

**“Warrior Women: Indigenous Women Share Their Stories of Strength
and Agency”**

by

**Diane Frances Klaws
B.S.W., University of Victoria, 2005**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of**

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In the School of Social Work

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Indigenous women who are single parents and who have had involvement with social services such as child welfare or social assistance have had to be strong and courageous to maneuver through these large institutions. Over the course of this research, I examined the concept of strength by asking the question “how do Indigenous women perceive their own strengths”. This research is grounded in Indigenous methodologies through the worldview that all things are interconnected, all people and things have a soul, and that we have a physical effect on our surroundings as our surroundings affect us. The focus of my research interest is to gain a better understanding of Indigenous women’s strengths through their own lived knowledge and by contextualizing it within the experiences of oppression that they have had as a result of colonization. I undertake a literature review as well as field research to address my research question. For my field research I ask one simple question with probes to better understand their view of the strengths they possess: “Tell me your life story beginning with your earliest memories”. I use the research methodology of storytelling. Storytelling is another form of narrative methodology. Storytelling is about sharing stories from the past and present. To hear stories from the past is vital to our understanding of who we are as Indigenous people as this is how we learn where we come from and who we are. Storytelling is essential to re-claiming our histories. Data was collected from three Indigenous women who I interviewed twice. Two themes emerged from analyzing the data. One theme was oppressions and within the theme of oppressions emerged: assimilation, loss of traditional gender roles in the family, financial systemic oppression, physical and sexual abuses, and addictions. The second theme was strengths. The themes that emerged within strengths were: women being active and having agency, women as protectors of family and community, reconnecting with Spirit – Soul work, and women as keepers of tradition. Indigenous women’s voices and their experiences must continue to be researched and included in today’s education.

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Diane Klaws, June 2013

Dedication

**“I look on Native women’s writing as a gift, a give away of the truest meaning.
Our spirit, our sweat, our tears, our laughter, our love, our anger, our bodies
are distilled into words that we bead together to make power.
Not power *over* anything.
Power that speaks to hearts as well as minds”**

Beth Brant (1993)

**This thesis is dedicated to my family:
Thank you to my family for your love and encouragement.**

Self Location

I am aware that my social location determines how I interact with others, the way I think, and the questions I have entering into the realm of research. As Taiaiaike Alfred (1999) writes, "in the Indigenous tradition, the idea of self determination truly starts with the self; political identity" (p. 25). To begin, I identify myself as a mature First Nation woman, a spouse, mother, grandmother, daughter, sibling, aunt, cousin, and friend, to name a few aspects of who I am. I am a member of Lytton First Nation from my late mother with German Canadian heritage from my late father's side of the family. I have been with my spouse for 34 years, have three sons (from a previous relationship), and three grandchildren. I was born in Duncan and raised in Nanaimo. My children were born in Nanaimo and my spouse is a member of Snu ney muwx First Nation. I am currently a student and I work fulltime as a child protection social worker. My personal location is quite complex and I often feel quite fragmented that I cannot fulfill all my responsibilities fully at any one time.

In the late 1950s, when my mother married my father, she had to leave her reserve to go live with my father. This was legislated through the *Indian Act* "with the introduction of Section 12(1)(b), First Nation women who married non-First Nation men lost their "Indian" status according to the law of Canada and were taken off the government record of registered Indians. When a woman lost her Indian Status she also lost her rights to live 'on reserve' and was sent off reserve to live with her non-Native spouse to raise her family" (Jensen and Brooks, 1991, p. 9). I talk more about this section of the *Indian Act* in the next chapter.

When I was about 8 or 9, I noticed that there was a difference between my sets of grandparents financially. While, both sets of grandparents lived on large pieces of property, my paternal grandparents owned lots of farm machinery and a car and a truck. My maternal grandparents did not own any farm machinery; not even a car. It was my maternal Uncles who owned and drove trucks as they helped out on the ranch. This

makes me think of Taylor's (1978) theory of Marx's "concept of liberty. Liberty lies in the idea that human beings are by nature productive, and that labour represents a form of self-fulfillment for people...Labour itself is not seen as oppressive, but the social relationship within which it is situated is oppressive for the majority of the people who make up the working class" (Moosa-Mitha, p. 85). While I have always considered both sets of grandparents as hard workers, I can see there is a difference between them. My paternal grandparents were working the American, or in this instance, the Canadian dream and being successful and my maternal grandparents were working the piece of land they were provided on reserve to survive and care for their children and extended family. I wouldn't even consider my maternal grandparents as working class because of the fact they were Aboriginal and living on Reserve Land. My maternal grandparents weren't expected to *own* anything because of their Indigenous heritage so there was certainly no equality for them. I am reminded of Althusser the structural theorist's belief of how "the dominant classes use their power and control of media, technology, and political power to serve the interests of the dominant society over others" (Moosa-Mitha, p. 85). Althusser "believed that not only the economic system but also the culture of society was political, where the institutional and structural practices that defined the culture of societies served the interests of the dominant in society over others" (p. 85). As many are aware that the EuroSettlers took over Indigenous lands for the value that was laden from the lands, the EuroSettlers discovered they could become wealthy from the land that the Indigenous Peoples were living on therefore the result of Reservations to keep control over where the First Nations were allowed to live and make a living.

As a child, I was not ever aware of the fact that my maternal grandparents lived on a reserve and my paternal grandparents did not. I do not recall my mother ever talking about or practicing her First Nation culture or traditions in our home at any given time. When I have tried to make some sense of the reason why, I have to remember that in the late fifties and early sixties for my mother to live off-reserve and practice her cultural traditions and beliefs would not have been acceptable. Smith (2001) writes that "for indigenous peoples fragmentation has been the consequence of imperialism" (p. 28). My mother's values and belief system were affected by colonialism while living in the

dominant society's community that separated her from family and culture, which leads to the fragmentation of understanding my heritage.

Growing up our family lived according to my father's Euro-Canadian way of life and as children we never really understood what our mother's life was like as a child. When I reflect on celebrations and special occasions as a child, I can hear the music of the accordion, waltzes, marches and my father singing in German. My mother learned to cook the foods that my father was used to eating, foods with more spices and flaky types of pastries that were tied to his upbringing. It seems that my home life suited my father's beliefs and upbringing that included our family celebrations, traditions, culture, language, music, and food. I don't ever recall hearing my mother talk in her language or talk about her upbringing or sharing about celebrations that were important to her as a child. The way we lived was just the way life was.

My mother appeared to be happy even though she lived amongst a predominantly European family system. I do recall the excitement in the home when grandma or grandpa (her mother and father) planned to come to Nanaimo and visit. It was always exciting when any of my grandparents came to visit us in Nanaimo. When my maternal grandparents came to visit, they never visited us together and when they travelled they would take the Greyhound from Lytton to Nanaimo. When my grandmother came to visit I could sense her personal strength. My mom and dad were always on their best behavior, not that I ever thought they misbehaved, but there was a certain feeling of respect in the house. My grandparents never stayed with us for very long and mostly because I think it was a big trip for them to travel by bus and by themselves. I could assume that it may have been a culture shock for both grandma and grandpa to leave the reserve to come and stay for a short time in a mainstream environment. I often wonder if my grandmother was disappointed that mom was living in a "worldview according to imposed Eurocentric scripts... [not her] worldview or visions... [and perhaps] confused with the idea of civilization or modernity...[and that my mother was living] in contradiction" (James Henderson, 2000, p. 23.) to her upbringing.

In my teens I became aware of my father's belief that the woman's role was to cook, clean, care for the babies, care for the home, and care for her husband. My father's belief was that it was his responsibility as the male to work outside the family home to make money and provide for his family. It wasn't until I was in a relationship and had children of my own, that I began to question my father's beliefs around roles in the family, and now I wonder how connected his beliefs were with his Euro-Canadian upbringing.

What I have missed the most about my mother's ways is that she is the one who kept us connected and tied to our extended families. Mom always made sure that we visited with our grandparents every summer. The routine was to visit with her parents first in Lytton for a week, then off to visit my father's parents in Kelowna for a week. These were wonderful and amazing times. I was exposed to my maternal grandparents' life on reserve and loved hearing their sing song type of language, the laughter, being teased, and the interconnectedness with all my aunties and uncles. I was also exposed to my paternal grandparents' life off reserve. They spoke fluent German and liked to tease, and there was a strong connectedness with my uncles and aunties. During these visits there was a lot of family gathering and updating each other about our family and extended family. The grandmothers directed the men to do chores while the women and children were put to work in the kitchen. These were the times that I observed my mother to be 'more than' the woman I knew her as when living in Nanaimo away from her family and community. While there were many similarities between both my extended families there was a subtle difference of who was head of the households. In my maternal grandparents side of the family my grandmother was the decision maker in the family and in my paternal side of the family my grandfather was the decision maker in the family. Although I do believe that my paternal grandmother influenced a lot of my paternal grandfather's decisions because when a decision was being made regarding certain situations about family and money they had discussions using their German language.

It wasn't until I started taking social work courses that I realized how the Indian Act affected me. I often thought about what it must have been like for my mother marrying my father because under the legislation of the Indian Act, my mother had to leave her

reserve to go and live with her non-Aboriginal husband wherever he lived or chose to live as long as it was off reserve. Plus, my mother lost her Indian Status when she married my father. Interesting now that I look back but I had always believed my parents were happy to make Nanaimo their home even though they both lived away from their parents and communities.

Even though my father was considered the 'bread winner' in our family, my mother worked outside the family home from the time I was a preteen. My mother contributed financially to the family yet she was solely responsible for cleaning the home, cooking, caring for us children and caring for my father. As a child, I remember my paternal grandmother who worked hard on the family farm tending to the animals, gardens, and orchards, and she was the one who cleaned, canned, cooked, and took on the majority of the inside household responsibilities. I remember my maternal grandmother as the matriarch in her family. She held authority around decision making for the family and everyone paid attention to her words when she spoke. For instance, when my mom passed away in the late seventies, it was my maternal grandmother who told dad to bring my mom back home, to bury her in her community. Without question, my father abided by her words and we returned my mom to the burial ground across the Rivers in Lytton. Now I understand where my mom got her strength from, from her mother, my grandmother.

I believe my mother was a strong woman herself because she was one of very few First Nation women in our neighborhood living and raising a family far from her First Nation community. I believe it was not only a lonely time but a challenging era in the 1950s and 1960s living in a Euro-Canadian traditional type of family system. My mom's life experience is one of the reasons why I am interested in learning and understanding more about the courage and strengths of Indigenous women.

Chapter 1

Introduction

My interest in the topic of First ¹ Nation women and the strengths they possess, in spite of the hardships that they have endured as a result of colonization, began when I was attending University and taking social work courses that included a First Nation Women's Studies class. The majority of students were of First Nation heritage. During this course, there were many times that we took turns sharing our childhood stories and experiences. We shared stories of what it was like growing up and about our teachings from our parents and extended families. In addition, the readings for this class were mainly written by First Nation authors. From the readings in this class and learning about First Nation women's issues I was beginning to learn that there was an obvious difference in how the realities of First Nation women's experiences were being described by mainstream authors versus those of Indigenous authors. I wondered why First Nation women's worldviews had not been included in the history that was being taught in our education system.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to hear stories from Indigenous Women about their lives, from childhood into adulthood, women who have had involvement with social services and have remained strong throughout their lives. The aim of this study is to analyze the concept of strength by asking the question "how do Indigenous women perceive their own strengths". I will reflect on this question as I work on the analysis of the women's stories.

The journey of writing this thesis has provided me with the opportunity to explore First Nation women's lived experiences since they can remember - as children, as teenagers, as single mothers. The women shared their experiences as they maneuvered through many large social welfare systems that included child welfare and income assistance. I wanted

¹ The terms First Nation, Aboriginal, Indigenous, Native, Indian, are used synonymously to refer to indigenous people of Canada including the Metis and Inuit people.

to learn about First Nation women's strengths during their most challenging times. Through this process, I now have a deeper understanding of First Nation women's lived experiences with being single moms and their experiences with large oppressive (to them) systems such as financial assistance and child welfare.

Chapter two, the literature review, explores the writings of mainstream and Indigenous scholars and their views of the oppressions that Indigenous peoples, particularly women, endured. I begin by contrasting mainstream and Indigenous authors' views of Indigenous people's experiences with oppression and colonization since the inception of the *Indian Act* in 1876. I center the voices of Indigenous scholars themselves and write about some of the assimilation policies that have affected Indigenous women as understood by Indigenous authors. I end the chapter by analyzing Indigenous writers' views of the strengths that Indigenous women possess, particularly through an examination of the role of Indigenous women in their families and communities throughout history. I am interested in analyzing how these scholars define the concept of strength with relation to Indigenous women. In my second chapter, I analyze the concepts of oppression and strengths by undertaking a literature review.

Chapter three discusses the use of storytelling as a methodology. My intention in using storytelling as a research methodology is to share the stories of three Indigenous women's life experiences in their words as they relate to their own way of 'knowing'. I used an unstructured style of interviewing beginning with one open ended question: "Tell me your story or life experiences". Thomas (2000) writes in her thesis about the experiences of residential school that, "storytelling provides an opportunity for the uncovering of a new way of knowing" (p. 23). Because I am asking First Nation women to share their lived experience with me, I appreciate the words from Gluck and Patai (1990) that "oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their world" (p. 11). In this chapter I explain the process of how I went about getting participants, then describe how the analysis of the interviews was done, and share my own experience with the process of listening to the women's stories before putting their words into this work.

Chapters four and five are the analysis of the interviews. Chapter four is an analysis of the oppressions that the women narrated and chapter five analyzes women's strengths. Each of these mega-themes is broken down into meta-themes. Under the broad theme of oppression, the women talked about their concerns regarding loss of culture, intergenerational loss of identity, loss of mothering and grandmothering, poverty, substance abuse, as well as physical and sexual abuse. The women shared their involvement with large institutions such as social assistance and child welfare. In the strengths chapter, I discuss how the women resisted these oppressions and what the sources of their strengths were. I talk about how the women took strength from their traditions and their traditional role as protectors of their families and community, and by reconnecting with their spirit, as well as being keepers of culture and traditions. These were the ways that I came to understand what the meaning of strength was in the lives of the Indigenous women I interviewed.

In the conclusion, I will review the question asked of the participants. I will provide a brief summary of what I have learned from the data analysis that is separated into chapters called oppressions and strengths. Then I will share my thoughts about the importance of future studies that would build upon this work and reflect upon my experience of doing a thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

**“this woman that i am becoming
is a combination of the woman that i am
and was
this journey backward will help me
to walk forward”
(Rendon, 1988, p. 219)**

Introduction

I have often wondered why Indigenous women's worldviews have not been included in historical texts on the colonization process in Canada. This is because I have always thought there would be differences of perspectives between the mainstream voices and Indigenous voices regarding the Indigenous lived experience. For this project, I want to center the views of Indigenous women, including their narratives on how they see themselves and what they think their roles are in their families and communities. I will also examine Indigenous perspectives on the nature of oppression that Indigenous women experienced so as to better understand the context of what they were responding to and by which they displayed these strengths. I don't mean to treat all Indigenous women as being one homogeneous group because as Taiaiake (1999) suggests, while many differences exist between Indigenous communities, there are also some over arching commonalities, “we share a common bond that makes it possible to speak of a Native American political tradition: commitment to a profoundly respectful way of governing, based on a worldview that balances respect for autonomy with recognition of a universal interdependency, and promotes peaceful coexistence among all the elements of creation (p. xvi). Indigenous peoples also share commonalities through ceremonies and belief in every being is interconnected, and so much more, but Indigenous people also share the importance of lived knowledge. Burkhart (2004) provides this explanation, “knowledge is embodied knowledge...this lived knowledge...is the perfection of wisdom. It is called the heart of wisdom” (pp. 20-21). The focus of my research interest is to gain a better understanding of Indigenous women's strengths through their own lived knowledge and by contextualizing it within the experiences of oppression that they have had as a result of colonization.

I will begin by exploring the political context within which Indigenous women experienced oppression and resisted it, through an examination of the Indian Act of 1876 and some of its effects on First Nations communities, particularly women. While all Indigenous women were not the same, the political context and the systemic oppression that they experienced at the hands of the colonialists was the same for the most part. I also explore the writings of non-Indigenous people to analyze their views of the oppressions and strengths that Indigenous peoples, particularly women, were understood to have endured and manifested. I will then devote the rest of the chapter to analyzing Indigenous writers' own views of oppressions and strengths of Indigenous women

Social policies and assimilationist ideology

When I attended the First Nation Women Studies class I was introduced to the "*Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume I, Looking Forward, Looking Back* (1996). This was my introduction to the *Indian Act* and its classification of individuals as 'registered or non-registered'. This was when my curiosity began as I wanted to learn more and more how Aboriginal women and their children were impacted by assimilation policies throughout history.

In order to understand Aboriginal peoples' experiences of oppression I would like to begin with listing some of the assimilation policies within which they have lived since the inception of the *Indian Act* in 1876.

Some of the social policies that have affected Aboriginal women besides the *Indian Act* include the policies within Residential Schools that were created to assimilate Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian ways of life by forcing them to learn English, attend a Christian church, and learn Euro-Canadian customs:

“In the 19th century, the Canadian government believed it was responsible for educating and caring for the country's aboriginal people. It thought their best chance for success was to learn English and adopt Christianity and Canadian customs. Ideally, they would pass their adopted lifestyle on to their children, and native traditions would diminish, or be completely abolished in a few generations. The Canadian government developed a policy called "aggressive assimilation" to be taught at church-run, government-funded industrial schools, later called

residential schools. The government felt children were easier to mould than adults, and the concept of a boarding school was the best way to prepare them for life in mainstream society. Residential schools were federally run, under the Department of Indian Affairs. Attendance was mandatory”. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-faqs-residential-schools.html>

This passage demonstrates that racism and oppression were powerful in the 19th century. It is difficult to imagine a written policy called ‘aggressive assimilation,’ never mind pushing this policy forward on human beings who are children. The residential school systems were created in a planned attempt by government to assimilate First Nation children. “The process of resocialization involved a collaborative effort between the churches and the government to eliminate the familial and community connections, Aboriginal languages, traditions and beliefs of the First Nations students” (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People [RCAP], 1996, p.337). It is clear that residential schools were created to assimilate young First Nation children into mainstream ways of thinking and being as they were not allowed to speak their own language, practice their culture and they were kept from their families and communities.

Ing (2000) writes about the residential school experience as well:

“There are three generations of First Nations people who attended residential school...they were children separated from their parents to satisfy a goal of assimilation in Canadian Indian Policy where institutionalized racism was practiced in many forms. After separation, and away from parents and communities, First Nations languages were forbidden, and most children were punished if caught...some had needles stuck through their tongues (Chrisjohn and Young 243)... many children suffered indignities, either directly or indirectly. Running away was a common practice of rebellion and resistance. Most were rounded up and returned to face severe punishment in humiliating ways, such as being stripped naked and strapped, ‘whipped or beaten’...First Nations culture was branded inferior. Schools carried out a program of cultural replacement so severe that it forced some of those leaving the school to deny their identity as First Nations people” (pp. 158-159).

The treatment of First Nation children was extreme, severe and humiliating. While Aboriginal children’s spirits were destroyed during their time spent at residential schools the survivors of residential school have held onto their culture and traditions through the past generations. Aboriginal people continued to practice their ceremonies by going underground and by the way of storytelling. Their culture and traditions remained strong

despite the Canadian governments' numerous attempts at destroying the Aboriginal population.

Then there is the child welfare legislation and its policies of British Columbia and Canada which continued the assimilationist intent of other government policies and started off with what is known as the "Sixties Scoop" where a phenomenal number of Aboriginal children entered into government care. Walmsey (as cited in Strega and Carriere, 2009) provides the following:

"For example, in British Columbia, only twenty-nine Indigenous children were in the care of the Superintendent of Child Welfare in 1955, but by 1960, this number had risen to 849 and in 1964 to 1, 446. In a period of ten years, Indigenous children shifted from under 1 percent of the total children in care in BC to about 32 percent" (p. 98).

The assimilationist nature of the policies continue to the present, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond from the Representative for Children and Youth website:

<http://www.rcybc.ca/Content/Publications/Reports.asp> tells us that in

"2011/2012...[while] only 8% of BC's child and youth population are Aboriginal, more than 55% percent of Aboriginal children and youth in care are Aboriginal". The devastation of Aboriginal children still entering into government care in this new millennium is now called "the Millennium Scoop" according to an online newspaper article located on the following website

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2011/08/02/pol-first-nations-kids.html> states,

"there are more Aboriginal children in care than at the height of the Residential School system". It remains evident that this assimilationist tactic continues to impact Aboriginal children and their families and communities in a most powerful manner.

Another oppressive institution is British Columbia's financial assistance system. This large institution is currently known as the Ministry of Housing and Social Development. The Ministry of Housing and Social Development has its own legislation with policies that are meant to actually financially support many of the Province's most vulnerable and impoverished groups. The people most affected by this Ministry's policies are single parents that include Aboriginal women and their children. With the high cost of living today it is nearly impossible to provide good nutritional meals for the entire month

because of the high cost of rent. To manage the high cost of rent, many single parents must use a portion of their living allowance for their shelter which leads to less money for groceries for the month. Single mothers, Aboriginal and otherwise, have had to learn to budget to survive while living on a limited income.

Gendered Impact of the *Indian Act*

What I learned in the First Nation Women Studies class shocked me because I learned that the *Indian Act* affected me without my knowledge. I was surprised to learn that schools did not teach First Nation history in Canadian history classes when I went to school. I wondered how the education system made the determination of what was to be taught in the school. This was my introduction to learning about myself as a First Nation person. I was making the connection to my mother's experience regarding Enfranchisement when women and children lost their First Nation status. I learned that "in 1876 all laws affecting Indian people were combined under the *Indian Act*. The combined *Indian Act* addressed land, status, and membership" (1996, Excerpts from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, pp. 6-110). Because of the *Indian Act* many Indigenous men, women and children became disenfranchised. Enfranchisement is described by Bennett McCardle (1978/1981) on the Internet site *The Canadian Encyclopedia* in this way:

“Enfranchisement was the most common of the legal processes by which native peoples lost their Indian (sic) status under the *Indian Act* (sic). The term was used both for those who give up their status by choice, and for the much larger number of native women who lost status automatically upon marriage to non-native men ...the right to vote, often confused with "enfranchisement" in the technical sense discussed here, was only one of the supposed advantages of loss of status before native people acquired the federal vote in 1960. From its first enactment in 1857 up to at least the 1960s, voluntary enfranchisement was the cornerstone of Canadian Indian policy...By enfranchising, a person was supposed to be consenting to abandon native identity and communal society...in order to merge with the "free," individualistic and non-native majority...”

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/enfranchisement>

The terms enfranchisement and disenfranchisement are confusing. Enfranchisement was recognized as a privilege that came with assimilation and disenfranchisement was thought of as negative when First Nation people went against the policies or rules as set out in the Indian Act. Both enfranchisement and disenfranchisement were legal decisions

determined by government and not a choice of status made by First Nation people. First Nation women and their children could become disenfranchised by attending higher education or by marrying non-First Nation men. First Nation women who married non-First Nation men lost their status as Indian within the law of Canada and were taken off the government record of registered Indians (Jensen & Brooks, 1991, p. 9). The enfranchisement law was discriminatory to the First Nation woman because “a non-Indian woman who married a man with Indian status immediately became an Indian, as did any children of that marriage. A double standard was at work” (RCAP, V4, CH2, pp.7-37). How ironic that the non- First Nation woman was given the same rights that were stripped from the First Nation woman for marrying a non- First Nation man, and even her children would lose their Indian Status because of their non- First Nation father. When the woman lost her Indian Status she also lost her rights to live ‘on reserve’ and was sent off reserve to live with her non- First Nation spouse to raise her family. Both First Nation women and children lost their status and neither was allowed to live on or to inherit property on reserve. As a final insult the First Nation woman who married someone non- First Nation lost her right to be buried on reserve land with her predeceased family members (Jensen & Brooks, 1991, pp. 8-11).

Under the *Indian Act* women had no rights to land or property rights. “A study of the historical development of the *Indian Act* reveals that the intent of the Federal Government was...to ‘eliminate’ the Indian people” (Jensen & Brooks, 1991, p. 8) through assimilation of the First Nation people into Euro-Canadian society. This assimilation began by stripping the First Nation people of their rights to ownership and jurisdiction of their territory. The denial of property rights still exists today and only the male can pass on his property rights to his children and “the wife is excluded, her maintenance being the responsibility of the children” (Jamieson, 1978, p.25). Even in the late 1990’s the Supreme Court was ruling against First Nation women having any property rights. “In 1986, two Supreme Court decisions ruled that Aboriginal women have no property rights at all on Indian lands because there is no federal law in the field and the provincial laws do not apply” (Absolon, Herbert, MacDonald, 1996, pp. 6-110).

As can be seen from the discussion thus far, racism intersected with patriarchy in the lives of Aboriginal women.

This situation was in direct contradiction to women's status before the Indian Act where: "prior to colonization, women in many tribes owned substantial property including the family home" and "many First Nation communities operated on a matriarchal system, which was based on the concept of equality between men and women" (Absolon, Herbert, MacDonald, 1996, pp. 6-110). When the *Indian Act* was introduced, the Act imposed a patriarchal system with laws that favoured men. "Between the 1850 Lower Canada legislation and the 1869 *Gradual Enfranchisement Act*, it seems apparent that Indian women were singled out for discriminatory treatment under a policy that made their identity as Indian people increasingly dependent on the identity of their husbands...the 1876 *Indian Act* consolidated and expanded previous Indian legislation, carrying forward the provision that put Indian women at a disadvantage compared to Indian men (RCAP, V4, CH2, pp.7-37). While this legislation appears to be largely oppressive to First Nation women, and men, First Nation women were beginning to take notice.

Indigenous women were not passive in the face of this gendered oppression; they put up resistance:

"In the early 1970s, Indian women began to make legal challenges to the Act, arguing that it discriminated against women. Using the Bill of Rights Lavell and Bedard brought forth their arguments first to the 'courts' [then] to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The U.N. supported [their] claim of discrimination [but] the Commission could not rule on whether the *Indian Act* discriminated against her on the subject of her marriage... The Lovelace case drew international attention to Canada's discrimination, and more women joined the fight, forming organizations like Indian Rights for Indian Women and the Native Women's Indian Brotherhood... In 1982, a Parliamentary committee recommended reinstatement of women (and their children) who lost status. The Liberal Government proposed a bill that died in the Senate just before the change of government... The challenge was then taken up by the Conservative government, which passed Bill C-31 in 1985" (Brizinski, 1993, pp180-181).

Lavell and Bedard have made a huge difference for many First Nation women and their children since Bill C-31 was passed into a new law within the *Indian Act*. With the

passing of Bill C-31 in 1985 many First Nation women who were enfranchised were able to apply to the Department of Indian Affairs to become reinstated with their “Indian” Status and their children were able to apply to have their Status for the first time! With the passing of Bill C-31, Brizinski (1993) states “that by June 30, 1989; 60,624 Indians had regained status under Bill C-31...In 1992 over 81,000 women, men, and children regained status and numbers continue to rise...all these individuals are on the Indian Registry and are entitled to benefits provided by the *Indian Act* such as medical benefits and post secondary education” (p. 184). When Bill C-31 was passed, I was one of the first generation of children who could apply for Status. By this time my mother had passed away so she missed out on regaining her Status. This was an exciting time for many Nations whose population was largely affected by the passing of this Bill.

With the passing of Bill C-31, this new legislation states that a woman who lost her status through marriage can apply and get her status back as well as her band membership, regardless of band rules or decisions. However, not all reinstated women are band members and not all are allowed to live on reserve. This is mostly because there is no allotted land base for the new members. The first generation of children of those reinstated will also be reinstated but after this if only one parent has status and s/he marries non-status their children will not be entitled to Indian status. Therefore, in order for status to continue on in future generations, a status Indian must marry another status Indian; if not this will result in loss of status for future generations and widen the gap between First Nation people.

Next, the Provincial governments developed Child Welfare systems that were yet another form of assimilation by taking children from their families and communities to European family settings forcing the children to adapt to a very different lifestyle than they were used to. Lavell-Harvard and Lavell (2006) write the following in regards to Aboriginal children and the child protection system:

“both the residential schools and the child protection system are instrumental tools of assimilation and control... The socialization process involved with exposing children and youth to Aboriginal parenting practices has also been precariously compromised... the ‘Sixties Scoop,’ involved agents of the state entering Aboriginal communities, rounding up children, and relocating them away

from their parents, siblings, families, communities, clans, languages, customs, and culture. The ‘Sixties Scoop’ apprehension and relocation process involved placing children in distant locations and with non-Aboriginal families... Upon removal, names of children were changed, often multiple times and personal histories were essentially erased (Downey 57). This has cumulated in the creation of a ‘lost generation,’ a cohort of Aboriginal people removed from their homes without access to their roots” (pp. 144-145).

Canada’s policies and legislation have created this lost generation that continues in its generational devastation for children who have lost their connection to their families, cultures, languages, traditions, foods, siblings, communities, and homes. There have been many personal and familial and community losses since the residential schools and child protection system were put in place and utilized on the First Nation population of Canada.

It is as if the ‘lost generation’ never did exist because their stories were never known and only now are people beginning to share their experiences of the foster care system of Canada and British Columbia. The following story is one of many regarding the foster care experience. Crey (1997) shares about his foster care experience:

”I arrived confused and afraid at my first foster home. It was a large German family who already had three other native foster children. In my presence, the woman of the house openly displayed her dislike of Indians... ‘smoked meat’ or ‘brown stuff’ ...[in] the early 1960s, the BC child welfare branch was taking aboriginal children into its care so quickly and in such huge numbers that anyone who was willing to take Indian children was deemed suitable. We were warehoused in homes that were by no stretch of the imagination suitable for any child, let alone a traumatized, culturally dislocated, grieving aboriginal child... throughout my time in foster, I beseeched social workers for news of my siblings. They responded with platitudes that my sisters and brothers were happy in good homes, far away... as it turned out, all my brothers and sisters lived within miles of me... the social services ministry’s ostensible goal to reunite families apparently applied to only white children. Social workers accepted letters my mother addressed to us, but these were placed in thick government files. None of those letters ever reached me or my siblings in our white foster homes” (pp.32-37).

This is a story of sadness, loss, racism but also of courage. It does take courage to make political the actual lived experience of a child in care and one who is reaching out for some familiarity to keep their soul strong. It is highly likely, given experiences and stories such as these, that this is one of the reasons First Nation communities have been

working towards providing their own child welfare services in their communities. While First Nation communities take on providing their own child welfare services they will ensure that their children maintain their cultural and community connections. There are a number of First Nation organizations in British Columbia that have either begun the process or are providing child welfare services to their own communities.

Since the arrival of the Europeans, the inception of the *Indian Act*, introduction of the Residential Schools, and the child welfare system, the definition of the Indigenous family unit has been profoundly affected. Parents were separated from their children; from their teachings, culture, and language; and parents separated from each other. There has been a real disconnection for many Aboriginal people's sense of belonging and where they have come from.

Non-Indigenous view of the Indigenous Life Experience

Assimilation and the oppressions that Indigenous peoples faced was not only limited to the legislation that defined their life experiences. It also existed at the level of knowledge creation by scholars, historians and others who depicted particular, and colonial, representations of the lives of Indigenous people. Historically, Indigenous experiences of colonization have been written by mainstream, non-Indigenous authors and researchers who have defined and influenced mainstream beliefs with regard to Aboriginal experiences of marginalization and their interactions with European settlers. Many mainstream authors and researchers portray Aboriginal experiences as if they themselves were the experts of the Aboriginal lived experience. Youngblood Henderson (2000) writes:

“because of their superior civilization, classic ethnographers assumed an illusion of objectivity, although few of them actually mastered Aboriginal worldviews, consciousness, or languages. Most re-created the Aboriginal realm in their own likeness and confidently taught it to Eurocentric society as the actual Aboriginal truth” (p. 255).

Many mainstream authors were quite adept at writing as if the lived Indigenous experience were their own. In his book titled the *Imaginary Indian*, Francis (2000) writes about Grey Owl who portrayed himself as part Apache. Grey Owl claimed to be “adopted

by an Ojibway trapper...who had given up trapping under the influence of his Iroquois wife to become a fervent conservationist. In 1933, Grey Owl published his first book *Men of the Last Frontier* a tribute to the life of the Wilderness man” (p. 131). His book became so popular that he quickly became a renowned public speaker about wilderness spaces disappearing because of industrial civilization. When he spoke Grey Owl “dressed in a buckskin jacket and moccasins, his black hair in two long braids... [the public] called him the first real Indian that really looked like an Indian...from those thrilling Wild West days of covered wagons, buffalos and Sitting Bulls” (p. 131). Grey Owl had a huge following from Canada and the United States. He went on to write two more books - *Pilgrims of the Wild* which was about his transformation from a trapper to a naturalist and later *Pilgrims*. Both books were best sellers. The public was attracted to his books and eager for his public speaking which brought him to fame. It wasn't until after his death that we learned he was an "Englishman born and raised"(p. 135). Grey Owl had learned how to take advantage of his ability to write and portray himself as an Aboriginal person during an era when Aboriginal people were just struggling to survive.

Another example of appropriation was in 1925 when General Motors named one of their cars “Pontiac”. Between 1763 and 1765, Pontiac, a famous Chief, led a large group of tribes with the intent to send the English out of America. Francis (2000) tells the following, “Pontiac...a leader of the Ottawa people...forged a grand alliance of tribes to drive the English from the interior of America” (p. 171). Chief Pontiac and the members of the tribes that he led were concerned that the English were taking over the hunting grounds that these tribes used to feed their families. Chief Pontiac considered powerful and strong, led the group of tribes into a number of battles at that time. The irony is that General Motors wanted to portray their new car called the Pontiac with the same power and respect that Chief Pontiac held during that time.

Then in 1929 B.F. Goodrich introduced a canvas running shoe called the Chief Long Lance Shoe. The running shoe was modeled against the Indigenous moccasin. Francis (2000) writes that “B.F. Goodrich wished to associate its shoes with speed, strength and durability. There was no better way to do this than to associate them with the Indian,

known for his ability to run like the wind” (p. 173). It appeared that associating the running shoe with the moccasin and Indigenous people was a valuable tool for advertising. Francis goes on further to say that there were “...dozens of products identifying with the Indian: Pocahontas perfume, Red Indian motor oil, Iroquois beer, Squaw Brand canned vegetables-the list goes on and on” (p. 174). Indigenous people were associated with power, strength, and stamina that supported a strong perspective for advertising. The Indigenous person was also used as a symbol for sports. Francis states this “tradition continued in the naming of sports teams after Indian groups-the Braves, the Redskins, the Indians” (p. 174). The Indigenous people represented strength, agility, and courage which was what these sports teams wanted to be portrayed as themselves as strong and powerful athletes.

When I think of these stories of people who have represented themselves as Aboriginal people, appropriating Aboriginal culture as they did so, I am reminded that "since the beginning of the country, non-Native Canadians have wanted Indians to transform themselves into Whites, to assimilate to the mainstream. But there has also been a strong impulse among Whites, less consciously...to transform themselves into Indians" (Francis, 2000, p. 172). Mainstream thought has appropriated the voice of Aboriginal people for well over a century.

The Aboriginal experience with oppression is not a fallacy or fictitious and the *Indian Act* is real. To hear the stories told by Aboriginal people themselves and communities validates the courage and strength it took to survive to this day. Because of the above, I think it is really important that we get the voices of Aboriginal people to describe the effects of oppression in their lives. This is why I wanted to interview Aboriginal women, to hear their voices regarding their lived experiences. It is also important to include the voices of Indigenous scholars who have written extensively to analyze the oppressions that Indigenous peoples have experienced as a result of assimilationist policies. There is one exception to the various authors that I use in this project who is Sylvia Van Kirk. Sylvia Van Kirk is a non Indigenous woman who is a feminist historian. Van Kirk's interest in the role of First Nation women in the Fur Trade raised awareness of the First Nation woman's likely actual role during that era. Her description is perhaps closer to

what it was like then as a First Nation woman coming from a woman's view versus the view of male author regarding that era in Canadian and British Columbian history.

The Fur Trade – Introduction to the Euro-Settlers

A most important time in the history of Canada was during the Fur Trade era.

Immigrants travelled here from France and other parts of Europe once they learned the value of fur pelts.

“Europeans were impressed by the quality of the furs in the possession of the natives they encountered and saw the potential for marketing such furs in Europe where supplies of good quality fur were becoming increasingly scarce...the main impetus for the subsequent development of the fur trade as a major business, however, was a change in men's headwear fashions in western Europe sometime in the late 16th century...beaver fur was particularly well suited...to make this type of headwear. Shortly after 1600, French traders established posts...on the St. Lawrence at Tadoussac and Quebec. Dutch traders about the same time began operating in the Hudson River and establishing posts at what is now known as Albany. Thus began the rivalry between two great economic systems-the one based on the St Lawrence... the port of New York, soon to be joined by a third, based in London and gaining access to the North American interior by way of Hudson Bay”. (<http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~reak/hist/fur.htm>)

The Fur Trade played a large role in the development and change of the social, cultural, and political structures of that era. European men were eager to come to North America to establish themselves financially in their search for the fine fur pelts. This was the introduction of European males' powerful influence on Indigenous country and communities at that time. They had to rely on the Indigenous women at the time to show them the way to the best trapping places to obtain the furs.

While Indigenous women played a huge and necessary role during the fur-trade era, Van Kirk (1983) notes that, "despite her important contributions and influence in certain areas, the Indian woman in fur-trade society was at the mercy of a social structure devised primarily to meet the needs of European males" (p. 88). Because the First Nation

people relied on animal skins and pelts for food and clothing, the women knew where to find the best furs and how to get there. The Euro-settlers took advantage by seeking these powerful Indigenous women who would guide them to places they wouldn't have known to go on their own.

It was interesting to learn that many of the European men who came to Canada and partnered up with First Nation women could easily leave their First Nation partner or mate without penalty when choosing to marry a European wife when the European women started to move to North America. At first

“[t]he Hudson Bay Company...discouraged relationships between their employees and First Nations women...the company eventually realized that these unions were inevitable, because of the absence of European women and the isolation of the fur trading posts. The company began to make rules regarding relationships...these marriages were conducted without clergy present and were according to "the custom of the country." ...some judges did not consider these 'country marriages' legal and did not support the First Nation nor their children when some European men left them for a European wife leaving the First Nation woman and her children abandoned and without financial support from their European husband”. (<http://bcheritage.ca/tod/bios/cwives.htm>)

It appeared that the European men were not committed to their First Nation female partners because they could just leave them with no regard or care for the relationship they shared prior to the European women arriving to Canada. First Nation women were treated as commodities because it was financially gainful for white men to marry them to obtain their families' trust. This was an era of racism, one of many forms of oppression.

Indigenous Scholars' View of the Indigenous Lived Experience

There are a growing number of Indigenous authors who are writing about the oppressions that Indigenous women and children have experienced since the inception of the Indian Act. Through mainstream education, most histories of the Indigenous experience were written by ethnographers who were of mainly European descent. In the development of this project, I have learned that there are stories of Indigenous history being told by elders who recall stories from their late elders. Fournier and Crey (1997), in their book *Stolen From Our Embrace*, discuss how the stories of Indigenous experience is evolving:

“we have only begun to tell the story of aboriginal children in *Stolen from Our Embrace*, for their story begins long before European contact, when the oral tradition preserved tribal and family history and children were reared through the modeling and practice of behavior, done mostly by elders. We know this partly from ethnographic accounts but more reliably, since contact was relatively recent in British Columbia, from the living testimony of elders and adults who recall their elders’ words” (p. 17).

To have actual stories shared from the past confirms the importance of the tradition of storytelling. These histories are important to hear or learn about because they provide a more meaningful view of the past that speaks specifically to their families’ and communities’ ways of the being and knowing from their earlier generations. Fournier and Crey describe a number of histories that reaffirm what ethnographers have written regarding assimilation tactics utilized towards Indigenous people since European contact. Fournier and Crey talk about Crey’s memories of his father’s residential school experience:

“the school was such a powerfully negative experience for my father that as a parent he used it as a kind of threat to discipline us. If I didn’t behave, he told me, I would be sent to a school where children had to rise at 5:00 a.m., say prayers on their knees for hours and eat thin gruel three times a day...he remembered having his knuckles rapped with a wooden stick or getting whipped for speaking his language...St. Mary’s, like other Indian residential schools, was designed to strip aboriginal peoples of our culture” (pp. 22-23).

This is a story of how assimilationist tactics were utilized on young children who were vulnerable against the planned harshness against them as people. Crey, who later became a public speaker of Indigenous history, recalls that his father only spoke English and never spoke his Indigenous language. It remains evident that the residential school system was successful in destroying culture and pride in the children who were forced to attend the schools. The children who attended these schools have passed their traumatic experiences on to their own children that perpetuate the internalized racism and shame of who they are and where they came from.

The child welfare system was created to separate children from their families and communities; another assimilation tactic. These children who were taken from their families were put into non-Indigenous foster homes, stranger homes. Being brought into stranger care was a bewildering and frightening experience for children who didn’t really

know what was happening or what to expect. Children were separated from people who were just like them, who shared their stories, traditions, food, language and who accepted them as they were. To be treated with disrespect and with racism was a horrifying time and a time that is not easily erased. Where was a child to learn about love and witness healthy parenting role modeling? These experiences are just unfathomable to many who have lived to tell about these stories. These are stories not only of racism and loneliness but also of violence; a violence that is unspeakable and hits to the core of a child's heart and soul. It is no wonder that Indigenous people fear for their children entering into the foster care system. The fear is real with the concern that their children will transform and forget who they are and where they come from.

Violence is another form of oppression that has been experienced by Indigenous people and perpetuated violence within the Indigenous population. Violence has become an intergenerational issue where parents have experienced or even witnessed physical abuse as a child from their parents, residential school, or foster care. Crey (1997) shares his memory as a child and his experience with violence that was connected with his parents drinking alcohol:

“Both happiness and terror colour my earliest memories. We lived in a tiny shack at the foot of Hope Mountain, because my father was employed off the reserve in hard rock mining or logging in the area. Around the time I turned six, both of my parents began drinking alcohol to excess. My father's work buddies would come over and fall to hard drinking and scrapping. During one fight in our home, a number of men pinned my father to the floor. I remember grabbing a huge wine jug...and hitting one of the men as hard as I could on the back of the head” (p. 26).

This family had experienced violence either personally or through witnessing violence against a family member. Clearly, Crey was traumatized as a six year old child and did what he believed was necessary to stop the men from hitting his father. Six years old is young to have witnessed this much drinking and violence. This family's way of living describes the effects of colonialism in their ways of coping through drinking.

Violence has also followed many Indigenous women since they were children. Sugar and Fox (1989-90), Indigenous women prisoners, participated in the Task Force regarding Aboriginal women in Canadian prisons. Sugar and Fox discuss their experiences and

other Aboriginal women prisoners' experiences with violence and racism in the work titled "Nistum Peyako Seht'wawain Iskwewak: Breaking Chains". They talk about the importance of being heard before healing can begin:

"Prison cannot remedy the problem of the poverty of reserves. It cannot deal with immediate or historical memories of the genocide that Europeans worked upon our people. It cannot remedy violence, alcohol abuse, sexual assault during childhood, rape, and other violence Aboriginal women experience at the hands of men. Prison cannot heal the past abuse of foster homes, or the indifference and racism of Canada's justice system in its dealings with Aboriginal people" (p. 469).

Sugar and Fox wanted the public to be aware of the Aboriginal women's experience prior to entering into the prison system. They wanted to tell their stories as they experienced them and how important their stories were for the government to hear so they could begin their journey towards making changes and healing as Aboriginal women. Sugar and Fox shared their concerns with the Task Force of what it was really like within the walls of the prison. They talked about the living conditions in the prison such as no hot water, showers that didn't work or get repaired, and no heat in the winter. The women had limited life skills and what they knew and how they were treated throughout their lives were the reasons they were incarcerated. The women were treated violently that began in their childhood:

"our stories show that we have all been the victims of violence. Many of us are not the victims of violence in the way in which victims of a mugging experience violence. Instead, and all too often, we are the victims of long term and systemic violence. Many of our stories tell about sexual and physical abuse during childhood. Some of this violence occurred in our birth families, in some cases it arose in foster homes, and in juvenile institutions" (p. 470).

For many of these women, the violence they experienced in childhood continued on into adulthood thus the reason they were incarcerated. These stories contain trauma and litany of sadness that in a lifetime does not just disappear on its own without opportunity for healing. When incarcerated, where does one find the strength and courage to work on healing a broken soul?

Subsequent to assimilationist tactics stemming from the Indian Act such as residential schools and the child welfare systems, and perhaps even the justice system, many

Indigenous families and communities have combated their oppressions through intergenerational addictions and abuses. Unfortunately, another compounding affect of these colonialism devices is the concern with homelessness for women and their children who are forced to live off reserve. The growing problem is that reserve land bases have not grown along with the Indigenous population. There are more and more Urban Aboriginal families facing the challenge of finding a residence off reserve that is near their reserve or community. It is becoming a common situation for some Indigenous women and children to face homelessness due to the lack of community resources that provide them with affordable and suitable housing. Winona Laduke (2009) shares:

“housing is a critical problem in Native communities in North America. Many Indian people live in overcrowded conditions or in homes without proper sewer and sanitation systems. In addition, the lack of infrastructure whether roads, electricity or sewers in many reservation communities continues to mark a level of underdevelopment not present in adjacent non-Indian communities. There a great number of of similarities between Native communities in North America and third world communities internationally” (p. 169).

When a basic need such as shelter is non-existent, one may question how women and children are able to survive and live in a healthy manner. Even if there was a large enough land base to live on reserve, the Federal Government does not provide enough financial support to ensure a healthy quality of life on reserve. As a child welfare social worker, I have witnessed single mothers with their children trying to find and maintain suitable and affordable housing in mainstream communities. There is a lack of affordable housing for single parents to begin with. Housing is a basic need and not having a home creates a multitude of stressors that can only be addressed by having shelter first.

Although Indigenous people have suffered and experienced a great deal of oppression, when Indigenous people tell their stories, the stories speak to not only years of oppression, but also of the strength and courage it takes just to live and tell their stories. The stories that my participants narrated were just that; stories of courage, and stories of survival; survival stories that will shine through to the next generations.

Indigenous Perspectives on the Strengths of Indigenous Women

In the previous section I discussed the Indigenous women's experience in the Fur Trade era, which is only part of the story and a story that does not ideally come from an Indigenous woman's voice. While the Indigenous women's roles were of power and strength, there was blatant racism by the Hudson Bay Company and some Judges who did not consider the marriages between the European men and Indigenous women as legal. Yet Indigenous women during the Fur Trade era showed considerable strength through their involvement during this time of huge social and cultural change. Indigenous women continued with their stand of courage and the following are some of the ways that Indigenous demonstrated their strengths.

a) *Women as agents, not as victims:*

During the beginning of the Fur Trade era, the Indigenous woman was highly valued by her European male counterparts. The Indigenous woman knew where to find the best animals for their pelts and how to get there. In her book *Many Tender Ties: Women In Fur Trade Society*, Van Kirk (1983) reconstructs the Indian women's views on their experience during the Fur Trade. She writes that initially "some Indian women took the initiative in securing fur-trade husbands and sought to make the most of the opportunities offered by this new role" (p. 75). The Indigenous women initially "occupied an influential position as 'women in between' two groups of men" because she "played the whites against the Indian" in maintaining her status in both worlds. The influential position was only to last until the fur-traders had gleaned enough knowledge from the Indigenous women as necessary to carry on the fur-trade business on their own.

Brant (1988) provides a strong statement that Indigenous women "...are not victims. We are organizers...freedom fighters...feminists...healers. This is not anything new. For centuries it has been so." (p. 11). I appreciate Brant's statement that tells us that Indigenous women are indeed participating agents who strive to make change and not sit back and let life happen or become victims of oppression or colonialism. Brant (1988) writes about Indigenous women's spirit as, "[we] have learned about courage, about pride, about survival. Indian women have given of themselves with love and hope. May we continue to learn from each other" (p.13). Many women have their own experiences to

draw from and willingly share these experiences with the women in their family. These are acts and stories of strength.

b) Indigenous Women: Single mothers as role models:

While Indigenous people have experienced colonial oppression, I am particularly interested in examining the nature of oppression (and strength) that Indigenous women experienced in their role(s) within their family. I have always been interested in the roles and strengths that Indigenous women take on and where these stem from because I have experienced and witnessed women take on many roles that are not always considered to be feminine by mainstream society. In my own family of origin, the women did physical work on the family farms, and also worked in the community and contributed financially to the home and family whilst carrying the duties of looking after the household. I have been raised in a typical nuclear family with a mother and a father. In this project however, I am looking at the single parent women led families and their lived experiences, and more specifically the single mothers' lived experiences.

In her book, *A Recognition of Being, Reconstructing Native Womenhood*, Anderson (2006) writes about gender and roles that "men and women had their spheres of work, they were not restricted from engaging in each other's work, if it became necessary" and that because some men did not have a wife, they would have to do the cooking themselves and "similarly, women had to provide for themselves and their families in the absence of a man... [women would] learn essential trapping and hunting skills... this knowledge allowed each gender to have respect for the work that was typically done by the other" (p. 59). Anderson goes on to describe, "in some societies, neither women nor men were restricted from doing each other's work if they felt they were more suited for it" (p. 59). Anderson's description helps one to understand the division of work and responsibilities between males and females. As well, her description provides the rationalization that if there is only one parent that this person would take on the role of both mother and father. The role of a single mother makes for strong role modeling for the younger generation as they grow and develop into their own roles. The younger generation will have a better respect the knowledge they have learned of responsibilities between mothering and fathering within their family and community. I realize that the

discussion on the role of women assumes a hetero-normative aspect in the literature by First Nations' writers; this is a limitation that I hope will overcome with time.

c) Indigenous Women as Protectors of their Families and Communities:

Indigenous women have carried the responsibility of protecting their communities and families. In her chapter in the book, *First Voices* (2009), Jacobs writes about procreation as one of the ways Indigenous women are known as protectors:

“prior to colonization, the women in our communities were...respected and honoured for the role that they have in our communities. Women are life givers...caretakers of the spirit that we bring into this world, Our Mother earth. We were given those responsibilities by the Creator to bring that spirit into this physical world and to love, take care of and nurture our children (pp. 11-12).

Giving life is not only about the Indigenous women's traditional role. It is also connected to protecting the community by ensuring her nation's strength in growth and population.

Another way that Indigenous women protected their community was through the political power their nations provided them. They held authority in decision making as Harper (2009) explains: “Aboriginal women...exerted a great deal of power such as the power to choose and oust their nation's chiefs” (p. 335). Historically, Indigenous women held a high political role within their communities and held - and likely shared - the responsibility of making change for their communities. Decision makers are known to be protectors of families and communities as this role is important in the development and maintenance of strong communities and nations. Although we cannot talk about all First Nations communities as being the same because there are many differences in the various nations; however in most First Nation's communities, women had a very similar role to what has just been described.

Gunn Allen (1992), a powerful author, writes about Indigenous women who have remained strong throughout their experiences with colonization. Gunn Allen introduces the reader to her description of Woman:

“in the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman. The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those people of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures,

architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization. She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. She is the Eldest God, the one who Remembers and Re-members...(p. 11).

This statement reflects on all Indigenous women as we have evolved from our great grandmother's tribal lives to our lives as they are today. Indigenous women understand the importance of families and have kept families connected through practicing their traditions through culture and celebrations. Celebrations are what bring families together and it is there that Indigenous women provide family teachings that are about tending to the fires of life that Gunn Allen talks of. Indigenous women have endured and I believe this is because "the power of woman is the center of the universe and is both heart (womb) and thought (creativity)" (Gunn Allen, 1992, p. 22). Indigenous women understand the power of ceremony that grounds families so they know where they come from and their connection with each other and with community.

d) Indigenous Women's Strength: Keepers of Tradition:

Some of my favorite memories are when our family gathered together to celebrate family traditions such as weddings, birthdays, Christmas, Easter, fishdays, canning, berry picking, and so forth. The men would go off together to do their traditional work and the women would gather together to do their traditional work. The men only left the larger gathering after the women told them what chores they needed to have done by dinner time. It seemed that the youngest family members were expected to stay behind with the women that included our mothers, grandmothers, aunties and cousins. I loved these times; we had lots of fun with laughter and lots of storytelling from the women in our family. Our grandmothers, aunties, and moms would talk about what it was like for them growing up and the grandmothers would occasionally slip into their language when they didn't want us younger ones to know what they were talking about.

Indigenous women were known to be teachers of culture and traditions, matriarchs of family. Gunn Allen (1992) reminds us that:

"the high position held by women as a group...results from certain inclinations that the women are born with...interest, competence, spirit direction, and guidance. Women are by nature of feminine 'vibration' graced with certain inclinations that make them powerful. Their power includes bearing and raising children... cooking...decision making...locating and/or allocating virtually every resource used by the people... [responsible] for preserving and using the oral tradition; making important tribal decisions about the life and death of captives and other outsiders; and overseeing ritual occasions... women did...everything that maintains the life and stability of their tribal people " (p. 207).

My grandmother, mother, and aunts always told stories of traditions, child rearing, and they kept everyone up to date on other extended family members who lived in other communities. These were definitely glorious moments of teachings and lessons for us younger ones and while these gatherings may not be as large as they once were; they continue just the same. It seemed as though the women were the ones who kept the families together and ensured that the younger generations knew their place within the family and who their family was. From the earliest notion of family, it was easy to understand who the leaders in the family were; those leaders were the grandmothers. They knew what needed to be done and who in the family was to do which chores, from the youngest to oldest and that included both males and females. My grandmothers were the foundation of our family and exuded a subtle and well respected strength within the family.

I appreciate Kim Anderson's (2006) description of Aboriginal women: "many Native women have told me that underneath all of the oppression and confusion, there has always been a part of them that knew the strength and vitality of being a Native woman" (p. 221). Anderson is writing about how she understands the strength of being an Indigenous woman and it is based on the connection to culture and traditions. It is interesting to read Gunn Allen's (1992) words that:

"During the ages when tribal societies existed in the Americas largely untouched by patriarchal oppression, they developed elaborate systems of thought that included science, philosophy, and government based on a belief in the central importance of female energies, autonomy of individuals, cooperation, human dignity, human freedom, and egalitarian distribution of status, goods, and services. Respect for others, reverence for life, and, as a by-product, pacifism as a way of life; importance of kinship ties in the customary ordering of social interaction; a sense of the sacredness and mystery of existence; balance and

harmony in relationships both sacred and secular were all features of life among the tribal confederacies and nations. And in those that lived by the largest number of these principals, gynarchy was the norm rather than the exception" (pp. 211-212).

This passage from Gunn Allen describes just how it was in my family, that the women were the teachers of tradition and culture even though the men would teach and explain to the younger males their roles. Overall though, everyone in the family appeared to respect what the older women had to say. Our family was certainly and clearly women centered, the grandmothers were revered and respected for their teachings. It was my late mother who ensured that, as children, we visited both sides of our grandparents every summer. It was my mother who kept us connected with our family and in her own way this was her teaching about our pathway to knowing who we were and where we came from. During these visits I spent a lot of time with my grandmothers who were the organizers of family events and the caretakers of anyone who walked through their doors. The men never questioned what the women asked of them and seemed to know their place during these family times.

e) Indigenous Women as Warriors:

The history of Aboriginal women's experience with oppression stemming from the *Indian Act* through the Fur Trade and post Fur Trade eras portrays just how strong Indigenous women were. They played a huge role in their communities as matriarchs, business women, guides, mothers, and grandmothers that do today's women proud of where 'we come from'. In Lavell-Harvard and Lavell's (2006) book, *Until Our Hearts are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance, and Rebirth*, the authors discuss "the important roles of grandmothers and older women... this collectivism is manifested in these women as critical and involved decision makers, co-parents, and full participants in child rearing, and indeed in child survival... because child survival is the fundamental basis of cultural survival, among indigenous people the roles of powerful senior women is essential for these oppressed cultures and ethnic distinctions to survive" (p. 119). The Indigenous woman's experience is truly one of courage and strength that demands society to notice and take heed. Gunn Allen (1992) tells us about women as warriors:

“we survive war and conquest; we survive colonization, acculturations, assimilation; we survive beating, rape, starvation, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children, our loved ones, destruction of our land, our homes, our past, and our future. We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we learn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what” (p. 190).

Surviving may be part of the lived experiences of these women but what stands out in testament is their ability to take action and not remain as victims throughout their hardships.

Concluding Thoughts

“Tremolo
A woman is making the tremolo in the wind
No longer is it the song she once made
For her husband and sons in battle Now
She sings it for herself
This woman is a strong woman
Her face is etched in lines
That have not yet made an ending
In another time she would be called "man hearted"
But now she has turned her back to the wind
and the four winds take her cry and carry
it to the four directions, to all-women
And her tremolo is a new song
She sings in a voice of rolling thunder Saying,
Listen women, The word for *strong* is 'Woman-hearted'"
(Isom, 1988, p. 219)

This poem speaks to me about the strength of Indigenous women. Despite experiencing years of oppression she continues to sing and will not allow her voice to be silenced. Throughout my research study, I will be looking at and analyzing Indigenous women's experiences of oppression and their strengths used to resist oppression through the eyes of my participants. I should note that there are many different nations and not all Indigenous women are the same, however when reviewing the literature from various Indigenous authors reflecting on the experiences of different First Nations, I did find that a commonality of themes in the way that I have discussed above. Even though there has been a changing notion of Indigenous women's strengths where once the men as warriors were considered strong, now the woman becomes a warrior in her own right. Indigenous

women are warriors because they have resisted all that has been done to them while surviving and singing; thus their strength can be interpreted as "woman hearted".

Chapter 3 - Research Methodology and Design

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored literature that informs my research. In this chapter, I will discuss the methodologies and methods used in this research project. I begin with a description of qualitative research and provide my rationale in utilizing storytelling as a methodology. Next, I explain the role of the researcher, talk about the participants, the purpose and importance of this research, data gathering process, listening and sharing, data analysis, ethical considerations and limitations of research. I end by acknowledging the participants.

1. Qualitative Research

For this research project, I used the narrative approach called story telling. Qualitative methods such as narrative approaches to research are preferable to use when the researcher is interested in learning about a specific group of people and their experiences. Silverman (2001) "found that in social contexts, qualitative methods are believed to provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena (p. 32). The participants will provide a deeper understanding of their life experiences because I do not have a list of questions to ask that would influence their thinking. This approach will allow the participants to feel in control of what life stories they want to share and to talk about.

This research project, then, is based on unstructured interviews with Indigenous women who shared their life stories. Interviews took place in the venue of their choice. What I appreciate about qualitative research is that this method is particularly effective when working on feminist or women centered issues as Fraser (2004) suggests: "Qualitative researchers use interviews to validate the knowledge of 'ordinary people', especially 'ordinary' women who are liable to be omitted from many research projects" (p. 183.). One may call these women "extra" ordinary as their stories will illuminate.

2. Narrative Methodology and Indigenous Oral Storytelling

Indigenous researchers are slowly articulating Indigenous methodologies and are changing the way research is being conducted. One of the ways that research is changing

is by Indigenous people conducting research using a methodology called storytelling, which is another form of narrative methodology. Storytelling is about sharing stories from the past and present. Sharing stories in this manner is a form of providing the listener(s) with teachings that are important for the participant to communicate lessons learnt. To hear stories from the past is a vital element in our development as Indigenous people as this is how we learn where we come from and who we are. Storytelling is essential to re-claiming our histories:

"We have often allowed our 'histories' to be told and have then become outsiders as we heard them being retold... history is also about power... it is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful... coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony... are strategies employed by Indigenous people" (Smith, 2006, pp 32-35).

While I was raised with mainly German Canadian culture and traditions, I am sensitive to my First Nation heritage as I, too, hold alternate knowledges of my personal history. I am a mature woman with Indigenous ancestry who is conducting research about Indigenous women's strengths and writing about their stories will add new knowledge, thus reclaiming a piece of Indigenous women's worldview.

Reissman (1993) writes that "locating narratives of personal experience for analysis is not difficult. They are ubiquitous in everyday life... and telling stories... [is] a universal human activity" (pp. 3,4). Growing up, my grandparents and my parents told stories at family gatherings and these stories were usually about their life experiences and growing up. These stories inform my identity and my place in history. My parents would share what it was like for them growing up on farms and the expectations that family and community had of them. These stories were, in fact, lessons for my siblings and me to learn from. Reissman explains the concept of narratives further, saying that "narrating our personal experiences ... could be interpreted to reveal intersections of the social, cultural, personal, and political" (p. vi). Recalling my family stories is a strong reminder of how family influences or instils intrinsic values, culture, traditions, life principles, respect, honour, and even work ethics within the family. These family values and life principals have been passed onto my own children and grandchildren which is also a

reflection of who I am at home, at work, and in my community. Reissman further claims that "personal narratives... refers to talk organized around consequential events [and] a teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or 'world'" (p.3). I always looked forward to our family gatherings because I loved hearing the stories about my family members and what their homes and childhoods were like. These stories took me to a world my family wanted me to hear about, a time and place my family thought important to remember.

The story telling approach to research is particularly suitable for my project because I am inviting Aboriginal women participants to tell me their life stories. In her work *Life Lived Like a Story*, Cruickshank (1990) reaffirms that "storytelling is a universal activity and provides a model for research" (pp. ix, 1). I believe that using the methodology of storytelling will help the participants feel more comfortable during their interviews as they will be able to tell their stories without the interruption of answering a list of pre-designed questions. When Cruickshank talks about storytelling as a methodology, Cruickshank tells us that the 'women have taken on an energetic role in determining...the direction of our work" (p. x) which is the intent of using this methodology. And Reissman (1993) states "narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself. Storytelling, is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us" (p. 1). Story telling as a narrative analysis lends it self to a more respectful way of doing research with Indigenous women who are accustomed to this "culturally specific narrative genre" (Cruickshank, 1990, p. x) as a form of communication.

As an Aboriginal woman, I was particularly interested in hearing the lived experiences of other Aboriginal women. I wanted to hear about their experiences and impressions of being an Aboriginal woman. My curiosity stemmed from the time I learned that I was affected by the Indian Act, the education system, Income Assistance, landlords, etc. I wanted to gain a better understanding of what life was like for Aboriginal women and how they were affected by the Indian Act, their experiences within their family environment, and community and how they experienced and moved around within the large systemic institutions on a day to basis. After I realized that my late mother was affected by colonization, I was saddened that I would never hear her stories about being

an Aboriginal woman. I believe it took a lot of courage for my mother to live in a Euro-Canadian community and family setting as an Aboriginal woman. Because I would never hear my mother's stories, I wanted to hear other Aboriginal women's stories and bring to light their stories of being women, raising children, and for these women in particular raising children on their own, their roles within their families and communities, and the actions they took along the way to demonstrate their strengths. Maynes, Peirce, and Laslett (2008) write, "the core of feminist epistemology is the claim that new insights about gender relations and power emerge from women telling stories about themselves and their lives and that process of telling reveals oppressions that have been suppressed or unrecognized" (pp. 6-7). I was excited that Aboriginal women were willing to share their lived experiences with me for this project and that their stories would likely reveal suppressed or unrecognized oppressions.

I also wanted to ensure that my research was culturally appropriate as my participants were Aboriginal women. The narrative approach of storytelling to research is particularly appropriate culturally as Thomas (2000) remarks when talking about her choice of using storytelling when undertaking research with Indigenous communities: "First Nation people come from an oral society" (p. 21). Storytelling appears to be a natural and culturally appropriate methodology to use for this project. I recall listening to many stories that my late grandparents and late Uncle would tell and how I would listen with respect as there was always a lesson or history tied to their stories. According to Thomas: "[t]raditionally, stories and storytelling were used to pass down historical facts, share culture and traditions, and life lessons; as well as to teach values, beliefs, morals and lifeskills...to use storytelling as a methodology honors my Ancestors and traditions of our People" (Thomas, 2000, p.21). I want to conduct my research in a way that is traditional to Indigenous culture and society and believe that using the approach of storytelling is a respectful way of undertaking research with Indigenous women to begin to understand their histories.

My worldview is shaped by the Circle of Life which is likened to the Medicine Wheel that I relate to 'walking the good road'. Ouellette (2002) provides the following

interpretation of the Circle of Life by Alice Williams (1989), who uses this symbolism in her quilting designs:

“Lines that radiate from the ‘Pimaatisiwin Wheel’ tell us that each Being in the creation affects all that comes into contact with her/him. The centre, where all the colours touch, is the soul. The belief is that all Beings, all animate objects, have a Soul or Spirit. The Mother Earth circle represents the physical existence of all things. The lines radiating from the physical circle show that we have a physical effect on our surroundings, while lines from the centre, the Soul, show that our Souls also have just as great an effect on all things that touch our lives” (p.47).

This interpretation relates to my worldview that all things are interconnected, all people and things have a soul, and that we do have a physical effect on our surroundings as our surroundings affect us.

As well, I relate the following principles with my worldview as written by Burkhart (2004) who writes about "the...principles of American Indian Philosophy...the principle of relatedness, the meaning-shaping principle of action, and the moral universe of action" (p. 15). These are only a few of the principles that influence my worldview.

Regarding the principle of relatedness, Burkhart's (2004) explains "...the most important things to keep in mind are the simple things that are directly around us in our experience and the things to which we are most directly related" (p. 16). I believe that we are all interconnected with one another and with all things living. I appreciate Ouellette's (2002) statement that all beings depend upon each other which is about connectedness, "[t]he interconnectedness of all things and their dependence upon each other for survival is basic in Aboriginal worldview understanding". (p. 47). Relatedness supports us as beings and we rely on other beings and things to live within our world. Deloria (1999) also writes about relatedness: "everything in the natural world has relationships with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it" (p. 34). The principle of relatedness encourages me to think of how everything is related from a person, to mother earth, grandfather sky, air, food, animals, all the senses, behaviours, and how everything is affected by the other. If something was missing from outside or within our world then as person I would have a different relationship with whatever or whomever surrounds me. I am always conscious of my

surroundings and of my relationship and experience with people and with all objects surrounding me. In my role as researcher, I was respectful of the participant and her story and how my behavior and words would affect the storyteller.

Next, I believe in the meaning-making principle of action which relates to our interconnectedness and how we interact with each other and the world. Our behaviour is related not only to our lived experiences but also to the stories that we tell others about ourselves. Burkhart (2004) describes the meaning making principle as follows: "how we act is merely not a result of causal interactions with the world...how we act is a response to stimuli" (p. 16). This leads me to believe that our stories or truths are a result of our experiences in life. How we act or behave in the world gives us our meaning and relationship to the world. Our experiences are valued because they helped us to behave or think the way that we do. In my role as researcher, I have respect for the lived experiences of the participants and of how they made meaning of and valued their life experiences. I was also aware of my response to their stories and how I made meaning of what I was hearing.

The next principle as described by Burkhart is as follows: the "universe is moral...facts, truth, meaning, even our existence are normative...there is no difference between what is true and what is right" (Burkhart, p. 17). The way I am as a person is based on my existence and is how I make meaning of myself within my existence. Life is about experiences or lived wisdom which is based on our lived experiences. My truth is my experience. Deloria (1999) writes about a moral universe as well: "the real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but to find the proper road along which...individuals were supposed to walk" (p. vii). Our acts instruct our learnings which teach us about our values and ultimately our way of living. This doesn't mean that the way we live is necessarily right or wrong, just that our way of living is a journey and we learn by experience. Our experiences build on each other as we age and thus build wisdom. Waters (2004) writes that Indian philosophy "entertains a way of knowing by direct access, or awareness of experience...the Indian philosopher can accept that the world has 'turtles all the way down'" and not question as in Western philosophy "if the turtle holds the earth, what holds the turtle?" (p. xvii). Indigenous

philosophy informs us that we 'only need to know what we know' and that we don't need to know all things. By using the methodology of storytelling, the women participants will ultimately be the ones who choose the stories they wish to share. As a researcher using storytelling methodology, I never would question the storyteller's life experience. I only value the wisdom that was shared with me regarding the storytellers' journey. And in my role as researcher, I must carry and share their stories with respect and with intention to write their stories in an honorable way.

I needed to prepare myself to conduct this research with integrity. I needed to ensure my research was grounded in Indigenous methodologies even though I walk in two worlds (not solely Indigenous nor white). As the researcher, I needed to be continually conscious of the power I carry in this project and how my behavior affected the participants. To conduct this research project grounded in Indigenous methodologies may be somewhat political because there are people who may question my Indigeneity because I don't live on Aboriginal territory, nor do I speak my late mother's language, and I am unaware of many cultural traditions tied with my Aboriginal community. Identity is a complex topic and could be an entire research study on its own. Through my teachings from my late mother and late grandparents I am aware of the values and beliefs that I try to live by that include grounding my spirit which I do through prayer that helps to keep my intentions clear. I needed to be respectful and mindful that the stories I would be hearing belonged to the women who were sharing them; that the participants are the true owners of their knowledge. "When we listen with open hearts and open minds, we respect and honour the storytellers" (Thomas, 2000, p. 23). It was and remains my intent that this process will strengthen the Indigenous woman's life experience and place in the world. I appreciate Jelena Porsanger's (2004) the aim of Indigenous methodology:

"Indigenous methodologies should be designed to... protect indigenous knowledge from misinterpretation and misuse; to demystify knowledge about indigenous peoples; to tell indigenous peoples' stories in their voices; to give credit to the true owners of indigenous knowledge; to communicate the results of research back to the owners of this knowledge, in order to support them in their desire to be subjects rather than objects of research... and to determine their place in the world. Following these methodological issues, indigenous research will strengthen indigenous peoples' identity, which will in turn support indigenous

peoples' efforts to be independent: not only legally, politically or economically, but first and foremost intellectually" (p. 117).

My research process followed the above principles as outlined by Porsanger. To protect Indigenous knowledge from misinterpretation and misuse, and not unlike feminist and other critically centered research, I provided each of the participants with a copy of her transcript to review to ensure these were her words before putting them to paper. I believe that I demystified Indigenous knowledge by inviting the participants to share their stories in their own words and by giving them the credit they deserved by sharing their stories in this written work. The women were provided the option of participating in this research study and it was explained that if they chose not to participate there would be no repercussion. I believe that this study will strengthen Indigenous women's identity by providing an in-depth understanding of Indigenous women as not just being victims but rather as having agency and as resisting the oppressions they experienced throughout their lives. These women demonstrated their strengths as Indigenous women and it is time for their courage and strength to be acknowledged.

3. My Role as a Researcher

Indigenous methodology has informed me about my role as a researcher. As a woman with mixed heritage First Nation and German Canadian, and now as a researcher and accepting that I walk in two worlds, I needed to draw upon my own way of knowing and being that mirrors my Indigeneity.

I believe in protecting the Spirit and because of our interconnectedness to one another and all things, there is an unspoken way of being that is about walking and living with respect for all people and all things. I appreciate that Indigenous people are drawn to strengthening and grounding the spirit and Wilson (2008) asserts that "Indigenous people ... share similar beliefs and a common spirituality" (p. 32). I believe that it is important to keep the spirit strong whether it is through prayer, visions, or other forms of spirituality. Throughout this project my intention has been to remain respectful with good intentions and to support this principle I have used prayer and candles as grounding techniques.

Kovach (2009) also explains the role of the researcher within Indigenous research methodologies:

"within Indigenous research, self-location means cultural identification, and it manifests itself in various ways. Indigenous researchers will situate themselves as being part of an Indigenous group, be it tribal, urban, or otherwise...for many Indigenous people, this act is intuitive, launched immediately through the protocol of introductions. It shows respect to the ancestors and allows community to locate us" (p. 110).

Kovach's words have been a strong reminder of my role as researcher. When meeting the participants, I introduced myself by sharing who my late grandparents and my late parents were and where they came from as a way to show respect to my ancestors and to the women whom I was meeting. With my teachings and worldview, I believe that I can be my 'self' knowing that the participants are of Indigenous heritage and will have their own teachings and worldviews. I am aware that we share some commonalities that stem from our families and communities and we are interconnected due to our Indigeneity.

I believe that my role of researcher is also to bring forward the women's stories so that anyone who reads this work will have a better awareness of the lived experiences of Indigenous women. The reader will learn of the strength and courage it takes to take action against the harshness of day to day living (some may call it survival) when involved with social services such as social assistance or child welfare. My intention is to illuminate these women's stories that they likely have not *talked* about or shared with anyone outside of their close family or friendships.

4. Participants

When I began the search for participants, I had particular criteria for the participants to meet. First of all the participants had to be Indigenous women, who are mothers, who currently live on Vancouver Island, who had experienced either living on financial assistance or had been involved with child welfare services at one time in their life. The participants did not have to belong to the same Nation but they needed to live in the community of Nanaimo, to make it easier to meet each other in person. Finally, the participant could not currently be involved with child welfare. This criteria was put in

place to ensure that my participants did not feel unsafe by talking to me due to the fact that I work for the Ministry of Children and Family Development and it would be unethical to interview someone currently involved with the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Next, because my research stems from an Indigenous research paradigm and I was inviting Indigenous women from the same community that I live and work in, I had to be ethical and respectful to ensure that my research followed the protocols of conducting research that were culturally acceptable. So, before I could begin this project my first task was to ask a local Indigenous Agency for their support for my research. I approached Tillicum Lelum Friendship Centre's Executive Director to explain my research, its aims and methodology. I received a letter of support (See Appendix "A") that indicated her support. I also requested and received permission to post ads for participants in two of their buildings, the Health Centre and the Management Building. Three participants contacted me by telephone after they had seen and read the ads that were posted at the Tillicum Lelum buildings.

What I thought important for critical research and coming from an Indigenous research paradigm was to bring the results of the interviews back to the participants to ask if the information was correct. The intent was to respect that the participants were the experts of their experience and knowledge. Therefore I consulted with the participants to ensure that they agreed with what was recorded in the transcripts and in the thesis upon its completion. As well, I have offered to give a copy of the completed thesis to the participants and to the Friendship Centre's Executive Director and her Management team.

There were three participants that ranged in ages from 30 to approximately 60 years of age. The participants lived in Nanaimo off reserve and were not members of Nanaimo First Nation. The women were all members of Nations within British Columbia: Wei Wai Kum First Nation, 'Namgis First Nation, and Lytton First Nation. Two of the women are single mothers. The other woman was a single mother, now in a relationship and she is also a grandmother. All the participants had experience with social services that included financial assistance and child protection services. All the participants had

experienced addiction either personally or with someone they loved and two women shared their experiences with physical and sexual abuses. The women were eager to share their stories so that other women would hopefully learn that they could resist oppression that they may be facing and that they are not alone.

5. Purpose and Importance of this Research

For participants the significant benefit is that, by sharing their life stories and involvement with social services, that their experiences will inform the work of social service practitioners and, hopefully, other sections of society that Indigenous single mothers are not only strong but courageous. These women represent only a minute portion of Aboriginal women who have had to maneuver through large oppressive systems. The women's voices will contribute to maintaining strong Indigenous identities. It is important for society to gain some understanding of the life experiences of Aboriginal single mothers as this information helps to build awareness of the day to day experiences of Aboriginal children, families, and their community.

At the academic level this research will contribute to graduate research in a variety of disciplines such as social work, child and youth care, and perhaps nursing and other helping professions by being used as a resource to other academics and practitioners. I also intend to publish in journals and professional magazines to discuss the findings of this research.

6. Data Gathering Process

I gathered data by asking women to tell me their stories using an unstructured approach to conducting interviews. As Thomas (2000) writes, "the use of informal conversational interviews is further recognized as the phenomenological approach to interviewing. Unstructured interviews are useful when the research has no presuppositions about what of importance may be learned" (pp 26, 198). Therefore unstructured interviews was a suitable technique for story telling, which was my methodology of choice I had no idea of these Indigenous women's experiences and didn't know what stories they would be sharing. Thus, I did not enter into the interviews with any presuppositions of the

woman's life experiences as an Indigenous woman, a single mother, or involvement with social services. I was prepared to sit and listen to the women's stories and see what emerged.

I interviewed the women separately. The first woman chose to be interviewed at my workplace. The second woman was interviewed at her home. The third woman chose to be interviewed at my home. To prepare two of the women before starting the interviews, I showed them where the washroom was, then invited them to choose their seat, and offered refreshments such as water, coffee, or tea. I wanted to ensure the women were aware of and comfortable with their surroundings. The second woman was interviewed at her home. When I visited her, she offered me to take my seat first before taking her own, thus showing me great respect. In the case of all participants, when we were seated, our conversation began with me explaining to each woman that I was interested in hearing about her life experience beginning from a young child, to a youth, then as a parent. I also told them that I was interested in hearing about any of their experiences with social services as in child welfare and or financial assistance. Then I explained that I would like to interview them twice, that the second interview would provide some time to reflect about the first interview and would give them time to think if there was something more that they would want to share. I had asked the participants to think of what they believed their strengths to be and that they could share their thoughts during the second interview. When it came time for the second interview, the women stated they struggled to think of what their strengths really were and they were kind of shy about this subject. After this sharing the women continued on with their stories. The second interview did not take as long as the first.

Next, I explained that when they were telling their stories that I had no list or preconceived questions to ask of them. The only types of questions I used were those of clarification or probing. I explained that some of the clarification or probing questions may sound like: what were you thinking when that happened? How did you know what to do, or listening sounds like mhm, hm, oh, or yes. I believe, as does Thomas (2000), that "the unstructured dialogical nature of the interviews will enhance the collection of stories" (p. 26). Having a list of questions to ask would sway the stories the participants

would share with me and I wanted the participants to share their stories without the influence of a list of questions. I explained to each participant that if she felt any level of discomfort that she could stop the process at any time or withdraw from telling her story with no penalty. After each interview was over and the participant and I separated ways, I used a journal to reflect my thoughts and feelings during and after the interviews.

Prior to the interview, I provided and reviewed the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix "B" – Informed Consent) with each participant. Then after the Informed Consent Form was signed I asked for permission to record our conversation. Next I explained that if anything that she was sharing with me raised some distress that I had a list of local community supports that she could seek some support from. I provided this information because of the likely sensitive experiences that may come up during the interview. Then I explained that she would have an opportunity to review and edit the transcribed interview before I would begin the analysis.

As it turned out, when I was ready to give the participants' copies of their transcribed interviews only two participants accepted their transcribed interviews to read over. The third participant declined her copy because she was supporting her partner who was having some medical problems at the time. This woman gave me permission to go ahead and use her transcript for the purpose of analysis.

7. Data Analysis

Regarding data analysis, I followed Fraser's (2004) step-by-step process for data analysis because the process she outlined is suitable to undertaking thematic analysis. Fraser explains the first step as being a process of analysing personal stories line by line. My method of using informal conversational interviews with a small number of participants ended up being somewhat labour intensive when transcribing the taped interviews. As I transcribed the interviews, I was conscious that I was transcribing the interviews very similarly to the way that Mishler (1991) has described transcribing: after I listened then I "typed line by line with "close and repeated listenings, coupled with methodic transcribing, [that] often leads to insights that in turn shape how we choose to represent an interview narrative in our text" (p.60). In my work for the Ministry of Children and

Family Development, I have transcribed taped interviews many times. Quite often transcribed interviews are utilized in court so it is important to transcribe word for word and as accurately as possible. Pauses, partial sentences and laughter are always included in the transcripts to ensure that context supports interpretation of the text.

Reissman (1993) states that "analysis cannot be easily distinguished from transcription" (p. 60). During transcription, I became immersed in the data, i.e. the women's stories and reviewing my journal notes enriched this process. This immersion helped me to remember the context when the participant was telling her story.

When I was reading and re-reading the transcripts I was looking for themes to emerge from the data. I found that reading their stories was spiritually challenging. The women had shared a lot of personal experiences that were hard to fathom. Their experiences with oppression were very real and I had to take a break every now and then to regroup and strengthen my spirit. This process took a little longer than I expected because of the necessary breaks that took place when reading through the data to put the words into themes. My thesis supervisor and I discussed how these stories were hard on the soul and they truly were. This is why it was so important for me to take time for my grounding rituals of prayer and candles. I lit candles for the women who shared their stories with me. I lit candles for my late mother, late grandmothers and late aunties who left to the Spirit World. I found that these rituals helped me to focus and ensured my intentions were respectful as I continued on with the task of breaking the stories into themes as will be explained in the following paragraph.

As I expected, I learned just how "multilayered interpretation is as I reviewed each transcribed document line by line" (Reissman, 1993, p.68). I began by reading and re-reading each transcript using a highlighter to identify similar phrases and then writing down each theme. I found this task a little daunting so I decided to use Word documents to separate the interview data into two main themes, oppressions and strengths. Then, I used the individual's main transcript, copying and pasting each theme by sentences and paragraphs onto a separate document, saving each document in the person's pseudonym of choice. Then I used a different color of printing paper for each person and printed off

the pages of themes. I used yellow, pink and green paper and these colors easily identified each participant for me to remember. After I printed off the colored paper of themes, I cut out each theme from the colored paper. Then I carefully read the colored strips of paper and put them into theme piles. Then I used a Word Document, again typing in the headings of each major theme. On these white pieces of paper, I stapled each phrase that was identified for each of the themes. I laid the themes out on a large folding table in my computer room and tried to make sense of what I was looking at.

When I placed the common phrases together, I looked for commonalities and emerging themes that related to my curiosity of learning about Indigenous women who are single mothers and their experiences since childhood to now. I looked for themes that allowed me to better understand the concept of strength through the story tellers' data. I discovered that overall there were two meta-themes. The meta-themes that I discovered were oppressions and strengths. These meta-themes were broken into oppressions that the women had suffered and then into the strengths that the women had used in relation to these oppressions. Within the theme of oppression there were a number of sub-themes regarding loss of culture, intergenerational loss of identity, loss of mothering and grandmothering, poverty, substance abuse, as well as physical and sexual abuse. The women shared their involvement with large institutions such as social assistance and child welfare. Within the theme of strengths there were a number of sub-themes regarding the strength that the women derived from their traditions and their traditional role as protectors of their families and community, and by reconnecting with their spirit, as well as being keepers of culture and traditions. It was through these themes that I learned what being strong meant within the context of the lives of the participants and in relation to the oppressions that they experienced.

Throughout the process of analyzing the data before me, I was always cognizant of Porsanger's (2004) and Kovach's (2009) words regarding the role of the researcher within Indigenous methodologies, as in some other critical methodologies, is to remember who I am and where I come from and how this affects my interpretation of the participants' words. Initially, I struggled with how to analyze the data from the participants' stories and then how to put the data into written form. I heard many times

in class how important it is to remember that the stories belong to the participants. The struggle with the ownership of the stories is that once the researcher is using the participant words the researcher is actually choosing what parts of the stories to write about and the interpretation of the stories may shift from what the storyteller was trying to talk about. With this in mind, I remained ever aware of the participants as I was writing about their stories in this project. I kept aware of my own stories and life experiences and how it would likely affect how I was interpreting the participants' words and struggled with this concept off and on. My intention was to not misuse the women's words. My intention was to share their knowledge or life experiences in their own words within this work and of course with respect to their experience and words. My struggle with how to analyze and work with the interview data was about being accountable to the research that I was conducting and about being accountable to the participants. I also wanted, as the women wanted, to strengthen the Indigenous woman's identity through sharing their stories and telling the world just how strong they were as they reacted to the oppressions at the time and were not victims of oppression but actually warriors against oppression.

8. Ethical Considerations

Before I could begin my research I made an application to the University of Victoria's Ethics Committee for approval. As a woman of First Nation ancestry who was to be interviewing First Nation women from my community, I also approached a local Friendship Centre for a letter of support. I reviewed the *Protocols & Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context* (UVic: February 2003) document and reflected on this protocol throughout this research project. I checked in with my thesis supervisor on a regular basis for feedback throughout this project. I believe that Dr. Moosa-Mitha's support assisted me to work ethically as I moved through this research process.

When thinking of ethical considerations, Wilson's (2008) words come to mind about axiology or "the ethics or morals that guide the search for knowledge and judge what information is worthy...what part of this reality is worth finding more about and what is

it ethical to do in order to gain the knowledge and what will the knowledge be used for?" (p. 34). As an Indigenous researcher I acknowledged the expertise and strengths of the participants when asking for what information it is they wish to share. My belief is that Indigenous women's stories are valuable, not only to the women themselves and their families, but also to their communities, social work practice, and the documentation of their stories for future generations. These stories must be shared and the women must be honored for their resiliency that has brought them to where they are today.

I explained to the participants that within the context of their stories there may be a possibility that they may be identifiable from the details in their stories. This may be a particular concern given the research participants' past involvement with child welfare services. In terms of protecting the participants and family members' confidentiality, I asked the participants if they wanted to use a code name in their story and analysis of the study. The women, T.I., Cindy, and DZ used code names for themselves and DZ used code names for her children and extended family members. I asked if the women wanted to use a code name for any social worker they were involved with to protect the social worker's anonymity due to the context of the participants' stories. As it turned out, none of the participants talked about a specific social worker or social service worker and a code name was not required.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I packaged up the participants' copies of their transcribed text for their editing and approval. I wanted to ensure that I transcribed the stories correctly and did not omit any information that they thought was important. I also wanted to ensure that the names the women used were what they wanted me to use throughout this document. I wanted to express my respect to these women who had helped me in this research process.

When each interview was over, I asked the storyteller how she was and if anything she had shared had made her feel upset. I explained that if the participant had experienced any distress, that there were a variety of community supports (See Appendix "C" – List of Community Supports) to access where she could debrief and talk about her experience. I reminded her that she could review the list of community supports that I provided if she

required further support that I could not provide her. These agencies provide one to one support, are approachable, and are agencies that I use in my role as a social worker. They not only provide one to one support but also maintain confidentiality. Once we had this conversation, I thanked each woman for sharing her story with me and gifted her with a Thrifty's food card enclosed in a thank you card.

9. Limitations of Research

One of the limitations made about storytelling as research is that this methodology is thought of as subjective and biased. However, Cruikshank (1990) would argue that storytelling:

“provides a model for research. Instead of working from the conventional formula in which an outside investigator initiates and controls the research, this model depends on ongoing collaborations between interviewer and interviewee. Such a model begins by taking seriously what people say about their lives” (p. 1).

Cruikshank's argument supports storytelling a methodology which is important in learning the First Nation women's experience that is essential in learning about the Indigenous woman's life experience because their experiences were not included historically. This is an opportunity for these women's voices to be heard and their experiences to be shared. As Thomas (2000) writes,

“Storytelling or oral histories are seen as subjective and therefore biased. In some communities there was little, if any, written records. Storytelling allows for the 'other', or those voices that have been erased, to be included in the dominant discourse. Storytelling has the ability to fill the gaps in the present documentation of the lives of First Nations people and provides opportunity for First Nations to document their histories and to become a part of the written record. Storytelling 'revises' history by naming and including their experience” (p. 22).

One of the limits to confidentiality was that if, during the interview, there was a disclosure of child abuse or a concern that they may harm themselves or others, I had a duty to report this information to the proper authorities. The proper authorities include the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Mental Health Crisis Response, or Seniors Outreach team. These limitations were explained to each participant prior to the interview.

Another limitation was the number of participants did not allow for a more diverse group of First Nation women to be interviewed. The participants who participated did not represent Metis' nor Inuit people.

The methodology of storytelling provides in-depth information and, together with my thesis committee, it was decided that I would limit the number of participants to three people. I had ample data and was surprised at how much information the women shared with me about their lived experiences of strength and resilience throughout their lives.

10. My journal and acknowledging the participants

Journal-writing was an important part of my research process. I journalled after each interview "to describe the feelings that emerge[d] [as] taking notes about the time, place and emotional climates of the interviews might prove useful because they are likely to affect the subsequent interpretations made" (Anderson and Jack, 1991, p. 68). I wanted to ensure that I recorded my thoughts and observations while they were fresh in my mind so I would remember during the analysis stage.

Initially, I was concerned and getting worried at how long it took to find participants, especially after talking so much about my research to different people who said that they knew of someone who fit the criteria of my research. I also learned that just because someone knew of someone who fit the criteria didn't necessarily mean that person was emotionally ready or in a place in their life where they felt they wanted to tell her story. I learned that the women whom I would be interviewing would need to be in a place in her life where she felt strong and ready to share her story with me or anyone else. This is because the women would have accepted how they responded and took actions against their oppressions. The women would need to be in a place where they felt strong about the choices they made in their lives to make changes and able to talk about the hard times they lived through as well.

After the interviews were done, I was an emotional wreck. This came as a surprise to me because in my work as a social worker I had heard many stories of hardship, addictions, physical and sexual abuse, emotional abuse and abandonment. But for some reason the

stories that these women shared with me struck deeper to my soul. And writing these words still brings tears to my eyes and makes my heart sore. I thank these women for bringing me into their histories with oppressions. I thank these women for bringing me along in their stories of taking action with their personal war against oppression. As I have written previously, the process of telling reveals oppressions that have been suppressed or unrecognized but also the process of telling reveals the strengths and resiliencies that have been unrecognized. I want to acknowledge these women for the telling of their histories, their oppressions, and courageousness.

Chapter 4: Understanding Oppression in the Lives of the Participants

Introduction

When undertaking the literature review, I made the point that to understand the strengths that the Indigenous women possess you first have to understand the oppressions that they experienced and were responding to so as to get insight into the context within which their strengths are exercised. In the literature review, a major theme that kept emerging in the scholarship with regards to the meta-theme of oppression was assimilation as a form of oppression. Assimilation tactics stemmed from the *Indian Act* through to enforcement of Residential Schools and Canada's child protection legislations and policies within its provinces. The women participating in the field study shared stories about their involvement with large systemic organizations such as social assistance and child welfare. Social assistance keeps the poor very poor because the rates are very low and below the low income level in British Columbia and Canada. The residential school system placed a large majority of First Nation children in the care of church run group homes where children were not allowed to speak their language nor visit their parents regularly. The child welfare system tends to put a large percentage of children from First Nations' communities in the care of the province that has resulted in children not knowing where they came from and not knowing their families or communities. Each participant in the study shared their life experience as having been affected by Canada's assimilationist legislations and policies to date and through the generations.

In the field study, the narratives of the participants added substance and subtlety to what the scholars had said in the literature review. When the women were sharing their stories they did not dwell on their oppressions in a direct way. Rather, the women shared how challenging their lives were at times while they were growing up and the times they had been single mothers. The participants echoed some of the findings that the scholars, particularly indigenous scholars, had analysed regarding the nature of oppression experienced by Indigenous women. These were cited in the second chapter as being: loss

of culture; intergenerational loss of identity; loss of traditional gender roles in the family; poverty; substance abuse; and physical abuse.

The women told their stories with a variety of emotions, at times with a sense of loss, soulfulness, hurt, and sadness. When they talked about their strengths this was done with a sense of accomplishment, pride, fierceness, humour and, at times, with tentativeness as if testing aloud what they already knew was deep within them. Despite their oppressions the women were proud of where they are today. One might call them warrior women!

1. ASSIMILATION

Assimilation can be defined as “the process whereby a minority group gradually adapts to the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture and customs” (retrieved 2012Dec20 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assimilation>). What is oppressive about assimilation for Indigenous people is that they were never given a choice whether they wanted to ‘adapt’ to the Euro-Canadian cultures, languages, traditions, etc. Assimilation for Indigenous people was something that was forced upon them through the Indian Act, living on Reserves, residential schools, child protection, and racism. As stated previously, the women themselves did not speak directly of the term assimilation as a form of oppression and yet a lot of what they said can be understood in terms of assimilation as a form of oppression. The following are the sub-themes that emerged from their narratives that speak to assimilation in all of its different aspects.

a) Loss of Cultural Practices:

The women acknowledged that they walk in two worlds. They are First Nation women who are living and learning how to *be* in a non-Indigenous world or community. The women are proud of their Aboriginal heritage and worried about living away from their communities and losing *touch* with their Aboriginality.

T.I.: I had some good times in my village until I moved away. Then I moved to Vancouver Island and ...everything was changed. Thinking like aadult wanna-be white man. You know what I mean? You’re no longer thinkingyour native ways anymore. That’s how a person loses touch ... Thinking the white way and not your cultural way. Not until later on ...that you realize, that you know, the importance of being ...who you are and where you come from.

DZ: I didn't know what my culture was. You know the protocols of things because living off reserve and not being a part of ...like the singing and the dancing and the teachings of, of uhm, our culture.

They realized the importance of knowing who they are and where they come from and missed their cultural traditions, celebrations and teachings. The problem was not simply about wanting to go back to a cultural way of life. Too much had happened and these women belonged in two worlds, the 'western world' and the Indigenous world. Walking in two worlds can result in a form of alienation and feelings of being caught between two cultures. Gunn Allen ((1992) writes that often the

“world is seen in terms of antagonistic principles: good is set against bad, Indian against white, and tradition against cultural borrowing; personal significance becomes lost in a confusion of dualities...the personal war waged by those who choose to see themselves as thoroughly westernized is often worked out in bouts of suicidal depression, alcoholism, abandonment of Indian ways” (p. 134.).

Walking in two worlds can feel frightening when it is so important to feel as though we 'belong' and are accepted in both the non-Indigenous world and within our Indigenous communities.

Beyond having lost their own sense of culture, two of the women talked about their concern regarding the loss of cultural identity and language within their family. T.I. was worried about her son who was struggling with his own addictions and was incarcerated. She was concerned that he wasn't really practicing his culture nor was he aware of how important his “Indian Name” was that was passed on to him. His cultural name belonged to his maternal great grandfather who was well known in his community.

T.I.: my dad was a ...a big man in ...in the Village. Meaning big ...that he had a big name. He was one of the first ones that brought the Long House to the Village...my son has a big name. He's named after his great grandfather. And, um, he hasn't realized that the name that was given to him that ...he should know and make it special in his heart. He doesn't know the value of that name. And, um, he should be proud to have that name.

You know, it's got to be I try to explain to him on (*sic*) the letters I write to him ...Where he got the name from. And, uh, the importance of knowing who had that name. Because one of these days he gonna be called on that dance floor...they're going to call his name and ... I don't know if he's gonna remember

because when you're in the Big House they call you by your Indian name. They don't, they don't call you by your real name. You gotta have your Indian name and know it.

Like all the singers that get called to the floor to ...to sing. They're all called by their names to get up to go and sing.

So, my son's name is ...it's uh, it's big. He carries a big name. And um, hopefully one day he'll fillfill that spot. To realize ...before he gets tootoo old. He's, he's 42 years old now andhe should have been on that dance floor when he wasyoung. Like I said earlier, I didn't really know about my culture until years later.

The second woman talked about her children's father who didn't really know about his culture although he is talented in carving and painting, arts that are his inherent ability.

DZ: ... the kids side of the family. I really want them to know, their dad, their dad is very you know, he's a carver and he's a painter you know he's got, he's very you know talented that way. But he doesn't really know the culture part because he grew...he was born in Vancouver and raised in Victoria. He knows his family, he knows some of the songs and dances but he doesn't like know it. Like, he doesn't really know it.

T.I expressed her sense of loss and sadness that her son was not in touch with his culture that was so important to her family and her community. DZ wished that the children's father knew more of his culture so that he could share more pieces of his heritage on to his children. Both women realized that where their family stems were not only the foundation of who they are as individuals but pieces of their past were sources of pride which T.I. cherished and DZ was concerned that her children were missing an important part of their father's heritage which he appeared to have lost himself.

Two of the woman shared how they always moved around from home to home and community to community. The constant moving from home to home created unsettledness with a loss of grounded family roots resulting in a shattered sense of identity.

DZ's first memory of moving was when she was four years old.

DZ: My earliest memory of being a child was when I was living in Gold River. I was playing. I remember running through the bushes and losing my shoe and I

couldn't find it. I tried to look for it and I thought I was going to get into trouble. Uhm, I...After that my, I moved...we moved to Campbell River. And, I remember...I was four.

And we moved all over in Campbell River. We used to...I don't remember....(pause) you know not living in a place very long. We always moved to different places all the time, and going to different schools. And you know not really having a set of friends for very long because I had to go school all the time. Different schools all the time and different places and...

In my role as a social worker, I have observed that many urban First Nation families tend to move around a lot either within the local community itself or from community to community. I have witnessed the sense of loss for people who have moved away from their families and communities. The parents struggle with a sense of loss of groundedness, with the loss of close family supports, a loss of cultural practices, and the loss of living within or near their First Nation communities.

T.I. recalls living in her village as a young child before leaving:

T.I.: I grew up in a little village where I was with my mother at first until my sister, oldest sister, took me in as her own at the age of 5. And I didn't really know my roots because I left my village in 1965. It wasn't until years later that I got involved with my family and my, uh, culture. I got married very young, at the age of 16, had my second child at the age of 17. So, I wasn't really living in Campbell River until, well, until I got married and became an adult.

And, uh, later on in my years I started moving from town to town with my husband, he was a logger.

I moved everywhere on account of him being a logger and, uh, for one whole year we were moving place to place.

And, uh, it wasn't always fun because I had to drag my kids with me wherever I went.

So, then I... was on my own for quite a few years after I left I Terrace, I lived everywhere, Terrace, Prince Rupert...Powell River. And then back to Campbell River, then to the Queen Charlotte Islands. My kids... were just being dragged around; they never really got a good education because of that.

Both DZ and T.I. recall moving frequently and from a very young age that has remained fixed in their memories. This feeling of being uprooted remained strong and the

recollection for one woman was that it wasn't always fun. The disconnection and feelings of not belonging are a big part of assimilation and the *Indian Act*. Children have lost and continue to lose their sense of identity, belonging, and knowing where they come from, which is so important to Indigenous people.

b) Intergenerational Loss of Cultural Identity:

Another way that assimilation became an issue for T.I., the grandmother, was through intergenerational loss of identity. While T.I. expressed how she had lost her sense of culture in her own life, she also expressed regret that this loss was being felt over generations. She shared that nearly all of her grandchildren were in the foster care system. When Indigenous children come into ministry care this affects the entire family and poses concern of loss of culture and identity for the generation that exists in foster care.

T.I.: Most... all of my grandchildren are in foster care now. And I wish that the system would change and allow us to have them more often...and to... have them during holidays and....so we could know....how they...how they live. You know, we could...give them a good life too, by them visiting us and....and us teaching them more cultural, which is very important...in our First Nations...lives. I'd like to teach them how to speak our language andteach how to do our dances. Teach them how to, uh, how to, uh, fix our native food, how to, you know, to can them, and store them away for the winter. There are a lot things that they're missing out not being withtheir own people...

My sister, the oldestI have, umthere's 8 of us girls in the family. The oldest one is 76and, um, my other sister, she is 74. She's having a Potlatch in the Spring next year. And she would like ALL of my grandchildren to come ... go to Alert Bay for that. Because, um, we come from a huge family on both sides, my mom and my dad. And, um, my sister wants to give all my grandchildren names. Yeah, Indian names for my...my grandchildren. And, uh, we have lots of names she said. Some of my grandchildren ARE named but just don't know which one ...it is. And, uh...like my...my son's children don't have names. That is our tradition to give out...names.

What may be unknown to many is just how many Aboriginal children are represented in state care. In Dr. Michael Saini and Ashley Quinn's (2012) "Touchstone's of Hope: Evaluation Report":

"the Auditor General of Canada (2008) reported that Aboriginal children in British Columbia are six times more likely to be taken into child welfare care than

non-Aboriginal children. As of September 2009, an estimated 8,677 Aboriginal children were in care in British Columbia, representing 53% of the province's total number of children in care" (MCFD, 2010, p. 8).

This high representation of Aboriginal children in care reiterates the ongoing generational challenge for Aboriginal children to know where they come from, who their family is, and the loss of cultural identity. Saini and Quinn (2012) explain that "when Aboriginal children stay within their communities, they have a greater sense of belonging and acceptance" (p. 16 of 48).

The foster care system can be likened to the Residential School experience. Monture and McGuire (2009) explained the effects on generations of Indigenous children growing in care and the loss of identity that they experienced:

"early missionary educational practices on Indian women of British Columbia alienated [them] from their own people...in the residential schools they could neither play with nor speak their own languages with their own brothers...this segregation has not only isolated generations of native ...women-and men-from their culture but also from understanding each other" (p. 39).

T.I. had lost her traditional role of educator for her grandchildren who were in the foster care system and bemoaned the loss of natural and loving opportunities that grandmothers have in teaching the young ones about the family's celebrations, language, and traditions. Yet she spoke with pride how in her family to be given their Indigenous name is a big part of their cultural heritage. The names given to the grandchildren in the family are carried on through the generations tying each family member with the ones who've passed on to the spirit world. T.I.'s experience is significant for the intergenerational loss of identity as she shared this lived experience with me and her concern as the educator for her grandchildren who are in the child welfare system. T.I. believes that her role as grandmother and teacher is missing from her grandchildren's lives and the following generation.

2. Loss of Traditional Gender Roles in the Family

The second theme to emerge around oppression I have named as loss of traditional gender roles in the family. All the women participants were single mothers at one time or

another and this led to an imbalance within the family itself because there were no male or female specific roles or partnerships for the children to observe and learn from. The single mother becomes the sole resource for her children without the male or father figure involved to fulfill his parental responsibility. She takes on the role of both the mother and the father in the children's lives.

Another challenge to traditional roles of mothering was the fact that so many of these women lost their children entirely to the foster care system, thus losing the opportunity to be a parent and grandparent to the children. By losing this opportunity they also lost their role as women, namely they lost their roles as keepers of tradition within the family.

a) Being both Father and Mother:

Two of the women remembered when they first became a parent and shared that the father of the children either left the relationship or vacated their parental responsibility. With this loss of relationship the male did not contribute emotionally, physically, or financially for them or their children. Both women stayed home to care for their babies and had to seek financial assistance from outside resources. They shared their experiences with being reliant on social assistance as a single mother.

Cindy: I have had three children from different men, so three fathers and all of them left when or we departed when all my kids became ten months. My first one was 10 months. I was together with the fellow for seven years and then as soon as the baby was born ten months later I was a single parent and that happened three times.

DZ: I'm their father too. It's like, well I know but I'm their mother. They live with me.

As the lone parent, the women had to take on the role to be both mother and father to their children. The fathers did not take on their parental responsibilities nor did they participate as a father to their children.

While Cindy and DZ did not complain about being both mother and father to their children, they both acknowledged this role. For women to take on the role of both mother and father demonstrates strength as one person or one parent. This connects to a

point raised in the literature review where Anderson (2006), writing about family and roles, says that “one of the traditions that contemporary Aboriginal women can call on is the notion of female-male balance. In this tradition, the raising of the children is not the responsibility of women alone. The western model has taught us that children fall under the sole authority of the father, who delegates the caregiving to the mother” (p. 205). In these families, the mothers had the sole authority and responsibility of caring for the children.

While gender roles were flexible in Indigenous parenting methods both parents were present and engaged with child rearing. Here the difficulty is that while Indigenous peoples value family very dearly, the loss of the father has seriously challenged child rearing practices. These single mothers have taken on both gender roles within their family. They have demonstrated that raising a family or children can be done by one parent. What the women’s stories have told me is that while it was challenging to be a single parent, it was also a strength as well. The women missed having the female-male balance of having a solid relationship with the children’s fathers but they managed as single parents and were proud of this fact as well.

b) Loss of Mothering and Grandmothering:

The loss of mothering and grandmothering is connected with involvement with child protection services and when children enter into the foster care system. When families become involved with the Ministry of children and families it results in other forms of oppression. Two of the participants, Cindy and T.I., discussed how involvement with child protection services affected them in regards to their roles as mothers and grandmothers. Cindy shared that she felt like she was a bad parent when her children were removed from her care by the social worker. Then she didn’t understand why she couldn’t see her children more than once a week. Plus, her visits were supervised. T.I. was at a loss for the reason she was never allowed any visits at all with her grandchildren. Both the mother and grandmother expressed their love for their children and grandchildren and that they felt they lost their ability to parent and grandparent their children. These women’s stories speak to the huge loss of children entering into the

foster care system and the huge loss for the children knowing where they come from. These losses affect the opportunities for the mothers and grandmothers to teach their families way of being to their children and grandchildren. This loss informs us how important children are to learning and passing along each generation's life principles and the reason children are important to Indigenous families and communities. Anderson (2006) agrees that, "Indigenous societies highly valued their children" (p. 83).

Being involved with this institution had a huge impact on the lives of two women who shared their stories with me. One woman talked about how she felt judged as a parent, as a mother, which strikes deep to the core of motherhood.

Cindy: At the time it seemed like the end of the world. You've got to start all over. Think of myself. What have I done, and all these things going through your head. You are mad at yourself, mad at the Ministry, but it wakes you up. Either you soak it in or you lose your kids. Actually my health wasn't very good at first pretty shaken up. It woke me up.

It was hard to handle hard to accept that I wasn't a good parent even though I knew I wasn't.

T.I., the grandmother in the group of participants, shared her sense of loss as a grandmother when her grandchildren entered into the foster care system. She missed her grandchildren and was saddened to know that she and they wouldn't even know what each other would look like if they were to pass each other on the street.

T.I.: Then my grandchildren started being... started getting taken away from the Ministry... and that really broke my heart. I (pause) had no access to them. My oldest granddaughter is now 22 years old. She has her own children now and I have not once laid eyes on any of them for years.

My step-children I haven't seen them now for either, for 5 years and, uh, the oldest one, 9 and uh, the young boy's 7. Our other..our oldest grandson is 18. And then son's children...they're, they're in Prince Rupert. It's been years... since I've seen any of them.

They don't know me. You know... I could walk by them, down the street if I was up in Terrace right now... I wouldn't know what they look like, because there's no pictures ...no letters. I use to try write to them and sent them presents butI never ever got a phone call forthank you or anything like that.

I have a granddaughter and... and I don't where she is. And... her name is Tatiyana. She's got to be at least 5 or 6 years old now.

She was taken from the Ministry ...quite a few years ago. My son had to find out that ...she moved to Ottawa with her Auntie who adopted her.

They changed their phone number on me ...now they're not...they're not, um, writing back their letters. I wrote to them and their letter just came back. Saying 'unknown address'. Yeah, that's my son's children, 19 and 14.

I've never ever ...contacted my grandchildren because...they..didn't seem to be interested in... in me anymore because they don't know who I am.

It is very disconnected from ...from the ... the kids. I have 13 grandchildren and I haven't seen any of them for years.

T.I. thinks the world of her grandchildren who entered the foster care system. She lost her role as a grandmother and alluded to the idea that this was also due to lack of support from the grandchildren's social worker to arrange for visits for her and grandchildren.

T.I. believed that visits weren't arranged because of her history with alcohol use. Then when she stopped drinking, she still hadn't been able to visit her grandchildren and was so saddened by this and the fact that she would not even know what her grandchildren looked like, thus leaving her with feelings of disconnection.

T.I.: The grandchildren's social worker never talked to me because of my past – addiction to alcohol. Now I have a clean home.

The foster mom ...ummm ...she won't allow ...my granddaughter to call me. Amanda, and she's in foster care now. And ...it's justit's hard. To not be connected.

The other grandparents got a hold of them and kept them. Kept them from me ...because I was still a drinker.

Years later I sobered up and... and now I don't know my grandchildren at all.

Someday I hope I see them (Big sigh) If they want to see me, is the question too! Do they want to see me? You know. No phone calls. No letters. But, one day I'll go up North and find that out. What ... what's really there. Is how I can put it, I guess. Is it there? Is the feeling still there? You know. You may be my granddaughter and they're saying, "Yeah, you're just a grannie." But, I don't know. But I would like to... to see them, get to know them. I never thought I'd reach 60 years old - here I am.

T.I. tells her story of a broken heart and mourns the loss of what could've been for her and her grandchildren. She feels the intergenerational and familial separation with them. Fournier and Crey (1997) write about 'child protection' as another way of taking children away from their parents and family:

“It was 1961, the beginning of what became known as the “Sixties’ Scoop”. For the first time in Canada, provincial social workers were exercising the jurisdiction given to them by the federal government to go into Indian homes on and off reserve and make judgments about what constituted proper care, according to non-native, middle-class values. Their mandate was “child protection,” which in practice meant the investigation of perceived neglect or abuse, then the apprehension of children and their placement in non-native foster homes. Poverty was the only reason many children were apprehended...For status Indians...there were none of the social services a white family in crisis might have received...homemakers...family counselling...daycare...There was no respite at all from the day to day drudgery faced by an uneducated, [single] mother of six trying to survive on welfare” (p. 30).

Whatever the reason for T.I.'s grandchildren entering into the foster care system, it is fifty years later and the child welfare system continues to affect Aboriginal children and families by maintaining the feelings of disconnect. The provincial child welfare mandate continues to be child protection. With the political atmosphere of this decade, with budget cuts, there are very limited resources such as homemaking services and respite for families involved with the child protection section of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. I am not sure what the answer is to 'protecting children' but somehow children need to either remain connected or supported to be 're-connected' with their families as it is clear this is what this grandmother continues to yearn. With more and more First Nation communities becoming delegated which means they have the ability to provide child protective services in their communities, it is much more likely that children will have the support to know their family and where they come from.

3. Financial Systemic Oppression

A third theme to emerge from the narratives of the participants was the nature of socio-economic barriers that they experienced in their lives which was a direct result of colonization. When Indigenous people are in financial hardship and then become involved with the income assistance system, the assimilation that they experience is

socio-economic in nature. Individuals must accept or adapt their lifestyles to the policies of the larger organization that is driven by provincial legislation. It is a bewildering experience when involved with such a large organization especially when one does not understand what is expected of them, nor understand the language, paperwork, process, and policies used by the staff working within the social assistance system.

a) Imposing Mainstream Values:

One of the ways that interaction with social assistance resulted in oppression was through an imposition on the participants of mainstream values. For example, when DZ applied for social assistance, she had to sign paperwork so that this organization could pursue the father of the children for family maintenance. She was overwhelmed and did not fully understand the reason for filling out all the required paperwork.

DZ: And ... I really didn't ...like being, having to fill out so many papers and having them to ask me so many questions. Having KZ, they made me sign uhm, my rights over to get him maintenance from the father.

DZ believed that she was signing over her child to the system without really understanding that this is policy and part of the process of applying for assistance. It is a regular procedure when applying for social assistance to ask the single parent, in this instance the single mother, to pursue the other parent, in this case the father, for child maintenance monies. DZ explained that she would never ask anyone for money even if she was broke. She shared that she could never trust the children's father because he had put himself first when he was entrenched in his addictions. She could not depend on him physically, emotionally, or financially for their children. DZ said that the children were ultimately her responsibility.

DZ: I can't take anything.... I think especially with the kids' dad I believe that I couldn't depend on him. Being there. I couldn't depend on him supporting us. I couldn't depend on him for a lot of things because the trust was broken. There were so many things that were broken....I felt that I have to do it.

DZ also shared that she could never accept any financial help from her mom even if she were broke or could benefit with her mom's help. She told her mom that her children were her financial responsibility.

DZ: My mom is always phoning...And she's like do you need any help, and I'm like nope I'm fine... even though she knows that I'm struggling she would be like, daughter you need to ask for help. I'm like, I can't. Then she is like why? I'm like mom they are my responsibility... I've always told myself that I wouldn't ever depend on you guys. She's like but those are my grandchildren. I know, I understand that they are your grandchildren, but they are my responsibility.

So, for this mother to sign forms for someone to pursue money for the care of her children was demeaning to her, it was already a challenge for her to ask for financial assistance to support her and her baby. For DZ, the act of signing paperwork to pursue the father for financial support took power away from her as a mother. This mother did not like to ask anyone for money to help raise her children. She did not like to ask for money from the children's father nor her mother. DZ believed that it was her financial responsibility to provide for her children. She felt very uncomfortable about the financial assistance worker having her sign documents to pursue financial support from the children's father and believed that she was expected to behave more like a non-First Nation parent when signing the forms.

b) Loss of Independence and Racism:

Social assistance is a form of financial support for those in financial need in British Columbia. Social assistance provides the basics of living that include monies for rent, bills, and food. Usually there is not enough money to cover extras such as cable television or long distance for the phone. Social assistance is meant to be a short term measure. Those on income assistance are encouraged to look for work and those who do find work must claim any monies they have earned and social assistance will deduct dollar for dollar any of the monies earned.

Asking for financial assistance is challenging because generally a feeling of shame is attached when asking for financial help. Cindy shared her feelings of shame when she applied for financial assistance, "they make it feel like it's embarrassing to be on welfare". While Cindy was not explicit in stating what was said when she applied for assistance, she remembered that she felt embarrassed about this experience.

These mothers quickly realized they needed to apply for financial support for them and their children.

Cindy: I've been involved with Income Assistance since I was 21 or maybe since I was 20 on and off throughout my adulthood because my first son was born in 1984. I was 21 and I couldn't work anymore and I became a mother.

DZ: Being on assistance when I first applied was when I had KZ. My oldest. Uhm, I didn't really want to live with my mom. I moved in with my one of my best friends and applied for welfare. Social assistance whatever.

I was on social assistance for ... maybe two years, I think. Maybe a little over two years. But that's when I lived in Campbell River; then I moved here. Then I had IZ so another baby in diapers and all that. It was just kind of harder.

As new parents, the women shared the times they needed to live on social assistance. They had to raise their babes on a limited income. The limited income added stress because of the worry to ensure they had enough diapers and food for their children to last to the next cheque.

One woman talked about the ease of remaining on social assistance as a single parent. She had said that when she had her babies, and according to the income assistance rules at that time, that single parents could stay home with their children until they started kindergarten.

Cindy: I guess in my twenties my first child I remember it was so much easier to be a single parent because the Ministry makes it easier for single woman to be on Income Assistance.

Cindy talked about the ease of remaining on income assistance and that when her children were little she could volunteer and that social assistance would pay her extra money for volunteering.

Cindy: It was always easier to volunteer. That's one thing I believe that kept me on income assistance all these years.

This is created dependency even though volunteering develops skill base it became challenging to find work that would sustain her and her family. Cindy was unable to find work that would sustain her and her family even though she had volunteered numerous hours and with a variety of businesses. When she did find work, the pay was not enough

to support her and her children which kept her on income assistance because she was familiar with the amount of money she had to budget. Even though volunteering is considered a strength in this situation Cindy wanted to be ensured that her skills would provide her with more than a subsistence way of living. Yet the system was skewed in a way that caused a barrier to enabling Cindy to work and earn money independently of the income assistance system, it enforced dependency.

Another socio-economic barrier that one of the women spoke of was racism. This woman realized that in order for her to find a well paying job that would support her and her children that she would need to go to school to gain work skills for the labour force. So she went to school and successfully completed her course work. Cindy believed that if she went to school and gained work skills that she would be accepted into the workforce. Employers did not hire her. She believed she was not hired due to racism.

Cindy: Where is the jobs like when you are native...? I don't really see people willing to hire natives back in those days in the 80s.

Just seemed like I always thought I was smart enough to get a job but why I never got hired anywhere? It was always easier to volunteer. That's one thing I believe that kept me on income assistance all these years.

I don't think too negative and give up because I am still trying to make a career and make it so that we aren't feeling so poor and so we could have something to eat on the table every day.

Cindy was disappointed that employers would not hire her. She had planned to work and raise her family as a self reliant and empowered woman. She finally succumbed to the negative response from the workforce.

To live on a limited income slowly eroded Cindy's dreams of raising her family to her full potential that would ensure she feel valued and empowered as an individual, as a single mother, and as a First Nation person. It is interesting to learn that British Columbia has an *Employment Equity Act* that came into existence in 1982. Doyle-Bedwell(2009) writes about Canada's *Employment Equity Act* and notes that the Act,

“identifies four groups that require support: women, Aboriginal Peoples, visible minorities, and people with disabilities...There is no question that for Aboriginal

Peoples, language, culture, poverty...racism, lower education...all serve to act as disadvantages in the mainstream labour market...But still, the unspoken, underlying premise of employment equity assumes that the barriers that prevent us from reaching our full potential are not culturally bound but are individual flaws in the groups themselves” (pp. 214-215).

The participants in this study have shown that racism continues to be part of the dominant culture that has prevented the women from reaching their full economic potential to rise beyond the poverty level. Racism and the ease of being on social assistance, a system that did not allow a person to make extra money and allowed one to volunteer, resulted in enforced dependency on the provincial income assistance system.

c) Enforced Poverty:

Another form of oppression under the theme of socio-economic barriers was the enforced nature of poverty of which some of the participants spoke. The following excerpt narrates the difficulties that this participant experienced when she learned quickly that she had to budget her money so as to have food last to the end of the month.

DZ: The budgeting was the hardest thing I think. Knowing where your money had to go. Knowing how much the bills were and how much food, how much money you have left for food and having to know that that had to last for the whole month. And ... that was a struggle. I think that was the hardest thing to deal with was to know that you didn't have that much for food.

Being on a budget all the time, like having a baby and you know. I didn't really know what the responsibilities were for living on my own.

DZ shared a story of the time her niece asked to come and live with her. DZ explained that she could provide her with the basic necessities and no more.

DZ: Because I'm on a limited income and I can provide you with the food, I can provide you with shelter and everything and sometimes I can buy clothes and stuff that you need. But you need to know that if you want more than that you are going to have to try and get a part time job and go to school. Because I'm not going to be able to do that for you.

Being reliant on social assistance keeps one poor and below the poverty level and it comes as no surprise to hear that food is a limited resource. Living on a limited income requires knowledge of budgeting and where to find food and clothing in the community when caring for a family. Food is important for learning and is generally connected with

nurturing. While it is promising to hear that income assistance is willing to support single mothers we did not explore just how long this support lasts.

4. Abuses

A significant form of oppression that the participants in this study talked about was the abuse they experienced in their lives. The women talked about a variety of abuses: addictions; alcohol and drugs; and sexual and physical violence in their relationships.

a) Substance Abuse:

Substance abuse or misuse was a common theme for all three women. Having an addiction within a family results in a whole set of oppressions. Two of the women shared that they were addicted to alcohol and drugs and the other woman was surrounded by people with addictions such as her father and her children's father. These are the stories they shared:

Cindy: I was 30 years old. I was doing drugs for four years and I guess my body couldn't handle it and it was getting too carried away. I was doing it every day all day and you might want to stop but you just can't. Right? It is just something that is out of control and I think I OD'd and then my children were taken away.

T.I.: I started drinking at any very early age because my husband was an alcoholic already.

DZ: My dad was a logger. And uhm, you know being a logger, and my dad was an alcoholic. My dad was an alcoholic my dad was an alcoholic for a long time. And my mom kind of used to get really upset when I was old..., like maybe, I don't know maybe around my preteens, she was starting to get really upset with my dad drinking. And my dad started doing drugs, like he did coke and he partied all the time...

I was with the kids' dad. Like we lived together but with him being an alcoholic it was hard. He was kind of like in and out of my life and the kids' life probably right from when KZ was born...

It is important to explain that alcoholism is a symptom of oppression for Indigenous people. Through the generations of colonization, indigenous people have lost their identities, cultural identities, language, land, spirit, and more. Many Aboriginal people have struggled and continue to struggle with substance abuse that has affected them

generation to generation. Brian Maracle, in his work called *Crazywater: Native Voices on Addictions and Recovery* (1993), tells us that alcoholism is a symptom of oppression:

“alcoholism among native people is a cover up for all the wrongs where we’ve been dehumanized by the white society. You just name it and they took it. They took our rights. They took our land. They took the resources. ..they took away our brains’ cause they brainwashed us in the boarding schools. They took away our language. They took away our songs. They outlawed our ceremonies...” (p. 172).

DZ also shared about the time when her biological mom passed away and during planning for the funeral she learned that she was pregnant. Then after the funeral she stayed with her family in Campbell River for two weeks. DZ felt the need to be with her family for emotional support. Her partner, the children’s father, returned home to Nanaimo. He was upset about DZ’s choice to stay behind with her family.

DZ: The kids’ dad got mad. He got really mad because I chose to stay. And he was you, he was like, he was kind of like, he as an alcoholic... I stayed for two weeks. I came back and he was mad. He just drank the whole time I was gone...He would work and he would drink. He would come and there was empties all over the place. He would order food and so there was like garbage like all over. It was just kind of like okay and just being stressed out of my mom passing away and having to come home to this. When I got back, I started spotting. I was kind of like something’s up. I went to the doctor...

DZ did not receive the emotional or physical support from her partner that one usually needs after losing an important person in their life. And because she was pregnant and worried for her baby’s health she had to take care of not only herself and her older children but her unborn baby as well.

She shared about the challenge of wanting to be a family with the children’s father while he was entrenched in his addiction to alcohol.

DZ: he would try and find every excuse to go out drinking, to go and do this. It was like that for 5 years. And a lot of the time, he would be gone for like two weeks at a time, three weeks, then it started being months at a time. You know, like I think, like I tried hard to make it work for us because we had these kids together.

Being a parent was a responsibility for this mom and as a parent she wanted very much for her children to have a father even when he often vacated his parental role. DZ shared her disappointment for herself and for her children.

DZ: With the kids' dad and I think especially with the kids' dad I believe that I couldn't depend on him. Being there. I couldn't depend on him supporting us. I couldn't depend on him for a lot of things because the trust was broken. There was so many things that were broken. There's so many bridges that were burnt between him and I.

I used to cry all the time in front of my kids and I used to like, just...And they would cry with me.

This mother felt the loss for herself and for her children when she realized that she could no longer depend on her partner any more to support her and the children. She grieved and the children cried when they saw their mom cry.

b) Sexual Abuse:

DZ shared her experiences with sexual abuse that began when she was very young.

DZ: When I was 5, my grandma and my grandpa moved to Campbell River. My mom would kind of leave me with my cousins. That's around when one of my cousins started touching me. I didn't know, my parents didn't really teach me anything about good touch, bad touch. That's when my cousin would start touching me and he'd tell me not to tell anybody. And he you know he always told me that and because I was always with him (pause) I never told anybody.

My Grandpa use to live with us. And he had his own room and you know he was one of the people too who also started touching me and telling me not to tell anybody. And because my cousin told me not to tell anybody; I didn't think it was wrong or anything. I never ever told anybody.

When I was 17. With one of my ex boyfriends, he, like... we partied at my cousins place and it was kind of like he thought it was consensual with what happened and you know just being under the influence and me not really knowing like what was going on.

Even though DZ was physically and emotionally wounded by the actions of these males in her life, she also says that she has healed from these experiences and knows that what happened to her is not her fault. These lived experiences were very challenging and I am reminded of Anderson's (2006) words:

“violence against women is so prevalent in our communities that it has become an ‘ordinary’ part of everyday life for many Native families, and Native women who have not experienced some form of family violence are seen to be the exception, not the rule... however, it is uncommon to hear Native women simply blame men for their condition. I think many Native women are aware that the social problems that hit them the hardest are the outcome of colonization. The struggle, then, becomes a struggle against the systems, policies, and institutions that were enforced upon us by the colonizer. It is not a simplistic struggle against men or individuals” (pp. 55-56).

First Nation people experience many forms of violence that is not just physical against each other or towards each other only. Anderson reminds us that violence towards First Nation people has manifested itself through colonization and the larger institutions and systems have perpetuated this violence. The lesson from DZ is that through her strength and determination to heal that she now fiercely teaches her children about boundaries with their bodies and about good touch, bad touch. During her story there were only words of strength and courage to take from this experience the ability to teach her children to protect themselves from sexual harm from others.

c) Physical Abuse:

One of the women shared her experience with physical abuse that began when she was little. T.I. shared her earliest memory of abuse as a child and stated that her childhood:

T.I.: wasn't a very good one because ... that's one of the reasons why my sister and my brother-in-law took me in because My mother had so many children and ... I was abused. I was, um... physically and ...mentally abused by my own mother.

So ... that's how I ended up living with my sister. So ...my childhood was ...I could still remember that far back.

T.I. told her story about her experience with physical abuse that started again when she got married.

T.I.: The abuse I got, and from then on I got married so young...and then I got abused again. And for years I actually thought...women were just meant to be beaten up. Because of the abuse I took from my husband. Right from my wedding night I got beat up by him. And, um...and today when I hear about other women getting beat up by their spouses ... I'm, like, shocked. You mean to tell me that's still going on?

I can't believe that...women are still walking around with black eyes and ... how I can go back in my memory of ...looking like that. So my childhood was ... not a very good one.

I moved everywhere on account of him being a logger and, uh, for one whole year we were moving place to place. It wasn't fun. And the drinking continued and, uh, more physical and more beatings came from him and....most of time my family... was there for me and.., uh, I left him a couple of times....

My kids... were just being dragged around, they never really got a good education because of that. They witnessed a lot of mya lot of the, uh, violence that was in the family, and all of the drinking that took place.

She also shared that her father (Uncle) and family knew about the way her husband treated her but she always chose to stay with him.

T.I.: Oh, he knew. He knew, he ..he stopped, he stopped my husband from beating me up a couple ..a lot times, not just a couple of times, a lot of times. But I just kept going back, until I just couldn't take it anymore.

She talked about her hard life, turning to alcohol, and the support she received from her family who ended up caring for her children when she couldn't.

T.I.: It was a hard...It WAS a hard life. Trying to be grown up and ...care for your children. That was even harder but like I said, I had my family to support me and, um, I turned to alcohol but my children were always looked after.

Even through the abuses and addictions, her children were always paramount in her mind and T.I. was thankful for her family who supported and cared for her children.

These stories of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse brings to mind a story from *Crazywater* (Maracle, 1993) and a woman named Johann talks about her experience with violence in her family. The violence she experienced was between her mother and father, between all her family members from her mother, herself, her siblings, her violence towards others and now that Johann is in recovery from alcohol she states:

“you've survived...what native women have had to endure in the last hundred years, compared to our pioneer foremothers who've helped the Europeans settle on this land, who've had to trudge their way through Riel and the rebellion, the strength and courage that native women today have is beyond our forefathers and foremothers because of the abuse that our men give them. They have to survive the odds of likely being battered women, likely being affected by alcoholism in the own family, their own community” (p.281).

To hear about the different acts of violence towards Aboriginal women certainly wounds the soul. What is also disheartening to learn is how violence was accepted by Christian groups, stemming from the late 1600s:

“redefining the nature of tribal women became one of their goals. Essential to the conversion of first nations (*sic*) people was the introduction of the European family structure, with male authority, female fidelity...LeJeune, a superior of the Jesuit mission Quebec in 1640, wrote in his journal of his efforts to subvert cultural practices of the Montagnai-Naskapi people by favouring male converts and placing them in positions of power and authority. Violence against disobedient women was sanctioned by the converts and LeJeune” (Absolon, Herbert, MacDonald, 1996, p. 13).

One must concur with Johann’s words about Aboriginal women: “the strength you have is beyond your knowledge. Look what you’ve had to endure...you’ve survived” (p. 281). Violence is no longer acceptable behaviour and it is encouraging to hear that these women have survived and want others to hear their stories of strength and courage; that there is hope and positive change can happen when one takes action against their oppressions.

Concluding Thoughts

It is important to note these women did not talk about the impact of the residential school experience which was a devastating and traumatizing experience for most Aboriginal people in British Columbia. I was surprised that the women didn’t talk about residential schools. Perhaps they did not go to residential school; I am uncertain of this and did not ask for clarification. I asked them to share their life stories with me and to tell me what they thought their strengths were. I mention this here because residential school is such a prevalent experience of oppression that First Nation women of that generation experienced.

Although the women experienced a variety of hardships they did not hesitate to share their stories with me. Their hardships were being a single parent, living on a limited income, and being involved with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. They shared about their struggles with substance abuse and living in abusive

relationships. While these were hardships they continued to move forward with their lives.

While listening to these women tell their stories one would not know what their life challenges were just by looking at them. These women carried themselves with dignity and emitted a certain strength that exudes as confidence. I learned that these women took action to make changes in their lives and their children's lives. I observed that the women did not carry any sort of grudge or have a look of sadness or tiredness about them. What was most noticeable was their humour, gentleness, sincerity, and integrity above all.

These women were not shy to share their stories. Indeed, all three participants shared with me that they wanted other women to know their stories and to let other women understand that they are not alone in their experiences. The women shared their experiences as though it was 'time' to tell their stories and time for someone to 'hear' their stories. Anderson (2006) would appreciate this as she states:

“ many women have experienced a period in their lives when have had no voice. Many have been through marriages in which their husbands did not value or listen to [them]...these experiences validate our need to find our voices so that we can speak up and speak out and name these oppressive experiences” (p. 236).

Despite the challenges these women shared in their lives, they have remained strong as women, strong as warrior women.

Chapter 5: Understanding Strengths: An Analysis of the Data

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the nature of the strengths that Indigenous women possess in the face of the oppressions that they experience in their lives. In the previous section I described the oppressions that the women experienced and in this section I am writing about the women's reactions to their oppressions. When analyzing the data it became clear that the women not only faced a variety of oppressions but it was also clear they resisted these. It was evident that the women took strong stances and made choices to act against oppression. In analyzing the data, I came to the conclusion that their strengths were expressed by exercising agency, taking on the role of protectors of their families and community, maintaining a re-connection with their spirit, and acting as keepers of their culture and traditions.

1. Women Being Active and Having Agency

“we must respond to our conditions of life in order to change them”
(Maracle, 1996, p. 91).

The narratives of the participants showed that the women were active in responding to minimizing the oppressive circumstances they found themselves in. I have conceptualised this active stance as having agency, by which I mean that these women took some type of action against their oppressions. Potts and Brown (2005) define agency as “our capacity to act and alter the relation of oppression when [it] occurs or when we are being oppressed ourselves...that ability to act which separates us as subjects from objects” (pp. 258-259). In this project the women did have the capacity to act and alter their situation as they braced themselves against victimization by family, community, as well as social services. They experienced physical, sexual, emotional abuses and racism within their direct and extended families and societally. To be victimized by those we love injures our soul on many levels physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is not only heartbreaking to be victimized by our loved ones whom we believe love us in return; it is also difficult to challenge being victimized by those we

love. I raise my hands in acknowledgement of these women who have been active in their resistance to oppression.

The agency that the women demonstrated was not only at an individual level, even though these women lived and grew up separate from their families and communities. Rather their individual strengths were somehow connected to the fact that they were Indigenous women. The women searched deep within their memories for ways of being that connected them to their families and communities. In a way, the cultural strength of these individual women was somehow tied to their distant families and communities which is part of being a First Nation woman. Anderson (2006) explains it this way: “blood memory...that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being...we are immediately connected to those who have gone before us” (pp. 24-25). This indicates that our everyday way of being is always connected with our ancestors who provide us with not only guidance but strength in our times of need. Hence community, tradition and Indigenous ways of being is a course of strength even when that connection is not always maintained. Following is an analysis of the different ways by which the participants showed agency.

a) Being Resourceful:

One of the many strengths of these Indigenous women is the way they handled themselves in the face of their oppressions. Another strength is the fact they knew their community and what it offered. The women sought resources within their communities as a form of supporting themselves and their family. As single parents, the women had to rely only on themselves as the head of their family.

Cindy: I know how to use all the community resources and this goes back to since I was a teenager I suppose.

Being a single mother you have to be resourceful because like you know I just penny-pinched all the way through for my kids, they are all adults now. Yah, I got all that background knowledge and how to help others fend for themselves how to be a single parent. Somehow everything always worked out because you are always planning and budgeting, shuffling bills and you have to do it because you know you have to buy your kids new shoes one day and then you need money so you got to plan and keep money aside for things.

Cindy shared how challenging it was as a single mother raising her family on a limited income. The intensity of putting food on the table and clothing on her children which are considered basic needs as well as shelter. Cindy's story is one of a strong woman and a mother who ensured the daily necessities for her children by planning and budgeting and utilizing the local community resources. While she did not explain what resources these were she shared that she knew how to use these and to her benefit.

Another resource that two of the women found useful was their desire to return to school. The added piece to this strength is the fact the women accepted that returning to school meant they would have to make some sacrifices in their lives that would affect them and their children. This is a reminder that Indigenous women remain educators and role models for the family as they demonstrate a desire to obtain knowledge from the schools. Two of the women stated that to gain an education was indeed a strength for them and, in addition, they liked the learning.

DZ: I started going to Tillicum.... when I was pregnant with my second oldest. I figured you know, I want to go to school. So I went to Tillicum and upgraded. And that was when IZ was born and he was like 7 months when I went. And then I went and upgraded at VIU.

I started getting funding through uhm my band to go to school. I upgraded like all the courses that they had, you know Chemistry, Biology, English, Math.

I really want to go back to school but I also want to work. But I can do it, go to school full time. I can work part time. You know and the place where I'm living at they go by your income. I'll be able to do it, but there are sacrifices that I have to make.

Cindy: Schooling was much easier to do than being on welfare, but I didn't understand going back to school then until way later in my life.

Education is another strength, because taking First Nations Social Work courses are building on culture, and it learns, it teaches and that's a strength. It's history, so that is a good strength just to know your culture and even a little bit about European culture.

Both DZ and Cindy had the sheer determination and desire to learn and were aware of the sacrifices that would take place to return to school. Yet realizing how these sacrifices

would affect their family in the short term, the result of completing an education is about success and the wisdom gained through not only book lessons but life lessons. The women are saying that education is paramount on building upon lived experiences which also relates to women as educators. Manson (2011) states that “education can be a tool to decolonize and support First Nation people to reconnect to our culture and traditions to recover from the colonization that has come into our world” (cited in Thomas, 2011, p. 69). This statement rings true for both DZ and Cindy who aspire to an education and becoming self sufficient. These women understood that education is key to surviving and becoming successful in the world in general.

One of the women learned when she attended school that she enjoyed sports programs which kept her mind off stressors in her life.

DZ: Going to different schools and being involved with sports. I was very athletic. I'd played every sport in the schools since I remember. Like in grade 4, I think that's when we started basketball and volleyball and stuff.

When I was a teenager, I'd play basket ball, floor hockey, and ball hockey with my dad and my uncles. But I was still involved with, like native basketball and travelling to like Port Alberni and Ahousaht.

From a young age, this woman was aware of the importance of keeping herself strong by participating in sports in which she excelled and felt confident in her abilities as a female and a team member.

b) Contribution to Community:

The women made important and solid contributions to their community by volunteering with various organizations. The participants indicated that volunteering was a way to develop friendships which are important to building self esteem, developing a sense of comfort, and knowing where you fit within your community. It helped provide their children with a sense of identity, belonging, and knowing their community as well. A few of the community resources discussed were the local Art Gallery, schools, Salvation Army, Friendship Centre and bingo hall to name a few.

Cindy: There was lots of volunteering, it was easy to volunteer. I volunteered at the Nanaimo Art Gallery because I was trying to do secretarial work and then to

see if I wanted to take Office Administration Program at the Malaspina as it was called then. I was pregnant with my second child, so that was fun actually and I found out I liked to do Office Administration so I took the course.

I volunteered at my children's elementary school. That was fun helping the teachers and helping in the library and the FN's Support Worker like for Native Arts.

I used to volunteer at the bingo hall in Harewood and that was lots of fun.

I volunteered at the Salvation Army doing hampers because that way it was access to more food. I could always take home the dented cans. (laugh) and it was lots of fun because I knew just about everyone in Nanaimo. Lots of friends. It is lots of fun volunteering.

DZ: Seven months after the twins were born, I started volunteering with Tillicum. That's how I started working part time. And then you know I went to workshops, Re-discovering Your Spirit, I went a couple of times. You know. That really had a really big impact on my life because it was realizing and understanding what you know. It was like, understanding where other people came from. And why they did these things. It made me look at you know, choices that I made, choices that I wanted to change because I don't want my kids to go through what I went through and what their dad went through.

Cindy's and DZ's experience with volunteering sounds not only positive but fun. They participated as solid members of their community. They were genuinely accepted and depended upon by their community. Contributing to the community is a form of healthy role modeling to their children, friends and community acquaintances. The women would be considered as a friendly face and observed to be a strong resource to their community. As Thomas (2011) relates, "our teachings are purposeful and inclusive. Never, is anything only about self – our traditions were quite selfless and community oriented" (p. 30 of 186). While volunteering is most often seen as strength, there are times, as in discussed in the previous chapter, where participants noted that volunteering had also been a way of keeping them on income assistance. Volunteering was, at times, tied to economic hardship and racism for one of the participants who struggled to find work that utilized the skills she obtained while volunteering. This participant also believed that the labour market was racist, which kept her caught in a situation of continued volunteering in her community. Many citizens look forward to volunteering

in the community but when volunteering becomes more like a job, volunteering may not feel very rewarding or beneficial and then volunteering may be seen from a different point of view.

2. Women as Protectors of Family and Community

A second theme regarding strengths that emerged had to do with women as protectors of family and community. Judging by their narratives, this was not an uncommon phenomenon. Many Indigenous women open not only their hearts but their doors to family and extended family, whether it is a place to come for a cup of coffee, tea, a meal, or a place to spend a few nights. Generally, during these visits or times of offered support there are stories shared that may include some teachings from the past and present. Women are known to be protectors of their families and leaders in their communities. As Thomas (2011) writes, “women are the carriers of culture and the caretakers of our next generations” (p. 25).

a) Protecting Children:

The women shared their concerns with their children’s safety. Setting boundaries was important for one of the women to instill in her children’s lives.

One of the women put up strong boundaries with her children’s father by protecting them from being exposed to their father’s substance use.

DZ: I was always very protective over them and PZ always tried to be a part of the kids’ life. Even when he was under the influence, I was, no, you cannot see the kids. You can see the kids when you don’t smell like alcohol. You can’t see them when you’re hung-over and when you smell like alcohol. You can’t see them when you’re drunk.

I said I need to make sure that my kids are going to be safe. I can’t have them around you if you’re going to be like that. So I kept him away. I told the school and the daycare.

DZ was adamant that her children would not experience their father’s addiction. She wanted to keep them protected from the negative effects of alcohol addiction and in the end the children’s father realized this and supported her decision.

DZ talked about how she taught her children about their personal boundaries and about ‘good touch and bad touch’.

DZ: I have strict boundaries with my kids. Like teaching them. Like them knowing what’s right from wrong. Like it’s an everyday thing.

Boundaries of what happened to me when I was younger. Boundaries that were crossed, you know touching me. I consider that’s a boundary

It’s just stuff that I would want my kids to know because I don’t want them to go through what I went through. I talked to them about good touch, bad touch.

DZ wanted her children to realize that their bodies belong to them. She wanted her children to understand they have a right to protect themselves not only physically but spiritually. DZ in a sense is teaching her children that they and their bodies are sacred and that they have power over who can touch their bodies. Gunn Allen (1986) writes that “the term *sacred*, which is connected with power, is similar in meaning to the term *sacrifice*, which means ‘to make sacred’. What is made sacred is empowered.” (p. 28). DZ is empowering her children to command respect for their personal boundaries.

3. Reconnecting with Spirit – Soul Work

When I think of the spirit and the wounded soul, I reflect on Duran (2006) when he tells this story about “Crazy Horse’s dream early in his life about internalized oppression symbolized in the manner in which he died at the hands of his relatives:

A lightening mark was painted across one side of his face. On his bare chest were blue hailstones. Behind them to the west as they galloped was a dark, rolling cloud rising higher and higher. From it came the deep rumble of thunder and flashes of lightening. The horse was strong and swift and it changed colours: red, black, white and blue. Bullets and arrows suddenly filled the air, flying at the horse and the rider, but they all passed without touching them. Close above them flew a red-tailed hawk, sending the shrill cry. People, his own kind, suddenly rose up all around and grabbed the rider, pulling him from behind.” (Marshall as cited in Duran, 2004, p. 72).

It takes great personal strength to move through internalized oppression as one is just becoming to believe in the self. Power is felt when others support our steps towards believing in ourselves and reconnecting with spirit.

a) Belief in Self:

“we, as Native women, are in the process of rediscovering and reclaiming... We know that the process of transformation in the external world begins with the transformation of the internal” (Maracle, 1999, p. 14).

The women understood that their stories were being listened to and would be written in this thesis and that other women would one day read their stories. Their hope was that their stories would change the way others think of Indigenous women and children and the Indigenous women’s life experiences. The participants shared that they hoped that their stories would help other Indigenous women reclaim and rediscover themselves as Indigenous women.

To begin the process of reclaiming and rediscovering self, DZ shared how she was proud that she resisted her brother’s negative beliefs about her. He told her that she would never finish school and would get pregnant before she was seventeen. DZ stated matter of factly, “I didn’t become pregnant before 17, and I did graduate”. The words from her brother really hurt her feelings. She was surprised at how hurtful these words were and spoke with passion that she was so determined to prove him wrong by graduating and not becoming a mom at seventeen. She believed in herself.

Another woman talked about how she was proud of her heritage and believed in herself.

Cindy: I am glad to be a First Nations and I think that is a good strength to be. Just to believe in yourself.

These are not only words of encouragement and pride, but they are also words of strength.

DZ mentioned previously about the time that she told her family about her experience with sexual abuse. She shared her story when she was hospitalized after being raped by

her boyfriend. This disclosure led to her family supporting her in charging the perpetrators.

DZ: I got mad at, my parents, telling them that you know, this wasn't the only time that it happened. This is not the only time that it happened you know, it's happened with this person, this person, it happened when I was five, it happened right up until I was 13.

So I went to court. I charged them.

It's something that I can talk about now. Because I feel strong enough now to be able to admit that it happened and it's not my fault.

It had taken a lot of courage for this woman to tell her family about the sexual abuse she endured as a child from her grandfather and uncle. Her family walked by her side through the entire court experience. DZ felt supported, loved, and accepted by her family during a time in her life when she took a powerful step towards believing in herself.

What is interesting was that these women wanted to conquer the negative beliefs and stereotypes of First Nation women held toward them by their family and community. They resisted the negative stereotypes by looking to themselves as they challenged the negative beliefs.

b) Solidarity and Support Leading to Women Believing in Self:

Two women shared the importance of believing in oneself which led to Cindy's and T.I.'s recovery from alcohol and drugs. Cindy stated about her recovery from drugs "don't give up just keep on going and try not to look back."

T.I. realized that she wanted to stop drinking for her 'self', her family, and for her grandchildren.

People ask me how did you quit drinking. What did you have to do to quit drinking? And I just say, "I had enough". I can block it out of my mind. Being in hospital, you know ...being hospitalized from my drinking ...alcohol poisoning. It was I was not healthy. I not only quit for my health, I also quit for myfamily, my grandchildren.

T.I. realized her importance as a grandmother for her family. As Bedard (2009) reminds us, “it is often through the eyes of the young that we learn to value our lives as women (p. 52). The active resistance of reclaiming sobriety is a vital statement in T.I.’s role as matriarch for her family. T.I. talked about the importance of love and that she “has to be very strong to look after those whom I love... my spouse now... we had struggles with alcohol...we’re sober now for 14 years and we’re very happy”. This woman was happy in her relationship and it was clear that she and her spouse loved and relied on each other through their personal struggles with alcohol addiction.

T.I.: It wasn’treally hard for me to stop drinking. It just happened. I made that choice to stop. I got tired of the hangovers. I was going nowhere and ended up in hospital. Don’t know how I got there. Woke up with a doctor beside me saying,”You’re back in here again and you may not make it the next time.” So, Imyself, I just said, “OK, I’ve had enough”. And I did. So I’m happy now.

T.I. shared that she stopped drinking alcohol and became happy. It takes a lot of personal power to overcome addiction and it is promising for others to learn that these women were able to overcome addictions.

c) Soul Work:

Soul work is the process of believing in ‘self’, in believing in acceptance and forgiveness. One must be able to accept and forgive oneself before we can begin to accept and forgive other people. The participant who is a grandmother talked about forgiveness towards her children’s father who was physically and emotionally violent towards her. The stories follow:

T.I.: I had to reallyreally sit down andhave a really good thinking ...about where my life is heading. What was going to happen if I was to start drinking again. It would be like ... opening the gate for thecorral to go out ... you know, for the horses to go out.

I thought about it, and well, I don’t think I would go back to alcohol, ever. It just ...didn’t work for me the first time now why would it work the second time? Right? I have a happy life ...and, um I see the damage it’s done to our children... What they seen when ... when I was married, there was a lot of alcohol involved... And a lot of violence they witnessed. And, um, and it’s still in their head. And, maybe this is whythe kids are like that. You know. It’s ... it has some kind of, um... It’s related.

I ...eventually just blanked him out of my mind. And I just blanked alcohol out of my mind. I tried to go to AA meetings but ...that didn't go over too well. I just ... thought, well ...that's their problem. And this is my problem. I know I can fix it ...my way. And that's exactly what I did.

T.I. shared how she searched deep inside herself and her soul to come to terms with her addiction to alcohol and to understand, even though she knew deep within, that the most important part in her life is how much she loves and values her grandchildren. T.I. was proud of her sobriety but had hoped that because of her sobriety and her partner's sobriety that the Ministry of Children and Family Development would forgive them and provide some visits with their grandchildren. She was so hurt about not having visits that she did contemplate drinking again but knew deep in her heart that this was not the lifestyle she really wanted because drinking did not bring the happiness in her life that she currently was celebrating.

Cindy talked about how she came to terms with her own addiction and how it affected her and her children. She came to the realization that "it's just up to you to follow through with what you're gonna do for the rest of your life." She knew this was a life changing time for her and her children when her children entered into Ministry care. Cindy attended and completed treatment for her addiction. Cindy had worked on healing her soul through treating her addictions. She felt confident and strong making her statement of living a good and healthy life.

d) Letting Go and Forgiving:

Two of the women talked about the times they let go of their negative influences. The first woman actually let go and began the process of forgiveness after she told her family about her experiences with familial sexual abuse.

DZ: I got over, you know my cousin PC and my grandpa touching me, for all those years. I got over my ex-boyfriend doing that to me. I let it go. I don't let that affect me. It's something that I can talk about now. Because I feel strong enough now to be able to admit that it happened and it's not my fault.

You know it made me stronger for what has happened.

DZ had processed and accepted that these sexual assaults were no fault of hers.

DZ also shared that when she became a mom she learned how a mother's love for her children feels. In her role of motherhood, she reflected on her own childhood and recalled that her mom adopted her out to her aunt and uncle. When DZ learned about this as a youth, she was extremely hurt and bewildered and courageously asked her mom why she gave her up to her aunt and uncle.

DZ: It's tough being an adult....both of my biological parents passed away. You know I never got to know my dad. I knew my mom. I knew her as my aunty for like 12/13 years. I knew that she was my mom, and I started calling her mom. But becoming a parent and you know, I wanted to understand why mom did this to me; why she gave me up for adoption. She told me why. That was like a big load off my shoulders. Just knowing. I'm thankful that I got to know her.

DZ loves her children and it was evident in her story that she had always longed for her mom to be her 'mom'. She had come to the place and time in her life and realization that she loved and accepted her mother for who she was.

T.I., the grandmother, shared her last words with me about her forgiveness towards the man who harmed her physically and emotionally and as a woman.

T.I.: And I already forgave... the man who used to harm me. He doesn't know I forgave...I forgave him. I have to move forward too.

These words of forgiveness are as powerful as this grandmother has become from her years of experience and wisdom.

4. Women as Keepers of Tradition

Women have always been keepers of tradition and culture. This has been an expected and traditional role for women to assume in their families and community. Usually the older women are looked to for their wisdom and knowledge. As Thomas (2011) states, "Indigenous women have a critical role to play for the future generations because traditionally we were the carriers of culture. Despite the devastating impact of colonial policies and practices, indigenous women remain the givers of life, the carriers of culture,

the caretakers and the healers, the protectors of language, traditions, land, and people. As Xwulmuxw Shunlheni we have never forgotten our traditional roles, in fact we have been fighting for what is right since time immemorial” (p. 32). Aboriginal women from many communities throughout the world continue to teach their families about culture, roles, language, the land and their people.

a) Culture as Strength:

The women shared their stories with me and talked at length of how important culture is to them and how Indigenous culture and tradition has shifted over time. One of the women said that “a big part of my strengths is having two cultures, being First Nations and European.” When she became a mother she surrounded herself with First Nation friends who have been an evolving strength over her lifetime.

Cindy: Today a lot of my friends are First Nations so that is a good strength because it's culture. I learned a lot of my culture through just being a mother with lots of First Nations friends.

Anderson (2006) shares her learning about her Native identity as a woman of two cultures who sought:

“to locate the Native community...to seek out Native people through community organizations...[and] found a sense of community and belonging, and an incredible wealth of knowledge about the possibilities for a contemporary urban Native person” (p. 25).

A couple of the women were surprised at just how much they remembered about the culture and traditions that were important to their families and community after living away from their family and community for a number of years. The women shared the following words regarding culture.

DZ: I do know a lot about my culture and I enforce that on my kids.

T.I. She just loves being on the dance floor. And, uh, she's ..she's just a natural too, she just gives her on the floor, eh. She's 13. But she started dancing at a really young age, probably 4 or 5 years old when she started being on the dance floor. In Alert Bay.

She learned too from all the Potlatches we attended. Yeah ...she wasn't shy at all on the floor. She just, just really gave her on the floor. She was just happy. She was ..was just a natural. And she's very ...very smart. You know. I think

that she came back as ...another person ...because she knows a lot about the cultural.

If I speak my language to her. She'll say it perfectly, withoutwithout making mistakes and trying ...to pronounce it. She understands when I talk to her. And I think she's ...justa great kid.

I went to that Kwakwaka'wakw school in Alert Bay for ...for a week. To ...to see what I do know. And to be around the elders that was there. And much to my surprise, some of the elders asked me ...how do you say this and how do you say that. And, uh ... and it just came out. Because I heard it all of my life when I was growing up. How to say it and what it meant.

I just watched like the elders say, "You watch and learn." Now, I know what they meant.

It comes from inside. That wasthat was nice to ...to know. Listen. That's how you learn.

Culture is a powerful word with many meanings to many individuals and families.

Thomas (2011) reminds us, "Indigenous women have resisted colonization and clung onto their teachings" (p. 49). Culture embraces traditions and beliefs that stem from our ancestors and these traditions and beliefs have evolved over the years and generations.

Anderson (2006) also reminds us that women continue in their role as Keepers of tradition that:

"tradition and culture are living entities, subject to constant change, as are people...When we look for Indigenous 'traditions'...we must be aware that everything we are looking at was constructed to fit a certain reality of the people who were living it at the time...we must be mindful of the hundreds of different nations across North America that have all participated in developing their own cultures to suit the different times and environments they have been through... when we say 'tradition in our communities, we are referring to the values, philosophies and lifestyles that pre-date the arrival of the Europeans, as well as ways that are being created *within* a larger framework of Euro-Canadian culture, or *in resistance* to it" (Anderson, 2006, pp. 34-35).

This passage also confirms how culture and tradition develop and shift over time and generations. It reminds us that it is reasonable and acceptable for these changes to take place yet it is also a reminder to remember where we came from and to remember the teachings as we forge ahead into our own evolving lives and experiences.

b) Re-remembering Culture:

When I think of what I know about myself and my family which is about my culture, I have vivid recollections of spending time with my family, specifically my grandmothers, aunties, mother, and cousins. When our family gathered together it was always a big event. We gathered at my grandparents' homes, on both sides of the family, and at my aunties' homes. During these times the women gathered together in the kitchen where they spent a lot of time updating each other about each others' daily goings on and about other extended family. Fondly, I remember being taught how to churn butter and set the table for dinner or lunch. These were amazing times just as Bedard (2006) shares:

“my early childhood is filled with memories of being grabbed by the hand by my grandmother, pulled to the kitchen counter, stood on a box crate, and shown how to knead bread...my childhood...was spent listening to the Anishinaabe women in my family on and off reserve. These women took responsibility for me, surrounding me with women's ways of knowing and being in the world. Hours were spent reminiscing, gossiping, recounting family stories, teaching and instructing. Most of the time, as women do, they included me in the goings-on of daily life” (p. 67).

The women talked about their family and ways of learning and teaching. Family is what ties us to learn about family identity, values, culture, traditions, essentially where we come from.

DZ: I went to this thing in Campbell River with a few of my co-workers and they were talking about our culture. And I'm like oh I knew that, I knew that. They are like oh you know a lot. I didn't think that I knew, but I did. And I think it's just you know, listening to my mom, and my aunties, and my grandparents.

Cindy: I remember we used to go to church and so the mother, father and the children, so it's like a family unit and then family outings. Like we would go to wrestling as a family, and go out for dinners all the time and family gatherings were big, a big thing for our family. I remember so many it doesn't matter where we went, we would be going in the Summer time to Kelowna, or Kamloops, Lytton and lots of Sundays going to Duncan for dinners, gatherings.

T.I. I didn't really know about my culture until years later. I knew of it. But I wasn't just ... involved ..with it. Like, um, myself, I could still teach myself a lot of things like dancing, professionally. That's why I went to that Kwakwaka'wakw school in Alert Bay for ...for a week. To ...to see what I do know. And to be around the elders that was there. Then one them spoke up, “You know what, I didn't know you knew that much.” I said, “Well, when I was younger I must have listened to the elders”.

These women shared their stories of who they are and how they remembered where they came from. These histories are important for the children to hear so they can begin to make their own connection to their family. Family traditions, history, and knowing who we are and where we came from were taught in many relaxed and comfortable surroundings as children developed and matured. Gunn Allen (1986) reminds us about her growing up and learning as a young indigenous person,

"my mother told me stories all the time, though I often did not recognize them as that. My mother told me stories about cooking, and childbearing...about goddesses and spirits...about the land and the sky...about school and about people...she told me city stories and country stories...she told me political stories and religious stories...in all those stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me. In this way she taught me the meanings of the words she said, that all life is a circle and everything has a place within it" (p.46).

The women shared their stories of re-remembering with great pride. They will tell their stories of re-remembering to their children family and communities in the same way, with pride. Their stories of re-remembering will ensure that their strength as Indigenous women will be maintained within their families and communities.

c) Respect for Family and Their Values:

In many families, an important source for protecting culture and traditions were family values that were reflected in the earlier generations and that the participants had inherited from their own family. The women who shared their stories with me talked about some of their family values that stood out for them.

DZ: My dad always made sure that we had the rent paid, the bills paid, food on the table, he made sure we had clothes, and you know gave my mom money.

You know I've never raised my voice or sworn at my mom.

I always told them. Respect, you respect mom and treat them how you would treat your grandma and I was always very protective over them.

You know when you have respect for yourself, you'll have respect for others. It comes in a circle.

Cindy: Our family upbringing involved a lot of family outings, so a strength is closeness in family values.

Being a single mother is hard. I have done it my youngest son is nineteen, we made it, he has good work ethics and my daughter does too, and my oldest son.

Work ethic because we were brought up not lazy but always told to do things not now right now (*sic*), so clean, cleanliness, that's organized.

I worked when I was a teenager and that was two full-time jobs, it was a good time in my life because I was young and healthy and active and never broke.

Values such as respect for elders, a strong work ethic and having a sense of respect for one's self were identified as important values that were passed from one generation of the family to the next and were viewed as a source of strength by being positive values by which women were guided on how to live their lives. These women indicated that these principles were integral to them while they were growing up. These women continue to instill these teachings to their children because their parents and grandparents thought they were of value to the family's way of living with each other.

d) Family Supporting Family:

Another form of maintaining strength is when family supports family. The women shared the following regarding the support they received from their families.

T.I.: I have a very large family who supports mein many ways. It was there, the support and I didn't really know that.

My children were never ever taken from the Ministry because I have a large family who, who always supported me. They always took the children for me and had them in their care, so I was very, very fortunate for that. I just narrowed it down to one child so he could get the education he needed.

One day my brother-in-law just picked me up and said, "You're coming home with me, you're gonna be mine and I'm gonna raise you". So ... that's how I ended up living with my sister.

DZ: Both of my mothers and my dad and, my sisters, like my family kind of came together when all this happened, and you know being in the hospital.

Cindy: Yah, so family is a big strength and as well today family to me is a big strength still because I depend on my family for things. Yah, well not depend but

I mean they are there for you and I am there for them, so it's something that if you didn't have family I don't think I would be very strong.

Family helps because they are helping you and not against you or anything they are actually leading you on and encouraging you that you can do things and that is a big strength is being believed in so I think that is very important.

It is just a good thing I had family there to help me and a good foster family. That is one thing they are still involved with me and my three children today. We still talk on the phone.

While family is considered to be an important entity, what has been shared that family is more than a notion or description of our direct descendants. Family is complex and as shared by Cindy her children's foster family remains involved with her and the children. Both Cindy and T.I. shared their feelings of being left out of their children's and grandchildren's lives when their children were in foster care. Interestingly, Cindy shared that her children stayed with a good foster family who opened their hearts to her and her children.

The participants have had a variety of experiences regarding family and what family means to them. The participants have this particular wisdom to pass along to their children and the next generation. Their stories are important and part of who they are. They want their children and grandchildren to learn about the importance of having family and how family is there to support and in some instances to offer their homes up for them. The participants have some important lessons to share with their children regarding family and how family shares the responsibilities of caring for the children, the next generation. As T.I. shared, her Aunty and Uncle made the decision to bring her home to raise her, to protect her when she was a child. As Anderson (2006) reminds us, "contemporary Native women continue to value their role in influencing the future through the responsibilities and the authority they carry as the mothers, aunts, and grannies of the nations" (p. 211).

These women have taken a strong stance and taken action against being victimized. The women have survived poverty, substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, involvement

with child welfare, acculturation, and assimilation policies. Paula Gunn-Allen (1992) tells us about women as warriors:

“we survive war and conquest; we survive colonization, acculturations, assimilation; we survive beating, rape, starvation, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children, our loved ones, destruction of our land, our homes, our past, and our future. We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we learn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what” (p. 190).

Surviving may be part of the lived experiences of these women but what stands out in testament is their ability to take action and not remain as victims throughout their hardships. The women have told their stories with a sense of pride and accomplishment. As Gunn-Allen explained above, these women truly stand as warrior women.

Chapter 6: Concluding Thoughts

Introduction

In this final chapter I will provide a reminder of the research questions, reiterate the main themes that came out of the data analysis, discuss the limitations of the study, then discuss further areas of development on this research, and reflect on the process of undertaking this thesis.

My curiosity about First Nation women and their stories began when I was attending University working on my Bachelor of Social Work degree. I enrolled in a First Nation Women Studies course which was my introduction to First Nation history in British Columbia, and Canada for that matter. I was surprised to learn that the First Nation women's voice was never recorded in history. The only history of First Nation women's lived experience was either through the perspective of a mainstream researcher or author.

I not only wanted to hear the First Nation women's stories but I also wanted their stories to be available to others and decided that this thesis was one of the ways that I could make this happen.

Research Question

My research question was: "how do Indigenous women perceive their own strengths". The methodology I chose was storytelling. Storytelling is a narrative approach to research and is preferable to use when the researcher is interested in learning about a specific group of people and their experiences. The story telling approach to research is particularly suitable for my project because I am inviting Aboriginal women participants to tell me their life stories. In her work *Life Lived Like a Story*, Cruickshank (1990) reaffirms that "storytelling is a universal activity and provides a model for research" (pp. ix, 1). I interviewed each participant twice. Because I decided to use storytelling I did not use a structured interview. Rather I asked an opening question that would facilitate

the women's ability to tell me their story. Therefore I began each interview with a specific question. In the first interview I asked the participants to share their life story with me from their earliest memory to the present day. Then for the second interview, I asked the participants to tell me what they believed their strengths were. I wanted the women to tell me what they believed their strengths to be but the women were shy to think of what their strengths were and not able to put this into words. I did not want them to become overly anxious about answering what their strengths were and asked them to continue on with sharing more of their life stories with me. Realizing that Indigenous people, and for this project, specifically women have experienced oppression in a variety of situations and ways.

Main Themes

The main themes that came out of this research were broken into two main categories: oppressions and strengths. Based on the narratives, I analysed the nature of oppression to have occurred under the following main themes: loss of culture, intergenerational loss of identity, loss of mothering and grandmothering, poverty, substance abuse, as well as physical and sexual abuse. The women shared their involvement with large institutions such as social assistance and child welfare.

In the strengths chapter, I discuss how the women resisted the previous list of oppressions and what the sources of their strengths were. I talk about how the women took strength from their traditions and their traditional role as protectors of their families and community, and by reconnecting with their spirit, as well as being keepers of culture and traditions. These were the ways that I came to understand what the meaning of strength was in the lives of the Indigenous women I interviewed.

Limitations of the Study

For this project, three women were interviewed and while they were First Nation they did not represent all Indigenous women from all Nations. Thus the analysis of this study

speaks to what the strengths of some Indigenous women are that are not generalizable to all Indigenous women. More studies that include women from all Nations such as Metis, Eskimo, Cree, etc., need to be undertaken.

Further Areas of Development on this Research

The significance of this work was to share the lived experiences in the voices of Indigenous women who are or have been single mothers. These women took action against their oppressions and their stories are relevant and the intent is to transform the way non-Indigenous society perceive Indigenous women as a person, as a mother, as a single parent, as a community member, and perhaps even as an employee. However, the sample size is small and all the women were representatives of three nations and were living as Urban people. Indigenous women's voices and their experiences must continue to be researched and included in today's education.

Reflecting Thoughts

As this journey is coming to an end, I can't help reflecting back to the beginning and my anxiety about doing a thesis and working fulltime. Yet here I am. I also raise my hands in thanks to the participants who demonstrated their courage in sharing their stories with me for this thesis. I acknowledge these women who have survived, who have taken actions against addictions and the negative reactions and perceptions against them as women and as single moms. These women shared with me that they want other First Nation women to know their stories and that even when life is hard that they can take action and make positive changes in their lives and their children's lives.

This work is a reminder to care professionals in any community that it is important not to make assumptions or judgments about the Indigenous woman sitting in front of them or the Indigenous woman who walks through their front door or the Indigenous woman walking on the street. We all have stories and experiences and specifically Indigenous women have experienced a variety of oppressions and for generations. It is my hope that

the stories of the participants of this study will help transform common perceptions of Indigenous women and will inform how one perceives who they really are—as Warrior Women!

Footnote

1. For an explanation of the different usages of Indigenous, First Nation, Aboriginal, and Native, see note 1 in the introduction.

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Appendix A: Letter of Approval from external Aboriginal organization to conduct research in local community

TILLICUM LELUM ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRE

Administration Office

774-B Centre Street
Phone: (250) 753-4417
Fax: (250) 753-8122

Education Centre

927 Haliburton Street
Nanaimo, B.C. V9R 6N4
Phone: (250) 753-8291
Fax: (250) 753-6560

Health Centre

602 Haliburton Street
Phone: (250) 753-6578
Fax: (250) 754-1390



Courier/Mailing Address: 927 Haliburton St., Nanaimo, BC V9R 6N4

July 14, 2010

Diane Klaws, Social Worker
VSC Aboriginal Service team
Ministry of Children and Family Development
Suite 101-488 Albert St.
Nanaimo BC, V9R 2V7

Dear Diane,

Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre is pleased with your research aspirations regarding indigenous women and learning about their resiliencies for your Masters Degree requirements for the University of Victoria. Specifically, we fully support your desire to document the strength of Aboriginal women in your research project, "Warrior Women: Resiliency and Being Indigenous" by capturing their stories.

We wish you the very best with your research project and if Tillicum Lelum can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to ask.

Yours in the spirit of Cooperation,

Executive Director

TILLICUM - CHINOOK FOR FRIEND

Appendix B: Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Warrior Women: Resiliency and being Indigenous

You are invited to participate in a study entitled **Warrior Women: Resiliency and being Indigenous** that is being conducted by Diane Klawns.

Diane is a graduate student in the Indigenous Master of Social Work Program at the University of Victoria. You may contact Diane if you have further questions by telephone or email.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in the Master of Social Work. I am doing this study under the supervision of Dr. Mehmoona Moosa Mitha. You may contact my supervisor at the University of Victoria.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to hear the stories from Indigenous Women about their life from childhood into adulthood, who've had involvement with social services (child welfare) and have remained resilient throughout their lives. The aim of this study is to analyze the concept of resiliency by asking the question "how do Indigenous women perceive their own resilience"?

There are many single parents who are women and who have had challenges in their life that include some involvement with social services. What has struck me is how resilient these women are even though their lives have been challenging from their earliest beginnings.

The intent of my research is to honour these warrior women as they prove not only to themselves, but their children, their communities, and social services that they are a force to be reckoned with. I feel it is time to honour these women by making their resiliencies known.

Importance of this Research

This research study will provide knowledge of the strength and courage it takes for Indigenous women to live through their day to day stressors as a person and a parent. This information will inform social work practice and society in general that Indigenous women need to be acknowledged for their resiliencies. Hopefully this will change services towards Indigenous women who require community supports appropriate to their day to day needs. At the academic level this research will contribute to graduate research in a variety of disciplines such as social work and child and youth care.

Participants Selection

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are an Indigenous woman, who has been a single mother either now or at one time, and who has been involved with social services at some point during your life.

What is involved

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include signing the consent form and returning it to the researcher, Diane Klaws, who will conduct the interview. Your story will be audio taped (recorded) and I will write notes afterwards. The recorded interview will be transcribed and a copy provided to you to review to ensure that this is what you said during the interview.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including having to take time, approximately 2-4 hours, out of your professional or personal life to participate in an interview and to review your transcript.

Risks

There is minimal risk involved in this study, none greater than the emotional stress caused in your day to day living. If you do experience distress, there are a variety of community supports that you may access such as Intertribal Health where you can talk with a counsellor, Family Life a local community agency where you can talk with a lay counsellor, and Tillicum Lelum Friendship Centre where you can access a Family Support Worker and/or a Wellness counsellor who can offer you one to one support. These are agencies I use in my role as a social worker and they are willing to provide support and maintain confidentiality. A list of these supports will be provided to you that includes the names of the organizations, addresses, and phone numbers (please see attached).

Benefits

For participants the significant benefit is that by sharing their stories of resilience it will help inform practitioners and society that Indigenous single mothers are not only resilient but have courage while maneuvering through large oppressive systems. Your lifestory will contribute to maintaining strong Indigenous identities and this knowledge is important for society to know to build awareness of the day to day experiences of Aboriginal children, families, and their community.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you withdraw from the study your data (information) will not be used in the research study and it will be destroyed.

On-going Consent

There may be two interviews if you have a desire to share more of your story. The transcripts will be mailed for review with a telephone call to confirm the validity of the transcripts and a meeting arranged to discuss what specific information you want shared in the final report. Verbal consent will be obtained either by phone or in person.

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity and your family members' anonymity, there will be no reference made to your real name in the story or analysis of the study. Code names will be used. If you would like to assign yourself and your family members' a code name (or pseudonym), please print these names here _____.

In terms of protecting the social worker's anonymity due to the context of your stories, you may want to consider assigning a code name for the social service worker as well. If you would like to assign a code name to the social service worker, please print this name here _____.

Confidentiality

Due to the context of the stories there may be a possibility that the participants may be identifiable. This may be a particular concern given your past involvement with social services. In order to avoid this possibility, you and your children will be matched with a numerical identifier or to your names or pseudonyms of your choice.

You will have the opportunity to change the name of the social service worker during the interview and within the thesis as well. You can choose a pseudonym for the social service worker for the written work and a numerical identifier for the transcript.

You will be given a copy of your transcripts to check if you feel there may be any identifying information, which will be removed once you point these out.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by the use of a code name, by protecting your privacy, by keeping the files in a secure storage cabinet. I will not share information about your participation with anyone. It will be your choice to share this information with others.

Limits to Confidentiality

The limits to confidentiality are that if during this interview there is a disclosure of child abuse or concern you may harm yourself or others that this researcher and/or yourself has the duty to report this information to the proper authorities such as the ministry of children and family development, mental health crisis response, or seniors outreach team.

These limitations will be explained to each participant prior to the interview.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: through a written report as a thesis and presented to my thesis committee, with other students, and community professionals, and a copy for yourself.

Disposal of Data

Once the research has concluded and the information is no longer required the audio tapes will be destroyed and the paper shredded.

Contacts

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria.

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.

WAIVING CONFIDENTIALITY

I agree to be identified by name / credited in the results of the study.

_____ (Participant to provide initials)

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: List of community supports**List of Community Supports**

Tillicum Lelum Friendship Centre,
Family Support Workers and Children Wellness Counsellors/Therapist
Health Centre
602 Haliburton Street
Nanaimo BC
T: 250-753-6578

Inter Tribal Health Authority,
Counsellor
534 Centre Street
Nanaimo BC
T: 250-753-3990

Nanaimo Family Life Association,
Peer Counsellor
1070 Townsite Road
Nanaimo BC
T: 250-754-3331