identity development does hold some relevance to my lived experience of Métis identity.

*Multiracial Identity Literature*

Characteristics of multiracial identity development also carry various levels of relevancy to my experience as a Métis person. In particular, there are elements of my narrative that speak directly to the impact of mainstream society’s desire to maintain the separateness of racial categories (Nakashima, 1992). For instance, pressure to choose between the elements that combine to create our inheritance and to ignore our Native ancestry has historically lead my family and I to choose an identity that does not recognize the full scope of our heritage. I have also been questioned about my background and seen as different by many people of European heritage. At the same time, I do not possess the physical characteristics that would ensure my acceptance in many Aboriginal communities. As a result, I have personally experienced being only conditionally accepted into each group that combines to form my racial heritage (Root, 1990).

Poston’s (1990) model of Biracial Identity Development has limited relevancy to my experience of identity development. Again, the stages presented follow childhood development stages and do not apply to my experience of identity reassessment in adulthood. In addition, most of the stages discussed by Poston do not speak to my
experience and the final stage of integration does not leave enough flexibility to 
recognize the various ways that I may self-identify. In support of my challenge to such 
views of identity, Gillem and Thompson (2004) contend that, “it is time to move beyond 
linear models of identity development that only examine how one deals with racial 
oppression or ethnic identification to a multidimensional framework that conceptualizes 
biracial women as racial/ethnic beings, gendered beings, sexual beings, mothers, 
daughters, partners and friends” (p.4). Thus, models of identity that allow room for the 
totality of a multiracial person’s lived experience are more likely to reflect the rich 
process of identity development.

As discussed earlier, Root (1990) contends that there are multiple positive ways 
that a multiracial person can conceptualize their identity. In accordance with this 
perspective, it is important to clarify that an individual with both European and First 
Nations ancestry may not choose to identify themselves as Métis. Specifically, an 
individual with mixed heritage may self-identify as First Nations, European, multiracial, 
Métis, and/or various combinations of these identities. Many factors could influence 
one’s self-identification process, including self-views, family experience, as well as 
community identity. There are multiple ways of viewing one’s identity that are not 
mutually exclusive (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). In accordance with this 
perspective, my self-identity combines my experience as a multiracial individual along 
with my identity as a Métis person.

When discussing how multiracial individuals experience identity development, 
Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2003) contend that many mixed-race people regularly 
encounter social invalidation from others in regards to their chosen racial self-
identification. Specifically, the authors explain that it is not the racial self-identification that is the issue, rather the experience of invalidation that represents the greatest challenge for multiracial individuals. This invalidation is especially poignant when it comes from an individual who is emotionally significant to the multiracial person. The impact of social validation or invalidation carries importance in relation to my personal narrative. For instance, the opinions and perceptions of family members have played a central role in my developing identity and the level of confidence with which I acknowledge my ancestry. For this reason, it has been important for me to connect with members of my family who are proud of our heritage in order to receive validation about my movement towards identifying as Métis. Conversely, when faced with the opinions of family members who disassociate themselves from our Aboriginal ancestry, I am hit with the internal turmoil that comes when I am reminded of the shame, denial and resistance that has surrounded our Métis heritage for generations. Additionally, the perceptions of people outside my family have also varied between positive, negative, inquisitive, and/or indifferent and have impacted my level of confidence and feelings of validation about my identity.

Aboriginal Identity Literature

Various aspects of Aboriginal identity literature hold significance when reflecting on my experience. For instance, Chandler and Lalonde’s (1998) emphasis on the importance of cultural persistence to an individual’s well-being highlights the importance of the revival of Métis communities. Specifically, the emotional well-being of Métis people hinges on the resiliency of their communities. In addition, the concept of assimilation from an Aboriginal perspective is of central relevance in my experience of
reclaiming my Métis heritage. Despite the importance of this concept, as I reflect on the applicability of the Acculturation Continuum developed by Little Soldier (1985), I do not see this model as reflecting the acculturation experience of most Métis people. Due to the inherent combination of both European and First Nations values and traditions that come together to form Métis culture, the dichotomous relationship between “Indian world” and “non-Indian world” suggested by Little Soldier does not apply to a Métis experience of assimilation. In addition, I do not think it is possible to conceptualize my experience in a format that relies on a beginning or an end point. To clarify, Little Soldier’s model does not recognize the implications or even the possibility of moving out of a position of assimilation and returning to previously suppressed cultural values.

This experience of reclaiming one’s ancestral traditions is partly acknowledged in the pantraditional level of acculturation described by Garrett and Pichette (2000). Unfortunately, the authors do not discuss how this process can contain challenges not unlike that of the marginal level of acculturation characterized as a “danger zone” for mental and emotional well-being. In addition, both the work of Little Soldier and Garrett and Pichette do not specifically speak of how acculturation is experienced by an Aboriginal person of mixed European and First Nations heritage. For instance, the bicultural ideal characterized as the ability to move between one’s culture of origin and mainstream society would need to be reconceptualized for an Aboriginal person who’s culture of origin is both First Nations as well as European. Furthermore, though the experience of assimilation on an individual level is important, there is also a need to explore assimilation of Indigenous peoples on a familial and community level. Through the development of a model of assimilation that integrates family and community, an
increasingly holistic view will be achieved, leading to the development of viable
approaches to therapy. In summary, though the concept of assimilation is of crucial
significance to my personal narrative of identity, neither Little Soldier's Acculturation
Continuum, nor the levels of acculturation explained by Garrett and Pichette provide a
relevant representation of my experience of assimilation as a Métis woman. A model of
assimilation from a Métis perspective must address the detrimental impact that occurs
when a family and/or individual deny any element of their heritage, thus limiting the
ability for future generations to make an informed choice about how to identify
themselves.

*Métis Identity Literature and Additional Thoughts*

Not surprisingly, the literature specific to Métis identity holds the most relevance
to my identity development as a Métis woman. For instance, C. Richardson's (2002)
discussion of the Métis experience of embodying both the oppressor and the oppressed
resonates with my experience. I have often felt inner turmoil as a response to my
combined heritage. Specifically, prior to a more profound understanding of my ancestry,
the legacy of my European heritage and the impact that the actions of these ancestors had
on the lives of my First Nations relations factored into my initial hesitation to identify as
Métis. By having both the colonizer and the colonized represented in my genealogy, I am
often pulled between feelings of guilt and anger as I become more aware of the impact
that colonization has had on the lives of Aboriginal peoples in general.

As I reflect on the Model of Four Métis Categories of Childhood Experience
outlined by C. Richardson (2002), I see my own childhood experience revealed in what is
presented as the assimilated category. This category takes into account the assimilation of
my entire Métis family, my experience of finding out about my Métis ancestry in adulthood, and the changes and fluctuations in my identity as a result. In addition, C. Richardson’s (2003) explanation of Métis identity as a third space for self definition found in between the spaces occupied by First Nations and European identities, offers another framework from which to conceptualize my developing sense of ancestral inheritance. Specifically, from this perspective I am able to view my identity as connected to both elements of my ancestral heritage, while at the same time existing in a separate or third space that is whole, in and of itself.

Métis identity, as I experience and perceive it, is a dynamic process. Richardson and Seabourn (2002) explain that we as Métis people “construct our identity through the ongoing mixing of our ancestral cultures and influences” (p.49). Therefore, a Métis person is continually integrating and moving between all aspects of their heritage. When searching for a metaphor to illustrate this experience, I have been reminded of the infinity symbol and the significance that this shape holds to Métis people. Specifically, this symbol has long stood for the resulting union of both our First Nations and European heritage. The process of contemporary Métis identity continues to follow the shape of the infinity symbol (see figure 9) as a Métis person continues to travel this path throughout their life, continually moving between and drawing from both his or her Aboriginal and European ancestry.

Figure 9. Infinity Symbol of Métis Identity
Contemporary Métis identity is experienced as a process of continual integration of all aspects of a Métis person’s heritage. We are continually integrating who we are, how we see our family and how we view our community. It is the movement itself that is symbolic of Métis identity.

**Implications for Counselling**

Through engagement with the topic of Métis identity and assimilation on both a personal and academic level, I have become increasingly aware of issues and considerations that are central to effective counselling within my community. In this section, I will review suggestions of various authors regarding considerations for counsellors working with Aboriginal clients. I will also discuss the relevancy of various therapeutic approaches in relation to my process of identity development and explain my attraction to a Narrative approach to therapy when working with Métis clients. In addition, the importance of validation in therapy with Métis people will be emphasized, along with the centrality of community to the healing and well-being of Métis people.

**Therapeutic Considerations in Review**

France and McCormick (1997) highlight that through empowering ourselves as Indigenous peoples, our identity becomes stronger and “people with a strong sense of identity feel good about themselves and honour the greatness of their ancestors, their past, their present and their future” (p.28). Therefore, the strengthening of one’s sense of identity is a central focus in the process of healing for Indigenous peoples impacted by assimilation. In particular, developing a strong sense of a Métis self is critical for the creation of a “psychological homeland” that C. Richardson (2003) explains as necessary for a Métis person’s well-being.
In order for the healing and strengthening of identity to take place, Duran and Duran (1995) specify elements that must be acknowledged and present in an effective therapeutic context. A counselor working with Aboriginal clients must be aware that Aboriginal or Indigenous are umbrella terms that refer to a large diversity of peoples. Often counselors who are not of aboriginal heritage make the mistake of assuming that these terms refer solely to those who fit into the category of the racially stereotyped “Indian.” In fact, there is an incredible amount of diversity among individuals and communities who identify themselves as Aboriginal. In addition, the authors note that a helping professional working for Aboriginal clients must keep in mind the historical context of colonization and the multi-layered historical trauma that impacts the daily life of Indigenous people.

Efforts to address the importance of establishing a strong identity must also recognize that many theoretical perspectives underlying counselling approaches do not fit with Aboriginal ways of perceiving the world and human nature (Duran & Duran, 1995). Duran and Duran clarify that “most of the problems encountered in therapy by Native Americans are due to the fact that most therapies are deeply entrenched in linear thinking that is foreign to the Native American client” (p.203). Therefore, counsellors must be cognizant of the “fit” between their theoretical orientation and the values and beliefs of the client and their community (Duran & Duran; White & Epston, 1990). John (2004) states that an Indigenous Therapeutic Perspective has at its foundation ethical considerations, rather than therapeutic techniques. By addressing the limitations and liabilities of employing a Western therapeutic approach when counselling Indigenous
clients, it is likely that the high dropout rate of Aboriginal individuals who seek
counselling support will begin to be addressed (Trimble & Thurman, 2002).

**Narrative Therapy with Métis Clients**

Consistent with the methodological approach chosen for this study, as well as the
preferred narrative view of identity discussed by McAdams (2000a, 2000b) and
Polkinghorne (1988), it is my view that a narrative view of therapy holds particular
relevancy for counselling work within the Métis community. Narrative therapy values
and focuses on the way people story their experience and their problems, seeing identity
as a process of meaning creation within a “personal, relational, and cultural” context
(White, 2000). White (2000) explains, “narrative therapy engages with the idea that the
establishment of identity is both a project and an achievement that takes place in the
social domain” (p.6). Therefore, this approach to therapy addresses the impact of family,
community and the sociopolitical climate on how one stories his or her identity, allowing
for an increasingly holistic perspective from which to view Métis identity development.
In addition, the concept of “multiple authenticities” central to the narrative approach to
therapy perceives individuals as having multiple identity claims that are often distinct one
from the other and the variety of these claims are evident in and sourced from an
individual’s movement between various life contexts (White, 2000). Therefore, a Métis
individual’s movement between and identification with varying elements of their identity
is seen as an understandable response to the shifting contexts he or she experiences in
daily life. Furthermore, the power of social verification in the establishment of one’s
sense of identity may lead an individual (or community) to commit solely to a dominant
identity story that is validated by these social forces resulting in the suppression or subjugation of conflicting identities (White, 2000).

A Narrative therapist explores and goes beyond the dominant narratives that have taken precedence in the lives of clients and investigates these subjugated narratives that have previously been ignored (White, 2000). For example, a counsellor working with a Métis individual in the process of awakening to his or her Métis ancestry could explore the dominant identity stories held by the client’s family within which he or she was raised. The influence of these stories of identity and the social forces that have limited the family to identify solely with their Euro-Canadian heritage can be acknowledged and the counsellor can work with the client to bring to light underlying or rarely recognized family and personal stories that affirm the client’s identity as a Métis person. Exploring these suppressed stories in depth and inquiring as to the significance and meaning that these narratives hold for the client may be an experience that has not been feasible at any other point in his or her life. A detailed exploration of a subjugated story invites it into the forefront to be integrated with the dominant narrative of the individual, the family and the community. Such integration leads to an enriched view of oneself and one’s ancestry, resulting in a “re-authoring” of one’s story of ethnic identity (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003; White, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). For example, my own identity went through a re-authoring process as I investigated family stories that had previously been silenced and began to speak about my life experiences that could not be explained solely through acknowledging my Euro-Canadian heritage. While exploring these subjugated family narratives, it is important to acknowledge emotions that surface as the client begins to speak of stories that have been a family secret for generations. Throughout this process,
the counsellor is encouraged to show respect for the client’s ancestors and family members through acknowledging and respecting the choice to bury their Aboriginal heritage as a powerful survival strategy when living in a culture that did not allow them to live free of prejudice as Métis people. It is likely that these survival strategies were of crucial importance in the past, but need to be reassessed as to their usefulness in the current life of a Métis client.

Re-authoring or re-storying one’s identity is validated through the acknowledgement of others as they bear witness to this new story of self (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003; White, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). In this respect, counselling Métis clients from a narrative perspective can incorporate supportive family members and significant others as a way to solidify the client’s process (Rockquemore & Laszloffy). In addition, if relevant to the values and beliefs of the client, ancestors can also be invited to witness the client’s reclamation of identity.

The Importance of Validation

The concept of validation is also a central issue when working with Métis people who have previously been assimilated into mainstream society and who are in the process of reconnecting with their Métis heritage. In their discussion about the experience of multiracial individuals, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2003) highlight the importance of validating one’s confidence in choosing one’s racial and ethnic identity. Specifically, if a person’s choice to self-identification is validated by others, then their confidence in their choice of identity is enhanced. Conversely, if one’s choice of identity is not validated or actively discouraged, then confidence in his or her chosen identity is diminished. This validation is particularly important from those who are considered emotionally significant
to the individual. The authors note, “the amount of validation and invalidation one receives relative to his or her identity choice is more important than the particular racial identity that he or she chooses” (p.3). In particular, individuals who consistently experience invalidation of their preferred racial self-identification are more likely to present with signs of psychological distress. Specifically, in the face of powerful stereotypes that surround common perceptions of Aboriginal people, the experience of asserting an Aboriginal identity can be challenging for many Métis or mixed-blood people. Counsellors need to be aware that a Métis client may feel unsure about how they fit within the Aboriginal community and, at the same time, may feel out of place within Euro-Canadian culture. The counsellor can provide support to a Métis client through encouraging him or her to move forward in his or her exploration of their heritage, while helping negotiate any doubt or insecurity felt about doing so. Rockquemore and Laszloffy encourage counsellors to help the client develop constructive ways to cope with and confront invalidation when it occurs, aiming to help the client accept such invalidation without internalizing feelings of self-doubt and shame.

In addition, a counsellor is encouraged to consider ethnic identity from a holistic, rather than a racialized perspective, when working with Métis clients. As reflected in the literature on multiracial identity, mainstream society often views ethnicity and race as one in the same and understands racial categories as mutually exclusive (Nakashima, 1992; Rockquemore & Laszloffy; Root, 1990). The experience of Métis people conflicts with these belief systems and challenges these perceptions. Counsellors from different ethnic heritages than the client are encouraged to explore their own beliefs about racial and ethnic identity, as well as interracial relationships (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003)
and to develop a clear understanding of their own cultural background (Killian, 2002). In order to ensure that counselling sessions cater to the needs of Métis clients, their identity must be regarded as a whole, rather than understanding their experience by dissecting the client’s ancestry into “parts” of a racial heritage. It is important that a counsellor stay cognizant of the questions they ask when working with Métis clients around issues of identity and race. Specifically, questions such as “How far back did the mixing happened?” or “What percentage are you?” should be avoided as they imply an assessment of a Métis individual’s level of “credibility.” Conversely, a counsellor is encouraged to ask questions that focus on exploring the client’s experience in relation to their ancestry and the meaning this holds in their life (France & McCormick, 1997).

The Importance of Community

A Métis client is likely to benefit from connecting with their local Métis community (Duran & Duran, 1995; France & McCormick, 1997). Such a connection can be validating through the experience of recognition from one’s community members, the attainment of more information about one’s history, and the hearing of other’s stories similar to one’s own. Furthermore, France and McCormick state, “mental well-being cannot be separated from the context of community” (p.28). Therefore, Métis people who have been separated from their people through the impact of assimilation requires a connection to a Métis community in order to develop a strong sense of their Métis identity. Within the community clients may be able to connect with respected elders who can provide guidance in their exploration and knowledge about their heritage. It is likely that a connection to community would validate the experience of clients while moving them forward in an understanding and knowledge of their ancestors and culture. Despite
the obvious benefit of connecting with community, it is important that counsellors investigate the beliefs and orientation of any agency or community group prior to making a referral. In particular, it is possible that Métis clients may feel more at ease connecting with an agency that is specifically for Métis people. This is due to the level of acceptance that one may or may not feel due to their facial characteristics and ancestry. In addition, a person of combined First Nations and European heritage who self-identifies as Métis may not fit the definition of Métis held by some Métis organizations. It is advised that the counsellor collaborate with clients while investigating the community connections that may be most appropriate. Once the suitability of the community agency has been established, connection to community can be a significant way to increase knowledge and confidence in one’s Métis identity.

*Additional Considerations for Counselling*

Counsellors working with Métis clients are also advised to see their clients as being part of a family system and to respect and keep in mind the importance this system (Richardson & Seabourn, 2002). At the same time, the counsellor must be aware of the unique family environment within which a Métis individual has been raised. Due to the possible secrecy that has surrounded a family’s Métis heritage, the family setting may not currently be a safe place to discuss one’s Métis heritage. Though encouraging the client to explore their heritage is desired, it is important to ensure that a client’s family connections are fostered. A counsellor can clarify with the client those in the family they feel it is safe to speak with about their ancestry and can encourage the client to seek out possible extended family members who may be more willing to discuss their family heritage. A good place to begin is with the individual through which the client initially heard mention of their Aboriginal ancestry.
A counsellor can be an important resource for Métis clients’ expansion and development of a clear and strong sense of ancestral identity by exploring the meaning that their heritage holds. By reflecting on the client’s life experience and how their heritage has factored into their experience, a counsellor facilitates the narrative enrichment (Polkinghorne, 1988) of the client’s story of identity and overall well-being (France & McCormick, 1997). In addition, a counsellor can support the client’s integration of heritage as he or she moves along the infinity sign explained earlier as symbolic of Métis identity. A counsellor may facilitate a Métis client’s exploration through discussing when and in what situations he or she feels closer to particular aspects of one’s heritage. In addition, the client can be encouraged to explore and keep track of shifts in one’s sense of identity in a given day or week. Through this process, a client is encouraged to find a rhythm in the movement of identity that is likely to continue to develop throughout his or her life.

In conclusion, a counsellor reading this study should not conclude that all Métis people have grown up assimilated or that all Métis families have worked hard to bury their First Nations ancestry. It is important to keep in mind that there are as many Métis experiences as there are Métis people in this world. For instance, a Métis person may have been raised in a Métis community, in an adoptive family, and/or may have additional heritage other than their First Nations and European ancestry. Each Métis individual will have a unique relationship to his or her heritage and, when working with Métis clients, it is important to suspend limiting perceptions of ethnic or racial identity and to avoid assumptions that may restrict a client’s movement towards embodying the fullness of his or her heritage.
Ethical Considerations for Future Research

Through the process of conducting a literature review around the topic of Métis identity, it quickly became clear to me that there has been insufficient research done on this topic. Through choosing autoethnography as the methodology for this study, I have aimed to begin the dialogue about Métis identity by illustrating my experience with assimilation and of being Métis. Through speaking from my own experience, I have intentionally begun this dialogue in a manner that honours and respects Aboriginal ways of knowing and conveying knowledge. Despite the importance of speaking from one’s own perspective, there are limitations to the use of modes of research that employ the researcher as the sole participant. For instance, though there are elements to my own story that may ring true for other Métis people, one does not receive a diverse view of how various people experience their Métis identity and assimilation. Though it is not necessarily desirable to generalize the results of studies to all Métis people or communities, research involving a larger number of participants is likely to present a wider view about the experience of being Métis.

It is imperative that future research done on the topic of Métis identity be conducted in such a way that continues to communicate respect and employs culturally relevant modes of inquiry. Duran and Duran (1995) emphasize, “research should be done only with the intent of acquiring new knowledge that is important to the community” (p.207). Such future research practice would include the active inclusion of community members in research done in any Métis community and respecting any research requirements or protocols identified by the community. It is vital that researchers investigate the existence of such protocols before engaging in the process of research. A
researcher is also advised to approach community elders before the research is initiated in order to gain their suggestions and perceptions about the study to be conducted. Such elders should be approached in a manner that respects their role in the community and in a fashion that is culturally appropriate. Follow through is also important, including keeping elders informed of the progress of the study at various stages of the process.

A foundational element of respectful research demands that researchers stay cognizant of ethical implications that surround their choice of methodology (Duran & Duran, 1995; Smith, 1991). Culturally relevant research practices include methodologies such as participatory action research that actively engages participants in the process and outcome of research (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1997). Inclusion of community members is likely to ensure that the findings of the research are shared and useful to the community following completion. In particular, participatory action research “is appealing to community members who are weary of outsiders who invade their communities, ignore their expertise, and fail to give anything meaningful in return” (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, p.303). It is also important that researchers involve participants in the process of creating meaning from the data collected and ensure that participants have the opportunity to confirm whether the themes and categories generated accurately represent their experience. In addition, it is suggested that one show respect for the words of each participant by ensuring that they remain connected to the stories within which they are embedded. Walker (2003) also highlights the importance of employing research methods that allow for the representation of spirituality within the findings of the study. Specifically, Walker states that “silencing of the sacred aspects of Indigenous experience results in data that many Indigenous peoples consider to be incomplete, inaccurate and
harmful” (p.40). Therefore, making space for the spiritual in research within Aboriginal communities recognizes the importance of this element of every day life. In addition, I suggest that the employment of personally and culturally relevant modes of expression beyond those used in traditional academic research protocol facilitates a connection to the spirit that would allow such a representation in research findings. For example, through the inclusion of visual art and prose, this research project has intertwined my spiritual and artistic process of being Métis with academic inquiry. Through expressing my story in these varying mediums, I engaged in a process that acknowledged the relationship between my everyday experience of being Métis and my spiritual beliefs. Additional suggestions for such an expansion and encouragement of expression on behalf of participants could include the use of song or dance as a way for participants to express their experience with any phenomenon being studied.

Suggestions for Future Research

Several possible areas for future research surface as one considers the diversity of experiences that constitute Métis identity. For instance, a further exploration of assimilation as experienced by Métis people involving a larger number of participants would provide a more diverse view of the experiences of Métis people. Continuing the inquiry into this topic would provide important information for counsellors working with this population.

In addition, research that explores the experience of being raised in a Métis family and/or community that openly acknowledges one’s heritage would be useful. Specifically, through exploring this experience of Métis identity, one may generate a clearer understanding of the strengths of such families and communities and offer insight that can be transferred and employed as other Métis families and communities aim to
infuse strength and pride in their heritage. Specifically, finding the strengths in one community, family or individual will provide vital information about instilling strength in others.

An additional area for future exploration involves investigating the implications of family beliefs and attitudes on how Métis people see themselves in relation to their heritage. It would be useful to investigate the characteristics of families who are able to instill pride about their Métis heritage, as well as how assimilated families are impacted by the shame that is likely to surround their Aboriginal ancestry. Studies in this area would provide insight into the diverse experiences of Métis individuals and families that would be useful when working with Métis clients. In particular, such awareness would give context to the individual experiences of Métis people, allowing a systemic understanding of how experiences of shame and silencing are maintained. This research could also stem into an investigation of the change that occurs in families as individuals move into identifying more and more with their Métis heritage.

Finally, research that inquires into the experiences of Métis individuals who have accessed counselling services would be useful. Through this research, specific aspects of counselling that have been particularly useful for Métis clients could be indicated, as well as those experiences that have been unsatisfactory or negative. This research would aid counsellors in their choice of approaches and lines of questioning when working with this client group.

Conclusion

There is growing acknowledgement on behalf of many Métis people across Canada about their unique heritage and the historical context that has lead to the
suppression and denial of Métis history. Richardson and Seabourn (2002) clarify, “our birthright does not disappear because history has erased the names of our forbearers” (p.49). This growing awareness and reclamation of our ties to our ancestors is likely to result in an increased number of Métis people accessing counselling services as they navigate their path out of assimilation, reintegration the knowledge of their heritage.

In this study, various perspectives on identity have been highlighted and explored, bringing together many concepts and theories that provide a backdrop from which to view Métis identity. Autoethnography was employed as the methodology for this study in order to honour story and lived-experience as a valid method with which to convey knowledge. Through written text and visual art, I have shared elements of my lived experience of unearthing my Métis ancestry and integrating the hidden stories of my family into my past, present and future. One of my goals in writing this autoethnography has been to present an evocative account of my process in order to illustrate an experience of moving from a place of assimilation into a proud acknowledgement of one’s Aboriginal heritage. Through a review of the literature and my personal narrative, one can observe that the movement between Aboriginal and European heritage and the continual integration characteristic of this movement is central in the experience of Métis identity.

Sharing my story of transformation and reclamation following generations of silence has been a challenging and fulfilling process. I have moved through many stages of emotions and hesitations as I have worked towards bringing together this document. Through this account, I hope to have created a document that validates the experiences of many Métis people and informs non-Métis readers. It is my hope that you have developed
your own relationship with the narrative I have presented and have been left with an emotional sense of my experience of being Métis.

All my relations
References


Richardson, C., (2001). To all mothers who have lost children, to all children who have lost mothers. In C. White (Ed.) *Working With the Stories of Women’s Lives.* (pp.167-177). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.


