Living in Two Worlds: First Nations Women Leaders’ Perspectives on Cultural Continuity, Cultural Identity, and Youth

by

Robin Anne Yates
B.Sc., University of Northern British Columbia, 2004

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Christopher E. Lalonde, Supervisor
(Department of Psychology)

Dr. Marsha G. Runtz, Departmental Member
(Department of Psychology)

Dr. Catherine Costigan, Departmental Member
(Department of Psychology)

Dr. Blythe Shepard, External Examiner
(Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies)
Abstract

This research project explores the relation between the participation of First Nations women in local governance and the well-being of First Nations youth. To explore this relation, semi-structured interviews were carried out with eleven First Nations women leaders. Special attention was paid to how these women conceptualized their relationships with youth and the differing approaches the women took to connect youth with their culture. The research aimed to identify: (1) the historical, social, and cultural influences that supported or challenged these women’s participation in government and their ability to influence youth; (2) how the women’s interest in the well-being of youth was influenced by their gender, family, and cultural roles; and (3) how these women described their contributions to the health and well-being of youth. Results point to four main themes that underpin the women’s activities as they relate to youth health and well-being: Identity, Relationships, Living in Two Worlds, and Holistic Caregivers.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Introduction

This thesis project utilized in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews within an interpretive phenomenological method of inquiry to explore the personal perspectives of First Nations women leaders regarding their involvement in community government and their views on the cultural identity and well-being of youth in their communities. This study was developed from the results of a larger program of cross-cultural research that explores the relations between identity formation and suicide risk (Chandler, et al., 2003). These studies reveal that suicide rates for First Nations youth in British Columbia are lowest in those communities that exhibit high levels of “cultural continuity”, where members work to preserve and promote First Nations culture and to maintain local control over key civic services (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). To date, these researchers (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler, et al., 2003) have identified a set of nine community-based factors that index cultural continuity and mark those communities that have been especially successful at attaining political and cultural goals related to self-determination. The presence of each of these community-based factors has been associated with significantly lower rates of youth suicide in British Columbia First Nations communities.

One of the community variables of particular interest is the participation of women in their local elected governance system: when women hold a simple majority of seats on band council their communities have lower rates of youth suicide (Lalonde, 2001). To better understand how the participation of First Nations women in local governance may provide a protective effect for youth, personal interviews were
conducted with First Nations women who were involved at various levels of local governance in order to identify: (1) the historical, social, and cultural influences that support or challenge women’s participation in governance; (2) how women’s roles in community (i.e., gender, family, and cultural roles) support or challenge their ability to influence youth; and (3) what these women do to support the health and well-being of First Nations youth in their communities. The following section clarifies some of the terms and language used within this document.

Definitions

The legal identification of an Aboriginal person in Canada has been parsed into multiple categories, including individuals who are registered, non-registered, those who have or do not have band membership, and those who have signed a treaty or not. For the purpose of this paper, the terms First Nations or Native refers to those individuals who have, or are entitled to, Registered Indian Status in accordance with the 1876 Indian Act and are sometimes referred to have status or be a legal Indian (Frideres, 1993). Aboriginal and Indigenous are used interchangeably and refer to individuals who may or may not be legal Indians, but who self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. Indian bands in Canada also define their membership. Participants involved in this study may or may not have registered Indian status, or have band membership; however, they do identify as a First Nations or Aboriginal person. I also followed the participants’ lead and use the terms they themselves utilized during their interviews to describe themselves.

The term government is used frequently within this document. The terms local government or community government refer to the elected band council, tribal council, or independent government system (as is the case when a treaty has been agreed to by the
First Nation and the provincial and federal governments). The phrase traditional government refers to the forms of government established by a First Nation prior to contact and that may be in place concurrent with local elected governments.

*Woman leader(s)* refers to the participants in their capacity as elected members of their local government, as defined above.

With the focus of this research project outlined above, and terms utilized herein defined, the following chapter provides an overview of the background research and literature that supports the research herein. In particular, the review discusses the complex impact colonization has had on First Nations in British Columbia and, in particular, on First Nations women. This is meant to accomplish two purposes. First, it will help establish the historical and temporal context in which First Nations women have come to participate in the elected band council system. Second, because the challenges of colonization play such a large and continuing role in the lives of the women participants, this detailed summary will help the reader to better appreciate the participants’ comments. Subsequent to this historical overview, the questions that guide this project are delineated. The project’s methods are then discussed, including sampling, data collection, and thematic analysis. The section on methodology includes a detailed look at ethical issues pertinent to qualitative research.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Suicide in First Nations Communities in British Columbia

The issue of suicide among First Nations youth is an important area of investigation due to the significantly higher numbers of First Nations youth who attempt or commit suicide as compared to the general population in Canada, and even to other indigenous groups around the world (Kirmayer, 1994). Contrary to the popular misconception that youth suicide is rampant in all First Nations communities, a more in-depth analysis of the distribution of youth suicide within First Nations communities in British Columbia indicates that there is extremely low to no suicide in some communities, while others have rates far above the Provincial average. This striking contrast in suicide rates led to the question: what is it about the communities with low rates of suicide that provides an environment that is supportive of youth and reduces the risk that youth will take their own lives?

Cultural Continuity

Researchers within the discipline of developmental psychology have responded by identifying a set of nine community-level factors that appear to be associated with a lowered incidence of youth suicide on reserves within British Columbia. Together, these factors measure “cultural continuity,” or the extent to which First Nations communities have been able to preserve and promote their own cultural heritage and exert control over their own common future (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler, et al., 2003). The nine community factors are as follows:

1. history of involvement in land claims negotiation and litigation;
2. action toward the attainment of self-government;
3. local control of education;
4. local control of police and fire protection services;
5. local control of health care services;
6. development of cultural facilities;
7. local control of child protection and family services;
8. majority participation of women in local governance;
9. traditional language use.

Flowing from this epidemiological review of factors that are apparent in First Nations communities in British Columbia that have low or no youth suicide, this research project serves as an initial step in connecting self- and cultural-continuity through the examination of two main areas. The first area focuses on what participants felt supported them in their activities within the governance system (e.g., personal encouragement from community members, or traditional roles within their own families). The second concerns the ways in which participants construed their role in the maintenance and transmission of a sense of culture or cultural identity to First Nations youth within their communities. It should be noted that the present research was not designed to address possible interrelations among these factors, or their relation to the participation of women in governance. That is, participants were not asked about youth suicide or to comment on the presence or absence of the factors within their respective communities, nor to discuss the possible influence that women leaders might have on the process of acquiring or creating the factors.
Summary of Background Research

As stated above, this research project involves the influence of culture on identity and, more specifically, how cultural practices are able to foster healthy outcomes for First Nations youth, and was based on research findings from three key areas. The finding from the first area of research indicated that aspects of individual identity development have been shown to increase the risk of suicide during adolescence and early adulthood. The second finding was that variability in markers for collective cultural identity are positively correlated with suicide rates in British Columbia First Nations communities. The third finding was that youth suicide rates appear to be lower in those First Nations communities where the majority of the elected band council members are Aboriginal women. The research herein links these findings through the examination of the role played by First Nations female community leaders in promoting both individual and collective forms of identity.

The research at issue, however, has two concerns that must be addressed. The first issue is that in making connections between the culture of a group or community and development at the individual level there arises the risk of a levels of analysis problem in which the individual is used to explain a phenomena at the level of community and culture. The second concern is that of the psychologists’ fallacy where psychological causes and explanations are applied to all categories of research observed. To clarify that attention to these concerns has been considered within this research, the term continuity will refer to both individuals (self-continuity) and communities (cultural continuity) and will be utilized as a potential explanatory factor for understanding the variability in suicide risk across individuals and whole cultural groups.
The study of culture and individual development is further complicated by the human paradox (Lazarus & Steinthal, 1860) where individuals are both the creator and the creature of culture. In addition, this paradox of person-culture relations is further complicated in this study of First Nations women leaders because of the holistic and “ecocentric” (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000, Transformations of Identity and Community section, para. 9) worldviews of First Nations peoples regarding health, identity, and development. The following section will provide an overview of the background research that supports the impetus to interview First Nations women who have been involved in their local governance with a view to deepen our understanding of the impact these women have had on youth with respect to culture, identity, and development.

What is Self-Continuity

Common conceptions of person or self” contain two somewhat contradictory features: that it is both constant yet able to change. We think of most individuals as consistent over time, yet we also accept that individuals change over time – some dramatically so. This paradox of how a person can change yet remain the same appears to be especially at issue during adolescence. Upon examination of written works dating back as early as those of Aristotle, the concept of how the self is the same yet also changes has seen little resolution. Suggested solutions focus on the role that an anticipated future has in tying together aspects of an individual’s past. This understanding has been affirmed by psychologists, in particular, Markus’ work on possible selves (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). These possible selves are defined as the mechanisms of change for the self-concept and “focus more globally on what
individuals hope to accomplish with their lives and what kind of people they would like to become as the significant elements of motivation” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, pp. 957-965). In order to investigate the means by which individuals try to resolve the paradox of sameness and change, Chandler and colleagues carried out a series of studies with persons of various ages and cultural backgrounds.

Measuring Self-Continuity

The procedure involved a standardized semi-structured interview where the participant was presented with fictional case histories of personal change over time. The participant’s comments were then solicited regarding the continuity of the person in question and subsequently about the continuity of the participant’s own life. This procedure was utilized, in various forms, to study reasoning about personal persistence in childhood (Chandler, Boyes, Ball, & Hala, 1987; Ferris, 2001), adolescence (Chandler & Ball, 1990), and adulthood (Brändstatter & Lalonde, 2006), as well as in different cultural contexts (Chandler, et al., 2003). Two main findings arose from these studies.

The first finding is that there appears to be a natural developmental progression from childhood to adolescence regarding thoughts about self-continuity or personal persistence. In childhood, individuals focus on physical characteristics or favourite activities, such as their brown eyes or that they play soccer, that confirm that they remain constant over time. These concepts of continuity gradually begin to become more abstract and include statements such as: I’m still the same because I’m still aggressive: I used to get into fights at school, now I’m only aggressive on the soccer field where it’s OK to be like that. These distinctions are difficult to make sense of; however, a clear age-graded
pattern in terms of increasing conceptual sophistication has been documented (Chandler, et al., 2003).

The second finding from these studies is that these descriptions of self can be sorted into two general categories. The first is that a person’s personality has remained the same despite the differing ways it is expressed over time, or the essentialist argument. The second argument is the narrative strategy that involves acknowledging that substantial change has occurred and that future persistence is formed in a narrative or plot-like way through cause-and-effect threads that connect to who one is today.

Self-Continuity and Suicide Risk

The findings outlined above suggest that abstract conceptions of selfhood are present in the minds of ordinary young people. However, does the way in which these conceptions of self are developed and expressed matter in relation to other young individuals? After interviewing more than 600 young persons, the only ones found to be without any connections to their past, present, or future were those individuals who were also known to be actively suicidal (Chandler, 1994; Chandler & Ball, 1990; Ferris, 2001). This connection between failures in self-continuity and suicide highlighted that failing to maintain a sense of self-continuity puts adolescents at higher risk of acting on self-destructive impulses.

Based on this connection between self-continuity and suicide, a series of studies were conducted that focused on the increase of suicide during adolescence (e.g., Ball & Chandler, 1989), and that investigated the striking differences in suicide rates that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth (e.g., Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). At the level of the individual, Chandler et al. (2003) report that the form of reasoning used in the
self-continuity interview is strongly associated with culture: 80% of mainstream Canadian youth employ Essentialist strategies while nearly 70% of First Nations youth make use of Narrative strategies. The researchers note how these results run consistent with features of Euro-American and Aboriginal cultural traditions; Euro-American cultures tend to promote structural or essentialist strategies, whereas First Nations communities support more narratively based, or functional, approaches to the problem of personal persistence.

*Cultural Continuity Research*

When examined at a population level, the difference in suicide rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth could be attributable to the greater reliance on Narrative strategies by Indigenous youth. In other words, if failures in self-continuity are connected to acts of suicide, then perhaps narrative solutions to the paradox of personal persistence are somehow more prone to failure and thus put their owners at higher risk. If this were the case, then suicide risk should not only be higher within Aboriginal populations, but should be equally high in all Aboriginal communities. However, a series of epidemiological surveys of suicide rates across all 197 First Nations communities has shown that this explanation is incorrect. What has been noted is that suicide rates within individual communities range from zero to more than 100 times the provincial average, with more than half of communities having experienced no suicides within the 14-year study period. These results bring up the question of how do these communities protect their youth from the risk of suicide?

The theoretical foundation of this research holds that failures of continuity also occur at the level of whole cultures and are similarly associated with suicide risk.
However, as previously mentioned, one must be mindful of the level of analysis problem and be particularly clear about how the concept of continuity can be made to apply to both persons and cultures. As Overton (1998) stated, continuity should be seen to constitute “a broad-based mechanism of development that itself differentiates into [individual] and social-cultural manifestations” (pp. 112). Thus, failures in cultural continuity should be just as hazardous as failures of self-continuity.

There is little disagreement that the post-contact history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has resulted in disruption to the continuity of Aboriginal culture (details of which are discussed later in this chapter). However, these disruptions have been responded to differently by each of these culturally and politically unique First Nations – dispelling any statements of uniformity high suicide rates within Aboriginal communities. Some communities have been able to rebuild or rehabilitate connections to their own cultural past with more success than others. Some groups have enjoyed better success in regaining control of their traditional lands and resources and in achieving a degree of political independence from federal and provincial authorities. The initial nine community-level cultural continuity factors were an attempt to measure this variability in suicide rates and acknowledge the individuality of each community’s struggle to resist a long history of acculturative practices that threatened their very cultural existence.

These cultural continuity measures focused on the mechanisms that work to maintain continuity, not of individual persons but of cultural communities. The resulting outcome of this research shows that communities that have been especially successful in protecting their youth from suicide risk are also marked by long-standing efforts to preserve and promote their cultural heritage, to assert direct local control over key aspects
of civic life, and to reacquire and maintain access to their traditional territories. That is, those communities that have enjoyed success in maintaining their cultural traditions and in securing greater degrees of political self-determination – communities that effectively own their own past and control their own future – also have the lowest suicide rates (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Lalonde, 2001).

**Other Research**

Strickland, Walsh, and Cooper (2006) utilized focus groups and individual interviews with parents and elders (within a Pacific Northwest American Indian tribe) regarding perspectives on the problems youth face today and, in particular, the issue of youth suicide. The participants in this project indicated that individuals and communities had been affected by historical trauma (Duran & Duran, 1995), the lifestyle of dominant North American culture, loss of culture, fractured families, educational problems, and lack of employment as contributing to the current stresses, depression, and hopelessness experienced by Aboriginal youth. Strickland et al. (2006) noted the need for the identification of community-based factors in the investigation of culturally-relevant interventions with respect to Aboriginal youth suicide. The focus on the effects of loss of culture and historical factors regarding suicide rates in Aboriginal populations has also been supported by the work of Duran and Duran (1995).

**Effects of Colonization on First Nations in British Columbia**

The following discussion relays a historical perspective on the impact of colonization on First Nations in British Columbia. From the time of contact with Europeans, the First Nations encompassed within the provincial boundaries of British Columbia have endured significant change that has had long-term effects on the identity
and health of Aboriginal people. The effects of colonization have been particularly manifest in the poor health of First Nations peoples, particularly those who reside in reserve communities. At the time of this research, there are 197 bands organized within 32 tribal councils within the Province of British Columbia. These bands, or nations, possess diverse socio-cultural structures and governance systems.

The influence of colonization was catastrophic for First Nations in British Columbia, affecting almost every aspect of social, economic, and cultural life. From a Western worldview, contact with Europeans could have been construed as advantageous for First Nations due to economic transactions with fur traders that engaged First Nations in a capitalist economy. By the late 1800s, however, many changes had occurred to class structure and gender relations within First Nations’ societies in British Columbia. Most notable was the extreme decline in Aboriginal populations due to epidemics of diseases brought from Europe and Asia (Miller, 1992). This drastic loss of population decimated the class structure of many First Nations, particularly on the west coast of British Columbia, and allowed for the acquisition of hereditary names and titles by people of lower classes and those of commoner status (Wolf, 1999). As well, the increased economic power of those benefiting from the fur trade and other colonial enterprises allowed some First Nations people (mainly men) to significantly increase their status within their communities through intensive potlatching and competition against established hereditary chiefs (Wolf, 1999). In 1876, the government of Canada imposed its legal system on First Nations through the enactment of the Indian Act. Community control was removed from the hereditary chieftainship system, and the potlatch, the means of social governance for rank societies on the west coast, was discouraged and
subsequently declared illegal (Frideres, 1993). At great risk, some communities continued to practice their traditional forms of governance alongside the imposed elected band council system, while others were so decimated by disease and disruption due to displacement onto reserves that they were unable to maintain a strong traditional system of governance and social structure. The de-emphasis on the potlatch within First Nations communities, in turn, had a negative impact on personal and cultural identity (Corrigan, 1992).

**Historical Changes and First Nations Women**

Most First Nations in British Columbia are based on a matrilineal descent system where membership is traced through female blood relations within the family. Although descent is imparted through women, traditional authority structures can vary considerably within these matrilineal descent groups, with women and men sharing varying rights and degrees of ownership and control over property (Duff, 1964; Stone, 2000). Ties are commonly strongest between sisters and their brothers and uncles, superseding that of husband and wife. First Nations are typically comprised of corporate groups, called clans and houses, whose members share a collective interest in property and rights. Utilizing the potlatch (a complex ceremony that is central to many British Columbia First Nations’ judicial and social systems), individuals, mainly men, held names, titles, and lands that were passed down through matrilineal ties (Stone, 2000). In ranked or stratified societies, such as those First Nations located on the northwest coast of British Columbia, hereditary title positions were typically held by men and, less frequently, by women. Other indigenous groups in British Columbia had more egalitarian gender structures with a distinct division of labour (Sayers & Macdonald, 2001). The historic literature on First
Nations, however, does little to clarify the role of women because the perspectives of those who documented these Indigenous cultures were mainly Eurocentric and focused on the lives of men (Etienne & Leacock, 1980).

An examination of the political and socio-cultural history of women within First Nations communities in British Columbia reveals a severe loss of social, economic, and political status as the result of European colonization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite differences in the social structure and gender relations of the many First Nations groups in British Columbia, pre-contact social systems commonly provided Aboriginal women with a position of decision making and control within their community that was equivalent to that of men (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1997). Women were most often in charge of decisions involving family and children as well as food and shelter and some had considerable influence and control over resources within their families, clans, and communities (Klein, 1980). Most importantly, women were the members of the family who maintained and passed on many cultural traditions to younger generations (Fiske, 1990-1991).

The lack of attention in the literature regarding the role of Aboriginal women both pre- and post-contact and with respect to the impact of colonization on matrilineal societies, challenges our ability to understand the changes that occurred to First Nations peoples’ social and family structures (Etienne & Leacock, 1980). It appears that matrilineal societies, like those present on the west coast of British Columbia, had a strong emphasis on a balance between the roles and responsibilities shared by men and women. For example, Fiske’s (1991) discussion of the pre-contact role of Tsimshian women provides fresh insight into the important position women held within their
communities. Tsimshian women of higher rank commonly held resources in their home territory and managed the property of their husbands who were often away hunting, fishing, or at war. Tsimshian women were excellent negotiators in the trade of their own and their husbands’ goods, were able to gain status through potlatching, and could contribute to the wealth of their husband’s house through economic contributions from their own resources.

During the early to mid-1800s, the balanced relationship between men and women changed dramatically as the result of colonial contact and the decline in the trade of sea otter fur. Due to imposed Victorian morals and imperialistic ideas regarding the roles of women and men, First Nations men gained a distinct advantage over women in trade relationships and the ownership of property (Fiske, 1991). The imposition of the patriarchal and domineering structure of the church on First Nations had especially devastating effects on First Nations women. In a move to legally define who was categorized as Indian in Canada, the 1876 Indian Act systematically removed women and children from their communities in the push to assimilate First Nations peoples. Thus, women’s power was restricted through a redefined role as housewives and caretakers of children in single-family homes, through lack of access to wealth via trade, and by limitations on ownership of property and resources (Fiske, 1991; Miller, 1992). With Canadian laws supporting the role of men as leaders, the implementation of the elected band council system further removed women from positions of decision making within their communities (Fiske, 1990-1991; Sayers & Macdonald, 2001). The fallout of these restrictive gender roles prescribed by colonial and church powers still affects how First
Nations women relate to their own communities and to the larger Canadian culture (Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1993).

During the 1960s, and largely without the acknowledgement of Aboriginal men, First Nations women took a more prominent role in their communities by fighting for gender equality and a balanced representation in politics. Women’s organizations had been created in reserve communities by Indian Affairs from 1937 to the 1960s with a focus on improving homemaking skills; however, from the 1950s through the 1970s these volunteer organizations were transformed by their members to focus on political and social issues within First Nations communities (RCAP, 1997). Within British Columbia, these organizations amalgamated into The Indian Homemakers’ Association of British Columbia in 1965. At the same time, Aboriginal women were seeking a more active role in politics and, with fortification from the women’s movement, The Native Women’s Association of Canada, a national association, was created in 1974 (Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1993; RCAP, 1997). These provincial and federal associations grew to support women’s political interests at the community, provincial, and federal levels of government (Fiske, 1990-1991). The organization and action of women for improvements in the lives of Aboriginal women and children in Canada eventually led to greater awareness of gender inequality by the federal government, resulting in the enactment of Bill C-31 in 1985.

Class and gender merged in relation to the political identity of First Nations women with the implementation of Bill C-31. Prior to Bill C-31, a Native woman who married a non-Native man lost her Indian status under law, and, concurrently, any rights available under status, such as the right to live on her home reserve. The bill allowed
previously enfranchised women and children – those who had lost their legal Indian status through a variety of means - to apply for reinstatement of their Indian status and to apply for band membership (Frideres, 1993). For many women, it allowed them to reconnect with their communities and culture. However, Bill C-31 is also an example of how Canadian law pre-empted Native women’s rights to access their communities as band membership became separate from legal status. Central to this discrimination were the male-dominated band administrations that had the power to determine the band membership of women who had regained their status through Bill C-31, thereby enabling or excluding women’s participation in the social and political arena of the community (Frideres, 1993). Some areas of the northwest coast saw a dramatic shift in the social status of women after the implementation of Bill C-31 due to increased numbers of women who returned to their communities and actively participated in band administration (Miller, 1992). Thus, Bill C-31, although reinstating legal status to many women and children, also caused rifts within communities due to differential access to services and resources provided by bands and different levels of government (Sayers & Macdonald, 2001).

Although there were many social and economic disadvantages for First Nations women, many were provided with educational and employment opportunities not available to men in their communities. Miller (1992) notes that, during the 1960s to the 1980s in particular, women utilized their positions as government employees and band office workers to gain valuable knowledge that they later used to obtain positions of political power within the band office and community. Miller describes how the Katzie band administration in Pitt Meadows, British Columbia, underwent a noticeable change
from an all-male to an all-female council in the mid-1980s. After the implementation of Bill C-31, Katzie women returned to the reserves at a time when many men in the community were finding less time to devote to political issues due to their employment in the commercial fishing industry. The knowledge gained by women through their jobs as secretaries and government employees, together with the cultural belief that women were better suited to positions in public office due to their emotional nature, facilitated the expeditious transition to an all-female band council. In the case of the Katzie band, gender played an important role in the transformation of the political body of the community.

In summary, there was little attention paid to women’s roles by those who gathered information on early-contact First Nations groups, thus our image of the life of women at that time is hazy and fraught with assumptions that often originate from patrilineal worldviews (Sayers & Macdonald, 2001). First Nations women have adapted to the structures imposed by colonial systems through the development of networks of communication and influence and through the use of women’s organizations. An increase in the involvement of women in local (and provincial and federal) government positions has been noted in many British Columbia First Nations communities. The historic and social experiences of First Nations women and the communities in which they reside has influenced how women participate in local leadership roles as well as how they facilitate the development of cultural identity in youth.

**Focus of Inquiry**

Given the connection between First Nations women’s participation in local government and low-to-no rates of youth suicide in British Columbia Aboriginal
communities, there emerged the question of how and why these women had an impact on the health and well-being of youth in their community through their role in government. The examination of the research regarding cultural continuity and the literature regarding the historical impact on Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and women in particular, brought about the development of the following questions that, in turn, guided the focus of inquiry with respect to the participants’ interviews and subsequent thematic analysis.

The first area of inquiry focuses on how historic, social, and cultural influences support or challenge First Nations women’s participation in government and their ability to influence youth. In other words, what were the particular aspects of the women leaders’ communities that fostered their participation in local leadership and why were they concerned about the health and well-being of local youth? In turn, we were also interested in how First Nations women’s roles within community (i.e., gender roles, family roles, and cultural roles) support or challenge their ability to influence youth. These two areas of inquiry regarding the circumstances and roles of women leaders brought us to ask: what First Nations women leaders do to support the health and well-being of youth in their communities? The following chapter reviews the methods and methodology used in to investigate these areas of inquiry.
Chapter 3 – Methods and Methodology

Qualitative Approach

The goal of this research project has been to utilize qualitative, in-depth interviews in order to explore the perceptions of the participants’ lived experiences as women leaders as well as their connections to youth. A qualitative research design was implemented for this project for the following reasons: (1) the exploratory nature of the research topic; (2) the desire for a flexible research design that enabled the collection of in-depth data representative of the participants diverse experiences and perspectives; and (3) the need for a method of analysis open to emergent themes (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It has been noted that qualitative methods in general, and the phenomenological approach in particular, are especially well suited to research with Aboriginal peoples because of the harmonious meeting of narratives with the oral tradition of Aboriginal peoples and the circular nature of phenomenological interpretation (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005).

Phenomenological Approach

Creswell (1998) states that a phenomenological approach will “describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). Smith and Dunworth (2003) define phenomenology as the examination of what we experience or, “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (p. 605). Phenomenology is well suited to this research topic given its focus on “holistic questions of meaning that spring from experience; in particular, phenomena that are not well understood and that are central to the lived experience of human beings” (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 409). As well, a phenomenological approach allows the researcher to hold her biases apart from the...
investigation. This technique, known as bracketing, allows the researcher to acknowledge her perspectives as separate from that of the participant while remaining open to what the participant brings to the interview (LeVasseur, 2003; J. A. Smith, 1996). In order to discern the perspectives of the participants in this study, the methodological framework utilized was that of interpretive phenomenological analysis (J. A. Smith, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Interpretive phenomenological analysis incorporates the phenomenological approach of the participant’s perspective together with a recognition of the researcher’s influence and perspectives on the research process and outcome. Thus the researcher is encouraged to provide an interpretive position with respect to the participant’s account of the phenomenon (J. A. Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Interpretive phenomenological analysis utilizes a reductive methodology and an inductive approach by the researcher in order to glean emerging themes through analysis of the lived experience of the participants, most commonly recorded via in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998; Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005).

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted and the transcripts reviewed for common and emergent themes. The study was conducted in two phases: an initial pilot study that consisted of five interviews, followed by a further six interviews to supplement the pilot data. The initial five interviews were conducted by the researcher in the summer of 2005 and the final six interviews were conducted during the summer of 2006. All interviews followed the same procedures, as described below.
Participant criteria. A total of eleven women were recruited for this study: five women for the pilot study and a further six women to round out the sample. The women were recruited from six cultural areas located within the Province of British Columbia. The final sample size is consistent with the recommendation of ten to twelve participants for a phenomenological research project (Creswell, 1998). All participants were currently or had recently been involved as an elected government official (most commonly as a band councilor or chief) in a First Nations community within the Province of British Columbia.

Participant recruitment. Sampling involved a purposive sampling strategy developed through the researchers’ personal contacts, thesis committee members, and a snowball sample of women referred by other participants during the course of data collection. The remaining participants were recruited through telephone calls and e-mails to women selected from the list of current band council members as listed on the website of Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada (INAC) within the List of First Nations profiles under governance for each of the First Nations (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], n.d.). A key informant, who was referred by a personal contact of the researcher, identified a number of friends and associates that resulted in four interviews (including herself). Though she did not hold a local elected band council position, this key informant was included in the sample due to her extensive experience at all levels of local (band), municipal, provincial, and federal government as well as her position as a hereditary chief. Her contributions were invaluable in understanding the traditional hereditary roles of women in her cultural group. The selection of participants was also influenced by limitations on the researcher’s ability to travel to the area in which the participants
resided in order to conduct the interview. Finally, a number of women chiefs and councilors were contacted, but were unavailable for interviews, declined participation, or did not respond to the invitations.

*Interview schedule.* The interview schedule was drafted in consultation with the researcher’s thesis supervisor and reviewed by three individuals. The questions were forwarded to a female associate of the researcher’s thesis supervisor, which individual is deeply involved on a personal and professional level with First Nations in British Columbia and Manitoba. The questions were also reviewed by a well-respected, non-Aboriginal female academic who has worked closely with First Nations in British Columbia. In addition, the draft questions were reviewed by a local Aboriginal woman who assessed the cultural sensitivity and suitability of the questions. The suggestions made by these women were incorporated into the final interview schedule.

*Research Procedure*

*Semi-structured interviews.* Initial contact with each woman was made through e-mail or by telephone. If an interest to be interviewed was expressed, the following documentation was sent to the participant via electronic mail and/or regular post: a Letter of Introduction (Appendix A); the Participant Consent Form (Appendix B) that outlines the larger project in which this research is embedded (the BC Project); and the Interview Schedule (Appendix C). The interview schedule was provided to each participant prior to her interview so that she could familiarize herself with the questions to be discussed. The interview questions utilized in this project were as follows:

1. When did you first become involved in local government?

2. How did you obtain your position in local government?
3. What kind of people (without naming names) supported you to become involved in local government?

4. Why was it important at that time for you to be involved in local government?

5. How do you maintain your position in local government?

6. When and how did women in the past participate in local government in your community?

7. Is your current involvement different from women’s historical involvement in local government?

8. In your opinion, what impact do women in local government have on youth in terms of cultural identity and health or lifestyle?

9. What do you see as the future for women in local government?

These nine open-ended questions were intended to elicit each woman’s personal perspectives on how she became involved in local government, how she conceptualized her role as a woman in her community, the perspective she held regarding the development and transmission of cultural continuity, and how she supported First Nations youth. Each of the interview questions relates to the focus of inquiry of this research project through the exploration of the personal background and motivations of each woman’s involvement in the elected governance system as well as their connections with youth in their family and their broader lives. The researcher traveled to Prince George during the summer of 2005 in order to interview four participants. In the summer of 2006, a further five interviews were conducted in or around Prince George, Smithers, and Terrace. An additional two interviews were conducted when participants were visiting in
Victoria and Vancouver. Each interview took place at a location convenient for the participant (most commonly in their home, place of employment, or a public venue such as a restaurant).

**Informed consent.** At the outset of each interview, the participant consent form was reviewed with the participant by the researcher and then signed by the participant. The participant was also reminded that she had the right to withdraw from the project at any time. A signed copy of the participant consent form, as well as a copy of the interview schedule, were left with each participant for her records. The participants were also asked to discuss their own personal experiences and not speak on behalf of her band or First Nation. Each interview was recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed by the researcher or a research assistant shortly after the interview took place.

**Participant validation.** To facilitate the transparency and communicability of the data (discussed further below), participant validation (also known as member checks) was utilized. A copy of the transcribed interview were forwarded to each participant via electronic mail or regular post for feedback and revision of content. Informed consent was confirmed once again with each participant at this time. Participants were also given the opportunity to review a final draft of this thesis prior to defense.

**Thematic analysis**

The analysis of each interview transcript was conducted according to the procedures outlined by Ritchie, Spencer, and O’Connor (2003). These procedures followed a framework analysis, which analysis involves a structured, yet flexible, process conceptualized as an “analytic hierarchy” (Spencer, et al., 2003, p. 213). This technique of analysis marries well with the interpretive phenomenological analysis research
paradigm, utilizing a fluid method of analysis that better reflects a holistic worldview, such as that of Aboriginal peoples (LeVasseur, 2003). Utilizing the framework analysis, the transcripts were reviewed for emergent themes and summarized across transcripts in order to identify commonalities that related to the three areas of inquiry as well as any novel aspects that emerged. The procedures for the analyses are described in detail below.

Each interview was transcribed from a digital audio file into text and then printed with each line of text identified by a sequential number. Two of the transcripts were selected and reviewed for concepts that summarized a section of dialogue. These concepts were manually noted in the margins of the transcript. The concepts were then listed in a word processing document and reviewed for similarities to form key concepts. The key concepts were organized and related concepts were grouped under each key concept, forming a thematic framework.

To establish inter-rater reliability, the two selected transcripts were reviewed independently by the researcher’s thesis supervisor who created an independent thematic framework. The researcher and her supervisor then met to discuss their independently conceived thematic frameworks and discussed any differences or omissions. The comments were incorporated to create one main thematic framework that was applied to all transcripts. An advantage of utilizing a thematic framework is that it leaves room for the emergence of themes that are unique or specific to each individual transcript and can be adapted to better suit the context of the transcripts throughout the analytic process. The application of the thematic framework to the initial two transcripts resulted in four main themes and various sub-themes.
The main themes that emerged from the analysis were Identity, Relationships, Living in Two Worlds, and Holistic Caregivers. Within each of these main themes, a number of sub-themes were identified. Within the main theme of identity, four sub-themes were developed: cultural, elected leader, woman, and spirituality. The sub-theme of culture was derived from the discussions that connected culture to the women’s identity, as they also did with the next sub-theme regarding their role as an elected leader. Their identity as a woman in their families and communities was often related to identity. And connections between identity and spirituality were also mentioned, both from a First Nations perspective and regarding Christian beliefs.

Within the main theme of relationships there were four sub-themes: family, community, elected leader, and youth. Relationships were strongly based on family ties and connections with community members. As well, participants often spoke of their relationships with others as it related to being an elected official. Finally, participants discussed the importance of their relationships with youth.

The main theme of living in two worlds included three sub-themes: elected and cultural roles, values, and youth. The participants had many thoughts on the challenges they experienced while in their elected and cultural roles. They also spoke of how their traditional values were supportive, yet also contrasted with, their roles as elected leaders. As well, the women spoke of how the negotiation of the Aboriginal world and the more dominant Canadian culture influenced youth in their communities.

The main theme of holistic caregivers was comprised of four sub-themes: identity as caregivers, movers and shakers, focus on youth, and challenges of being a holistic caregiver. The participants provided many examples of how they were caregivers. They
also emphasized how they were the movers and shakers – how they took action in their role as elected leaders within their communities, which efforts often focused on youth. Within their roles as holistic caregivers, the participants experienced challenges that impacted both their personal and professional lives.

In addition, each main theme had a sub-theme of other within which any information regarding negative cases, or perspectives of participants that are unique, or other unique aspects were placed so that this information would not be overlooked during analysis (Maxwell, 1996; Spencer, et al., 2003).

Following development of the thematic index, the two transcripts were coded for main and sub-themes through the application of a number for each occurrence of a sub-theme in the text (for example, the main theme of identity was attributed with the number 1, and the sub-theme of woman was give the number 3, so text was marked 1.3 to identify the sub-theme of women within the main theme of identity) (See Appendix D). After successfully coding the initial two transcripts, the remaining nine transcripts were coded and the results were compiled in a thematic chart. The text was then summarized and synthesized without losing the content or context from which it originated, and the text was entered into an Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Within the spreadsheet, each main theme was contained within a separate worksheet, and each sub-theme was defined as a column within the worksheet. Each participant was assigned her own row on each spreadsheet.
Methodology

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for this project was encompassed within the BC Project (project entitled ‘Conceptions of Cultural Continuity in BC’, Protocol No. 05-050). The Certificate of Approval was granted on March 22, 2005, with annual renewals granted from the Human Research Ethics Board. According to the procedures outlined above, each participant reviewed and signed a personal participant consent form (see Appendix B), a copy of which was left with the participant for her own records. In addition, the participant consent form was reviewed with the participant by the researcher. Consent was reaffirmed at the time the interview transcript was reviewed and returned by each participant to ensure ongoing informed consent. The BC Project focused on the health outcome of suicide; however, this research project did not discuss suicide with the participants unless they brought up the topic within the context of the interview. Accordingly, this project involved minimal risk to the participants. There was no monetary or material incentive provided to participants for their involvement in the project.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

The researcher-participant relationship within academic research that focuses on Indigenous populations can be volatile and pivotal point of confluence. Despite the altruistic motivation of many researchers and the implied sensitivity inherent in qualitative research design, Indigenous research populations are often left with little benefit after the researcher has left the field (L. T. Smith, 1999). Because the process of gathering data and rendering an analysis within a confined social and research framework
involves the creation of meaning, it is important that this meaning be relevant to the participants (Jaffe & Miller, 1994). Research conducted with First Nations peoples should focus on knowledge and information that will be useful to those communities. In accordance with the perspective of L. T. Smith (1999), the objective within this thesis was to develop a relationship, where both researcher and participant benefit from a culturally sensitive and respectful interaction, resulting in information that is useful to the parties involved in the dialogue and to First Nations communities more generally.

Reliability and Validity

Positionality and reactivity. Positionality (or researcher bias) and reactivity (influence of the researcher and research environment on the participant) are virtually impossible to eradicate; however, an in-depth understanding of these influences can be utilized during the analysis of interview transcripts (Maxwell, 1996). I am a second-generation, secular Canadian with mixed ancestry from England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, as well as Métis ancestry. My position in the researcher-participant relationship is emic, or as that of an outsider to Indigenous knowledge. My ontological stance, or what I believe is possible to know about the world, is that of a subtle realist, which acknowledges both the individual perspectives of the researcher and of the participant. Therefore, an interpretivistic epistemological approach – where the social world is explored and understood through the participants’ perspectives – shaped my exploration to include the historical, personal, and cultural factors that affected the perspectives of the participants (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

Positionality and reactivity were made visible through participants’ review and approval of their transcripts as well as their input regarding how the researcher’s
interpretations meshed with their own values and perspectives (Jaffe & Miller, 1994). Accordingly, participants were asked to review the researcher’s interpretation of their narratives through the process of respondent validation, as explained above. This process has been established under the recently adopted Ethics Guidelines for Aboriginal Research as developed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], 2007).

Reflexivity. The discussion of the issues brought forth by the participants during their interviews has been challenging for me. I do not claim to have a deep understanding of the participants after one interview; however, what I have tried to express in this document is a fluid and cohesive image of what life was like for these women as elected leaders in their community, and how that impacted their relationships with youth.

Credibility and consistency. Credibility and consistency were bolstered through the accurate transcription of interviews as well as the use of respondent validation of both the interview transcripts and the analyses. Triangulation was also utilized through the collection of data from various sources over time as well as the incorporation of written historical records regarding the First Nations in which these women leaders worked. In addition, negative case analysis was utilized, in which the researcher did not ignore or manipulate any deviant/outlier datum, but valued it for the contributions it brought to the discussion (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003; Maxwell, 1996).

Reliability and generalizability. The overarching objective of the research was to investigate one Cultural Continuity factor (the majority participation of women in government) that is relevant to First Nations communities and was suggested by First
Nations advisors. Therefore, the concept of generalizability and replication are conceptually different from that seen in the experimental model more commonly used in developmental psychology research. The generalizability of the research may be seen to be compromised due to the exploratory nature of this project, and the cultural diversity of British Columbia’s First Nations population, as well as the issue of selection bias; however, a detailed accounting of the methods and procedures utilized here allows for replication. In addition, one of the benefits of the use of qualitative research methods is the flexibility that is inherent in its design enabling the researcher to adapt the methods according to the demands of the project at that time. In the current study, for example, if a particular question was not relevant to a participant, the question was adapted to best suit the culture, age, or life experiences of the woman during the interview.

*Transparency and communicability.* Transparency and communicability of methods, procedures, and conclusions is an important aspect of validity. Problems in transparency arise when the researcher’s interpretations include hidden personal biases or distortions of a participant’s narrative (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999). In addition to the use of respondent validation (discussed above), these problems can be countered through detailed explanation of methods and thick description, commonly obtained through intense data gathering during the interview and the inclusion of extracts from participants’ narratives in the final write up (Ritchie, et al., 2003). In addition to thick description, extensive engagement with the research topic is key to transparency and can be displayed in the final research report through delineation of the stages the researcher went through in getting to know the data and literature surrounding the topic (Creswell, 1998; J. A. Smith & Dunworth, 2003). These dialogues then become criteria for
evaluation by the public through dissemination of plain-language reports, and by the academic and research audience through conference presentations and publications in academic journals (Pyett, 2003). If the description is thick and the research is clear, well conceptualized, and critically analyzed, these tools will increase the transparency and trustworthiness of the research (Creswell, 1998; Pyett, 2003; Ritchie, et al., 2003).

Knowledge Translation

The goal in the translation and dissemination of this thesis is to share the knowledge generated in a variety of ways so that the participants and interested parties receive the information in a respectful and digestible format. In addition to the usual academic venues for dissemination (e.g., conference presentations, journal publications), a copy of this thesis will be provided to the women who participated in this project. Because this research project was conducted with individual women and not within communities, the translation of findings is linked to the wishes of the individuals who provided the information herein. Accordingly, a final version of this thesis will be made available to each participant for their records. If desired, a shorter report will be prepared and made available for distribution within each participant’s community. If feasible (i.e., travel and scheduling), the researcher will personally present the findings of this study to communities or groups at the request of the women involved. Results will also be made available via the internet in ways that best promote the goals of the research.

The following two chapters provide a brief picture of who the participants are and discusses the key themes derived from the transcripts. These themes have been outlined in the form of a relational model that discusses the interconnection between identity and relationships, and how these themes have been affected by historical and social factors
resulting in a discussion of the participants living in two worlds – to maintain an Aboriginal identity, but also utilize an identity that served them in the non-Aboriginal society. As described in more detail below, the participants conceptualized these challenges and opportunities within a view of First Nations women leaders as holistic caregivers.
Chapter 4 - Participant Characteristics

The eleven women interviewed during this project could not be described as a uniform group of women. Although terms such as most and many are used to describe general statements made by the participants, the researcher cautions the reader to take into consideration the context in which this information was gathered (i.e., through interviews) and to resist the temptation to view the eleven participants as representative of all First Nations or to subsume the participants under a “commonality of differences” (Mihesuah, 1998, p. 15).

One purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of a diverse sample of women to provide a launching point for further research on the impact of the participation of women in local governance. The sheer number of First Nations bands in British Columbia, and the rich diversity that exists across these communities, precluded any attempt at representative sampling in the classic sense. For that reason, participants were gathered from First Nations located in a variety of traditional territories (cultural areas) within the Province of British Columbia. In total, the participants were representative of six cultural areas in British Columbia. Two of the participants’ home communities were located within 25 kilometers of an urban centre and were considered urban, the remaining participants’ bands were considered rural. Three of the participants had been elected chief councilors or tribal council chief, two had held both chief and councilor positions, and the remainder had held councilor positions. One woman is a member of a nation that has successfully signed treaty and are governed by their own self-government. One woman did not hold any elected chief or council positions, but is a hereditary chief and has held numerous positions with local, provincial, and federal governments. The participants
ranged in age from their early thirties to their sixties. To protect the anonymity of the participants, each woman has been given a pseudonym and any identifying details regarding the participants and their home communities have been changed.

The women interviewed varied in how they chose to respond to the questions posed in the interview schedule. Most of the participants were very open, responsive, and forthcoming with their answers, providing rich detail in their responses. However, a few of the participants were especially articulate during their interviews and the comments of these participants are more prominent in the discussion contained in the following chapter. Accordingly, the next chapter lays out the rich and complex findings derived from the interviews with the eleven First Nations women leaders.
Chapter 5 - Findings

Overview

The information gathered from the participants during their interviews highlights the impact that identity and relationships have had on these women, especially with respect to their roles as leaders within their communities, and further supports the proposition that First Nations women leaders provide a strong connection between youth and First Nations culture, thereby fostering the positive health and identity of First Nations youth. The thematic analysis of the eleven interviews revealed four main themes: identity, relationships, living in two worlds, and holistic caregivers. Within each of these key themes, various sub-themes emerged regarding a broad expanse of topics discussed by the participants. The discussion surrounding these themes forms a complex web of interpersonal, cultural, familial, and professional ties, as discussed below.

Throughout the poignant and often moving interviews with the participants a common story emerged regarding how and why these women took on their roles as community leaders and what motivated them to work to better the lives of First Nations youth. Although expressed in different ways, it was apparent that these women all cared deeply about youth in their communities. It was also apparent that the identities of the women were strongly enmeshed with their relationships, particularly those with family. These two key aspects of the participants discussions – identity and relationships – were further connected through notions of culture, values, place, and spirituality.

It was clear through discussions with the participants and through examination of the literature that aspects of identity and relationships for Aboriginal peoples have been greatly impacted by contact with Western Europeans and the colonization of Canada.
The participants highlighted many of the events and colonial structures that have impacted their culture and social structures such as: loss of population due to disease; the Indian Act; marriage laws; imposed governance structures; reserves; and residential school, to name a few. The effects of these historic events on First Nations cultures has been deep and transcendental, particularly with respect to First Nations youth (RCAP, 1995).

The impact of these historic events on First Nations culture was expressed in the participants discussions of living in two worlds—the perceived fracture of identity that was experienced by the participants and used as a means to explain the challenges faced by themselves and by youth in their daily lives. The discussion of living in two worlds was reflected most vibrantly in the lived experience of the participants as both elected leaders and as cultural members of their communities. How the women negotiated the differing values of each role is particularly telling of the challenges they faced. The participants also discussed the struggles and accomplishments that youth experience while trying to negotiate life in two worlds.

What emerged from the negotiation of the disparate and multifarious identities of these women leaders is a picture of the participants as holistic caregivers; women who draw upon their traditional values as a source of strength and motivation in order to assist in the guidance and protection of youth, family, and community. This role of holistic caregiver was expressed in many aspects of the women’s lives including choice of careers, motivations for taking on leadership positions, relationships with youth, and objectives held as women leaders. In turn, the influence of their role as holistic caregivers impacted the identity of the participants and their relationships with youth, family,
community, and the larger Canadian society. The challenges experienced by the women leaders combined with the strengths they called upon to face issues head-on highlights the hard work, dedication, and focus these women had in order to improve the lives of First Nations youth.

Figure 1 is a relational model of the four themes that illustrates how the themes are connected to one another and provides a visual aid in the organization of the discussion to follow. Note that the themes of identity and relationships are interconnected and inform the theme of living in two worlds. In turn, living in two worlds affects both identity and relationships, as well as the theme of holistic caregivers. The theme of holistic caregivers also informs living in two worlds as well as the themes of identity and relationships.

![Figure 1](image_url)

*Figure 1.* A relational model of the themes: identity, relationships, living in two worlds, and holistic caregivers.
Themes 1 and 2: Identity and Relationships

Although clearly illustrated as two themes, the discussion regarding identity and relationships were often intertwined and inseparable for the participants and, therefore, are discussed together in the following section. A broad spectrum of perspectives were presented regarding identity and, indeed, these women each had their own unique personal, environmental, and cultural influences that shaped their identity as community leaders and impacted the actions they undertook while in those positions. What was gleaned from the thematic analysis of the participants’ interviews was that the themes of identity and relationships are connected through culture, values, place, and spirituality.

The blended and contrasting identities of the eleven respondents are discussed utilizing the following four sub-themes: a) cultural identity; b) identity as an elected leader; c) identity as a woman; and d) spiritual identity. With respect to cultural identity, each participant related, to varying degrees, as a cultural participant within her family and to her community. All of the women spoke of their First Nations familial lineage as well as their clan and cultural group; however, not all participants were active members within their traditional hereditary system. As elected leaders, the participants’ identities involved divisions between their elected, cultural, and familial roles. When discussing their identity as women, the participants defined themselves as caregivers and as the ‘movers and shakers’ within their families and communities. Finally, for some participants their spiritual identity was important in order to remain grounded amidst the responsibilities of personal and elected roles.

The theme of relationships was informed by participants’ connections with a) family members, b) community, c) youth, and d) in their role as elected leaders. The
familial relationships of the participants were vivid as they described their connections to
current and past generations of family members. These concepts were also relevant to an
expressed concern and optimism for the future in the women leaders’ discussions
regarding youth. Relationships with community members were particularly important,
especially those with local youth and elders. The connections the participants had with
youth, both within their families and in their communities, were fundamental to their
motivation and focus as elected leaders. Finally, the participants’ roles as elected leaders
provided an image of how their position shaped their relationships with family members,
the local community, and the non-Indigenous world.

What became apparent from examination of these two main themes was that
identity was a key component to the women in their role as leaders and with respect to
their participation as cultural members, elected leaders, and women. What was also clear
was that identity could not be explained without the incorporation of relationships with
family, community, and youth. The expression of the two themes of identity and
relationships intersect in the sub-themes of culture, values, place, and spirituality. Culture
melded with all aspects of the participants’ identity. In turn, relationships with family and
community were instrumental in the development of the women’s cultural identity. The
cultural and personal values developed during the women leaders’ lives were strongly
informed by their cultural identity and the relationships that informed that identity. In
turn, these cultural values were expressed in their persona as women and as elected
leaders. Place was an interesting connection in that culture and values were strongly
connected to traditional lands and also framed relationships with family, community, and
youth – especially in their role as elected leaders. Tied to their cultural and personal
identity, and informed by their relationships with family, was the spiritual identity of the participants, which was used as a source of strength and grounded them to their cultural roots. These four manifestations regarding the intertwining of identity and relationships are discussed in the following section.

a. Culture

First Nations culture, as it was described by the various participants, is an expression of past traditional ways transformed by historical and current events. Culture is a living entity, challenging to describe, and always changing and adapting. It is both universal and individual – a representation of the past as reflected in the present by communities and individuals. For these women, culture was described as a warm blanket that they wrapped themselves in when aspects of their professional and personal lives became difficult. It was seen as a toolbox that they could reach into when the strains of their elected position threatened to become overwhelming. Culture and the relationships, structures, values, and traditions that it involved, was, simply put, a way of life. Many of the participants stressed how culture was a core aspect of their lives and living in their communities.

The discussions surrounding culture and the identity of the participants largely focused on who they were in relation to family and the value of traditional roles and knowledge. In particular, connections between family, clan, and nation formed the basis upon which the identity of these woman leaders was characterized. For all participants, especially those involved in the hereditary system, locating themselves in relation to family was key to identify who they were and what their position was within their clan and nation. In turn, family was important in the transfer of cultural knowledge —
particularly in a multigenerational context – and the participants often discussed how they had gained their understanding of traditional knowledge and activities from their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The loss of cultural knowledge was a poignant reminder to many of the participants of the struggles they faced in retaining traditional knowledge, and particularly indigenous languages, within their families and communities.

i. Family. Family has been conceptualized as a "broad network of people linked by blood, marriage, or adoption and extended well beyond physically living together in a house" (Strickland, et al., 2006, p. 8). Indeed, relationships with family members were spoken of frequently by the participants and were often associated with culture and cultural identity as well as the personal and professional support received during their time in office. Relationships through marriage were also discussed either as a means of describing connections with others or as a way of defining personal and cultural identity. Children, spouses, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all played key roles in the daily personal, cultural, and professional lives of these women. These relationships made for large and closely knit core family units and the participants often lived in close proximity to family members. Connections to youth were particularly strong within their family circles where nieces and nephews are treated like their own children and cousins are considered siblings.

Participants valued their identity as cultural members in their community and the support from family and community members that played a critical role in their elected and hereditary roles. It was often family members who encouraged the participants to run for chief or council, nominated them, campaigned for them, and offered support during their terms in office. Some participants, for example, discussed how their grandfather’s
and father’s roles in politics provided them with knowledge and confidence regarding politics. As well, the spouses of participants were a valuable resource, especially if they had been an elected chief or council member. It was also the participants’ immediate family members who helped with child care and other household duties when the demands of their position were overwhelming. With respect to the women’s hereditary roles, family members were central in assisting the women to obtain and maintain these positions. In turn, participants took interest in developing relationships with younger family members who had shown a potential and an interest in hereditary roles within the family.

A unifying experience for all participants was that they were asked to run for elected office by family members, elders, or members of their community. It was explained to these women by family and community members that they had the education, work, and/or life experience that had provided them with the skills and knowledge relevant for the role as an elected official. Sometimes it took repeated requests before a participant thought that she was ready to stand as a candidate. Karen, for example, was told that she should run for chief by her cultural advisors and family utilizing cultural language that obligated her to say yes. Margaret explained that the female elders who encouraged her to run for chief said she would represent their interests because she was female and because of their matrilineal tradition. These community members also wanted a woman to be involved in the treaty process to provide fair representation to women and children in their communities. This support encouraged Margaret and gave her hope that she could make a difference to her people. Participants’ connections to family and community were reaffirmed and their confidence bolstered
regarding initial interest in running for local government through the support and encouragement of family and community members.

Marriage, whether legal or common-law, was the central means by which partnerships were developed and solidified between clans and families. Within a matrilineal clan system, marriage follows the rule of exogamy, whereby husband and wife must belong to different clans – and this was true for the women interviewed. However, marriage for First Nations people has been controlled by Canadian laws that define an individual’s legal status, as well as those of his or her offspring. All of the women and their families had been impacted by the enfranchisement of First Nations people. Some of the participants’ families had been dispossessed of their lands and relocated to reserves, while others had given up their Indian status in order to maintain legal possession of their property. For example, both Jean and Sharon’s families had owned property at the time reserves were established and had refused to give up title to their property; therefore, they and their offspring lost all rights to and benefits of legal Indian status according to the Canadian government. Some of the women spoke of mothers or grandmothers who had lost their status because they married a non-Aboriginal man; however, Jane countered that those women and children who were without legal status were still welcome within her community. They were not, however, entitled to any of the benefits that those people with status received, such as on-reserve housing or health care. Karen felt that mixed marriages created a disruption in the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations; however, other participants indicated that many First Nations people who marry non-Aboriginal partners still value their cultural background. Jean expressed that mixed marriages have been so common that every First
Nations person has a non-Native relative in their genealogical tree. Despite the cultural break that may occur due to enfranchisement or mixed marriages in their own lives, it was possible for participants to rely on or seek out other family members to learn traditional and cultural ways.

Strength and support were intertwined in relationships and identity in the lives of the participants. The support received by participants through their culture, spirituality, family, friends, and role models provided them with the strength to be focused and effective leaders within their communities. For many of the participants, the presence of strong female role models were key to their participation in local government. Many participants elaborated on how female relations, such as grandmothers and mothers, were strong, outspoken women who were the primary organizers within their communities. Many of these senior female relatives had involved their children in activities and conversations that promoted cultural values. Gail, in particular, felt that the women in her culture “carrying the whole Nation on their shoulders” (lines 1079-80). Participants also looked to friends and other women outside of the Aboriginal community as examples to give them encouragement and guidance. Jane commented that female friendships were difficult to cultivate due to the demands of her position, although those friendships with women in similar roles were important to her. She found that surrounding herself with people who were skilled in the areas that she was not allowed her to have many resources and further the success of her community.

Elders within the community were spoken of with great respect by the participants and were the means by which a number of the participants gained much of their cultural and historical knowledge. Many participants consulted with elders about community
decisions and valued the opinions of these people greatly. Ellen made it a point to visit her elders in their homes at least once a week because she knew they had difficulty getting out to see her and other band council members. Margaret found that the female elders felt more comfortable discussing community affairs with her as a female leader. She attributed this attitude to their experiences in residential school when, as young girls, these women elders were not allowed to speak to any male person – including their own brothers. Unfortunately, elders were not treated with respect by all members of the community or had lost the respect of their communities through alcohol use and turning away from cultural ways of behaving and treating others. One participant commented that people put elders on a pedestal in public, but did not treat them with the same respect at home. Many elders have passed on and this caused great concern and grief to the women leaders. In Karen’s community, there were no culturally-trained elders left – she had to go to nearby communities to speak with elders in her cultural group. Participants felt the void of the elders who had passed on, especially when they attended feasts and other cultural functions, and were concerned over the loss of cultural knowledge.

ii. Traditional roles and knowledge. The relationship between culture and the cultural identity of the participants focused on a connection to cultural traditions, the traditional roles of women, traditional values and behaviour, language, and the impact of residential school. The women leaders discussed their role as women within their families and communities from both traditional and practical perspectives. Women were described as life givers, and more than one participant commented that without Aboriginal women and children Aboriginal culture would end. The traditional roles of women within royal families in West Coast First Nations cultures are commonly advisor
to the chiefs and keeper of names. Karen, who held these positions in her family, stated that in order to take on a hereditary position a person must first belong to the royal lineage and also have the relevant qualities and the desire to undertake the position. A woman may take a traditional name if she has participated in their hereditary system and if she is of a sufficient age to have earned a name (usually early adulthood). As Jean explained:

Our main hereditary names are not gender related. A hereditary name can be given to either a male or female, unless it is a specific name customized for that particular recipient. The name I carry now isn’t male or female. The hereditary names tell a story and are linked to traditional territories. (lines 996-1003).

Barbara, as elected chief of her community, was in the process of earning a hereditary name and was an active participant in the potlatch system in order to accomplish this goal.

A traditional education provided by parents and grandparents was encouraged and many of the women were taught by family members how to hunt, gather and prepare food, prepare for and participate in feasts and potlatch, dance, sing, and speak in their own language. For example, Gail explained that:

My grandparents were very traditional so we had to hunt and trap with them. We had to set [the] net in the ice. We had to help. We learned by looking and listening and also by doing (lines 463-65).

The participants also spoke of how women gathered and prepared traditional food on a regular basis. Activities such as picking seasonal berries and harvesting salmon often
took place with multiple generations of women and children and offered an opportunity to gather with family members. Many of the women had fond memories of partaking in these traditional activities with their grandparents and parents and expressed how these activities provided the opportunities to learn about their culture from older relatives by listening to stories and watching how food was prepared. This foundational knowledge of their culture provided participants with much strength and knowledge to draw upon during their terms as elected officials. As well, these traditional roles and activities allowed the participants to network with other women and provided a means by which they could impact their communities.

However, participants also expressed varying levels of personal connection to more specific cultural traditions, such as the potlatch and the hereditary name/title system. For example, Valerie felt that she had minimal connection to her culture because she had moved away from her mother’s reserve at a young age and spent most of her formative years in a nearby non-Aboriginal community. As well, her community had lost touch with the potlatch system due to its being weakly rooted in the community because of their distance from other West Coast First Nations and also because of early contact by settlers and explorers. These factors, together with a strong influence from the non-Aboriginal community where many community members worked or lived, resulted in the dissolution of the feast system by the mid-1900s. It was also noted that the women who lived outside of their home communities found it prohibitively expensive to engage in cultural activities resulting in sporadic attendance at these events.

Other features of cultural knowledge were also seen to be at risk of being lost, such as the complex rules and procedures involved in traditional forms of governance,
such as the potlatch. Andrea commented that even today, potlatches are becoming too focused on excessive material goods. Sharon expressed that it was challenging for her to understand the protocol and procedure that takes place during potlatch. Many elders are in their seventies or older and are taking the knowledge regarding culture with them to the grave. Valerie’s experience was that her band had lost many of its cultural traditions due to urbanization and that their cultural identity is now, as she put it, “minimal” (line 1069). The potlatch was a relatively new tradition in their culture at the time of contact and it was quickly lost when settlers moved into the area and people had to leave the community in order to seek employment. However, her community has made solid attempts to save their language and bring back some of their cultural traditions, such as songs and dances.

During the residential school era, the loss of cultural knowledge was immense and most of the women discussed the negative effects that were still manifest within their communities and families. The majority of the women interviewed had attended residential school in British Columbia, as did many of their children, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even grandparents. The women spoke of how the residential school system had contributed greatly to the disconnection from their culture as well as contributing to many of the social problems experienced by First Nations people. As Karen stated:

The family that went the most to residential school hung on to [their culture] the most. Because they came from nobility, they had an obligation to remember. I had an uncle, my grandmother’s brother, who died at residential school from a beating for speaking his language. She never spoke her language again after that. So you
find it depended on what happened to them and what the punishment was. (lines 957-970)

Karen’s experience was that there were variations of loss of cultural knowledge among the multiple generations of community members that were forced to attend residential school. The loss of cultural knowledge depended on how each individual person was treated. Language, songs, and dances were lost; however, the values and teachings remained with the families. As she described:

They never lost most of their values and teaching around so many of the areas, but the language was impacted in that particular time, in that particular school. And they were multilingual, these folks, they spoke several indigenous language because they had to from the intermarriages…. But the actual transmission of songs, dances, language, those were the kind of things that have big gaps in it for most of our people, huge gaps. But they never lost those values. (lines 970-985)

Language is an aspect of cultural knowledge that was strongly related to personal identity by most of the participants during our discussions. Over half of the participants could converse in their native languages fluently, while the remainder could understand their languages to varying degrees but could not speak fluently. For those participants who were fluent in their traditional language, the ability to express themselves and communicate with other native language speakers was a key aspect of their cultural identity. In particular, the ability to converse with older relatives and elders in their communities in order to learn about their culture and traditions has been important to all of the women leaders. Unfortunately, for those who were unable to speak their local
language it was often a challenge to clearly communicate with older family members and community elders. The women expressed concern over the loss of language within their communities and felt that language was a key aspect of their cultural knowledge. Specifically, the loss of traditional language speakers was one of the main motivators for one of the women to enter into the political realm. With indigenous language speakers passing away at alarming rates, many participants felt an urgency to save this vital aspect of their culture. Some have recorded the conversations and vocabulary of elders in order to have a record of their indigenous language, while others have published language books for use in schools and within the community. Still others, like Andrea, promoted language use among local children through an immersion program because she saw that young adults often do not retain most of what they learn about their language.

Culture affected the participants’ identities and relationships largely through family, traditional roles, and traditional knowledge. The support of immediate family members and the family of community was very important to the participants, particularly when first entering the political arena. However, their traditional roles within their families and communities also largely guided the identities of the women, as well as their relationships. Those who followed strong traditional roles found it both supportive and also challenging in their positions as community leaders. Finally, the traditional knowledge held by the women was often relied upon as a foundation for their personal identity and guided decisions and conduct while in office. In particular, knowledge and retention of indigenous languages was important not only for cultural identity, but for communicating with elders. Loss of traditional practices, knowledge, and languages was
particularly difficult for many participants to accept and motivated them to continue in their efforts to connect youth to their culture and to elders within their communities.

Culture played an integral role in the personal and professional lives of the participants, especially in regard to personal identity. Cultural roles of the women leaders, together with family, elders, and community members, aided in their participation in elected governance and facilitated their success in such roles. In addition, the participants expressed, in various ways, the many challenges they experienced in their lives regarding the retention of their culture and traditions, such as traditional knowledge, songs, ceremonies, and languages. Particularly relevant to these discussions were the apparent breaches in cultural knowledge that occurred due to historic events such as the establishment of the reserve system, marriage laws, restructuring of their governance system, and the forced removal of multiple generations of First Nations people to residential schools – the impacts of which are still being dealt with today. These historic events were significant to the participants culture and relationships due to the loss of knowledge and connections to family members and community.

b. Values

In addition to traditional knowledge, participants explained that the traditional values they learned from family members during childhood or through training in the hereditary system were key components of their identity and the ways in which they functioned as leaders. Participants placed a great deal of emphasis on how their involvement in the hereditary system had taught them values and beliefs they felt were important in defining who they are as First Nations women and as leaders in their communities. Some of the descriptors used by participants regarding their traditional
values were: humble, respectful, honest, generous, and kind. Relationships with female relatives, such as grandmothers, mothers, and aunts, were crucial in providing the women leaders with the cultural values, knowledge, and beliefs they esteemed in themselves today. However, many of the participants, when asked, stated that their male relatives were equally important in providing them with a strong cultural knowledge base.

Matrilineal descent places an emphasis on the mother’s brother’s role in the family and many of the women leaders experienced a close relationship with their uncles, who had the responsibility of teaching them cultural ways of life, especially during childhood. Grandparents or aunts and uncles also seemed to have been valuable in providing traditional knowledge to participants, possibly because these older relatives were not as influenced by the policies and cultural institutions (such as the education system) of non-Aboriginal Canadian society.

Parents and grandparents were often cited as strong role models for both political and cultural values. The active political role that older generations took to promote and defend the rights of First Nations people was seen as instrumental in how these women accepted their role as political leaders and how they construed the cultural aspects of their own personal conduct. As children, several of the participants assisted their parents and grandparents with activities such as typing letters, conducting research, and attending meetings with community members, Native organizations and government officials. As well, parents and grandparents often put a strong emphasis on obtaining an education beyond high school so that these women could survive in “the white man’s world” (Gail, line 805). To see their parents and other relatives, such as grandmothers, aunts, and mothers, take on these political roles often served as inspiration for the women leaders.
The independence, self-sufficiency, and persistence afforded by these role models was a great inspiration for these participants with respect to their behaviour and conduct.

For many of the women, an understanding of traditional values was gained through interactions with community elders. As Gail stated, “we always relate back to our elders because they are our historians” (line 821). Political and leadership knowledge as well as cultural values were a few of the core teachings from older generations and some of the participants made it a priority to consult with elders on a regular basis while in leadership positions. As well as learning from elders, many participants stressed the importance of their role in passing on cultural knowledge regarding values and behaviour to younger family members. Jean stressed the importance of imparting cultural values to her younger relatives and tried to reinforce that they be loving and helpful to one another. These values were reinforced through her hereditary upbringing and she valued them as a reflection of the positive influence of the older generations.

c. Place

Relationships with community, although different for each of the eleven participants, were critical to the personal and political success of these women. The women all had strong ties to their home reserves through family members, however, the amount of time each participant lived on reserve varied. Some of the women lived on their home reserves for their entire lives, while others were absent for portions of their lifespan. Some of the participants had spent a significant amount of their childhood living off reserve because of more lucrative employment opportunities available to their parents or because their families were enfranchised due to family property ownership (barring rights to live on reserve) or mixed marriage (resulting in loss of status). As well, most
participants had spent a portion of their teenage or adult years living away from their home communities in order to gain an education or procure employment. Both Valerie and Susan had returned to live in their communities in order to learn more about their culture and become closer to their family members who lived on reserve. A few of the participants from particularly remote communities did not live in their home reserve during their term as council member or tribal council member. Instead, they chose to live in close proximity to the head band council office, often located in a larger centre. These distant relationships presented challenges at times, but many of the participants made concerted efforts to seek out and listen to the needs of community members on a regular basis – especially those of elders. Cultural roles within their communities were also a vital source of support for participants and provided opportunities to renew alliances with fellow community members. However, the participants also experienced conflict and challenges in their relationships with community that affected their perspectives on leadership. A few of the participants did not live on reserve at the time they were interviewed because they felt that they were healthier when physically removed from the reserve environment. Together, these physical, political, and cultural relationships with community affected how the women leaders carried out their roles as elected leaders as well as their continued involvement in the political realm.

Despite any temporary or permanent habitation away from their communities, participants maintained or re-established connections prior to or during their leadership in order to gain insight into community needs and issues. When away from home, Gail commented that she kept in touch with family and friends through the “moccasin telegraph” (line 311) – a series of telephone and electronic mail communications where
information was passed through friends and family members. As well, community members would speak with participants at local events, at their homes, or via telephone to discuss their concerns. When a serious matter was being considered by council, the women leaders would often organize a community meeting in order to procure the opinions of community members.

Discussions of place and culture were often connected through ties to family, past generations and life on reserves, and traditional territory that had previously belonged to their family and had been subsumed into Crown or private land at the time people were forced onto reserves. Those with no existing family roots on reserves, whose families had elected to forgo band membership and relocation to a reserve in favour of keeping their private property, spoke of a strong connection and pride in the lands their families owned and lived on and of not having to rely on their band for their subsistence.

An example of the dislocation between place and identity is the disconnect that one participant had between the traditional territory of her father’s family and the hereditary names attached to that land. Andrea’s father was a hereditary chief and responsible for the territory of his clan; however, their traditional land was taken by Crown through treaty negotiations. Andrea lamented that the hereditary chief name had little meaning now because it was not connected to the land anymore: “And it’s kind of sad because without the land, without the real ownership to the land, it waters down our feasts. …We’ve kind of watered down our culture by agreeing to that small plot of land” (lines 227-229). She continued "...with the land, with the names, with the feasts and everything, that’s something that we pass down to our children, but how do you explain – that is what I’m struggling with” (lines 265-268). The forced dislocation of her family’s
traditional territory and the hereditary title that came from her father was a challenge for Andrea. Her identity and the identity of her family was framed by the hereditary name; however, the name was not grounded to the land. Without this connection, Andrea struggled with how she should pass down a solid concept of cultural identity to her children.

d. Spirituality

Five of the participants spoke of ways in which their Aboriginal spirituality helped them to remain grounded and strong as leaders, maintain a community-focused perspective, and behave in a respectful manner while in public office. Jane stated that:

I think my, my largest support comes from my own spirituality and I spend as much time as I can – two to four days – on the land and following our tradition practices on the land and the water. … I rely on that, drawing strength from Mother Earth and everything that grows from her and the birds and the animals and those things that are there. (lines 321-329).

Jane has also utilized her dreams to confirm when she is on the right path in her life. In addition, three of the participants (Gail, Andrea, and Barbara) relied on their Christian faith to help them maintain a positive perspective throughout their lives. Two of these participants combined their traditional spiritual beliefs with their Christian faith, which they felt aided their overall health and well-being and provided support for them in their roles as leaders. Not all participants connected their spiritual beliefs with their traditional practices or positions as elected leaders; however, many of the women spoke of how time spent on the land and surrounded by nature was revitalizing and important to their health and well-being.
Summary

Identity for the eleven women leaders found its substance in relationships with family and community, developed its complexity through cultural values and beliefs, was supported by spirituality, and made itself tangible through connections to place and community. Connections between past and future generations grounded their behaviour in cultural knowledge and traditions, provided them with a firm foundation on which to take on a position in government, and provided them with the motivation to pass on their knowledge to youth. As well, their relationship to their band – whether they lived on reserve or not – was central as a signifier of who they were. These women took great pride in the cultural values they held, especially with respect to their elected personae, and expressed how they strived to exemplify those values at all times. Connections to culture and spirituality provided strength and support for the women leaders in their stressful and demanding positions. In taking these core concepts of identity and focusing their efforts on making their communities better places to live and work, these women leaders have found a place in which they are able, as described below, to negotiate “living in two worlds” and utilize their skills as holistic caregivers.

Theme 3: Living in Two Worlds

I spent twelve years in a residential school and it was my choice to find a job. I kind of felt that in order to get ahead you must live in both worlds and I needed to try it out for myself. (Gail, lines 116-119)

Its hard to be [a] traditional person in the elected system – huge contradiction – unless you take your advice and your leadership skills from those traditional
places to begin with. That's your only way that you can either justify it or make it work. (Karen, lines 1636-40)

The impact of historical events on the identity and relationships of the participants was expressed through a framework of living in two worlds – that of the Aboriginal world and the non-Aboriginal world. The following section focuses on how the participants described living in two worlds through their elected and cultural roles, through the traditional values they held, and through their relationships with youth. In particular, participants spoke clearly of the issues that arose with respect to the negotiation of the traditional hereditary system and the elected systems of governance. Within these two worlds, different value systems were in place, sometimes resulting in conflict and confusion for participants in their roles as cultural members of their community and as elected leaders. The elected government system, with its Euro-Canadian, patrilineal structure and values, was difficult to integrate with First Nations values and matrilineal ways. In particular, the values that participants learned through engagement with the traditional hereditary system and day-to-day cultural knowledge were difficult to incorporate and utilize within the elected governance system. Participants noted that youth are particularly vulnerable to the challenge of living in two worlds. The focus of many of the participants during their term in office was to help youth negotiate these two worlds toward a successful and culturally-grounded outcome.

Personal identity was one platform on which the women felt they lived in two worlds. Participants such as Valerie, had the experience of being called “half-breeds” and living within that liminal space where they simultaneously belonged to, and yet were also rejected by both the Native and non-Native worlds. However, some of the women did not
make this distinction and blended their descriptions regarding differences into the struggle of surviving as a First Nations person in a world that is predominately non-Native. The age of the participant may have been a contributing factor as older participants were more likely to speak of living in separate worlds. These women often had poignant memories of experiences with relatives, such as grandparents, who had lived much more traditional lives with little contact from non-Aboriginal people. The stronger the connection to a traditional way of life, the larger the disparity between worlds and the greater the distinction was for these women in their identity as First Nations living in two worlds.

a. Elected and Cultural Roles

That is the fragility of leadership and governance on a reserve. There is very little connection. … I find the lack of continuity and how fragile these positions are makes it, unless you have a very strong cultural connection, you can become engulfed in the fight and forget about the needs of your community, and you can forget about your whole rationale for being there in the first place. (Karen, lines 84-92)

The relationship between cultural identity and the role of elected leader flows from participants’ discussions concerning how they connected more globally as a leader in their community and how the role of elected leader sometimes contrasted with their participation as a cultural member. The transcripts clearly indicate that the participants’ identities as elected leaders were complicated—with evidence of both complementary and conflicting aspects. To aid in their elected role, the participants relied on the qualities of traditional leadership they had learned from family members and personal role models,
particularly First Nations women. Often, however, these women leaders felt as if their identities were split into that of elected leader and cultural member due to the conflicting structures, roles, and values of the two systems. The demands made on their time as a community leader limited their participation in traditional activities and community events, resulting in considerable stress in their daily personal lives. Most participants expressed frustration regarding the limitations of their power as elected official, the short terms in office, and the lack of funding provided to them. As well, participants had concerns regarding how treaty negotiations drained resources and time from general community affairs. However, the support of community members gave the participants the confidence to lead their communities with integrity and face the challenges present.

Karen was particularly cognizant of the dichotomy between elected and cultural roles and consciously presented herself as a proactive and solution-oriented leader of her community while working within her role as chief. When working in her cultural role, however, she put aside her assertive leader persona. Karen stated that these two contrasting roles were sometimes challenging for some community members to accept, but she felt that by creating a clear distinction she could honour both roles. With her unique cultural and civic leadership identities, she was able to maintain a clear focus on the needs of her community members while still benefiting from the traditional knowledge of her cultural life. Although she was asked to become elected chief by her family and community, Karen still experienced personal conflict in her position as elected leader because, as she stated: “It’s not a woman’s role. It’s plain and simple. I am a lot more effective feeding the people in the front of the line than giving them information and advice” (lines 299-301). She tried to alleviate this conundrum by
maintaining a clear distinction between when she was acting as chief and when she was not. However, she also found that:

If you’re traditional and you work in that electoral system you never let it go, you’re always operating in some [traditional] manner, you’re translating it back and forth all the time, you can’t let it go. So, I think that there is some problems posed in moving people out of those traditional systems into modern systems without a full understanding of where the barriers might be, in the ritual terms. If you sometimes just identify where those barriers are, that’s enough, but you can’t do that unless you know who you are, know your identity, and know your cultural connectedness. (lines 1591-1605)

Karen felt strongly that she should not assert her elected position within her hereditary role and struggled to act with respect in both roles so as not to disgrace her community. Her cultural roles were beneficial in her relationships as elected leader, with the support of family and community, because “there is a need for some of the special skills that we have as women, traditionally, to be able to do the bridging that’s necessary to be done” (lines 1500-2).

One of the fundamental challenges expressed by many of the participants, and displayed in Karen’s statements above, is that the elected band council system has little in common with the various traditional governance structures of the participants’ cultures. Most traditional governments have a family or clan spokesperson who relays information and decisions reached through family consensus. This is in contrast to the elected council system that may not accurately represent the diversity of community members. Karen was not in favour of a government that did not focus on traditional practices: "Trying to
impose one system over another just isn’t right because you can’t then call yourself Aboriginal and fight for rights - you have an identity crisis. It’s so huge, no wonder our kids are in trouble” (lines 1686-89). However, it was not uncommon for hereditary leaders within communities to become involved in band council. The involvement of traditionally trained people in elected governance was seen as both a challenge and a benefit by the women interviewed. One particular benefit to the women leaders of participation in the hereditary system was the training it provided in being a strong, respectful, and culturally-informed leader, who has the qualities of leadership most valued in First Nations culture, such as being respectful of others, carrying themselves well in public, honouring their culture, and always striving to be the best person they could be. Many of the women spoke of parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents whom they looked to as models of respectful and culturally-appropriate behaviour and it was these individuals whom the participants tried to emulate in their positions as leaders.

Some of the participants spoke about the participation of women in elected roles on council and more generally about the strength of the women in their communities. The participants revealed a mixed level of participation of women in elected governance, with some communities having had women on council or as a chief since the 1950s or earlier, while others had an increasing involvement of women on council since the1980s. Some of the women have had aunts or grandmothers who had held elected chief and/or councilor positions. Sharon stated that the increasing number of women on council was due to the transitory nature of the job. A woman could hold the position for a two or three year term because her husband had a stable job and the loss of her employment would not be a financial hardship on the family. Sharon also stated that women were
better able to handle the stress of elected office and were more capable in the position. Despite the increased involvement of women in local government, one participant estimated that about eighty percent of elected positions within her community were still held by men.

Participants had different recollections of the involvement of women as hereditary leaders within their clans and communities. Many of the participants mentioned that it was traditionally a man’s role to be the spokesperson for family or clan and, more often than not, men held hereditary chief positions, although women had held these positions as well. Some women recalled female hereditary chiefs in the past, while others could not recall any women involved as hereditary leaders within their communities. Most often, participants noted that although women did not often take hereditary chief or titled positions they were nonetheless influential in community decisions through their relationships with male leaders (through their hereditary roles and/or position as a wife, daughter, sister, or niece). Male hereditary chiefs need their wives and families to support them, otherwise they would not have the support necessary to be a successful leader. In a matrilineal society, where equal respect toward men and women is valued, there is little cultural support for male-dominated society. Many of the women spoke of how women had a strong and valuable place in their culture, and some of the women felt they were carrying on the role of leadership held by women in past generations through their involvement in elected government.

Relationships with family and community members were also affected by the women’s dual roles as elected leaders and cultural members. The greatest challenge that many of the women faced within both their families and in relationships with community
members was their absence due to demands put on their time at work. This was particularly disconcerting for a number of the women as they had less time to spend with their children and relied on husbands and other family members to attend to family duties. Participation in community and cultural events was also difficult for some of the women because of the many obligations they had outside of their communities. However, when they could attend community functions, it provided them with the opportunity to communicate with people regarding their needs and opinions on community matters.

Most of the women interviewed had experienced some level of resistance in their role as a councilor or chief by members of the community and/or government. Lack of cultural knowledge, especially with respect to behaviour and values in leadership, was an area that some of the women found to be very troubling and contributed to conflict within their positions. The participants also felt it was wrong to use the occasion of their nomination, or election, as women to promote a personal agenda. Many of the participants had experienced that the boy’s club – the male chiefs that have been in power for a very long time – were not receptive to the change that younger women leaders brought to the table. These women found it challenging to earn the respect of their male counterparts and felt they had to work ‘harder and smarter’ to be successful. This loss of cultural knowledge regarding the traditional relationships between men and women was noted by a number of the participants in examples of patriarchal attitudes of older generations of male chiefs. Margaret recollected that it was during the period of the Charlottetown Accord that she first saw the division between the sexes and realized that Aboriginal women needed to stand up and fight for their rights because the male leaders that represented First Nations were interested in maintaining male leadership and were
not representing the needs of women and children in their communities. Karen felt that knowing who she was as a woman and as a cultural member of her community was crucial to her functioning well as an elected chief: “It’s not power over people, it’s a responsibility to people” (line 1391).

As part of the federal government’s goal of promoting self-determination, the obligations and historic role of INAC regarding service delivery are in the process of being transferred to direct control by band councils within these First Nations communities. The responsibility for delivering these services puts a great onus on the chief and council, however, and they continue to have little power within their communities to enforce current regulations. Many of the older women leaders in particular expressed displeasure at the adversarial relationship INAC has with First Nations. This relationship made it challenging for them to effect any substantive changes within their communities. Participants, such as Gail, made it an objective during their terms in office to improve relationships with INAC and other outside agencies. For example, Gail strove to improve relations between the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and her community and implemented regular meetings and communication between the local detachment and the band council. She also made sure the RCMP were invited to community functions, such as feasts and sporting events, so that people—especially children—would get to know them.

Two practical aspects of their positions were discussed by the participants: the short term in office and the lack of available funding. With only two or three years per term, there is little time to effect real change within the community before the next election, which often results in a new group of council members. This lack of continuity
in leadership keeps long-term planning at bay and forces the council to focus attention on crises and short term issues. The lack of funding provided by the provincial and federal governments for even basic services was a weighty issue for many of the participants, as were cutbacks to social programs and services, especially to services for youth and elders. As well, the lack of accountability regarding the distribution of their funds was seen as an issue. All in all, there are insufficient funds for communities to meet basic needs, let alone have programs and services that help youth live successful and healthy lives. As Gail stated, “we need better housing for people, then education, then improved health. If people’s basic needs are not met, how can they focus on anything else?” (lines 90-91). Gail chose to focus on community development for her portfolio while on council and found that there was no government funding for community development and many community members were challenged to find outside financial resources due to the remote location of her band. She was frustrated that, after her two-year term was complete, little had been advanced and no one on the new council was interested in taking up the portfolio.

Treaty negotiations were highlighted as a nascent challenge to many of the women while in office. The participants varied in whether they felt entering treaty negotiations was a positive or negative avenue to pursue. The treaty system was not favoured by Margaret and, in her elected position, she attempted to introduce a neutral party to negotiations, claiming that all members at the table were government employees: the federal representative, the provincial representative, and the tribal council representative. Other participants were more open to including both hereditary and elected systems of government in a self-government situation. Karen felt that most First
Nations leadership was void of cultural leadership values and to create a self-government system modeled on the elected system would be a betrayal to her people. “We can’t discard one [form of governance] in order to replace it and become a poor carbon copy of another system. We have to find ways to modernize and implement.” (lines 205-208). She would like to see a self-government system that parallels traditional values and family relationships. Many leaders look outside of their culture for remedies, which, to Karen, is not the solution to the problems that face First Nations today. Valerie found that when a community was engaged in treaty negotiations, it took time and funds away from the day-to-day functioning of the local government. Valerie also noted the challenges that come with delays and extended treaty stage transitions before final settlements could be reached. Valerie saw women as being integral to treaty negotiations and implementation because she felt women are more open to change and have a vision for the future success of their communities.

The participants experienced many challenges while working at the band council level of government. The conflicts between the structure and values of the elected and hereditary government systems was a significant issue for many of the women. Many of the participants felt that it was very important that elected leaders have exposure to hereditary training so that they would have a strong understanding of cultural knowledge and assume the values and behaviours appropriate to a leader. However, some of the women interviewed without this training were also successful in their positions. Other practical aspects, such as a lack of funding and short term in office, also tested the participants’ fortitude. As well, a lack of power to be effective in office was a great concern for some of the women leaders. Finally, the process of treaty negotiations and
self-government involved unexpected issues for the women leaders. The participants involvement in the governance of their communities presented many personal and institutional challenges; however, one of the issues that fostered much discussion were the problems experienced as women.

b. Values

We’ve forgotten the respect and the kindness, which is a real strong value in leadership. You know, in our world, our cultural world, leadership isn’t … about power, it’s about responsibility. And it’s about having that sense of not thumping your chest and saying you are a chief or a leader. (Karen, lines 534-539)

As elected members of chief and council, the participants’ relationships with their family, community, members of government agencies, and youth had an influence on their direction in leadership as well as their traditional role in the community. Values played a key role in the participants style of leadership and contributed greatly to how they approached their elected positions. Most of the women emphasized that their role as elected leader was to represent the needs of their communities in a fair and transparent manner. They focused on being strong and consistent, listen to community members, act in a culturally appropriate manner, be humble and patient, and focus on community youth. For a few of the participants, their relationship as elected leaders also intertwined with their traditional cultural roles.

For five participants in particular, involvement in the hereditary system had strongly influenced their experiences in their local elected governance system—both on a political and personal level. Traditional training had provided these women with knowledge regarding the history of their people, cultural customs, and traditional values
that enabled them to act on behalf of their community in a respectful and culturally-relevant manner. As well, they felt their training provided them with the personal qualities of leadership valued in First Nations cultures, such as being respectful and kind to others, carrying themselves well in public, honouring their culture, and being the best person they could be. This training was also seen as important to community members and those who supported the women in office. For Karen, involvement in the hereditary system was fundamental in her role as elected chief. Being brought up with guidance regarding traditional knowledge, values, and protocol provided her with a critical foundation from which she could guide her community from a culturally oriented position. On the other hand, she thought that the role of elected chief was demeaning for a cultural person because the obligations and responsibilities encompass a form of governance that is incongruent with her culture. In essence, she stated that being an elected chief was like being a glorified Indian Agent – it perpetuated colonialism. Even the term ‘chief’ is confusing as it takes a hereditary title name and applies it to an elected government position. Karen summarized her thoughts regarding those leaders with little or no cultural training in the following excerpt:

And I do notice that a lot of people who are totally void of training, and I have to say a large majority of elected leaders now are – both male and female – totally void of [it]… they may know how to put on their regalia and dance, but they are very void of … those values that they can’t operate in leadership with those same values. They think that you have to be tough and aggressive … you don’t have to be tough and aggressive like that. (lines 569-574)
Relationships with community members also revolved around traditional values and roles for the women leaders. For example, Karen, because of her hereditary position, was responsible for advising women in her community on culturally appropriate ways to behave. On occasion, she had to undertake this role while acting in her elected position. She told the story of how a young woman in her late teens was challenging her at a council meeting and how she had to advise the girl that her behaviour was culturally inappropriate and that she should consult with her older family members regarding her behaviour. This participant felt that the aggressive behaviour of many young, educated women was culturally inappropriate and challenging to deal with in the context of community and as an elected official.

Several participants stated how they strongly valued the needs and priorities of community members and worked hard to not lose sight of the larger community and the purpose of their position. To maintain this focus, Gail stated that as a leader one must value be honest, healthy, and think of the community before the self. Likewise, Andrea offered the following statement:

I always maintain … what I promised to the people. That’s always in the back of my mind when I’m doing what I do. And never, never lose sight of that. And when we have public meetings I publicly state how I do things and how I work – how I’m working towards what I’m trying to achieve on behalf of the people.

(lines 1105-1111).

c. Youth

I want both of [my grandchildren] to live in both worlds. I don’t want them to be dependent on something that will hold them back to whatever their future life
goals will be. I want them to set goals in their life and go after it. (Gail, lines 1000-1003).

Many of the women leaders expressed great concern regarding how challenging it was for youth to live in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. Contributing to this were distractions such as television and video games that occupy the attention of youth and divert them from learning about their culture. In some communities, youth did not have a strong voice and suffered “social breakdown dramatically” (Karen, lines 1179-80) and experienced abuse at alarmingly high rates and were exposed to alcohol and drugs from a very young age. Of great concern was that many youth and young adults must leave their communities to seek employment because there was little hope of obtaining a good job in the resource sector or traditional forms of work, such as fishing. It was noted that youth have few positive First Nations role models and that they must deal with racism on a daily basis. As well, some youth are now being denied legal status because of the limitations of Bill C-31 – impacting their ability to live in their communities.

Inadequacies within the educational system were a major concern for two of the participants who were previously employed in the education system, particularly regarding the inadequate curriculum and the lack of funds available. Also mentioned was the lack of focus on culture and language and the poor management and insufficient staffing in local schools. Many children must attend grade school outside of their communities, where they have little or no exposure to their language and culture. This results in a dramatic loss of language and interest in cultural activities. In addition, high school completion rates are extremely low for First Nations youth. In one participant’s
community there had not been a high school graduate for 20 years; however, due to mentoring while she was in office, they were able to have two of their youth complete high school. Another participant rallied parents in her community to become more involved with their children’s education so that they would stay in school and complete grade twelve. One participant was involved in her school board and worked diligently to improve the educational services in her community. She saw that children “just squeak by” (line 1150) in school and were not pursuing any post-secondary education. Today, youth in her community are taught how to use computers and have greatly improved their scholastic attitudes and abilities. In most communities, youth have difficulty obtaining funding for post-secondary education from their band. This is extremely frustrating to those who wish to pursue a post-secondary education and their supporters.

Participants noted that the quality of leadership within the community affects the level of services and education for children. Many participants took it upon themselves to raise funds for youth programs, particularly those with a focus on cultural activities and athletics. Many of the women had concerns regarding who will be taking over leadership of their communities in the future; however, they also expressed optimism regarding those youth who took an active role in their community affairs. This was particularly apparent in those communities that had an active youth council, where youth participated in community governance and had an active voice regarding civic issues. Programs for youth that involved cultural activities, language, and engagement with elders were often cited as means by which participants engaged youth in their culture and community.
Summary

Participants described ‘living in two worlds’ through their elected and cultural roles, through the traditional values they held, and through their relationships with youth. Of particular mention was the difficulties in negotiating the hereditary and elected governance systems. Participants worked to maintain their accountability to community members and improve their communities for future generations. In turn, their identities as elected leaders were rooted in traditional values, strong role models, and community support. Although conflicts between the cultural world and that of their elected role were challenging for many of the participants, they found ways to function as respectful, effective community leaders and cultural members. Central to their role as community leaders was their focus on the challenges present for many youth in their communities and to implement and support programs and services that support youth.

Theme 4: Holistic Caregivers

And if I can help in some way then I’m happy because I kind of think of myself as a caregiver. (Gail, lines 904-906).

Emerging from discussions of the challenges of living in two worlds was a clear picture of the participants as holistic caregivers: as women who felt strongly that their role was as caregivers for their families and their communities and who utilized their cultural background as a source of strength and inspiration. Through their careers and their focus while in leadership, the participants clearly took on a role as holistic caregivers for youth, elders, and other community members. How did the women express this caregiving role? Predominantly as members of their community who were there to get things done – they are the movers and shakers – and effect change in a healthy and
efficient manner. In particular, the concern of the participants for the present and future well-being of youth was a predominant focus of their role as caregivers. Participants focused on youth through the work they did as government officials as well as by connecting with youth on a personal level. The role of caregiver, however, also has its challenges and many participants spoke of these personal costs. The role of holistic caregiver appears to have informed the participants’ identities as well as their relationships with others in their families, local communities, and the larger Canadian society. These aspects of what and how the participants described as being a holistic caregiver are discussed in the section below.

a. Identifying as Caregivers

The connections as caregivers, mothers, and enablers within their communities provided these women leaders with deep connections to other women in their families and communities, a passion for youth in their personal and professional lives, and a commitment as caregivers. The participants’ discussion of their identity as caregivers was diverse; however, it mainly revolved around their family roles as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers and as caregivers for their families and communities. In addition to their caregiving roles, these First Nations women had a strong belief in the abilities of women to organize and lead their communities, as represented by past generations of women leaders.

All of the participants identified as mothers – either of their own biological children, or of step-children, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews. At least four of the participants were grandmothers – a role that sometimes involved raising their grandchildren on a part-time or full-time basis. Indeed, Gail, who was raised by her
grandparents, identified the importance of the role, especially with respect to the transmission of cultural knowledge. Identifying as a caregiver was very important to Sharon who stated that her children keep her grounded and provide a reason to live a better life. Two of the younger participants stated that their decision to live alcohol-free lives was in part due to their role as mothers. The role of aunt was particularly poignant for many participants who spoke of how they were close to their nieces and nephews and took an active role in their upbringing by spending time with them, providing support for their educational and employment pursuits, and encouraged their involvement in extracurricular activities. Karen summarized the importance of women as caregivers in her community with the statement that, “our culture ends without women and children, you know, we’re life givers for goodness sakes, and so there’s not a way to disconnect that.” (lines 1520-21).

Some of the women mentioned the positive influence of the skills and knowledge they had gained in their working life. Many of the women had long histories as caregivers in their professional careers and were proud of their roles as social workers, teachers, or health workers. Specialization within specific areas, such as education or social work, gave them knowledge and experience that they used to deal with issues in certain sectors of their community. For example, Valerie credited her experience working at a Native Friendship Centre in giving her the tools to enable her to do long-term planning for her community, especially with respect to treaty negotiation and implementation. Many of the women focused on the transmission of knowledge and awareness regarding First Nations people in their workplace and in interactions with non-Aboriginal peoples.
b. Movers and Shakers

Participants had strong convictions regarding the role of women in their communities. Women were the foundation of community life, the movers and shakers, the people behind the scenes (and often in front) who do what is needed to be done to make their communities better places for future generations. The consensus among the participants was that First Nations women leaders are highly organized, productive, and have the personal strength and persistence necessary to get things done. Many of the participants felt that women had achieved leadership roles within their communities because of their excellent skills as communicators and organizers. These special qualifications were recognized in a number of participants’ communities where women had taken on the role of hereditary or elected chief for many years. Barbara stated that her community had a long list of female chiefs dating back to the 1970s and had consistently had women chiefs in office since 1994. Women also have a strong role in Jane’s community where they had one of the first all-female chief and councils in Canada. Participants agreed that women were the driving force that served many committees and organizations and who had a proactive attitude toward improving the lives of children and youth.

Participants discussed how women were active in their cultural activities. Jean, who was to take up the position of head chief of her clan in the near future, stated that women in her culture, “don’t have to be a chief to have a key role in the community. They’re the movers and shakers behind the scenes - they do all of the organizing, they decide who takes a hereditary name.” (lines 785-787). All of the women leaders discussed their participation in organizing and holding feasts or potlatches for their clans.
or their husbands’ families. Andrea and Jane, in particular, discussed how they were the main organizers of feasts for their families – a challenging job that involved purchasing, cooking, and serving food for hundreds of people as well as arranging the distribution of gifts to attendees. Karen was excited to take on the challenge of incorporating her traditional values and still find ways to modernize the band council system so that a fair and equitable government would be in place when the youth in her community become leaders. Karen stated that, “women are the worker bees. In a different way men are too, but it’s just a different kind of worker bee. I guess it’s our skills that are what is needed right now. Especially those of traditional women” (lines 1727-30). She went on to explain that, "I think there is a need for some of the special skills that we have as women, traditionally, to be able to do the bridging that’s necessary to be done" (lines 1500-02).

With respect to elected office, both Valerie and Andrea spoke of the importance of having a dynamic and forward-thinking elected chief to facilitate the implementation of new programs. For Andrea, what local government needs is a strong leader with a “doer mentality” (line 1224) – someone who is ready to make positive changes rather than maintaining the status quo — especially when problems have been defined within their communities and government just needs to take action in order to solve them. Many of the participants relayed how they were involved in the implementation of immediate and severe changes shortly after they were elected. Two of the participants’ governments had to lay off a large number of band office staff in order to streamline services and reduce the number of employees on the payroll. This restructuring created conflict and outcry among the local residents; however, the participants were both willing to accept any backlash from community members regarding these drastic measures in order to achieve
long-term efficiency and financial equilibrium within their local governments. Shortly after taking office, Jane, with the approval of her community, withdrew the community from their tribal council in order to pursue treaty negotiations independently. This was a bold step to take, but one that benefited the community in the future.

The participants had many examples of initiatives that had been taken to improve the lives of First Nations people and focus on the strengths already present in communities. The older participants, in particular, were very confident and proud of their ability to work toward positive solutions to issues relevant to their communities. Strengths that were apparent in Ellen’s discussion of her community were a strong culture, active participation in potlatch, and a general understanding of their native language (although few speak it fluently). People in her community are encouraged to participate in cultural activities in order to bring generations together. For example, elders participated in youth programs, such as drumming, singing, and dancing, and by doing things such as making blankets for the dance group. Many of the participants’ communities have created some form of language program that focused on recording and preserving their language through the participation of elders as well as working toward teaching language skills to children and adults.

Jane stated that knowledge of what the community members wanted and needed was important in order for local leadership to fight for those goals. She felt that her nation’s community building was a key landmark that had a positive impact on community spirit and participation. Indeed, a number of participants made note of the positive impact of their community centres, which commonly housed the local elected government as well as a number of other social programs and community facilities.
Beyond her regular council duties, Jane does a considerable amount of fundraising for her community. One program dear to her heart is the local language program, which has resulted in the publication by her community of a number of language books for use by community members and the local school board. With a strong focus on the restoration and rehabilitation of her territory, Jane has fostered sustainable economic development to ensure that resources are available for future generations. She has also pursued larger business projects through the development of relationships with local governments, businesses, and First Nations. With previous unemployment rates reaching eighty percent, these business ventures have built capacity, provided employment opportunities, and created a lasting positive impact on her community.

With young children of her own and a keen focus on youth, Valerie has taken an active role to ensure there are constructive activities to keep children occupied and safe in her village. She and a fellow female councilor developed a youth treaty council (also discussed in the next section) with the hope of preparing local youth as future government leaders. When the nearby elementary school attended by the community’s children was slated for closure due to provincial cutbacks, she rallied her community to fight to keep it open and to save the children from a long bus ride to and from school every day.

During Ellen’s twenty years on council she has implemented and participated in a number of community projects, such as a gas bar, a fire hall, and the multiplex building. She has also fostered awareness and prevention programs regarding health issues such as HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. When Ellen was first elected, she traveled to other First Nations communities to research alcohol programs and then implemented a program in
her own community. She has a keen interest in improving the lives of youth in her community, including those of her own children and grandchildren. She has initiated a youth job counseling program and a youth council where one youth sits in on the regular band council meetings. Her interest in exposing youth to traditional activities has a long history and includes arranging mini-feasts where elders and youth can connect to share cultural knowledge and build bridges between generations. As well, she is a long-time participant in the local culture camp, where youth camp in their traditional territory and learn about traditional activities. Ellen started a traditional dance group with her sister almost twenty years ago in order to teach children how to dance, sing songs, and learn their language and clan system.

Barbara has been involved in many youth activities in her community over the years. She has helped organize mini-potlatches for youth and has participated in her community’s annual culture camp, where she went on a week-long canoe trip with youth in her community. She has also implemented a youth forum to hear the needs of youth in her community. Her government also created language classes and had summer programs in language, dance, and regalia for elementary school children. Barbara has also initiated a research partnership with a nearby university to investigate the alarmingly high rate of cancer within her community. She is constantly looking for opportunities to develop relationships with people with expertise and to obtain funding for her community.

These local efforts to improve the lives of community members have led to improved literacy and high school graduation rates, greater employment, improved social service programs, participation of youth in local government activities, exposure of youth
to cultural activities and language, and the bringing together of generations and cultures
to improve communication. Some of the participants felt that their communities were in
the process of taking control of their education, child welfare, health care, seniors care,
economic development, and resource management. Participants felt this could be done
through providing basic needs, improving economic development, developing and
participating in their language and culture, and focusing on healing. The participants
discussed how communication was key to understanding what community members need
from their local government.

All the participants agreed that women have always been the backbone of a
community and have been integral to decision making through a consensus or
consultation approach. Many women leave their communities to gain an education and
work experience and then return to give back to their communities through community
work, employment, and positions on band council. Most participants felt it vital to
include women in leadership roles due to their focus on youth and strong ability to
communicate, organize, and focus on the needs of their communities. It was felt that the
women were beneficial to government because they think beyond the present and are
more gentle in their approach to issues.

c. Focus on Youth

I’ve always believed that if a person is proud of who they are and where they
come from, they can do anything. (Andrea, lines 1181-82)

I think one of the important things for youth is not to give youth lip service. Like
get down and actually do something about the crisis that the youth face. (Barbara,
lines 485-88)
Whether through their roles as caregivers, through their careers, or through their roles as leaders in their local government, it was apparent that relationships with youth took precedence in the lives of the participants. These women leaders strove to be solid role models to youth through their actions and communications with others. As well, the participants’ narratives reflected that the best way they could support youth was to lead by example and communicate directly with youth regarding their behaviour. Youth also provided a key motivation for the women’s participation in leadership positions and, in many cases, were the reason some participants became involved in their local elected government. In turn, participants emphasized the positive influence youth had in their lives and expressed that youth were the future generations that will lead First Nations people; therefore, they strongly supported the educational, employment, and cultural pursuits of all children so that these young individuals would be prepared for the future.

Being a positive role model for youth was one of the primary ways the participants developed meaningful relationships with youth. Many of the women expressed that they were positive role models for youth in their families and communities – although some were reluctant to call themselves role models. Participants said it was important for youth to see women being independent, pursuing an education, and having careers. Other participants focused more on how they, as women leaders, behaved with others in their leadership and cultural roles as something that youth could look toward. One participant, in particular, discussed how she consciously ‘walked the talk’ by living a culturally-relevant way of life as a model for youth and young adults in her community.

Many of the participants strived to connect First Nations youth with their culture. Youth were encouraged to partake in cultural activities, such as food gathering and
hunting, or dancing and drumming, and to learn their language. These women leaders worked to foster pride in youth regarding their First Nations heritage and encouraged the development of respectful relationships with parents, grandparents, and elders. These women felt that it was important to have cultural knowledge to pass on to others and some participants encouraged youth to become involved in cultural activities (such as dancing) and to learn about First Nations history. Jane’s relationship with youth stemmed from her position of responsibility to pass on her knowledge to youth regarding the land, resources, spirituality, and language. Karen spoke of the lack of cultural ties that many youth have and how they seem to want this cultural knowledge. She encouraged them to participate in cultural activities and learn as much about their culture as they can. Andrea would like to create a healing centre where youth and elders could be brought together to share experiences and pass on cultural knowledge. Programs within the local educational system were also another important way that knowledge of culture and language is taught to children. Unfortunately, some of the communities did not have local schools – their children were sent by bus to public schools that may not be interested in such cultural programs.

The incorporation of cultural and life skills programs in the education system as well as an emphasis on school completion was mentioned by a number of participants as having a positive effect on youth. Valerie discussed how her focus was to keep kids in school and to provide life skills and she has seen a slow increase the number of youth who graduate from high school and also complete post-secondary degrees. Sharon felt that youth were stronger and healthier due to life skills programs offered at school and exposure to positive First Nations role models within her community – such as adults
who do not drink or do drugs. Andrea had seen the huge impact school programs had on her younger daughter, who is confident and secure in her identity and abilities. Her older children did not have the same experience in school and leading them to be more reserved. Similarly, Susan felt that First Nations youth in her community were willing to try new activities that build their confidence through new skills, such as drumming and dancing, and improves their health through increased physical activity. Jean emphasized that post-secondary education is important for youth, but they must know their history.

Many of the women emphasized that they tried to instill cultural values in children at a young age through direct communication and modeling of positive behaviour. Karen, for example, involved youth in her day-to-day activities so that they could learn through hands-on experience – a way that many of the participants themselves were taught. Many of the women spoke bluntly to youth, both within and outside their families, regarding the impact of alcohol and drugs and strongly encouraged them to avoid substance abuse and make positive choices in their lives. Karen found time in the evenings to mentor youth out of her office or home, where youth were always welcome to come and speak to her or her husband. She tried to nurture a caring and positive attitude in youth and help them find their passions in life. Karen also encouraged those with whom she spoke to find a solution within, not outside, of their culture. Not only speaking with youth and encouraging them, but listening was highlighted as being critical to gaining the trust and respect of youth in the community.

Three of the participants spoke of the positive relationship their elected governments had with youth due to the implementation of a youth council. The youth council consisted of an elected body of local youth modeled on the band council system,
where one of the youth sits in on the band council meetings. This system promoted the development of youth leaders who would be involved in the community and learn about the local band council system. Involving youth in the workings of local government through programs, groups, and employment was reflected as a positive way to involve youth in their community. It also provided a venue for community officials to hear first hand about the needs and dreams of community youth. In turn, these youth become role models for other youth in the community. Valerie felt that there were strong youth leaders in her community, many of whom participated in their youth treaty council. An increasing number of youth under 19 years of age were vocal regarding their needs and were empowered to ask for what they wanted from their government. Participants who were involved with youth through these means emphasized the positive impact such programs had on their community.

Most of the women stated that they tried to be involved with youth activities as much as their busy positions would allow. Although the limited amount of time they were able to spend with youth was disappointing for these participants, when they did attend youth functions they tried to listen to their concerns. Many of the women spoke of how they connected with youth at sporting events and other gatherings in the community. One participant’s community had a summer youth camp that exposes youth to cultural knowledge and traditional activities. Participants volunteered for these and other local recreational activities where they could engage youth and get to know them. Susan stated that she tried to ensure that youth were substance free when participating in recreational activities in the community. Her community also enlisted youth to visit drug and alcohol
centres in other communities and then have those youth discuss what they had learned when they return home.

The women leaders close relationships with their own children, youth in their families, and youth in their communities was discussed with a passion that was reflected in their goals as elected leaders. Many focused on bringing youth closer to their culture through traditional activities and encouraged youth to pursue their educational and career goals so that they would be successful and, hopefully, bring that success back to their communities. As well, the women leaders strove to be positive role models through their own behaviour as well as their involvement in extra-curricular activities and youth political groups, such as youth council. In sum, the women leaders reflected a deep caring and concern for youth that motivated their participation and activities in government.

d. Challenges of Being a Holistic Caregiver

As a woman councilor I think no matter what, it’s always going to be a challenge for any woman … in the role of council. … We not only have to manage things on a band level, but also on a community level, and on a personal level. (Valerie, lines 1284-88)

The complex combination of personal, cultural, and political associations facilitated, yet also hampered, these women leaders’ abilities to undertake a positive leadership role. Identifying and working as a caregiver has its personal challenges and participants expressed that the stresses of their positions sometimes affected their health and wellbeing. Despite challenges, the participants were able to maintain their focus while in office, with varied levels of what they felt was successful. These women had an awareness of how their relationships with community sometimes fostered personal and
political growth while at other instances it negatively impacted their well-being. Jane, who was elected chief of her community, said that it was very difficult to find her balance in the first year of her leadership amidst the ‘old school’ members of her tribal council; however, once she found her own voice she was able to lead her people in a positive direction, despite protests from some members of the community. In turn, Karen said that she did not hesitate to push people to change in order to better the lives of youth and was willing to take any negative reaction from the community and council in order to improve the situation.

Maintaining their own personal health was a challenge for Jean, Margaret, and Gail. Beyond the day-to-day stress of holding the position, these First Nations women endured lateral violence, sexism, internal racism, and the ingrained challenges of dealing with local, provincial, and federal Canadian institutions. Some of these women had their personal safety threatened by community members while others felt significant resistance from long-term male chiefs and councilors who they felt maintained the status quo and were not open to progressive acts for positive change within their communities. Some of them left their communities, others vowed never to take on such positions again, and others feel they are willing to persist despite the challenges they have experienced. One participant had such a negative experience during her term as chief that she expressed that she would not wish her experience on anyone, especially her own children.

The participants were altogether cognizant of the many challenges faced by women leaders, such as sexism and discrimination both within and outside of their communities. Margaret felt that there was not enough personal support in her position and stated that: “I think that’s a pretty devastating place to be as a woman.” (line 289).
Karen concurred and felt as if the role of elected leader was a challenging place to be for a woman who followed her cultural role within her community. More than one participant highlighted the negative ramifications of her position, particularly that she was unable to spend as much time with her children and family because of the demands of the position. One woman chose a specific portfolio within her council because it allowed her to stay close to home and be with her children instead of traveling for three weeks out of every four. Jean stated that she felt the larger society did not take her seriously when fighting for Aboriginal rights and title – one had to not look Aboriginal in order to be taken seriously in the larger Canadian society. Valerie stated, "I think because of the women’s transition in the past twenty to thirty years that we’ve actually, although we’ve progressed personally – we’ve made leaps and bounds – because of that it’s caused a bit of dysfunction in our communities" (lines 785-789).

These were some of the significant challenges faced by women leaders. Despite these many challenges, the participants felt that having young women participate in forums such as youth band council and youth treaty council encourages the participation of youth in local governance. As well, recognition of former and current women leaders sends a positive message to First Nations youth who may be future leaders. Karen strongly expressed that if women were to participate in the governance of their communities that they must be culturally trained. Others thought that a formal education and business training would provide important knowledge for youth who wish to become community leaders.
Summary

The participants readily identified as caregivers in their roles as family members, community members, and government officials. Their focus on the health and well-being of youth was apparent in their discussions regarding the actions they had taken within their communities. Despite facing professional and personal challenges while in office, participants devotion to improving the lives of youth, and the state of their communities in general, was admirable. The participants identified strongly as holistic caregivers of their families and communities – working toward improving the lives of youth.
Chapter 6 - Concluding Statements and Implications

Summary

This project explored the experiences and perceptions of First Nations women with respect to their involvement in their local elected governance system and their focus on the health and well-being of youth. The goals of this research project were to identify: (1) the historical, social, and cultural influences that support or challenge women’s participation in governance; (2) how women’s roles in community (i.e., gender, family, and cultural roles) support or challenge their ability to influence youth; and (3) what women leaders do to support the health and well-being of First Nations youth. The complexity and broad nature of the information gathered in this project provided an initial foray into aspects of the impact that First Nations women leaders, and the communities in which they live, have on the cultural identity and well-being of First Nations youth.

A picture emerged from the narratives of the eleven First Nations leaders of how these women utilized their cultural identity and their relationships to navigate the complexities of the intertwined, yet conflicted, roles and values of their hereditary and elected government positions. Strong cultural values combined with specialized skill sets gained through education and employment helped the participants to be focused and forthright leaders. In particular, cultural knowledge and traditional training enhanced the women’s abilities to incorporate cultural values into their leadership positions. In turn, their roles as leaders provided them with opportunities to implement change within their communities and to be positive role models for youth.
The women leaders found that their cultural identity often conflicted with their role as elected leaders due to contradictory value systems between traditional forms of leadership and the band council system. However, many participants felt that the challenges of being an elected official were worth facing even if they had only the slightest opportunity to make their communities healthier and more culturally relevant places for youth to grow up, prosper, and develop a strong cultural identity. This focus by women on nurturing healthy relationships based on culture, family, and community as an aspect of leadership has been noted in First Nations women’s involvement in self-government (Peters, 1998). Participants identified many structural roadblocks to the changes they felt necessary to facilitate supportive movement within their government and communities. However, these women appeared to invoke a strong and steady influence on youth within their families and communities through their place as role models and mentors and through their involvement in the institutions that affected children’s lives.

The participants identities as cultural members, elected leaders, women, and spiritual individuals were informed by their relationships to family, place, youth, and as elected officials. The intertwining of identity and relationships was important for the women in that each framework informed the other, providing these women with a secure sense of who they were and how they related to others. However, the women described aspects of identity and relationships that still bore the impact of negative historical events such as the relocation of families to reserves, forced attendance of children at residential schools, marriage laws that denied women and children legal status, and the imposition of the band council system. As well, youth were described as persons who particularly
reflected the effects of cultural disruption, as displayed through negative health outcomes.

Cultural identity may also be discussed through the lens of the acculturation of immigrant populations and ethnocultural groups. Acculturation is a “dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one’s identity or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group” (Phinney, 2003, p. 63). Although connections regarding cultural and psychological challenges due to acculturation can be made between Aboriginal peoples and immigrant populations in Canada, the historical context of how First Nations people have been represented and treated highlights the complexity and singularity that First Nations people have experienced regarding their cultural identity (Noels & Berry, 2006). While most immigrant populations have been, for the most part, supported by immigration policy and Canada’s Multiculturalism Act, thereby receiving political support to maintain themselves as distinct cultural groups, Aboriginal peoples within Canada have bore the brunt of a series of legislation and policy with the sole purpose of assimilation and annihilation of their culture (Kvernmo, 2006; Noels & Berry, 2006). These differences between ethnocultural groups should not be overlooked (Berry, 2003). The ramifications of the acculturation process for First Nations people is expressed in multiple areas such as mental and physical health, substance use, language loss, suicide, identity confusion, resilience, and, at a community level, economic and political disruption (Kvernmo, 2006; Phinney, 2003). However, ethnic identity has been noted to strengthen in those groups who experience increased discrimination (Phinney, 2003).

One manifestation of these historical, social, and cultural influences appeared in participants’ expressions of the notion that First Nations people must negotiate living in
two worlds: that of the Aboriginal culture and the hegemonic, non-Aboriginal world. These two worlds were described by participants as venues in which they had to consciously navigate between their roles as cultural members and community leaders. To negotiate the challenges they encountered in their positions as elected leaders, the women were able to call upon the strengths gained through personal relationships and traditional roles and values, and to support youth through their actions. However, youth were also described as being greatly challenged by living in two worlds, particularly due to the lack of strong connections to cultural traditions and healthy role models (such as elders) within their communities. This perspective is echoed in the research regarding identity formation in British-Sikhs growing up in England, who express that they are “being pulled between two ways of life—between two worlds that are separate and mutually exclusive…” (Hall, 1995, p. 247).

The challenging social, psychological, and economic conditions that youth in ethnocultural and Aboriginal groups experience by living in two worlds may also compromise the resilience that normally accrues with the development of a strong sense of cultural identity (Alperstein & Raman, 2003; Lalonde, 2006). Resilience as a psychological construct and protective factor has come to be understood as multidimensional and is comprised of individual, familial, and environmental attributes—not merely individual characteristics or features of the child (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience, particularly in the context of this research, highlights the protective influences of family, community, and culture (Alperstein & Raman, 2003). Accordingly, the women leaders’ attempts to positively influence youth could shed light on the unique relational and community factors that foster resilience in First Nations youth.
In order to mediate living in two worlds, it appears that the women adopted the role of holistic caregiver: as individuals they took it upon themselves to assist others, particularly youth, with the challenges they experienced. As holistic caregivers, the participants believed it was their responsibility to draw upon their traditional values to support youth in their goals to improve their communities through strong leadership and the implementation of beneficial policies and programs. Concurrently, the women felt personally driven to improve the lives of youth. By fostering positive relationships with youth in their personal and professional roles, the participants strove to impact both the identity and relationships of these youth and further moderate how living in two worlds was negotiated for these individuals. The participants were particularly focused on fostering connections between generations – bringing youth and elders together to share cultural knowledge and experiences. At a larger scale, the women worked to facilitate the transfer of cultural knowledge between elders, family members, and youth. They felt that these generational bonds aided in the fostering of connections between youth and their cultural identity.

The themes of identity, relationships, living in two worlds, and holistic caregivers are realized herein through the programs and cultural connections that women leaders brought to youth in the hopes that these short-term applications would develop into long-term aspects of cultural identity, relationships, and how youth related to the world. The participants worked to foster cultural continuity for youth through encouraging connections to culture (through the development of and participation in cultural activities as well as acting as role models), by building relationships (with family and elders), by encouraging involvement in community (through education, development of youth
councils, sports, encouraging cultural pride), by instigating cultural programs (such as those in language, dance, drumming, culture camps), and creating community centres where youth could come together with other community members to learn about and be active in their culture and community.

Conclusion

How do these themes relate to the original focus of inquiry in this research project? The focus of inquiry of this research project was to explore: (1) the historical, social, and cultural influences that support or challenge women’s participation in governance; (2) how women’s roles in community (i.e., gender, family, and cultural roles) support or challenge their ability to influence youth; and (3) what women leaders do to support the health and well-being of First Nations youth. With these three areas of investigation in mind, the following section discusses the findings from the interviews.

First area of inquiry. The first area of inquiry focuses on how historic, social, and cultural influences that support or challenge First Nations women’s participation in community government and their ability to influence the health and well-being of youth. The historical background that set the context for the lived experience of the participants provided different influences on their identities and relationships. Each woman had her own unique set of experiences that shaped her connections to culture and community; however, certain aspects of local and broader-based First Nations history were shared by all of the participants. In particular, the women leaders were clear about the fractures in the transmission of cultural knowledge that occurred due to colonization—such as the establishment of the reserve system, forced attendance at residential schools, and loss of legal status due to limiting clauses within Bill C-31—the impacts of which are still being
dealt with by Aboriginal peoples today. These influences were particularly salient in discussions regarding the themes of identity, relationships, and how these themes manifested in the participants’ discussion of living in two worlds.

Knowledge of First Nations history was cited as an important aspect of cultural identity and leadership by the women interviewed. Also expressed in other research, participants’ experiences with, or knowledge of, the deprived situation that many First Nations people endure on a daily basis was motivation for them to enter into the political realm (Fiske, et al., 2001). Seeing the struggles within communities to meet the basic needs of those who reside on reserve was frustrating for many participants. The lack of opportunities and healthy environments for youth were particularly disturbing; the political and social ramifications of colonization resulted in less-than-optimal opportunities for youth regarding health, education, employment, cultural involvement, and social engagement.

Social influences with respect to the participants’ involvement in leadership were largely focused on relationships. Many participants elaborated on how female relations, such as grandmothers and mothers, were role models for them of strong women who organized their communities and involved their children in activities and conversations that promoted cultural values. In addition, the participants’ identities as women were influenced by their gender and the ways in which they experienced their culture as girls, and then women, during the course of their lives. Many of the participants asserted that it was the special qualities of First Nations women that made a difference in their approach to leadership. These statements are reminiscent of Gilligan’s seminal work on fundamental developmental differences in how women and men approach morality, with
women taking on a morality that is focused on relationships and empathy (Gilligan, 1982). Participants also discussed how their relatives’ roles in the political arena provided them with knowledge and confidence regarding this venue and spoke to the transference of knowledge and values between generations. Another fact that spoke to the importance of relationships and cultural values was that all of the women leaders were approached and asked to run for elected office by family members, elders, and members of their community. This connection has been recognized in previous reports on First Nations women in governance (Fiske, Newell, & George, 2001) and highlights the important relationship between the women and their communities, and the obligation felt by many of the women to community members.

Although intertwined with social influences, the importance of culture in the lives of the participants cannot be understated – the participants felt that culture was just part of their life and living in their communities. Many of the participants stated that social and cultural ties to traditional hereditary systems facilitated involvement as elected officials and provided skills and values seen as integral to the participants’ abilities to be successful and grounded leaders within their communities. Most participants also indicated how there was a strong connection between the hereditary and elected systems of governance and how these systems were interwoven yet conflict with each other. Traditional values and knowledge became particularly important in the negotiation of any conflict between the two systems. One participant negotiated these two markedly different and separate worlds by creating a clear distinction between her cultural identity and her elected identity—always with an awareness of which capacity she was acting within so as not to disgrace either the hereditary or the elected positions. Although not all
participants segregated their behaviour as distinctly as others, all participants did attempt to integrate their cultural values and identity into their role as elected officials in order to negotiate the divide between colonial structures of government and traditional ways of leadership.

Aspects of cultural identity, conflict, and resolution are intertwined throughout the participants’ narratives regarding the historic, social, and cultural structures that both facilitated and inhibited them as elected officials. The effects of historic and contextual influences both challenged and motivated the participants in the two worlds they occupied as cultural members and elected officials. The ramifications of the imposed elected band council system on the complex structure of a First Nations hereditary-based socio-political system was apparent in the conflict between the values and goals of the two systems. The influence on the cultural identity of the participants and their relationships within community and in their role as elected officials was clear, especially when examined in the context of living in two worlds.

Second area of inquiry. The second area of inquiry focuses on how First Nations women’s roles within community (i.e., gender roles, family roles, and cultural roles) supported or challenge women’s ability to influence the health and well-being of youth. The importance of these roles was supported by participants’ narratives discussing the historic disruption that has occurred within First Nations family structures and how that disruption was expressed in current gender roles and relationships. In particular, challenges and shifts in the roles that people undertook within their families and cultures have affected connections with youth. For example, the effects of paid employment have created challenges for both men and women to remain in communities near their families
and cultural hub. However, the involvement of First Nations women in careers have put them in close contact with the challenges and successes that First Nations youth experience. It appears that the participants’ roles were affected by living in two worlds and also supported by their cultural identity and relationships within family and community. The women leaders’ appeared to negotiate living in two worlds through the role of holistic caregivers to their family, community, and through the participants’ positions within local government.

As holistic caregivers within their families, these women were often centrally responsible for raising their children. Often they were single parent or their partners worked outside of the community, and many of the women helped to raise stepchildren, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews. Participants discussed how women provided much of the social support within their families and to other members in the community and were the organizers and people who were always ready and willing to support community initiatives. It was stated that First Nations women have the personal strength and persistence necessary to get things done, and that they were the communicators and organizers in the community.

Some of the skills that participants identified as facilitating their abilities as holistic caregivers were gained through their previous employment and educational pursuits. Most participants chose areas of educational training and employment that focused on improving the lives of youth, such as teaching, social work, law, and health care, which, in turn, became a strong focus within their leadership positions. All participants discussed reaching out to youth to try to provide emotional and cultural support and felt that it was their role within their community to look out for the needs of
children and adolescents – just as their mothers and grandmothers had done. This tradition of taking on the role of caregiver within their families and communities was something the participants were proud of.

Youth were integral to the lives of the participants and were a fundamental motivation for their participation in leadership positions. Participants strongly emphasized the positive value of youth in their lives and expressed that youth are the future generations that will lead their people—reflective of the Aboriginal worldview where children are at the centre (Anderson, 2000). A predominant focus of their elected careers was on improving the lives of youth through the implementation of educational, social, and cultural programs. Many of the women expressed personal concern regarding how challenging it was to teach youth about First Nations culture and this inspired them to provide youth with opportunities to connect with and learn about their culture. These aspects of the participants’ discussion appeared to reflect how their role as holistic caregivers appeared to be in response to assisting youth in negotiating life in two worlds.

Third area of inquiry. The third area of inquiry speaks to the many ways in which women leaders worked to improve the health and well-being of First Nations youth in their communities – providing examples of how they negotiated life in two worlds through their role as holistic caregivers. The participants were able to focus on the positive development of youth in a number of ways. Many of the women emphasized that they tried to instill cultural values in children at a young age through direct communication and modeling of positive behaviour. They felt they connected with youth at a personal level through family relationships, community events, or one-on-one mentoring of youth in the community. They also organized and participated in activities
within the community such as culture camps, sporting events, and traditional activities. Participants also focused on improving the lives of youth through their work as elected officials and the creation and strengthening of youth-oriented programs and other services that aimed to improve the overall welfare of their communities.

The participants indicated that, as life givers and caregivers, they felt intimately connected to youth. Accordingly, all of the participants expressed a strong connection with younger members of their families and with youth in their communities. Some participants also found that their position as a role model was a positive influence on youth. It was emphasized that taking the time to listen to the concerns of youth and provide them with a venue for voicing their concerns was an important way to empower youth and engage them in civic activities. One participant discussed how she mentored community youth by providing social and emotional support to youth who stopped by her home or office to visit. By engaging youth in cultural activities, encouraging their positive behaviour, and highlighting the beneficial choices youth can make, this participant felt that youth responded well to her support and guidance. Despite challenges present in participants’ communities, the women interviewed all felt that they were investing in all Aboriginal people’s futures when they supported First Nations youth.

These women attempted to foster pride in youth regarding their First Nations heritage and develop respect for their parents, grandparents, and elders. They felt that it was important to have cultural knowledge to pass on to others so the participants encouraged youth to become involved in cultural activities (such as dancing) and to learn about First Nations history. Creation of cultural programs was a particularly important way that participants felt they could connect youth with their culture and improve their
self-esteem. Many participants spoke of their efforts to bring together elders and youth so that cultural knowledge, language, and traditions could be passed on to future generations. Many women also spoke of the time they dedicated to including youth in traditional activities, such as fishing, berry picking, and preserving foods.

The participants felt that women leaders brought a special attention to the needs and issues that concern youth. Accordingly, most participants felt it vital to include women in leadership roles due to their focus on youth and strong ability to communicate, organize, and focus on the needs of their communities; however, they are aware of the many challenges faced by women leaders. The recognition of former and current women leaders sends a positive message to young women who may be future leaders.

The participants’ cultural identity and relationships were a supportive factor in facing the vestiges of colonization that still present challenges in their everyday lives. The result was an overarching perspective of living in two worlds – the First Nations cultural world and the dominant non-Indigenous Canadian society. Living in two worlds was a reality for the women interviewed – as traditional cultural members and as elected government officials – and also for youth. The women leaders negotiated the challenges of living in two worlds by adopting the role of holistic caregivers: individuals who worked within their personal and professional lives to improve the health and well-being of First Nations youth.

In conclusion, this thesis project explored the personal perspectives of First Nations women regarding their participation in local governance and investigated how these women supported the health and well-being of youth, unearthing how a community-level cultural continuity factor is expressed and enacted at the individual
level. There are several important outcomes of this study. First, the interviews further our understanding of how First Nations women engage as leaders within their communities and provides insight as to how these women feel they impact the well-being of youth through strengthening the connections between youth and First Nations culture. Second, the knowledge gained regarding how and why First Nations women participate in local government may provide First Nations with an awareness that can facilitate the involvement and support of women in local government. Third, the results of this research identify specific relationships and practices within First Nations communities that appear to foster the health and well-being of First Nations youth, such as women leaders taking on the role of holistic caregivers in order to moderate living in two worlds and facilitating cultural continuity.

**Implications**

The discussion focuses on the aspects of First Nations communities that support healthy populations and encourages research at the community level regarding this and other cultural continuity factors. The implications of this research are as follows: first, that it validates and supports the participation of First Nations women in their local governance. Second, it speaks to the dedication that women have for their communities and the strong focus they have on the success of First Nations youth. Third, it supports the idea that cultural programs and activities that promote cultural knowledge assist the connection between youth and their culture; however, the data indicate that these efforts must be supported within communities and by local government over a long period of time. Fourth, this discussion also emphasizes the importance of local control of government in First Nations communities. Fifth, the data give a clearer picture of the
actions that, if more fully supported in practice, may lower the incidence of youth
suicide. Finally, this research illustrates the value of investigating aspects of First Nations
communities that support healthy populations and also supports research at the
community level regarding this and other cultural continuity factors.
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Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

Christopher E. Lalonde
PO Box 3050 STN CSC
Victoria, British Columbia
CANADA    V8W 3P5
tel: (250) 721-7535
fax: (250) 721-8929
lalonde@uvic.ca
www.uvic.ca/psyc/lalonde

*, 2005

ADDRESS

Dear *,

We are writing to ask for your assistance with a research project. This project focuses on the success of community efforts to preserve and promote Aboriginal culture and to gain local control over key aspects of civic life. In our work, we refer to this as “cultural continuity”. Our measures of cultural continuity include community-level factors such as:

- attainment of self-government
- control of education
- control of health services
- control of police/fire services
- creation of cultural facilities
- history of land claims
- participation of women in local government
- local control of child and family services

Our previous research in BC has shown that communities that have been successful in gaining control of these services and promoting their culture also have the highest levels of positive outcomes for both youth and adults. These outcomes include: lower suicide and injury rates; increased school completion rates; and lower proportions of children and youth in care. The aim of this project is to better understand the relations between cultural continuity and these positive outcomes by discussing these factors with people in communities—like your own—that have been especially successful in fostering cultural continuity. We hope to do this by meeting with community representatives responsible for the creation and maintenance of key components of cultural continuity. The aim of these meetings will be to gather views from community representatives on the meaning and validity of our measures of cultural continuity.
To understand the positive effect that these factors have, we are interested in exploring two main questions:

1. Do the identified factors adequately capture the diverse ways in which different First Nations communities work to promote cultural continuity?
2. Can we identify new and expanded outcome variables and new measures of cultural continuity that reflect community-driven concerns and goals with respect to First Nations youth development and youth health?

This research is important because it contributes to empirical and community knowledge regarding the relationship between cultural identity and youth health within First Nations communities in BC.

We are asking people who have an interest in these issues, or expertise to share, to consider taking part in face-to-face or telephone interviews (dependant upon your location and preferences). These interviews will be semi-structured and informal, allowing you to direct the course of the discussion. The list of general questions that will guide the interview are attached to this letter.

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Victoria and you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President Research at the University of Victoria by phone at (250) 472-4545 or by email at: ovprhe@uvic.ca

If you are interested in assisting us with this research, or have questions about the project, please feel free to contact us by telephone, e-mail, or by mail at the address above.

Sincerely,

Dr. Christopher E. Lalonde
Associate Professor, Dept of Psychology
lalonde@uvic.ca
250-721-7535

Robin A. Yates
MSc candidate, Dept of Psychology
yatesr@uvic.ca
250-472-4689

Encl.
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Conceptions of Cultural Continuity in BC

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Conceptions of Cultural Continuity in BC that is being conducted by Dr. Christopher E. Lalonde (principal investigator), Robin A. Yates (graduate student), and Ruth-anne Macdonell (graduate student).

Dr. Christopher E. Lalonde is a Faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Victoria and you may contact him if you have further questions by mail at: University of Victoria, Department of Psychology, PO Box 3050 STN CSC, Victoria, BC V8W 3P5, or by phone at (250) 721-7535, or via e-mail at lalonde@uvic.ca.

This research is being funded by Canadian Population Health Initiative and the Canadian Institute for Health Information under the title ‘Expanding the BC Model’: Mapping additional outcome variables to expanded measures of Cultural Continuity in British Columbia.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the relationship between positive health outcomes and cultural continuity, or community efforts to preserve and promote Aboriginal culture and to gain local control over key aspects of civic life. Our measures of cultural continuity include such factors as:

1. Attainment of self-government;
2. control of education;
3. control of health services;
4. control of police/fire services;
5. creation of cultural facilities;
6. history of land claims;
7. participation of women in local government;
8. local control of child and family services.

Our previous research has shown that across BC higher levels of cultural continuity are associated with positive outcomes for both youth and adults. These outcomes include: lower suicide and injury rates; increased school completion rates; and lower proportions of children and youth in care. The aim of this project is to better understand the relations between cultural continuity and these positive outcomes by focusing attention upon those communities that have been especially successful in fostering cultural continuity. This will be accomplished through interviews and focus groups with community representatives responsible for the creation and maintenance of key components of
cultural continuity. The aim of these interviews will be to gather community views on the meaning and validity of existing measures of cultural continuity from communities with low levels of youth suicide and high levels of cultural continuity. The main research questions will be:

1. Do the identified factors adequately capture the diverse ways in which different First Nations communities work to promote cultural continuity?

2. Can we identify new and expanded outcome variables and new measures of cultural continuity that reflect community-driven concerns and goals with respect to First Nations youth development and youth health?

You are being invited to participate in this research project because of your knowledge and involvement as a women in local government.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an individual face-to-face or telephone interview (dependant upon your location and wishes), which will be semi-structured allowing you to direct the course of the discussion. With your permission, interviews will be audio and/or video-taped and field notes will be taken by the researchers involved. You will be provided with the list of interview questions/discussion topics prior to the interview. Research questions for interviews are attached to this Consent Form. Please note that you do not have to answer a question if you do not want to. The interview process involves an initial 30-90 minutes as well as an additional 1 hour to review the transcribed interview at a later date; however, you may take as long as you feel necessary to express your views. The recording of the interview will be transcribed and any information you provide will be returned to you in written form so that you may review the transcripts to make sure the information is accurate before it is used as data.

There are no known risks attached to participation in this study. Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time that you dedicate to the interview and research project.

- Personal interviews (in person or by telephone) will take approximately 30-90 minutes. You will also be given the opportunity to review your transcript of your interview and confirm the data therein. This review will be done at your leisure and may take an additional 1 hour.

- Our previous research concerned the rates of suicide within First Nations communities in BC. Although it is not our intent to focus on suicide in the current study, you should be aware that in the process of introducing our earlier work to you, this sensitive topic will be raised.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include:

- Benefits to participants and to First Nations communities include the opportunity to identify and discuss aspects of their community that foster cultural continuity and promote healthy youth development.

- Benefits to the state of knowledge include strengthening a model of cultural continuity in First Nations communities and seeking out other indicators of self-continuity other than suicide.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation.
If you do withdraw from the study and you are involved in an individual interview, your data will be discarded (tapes erased, notes shredded).

To make sure of your continued consent to participate in this research, when we ask you to comment on the interview transcript, we will review the voluntary nature of your participation and your right to withdraw your consent at any time.

Your anonymity cannot be fully protected due to the limitations of the methods used and because we require interviews with select groups of individuals, community leaders, and persons involved in certain community positions.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by not sharing data collected in interviews with anyone outside the research team without your specific permission. No information will be reported in a way that could identify you without your written consent.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways:

- Academic and community conferences, lectures, publications, and presentations.
- Portions of this research may also become part of a graduate student’s project, conference presentation, and/or thesis project.

Unless directed by yourself, any and all data (paper records, audio recordings) from this study that is held by the researchers will be kept in secure storage in the form of a locked cabinet and/or password protected computer files at the University of Victoria. Any information that could identify individual persons (for which permission to report has not been given) will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Anonymized, summary data that do not contain identifying information will be permanently retained by the researchers.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

_________ Name of Participant ____________ Signature ____________ Date ____________

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix C

Interview Schedule

We would like to discuss your thoughts about the importance of First Nations women in government. You have been identified as someone with knowledge to share on this topic. Can you discuss with us the following topics:

1. When did you first become involved in local government?
2. How did you obtain your position in local government?
3. What kind of people (without naming names) supported you to become involved in local government?
4. Why was it important at that time for you to be involved in local government?
5. How do you maintain your position in local government?
6. When and how did women in the past participate in local government in your community?
7. Is your current involvement different from women’s historical involvement in local government?
8. In your opinion, what impact do women in local government have on youth in terms of cultural identity and health or lifestyle?
9. What do you see as the future for women in local government?
Appendix D

Example of Thematic Chart

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