

Helping First Nations Children-in-Care Develop a Healthy Identity

*Sitsipssat ohp o 'kia 'pitapi<sup>6</sup>*

*Sspommihtaa niitsitapi ii 'ksskita sokimmohsi itapiiyi*

*by*

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Tom's goal is to prevent children from ever having to become involved in child protection services. This work is dedicated to those in the human services field and in communities everywhere that share that goal. *Niksiksistssi*<sup>9</sup>...(I am hopeful ) the time will come when all *ii'ksskitaiksi* (abandoned children) will be treated as *minii'pokaiksi* (special children).

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### Abstract

Grounded theory was used to collect and analyze data from a literature review and the lived experience with First Nations participants, a non-First Nations caseworker, and an Indigenous scholar in order to answer questions related to permanency for Aboriginal children-in-care. Assumptions underlying this study were the difference in child-rearing philosophies between First Nations and Western society – specifically as to what practice each culture considers to be in the best interests of the child. Also, negotiating “best interest of the child” lengthens the time it takes for children-in-care to find permanent homes, which may prevent them from achieving the self-confidence that comes from healthy identity formation. Research resulted in identifying effective practices, along with questions for further study. Some effective practices include ensuring the focus of care is on the child, reinforcing the importance of parenting; developing cross-culturally enhanced social work practices; cultural planning; open and custom open adoption; facilitating cross-cultural connections; and the importance of language in cross-cultural understanding.

## Introduction

This study is a conversation between people with a vested interest in helping First Nations children-in-care. This conversation is about an emotional and physical return on investment for those engaged in working with, fostering or adopting, and loving children-in-need. Hope and optimism, and finding the best path for those who want the best for children everywhere, are the key themes within the conversation, in which focus and a willingness to find common ground in what works for both cultures are required.

The people engaged in this discussion are knowledgeable on a personal, cultural and professional level about this topic and offered this knowledge outside their professional or political personas. As someone professionally involved with issues surrounding First Nations children-in-care, I sought to discover what practices currently do work in establishing a sense of permanency and healthy identity in these children. As someone with personal relationships with non-First Nations families that have been affected by the generational effects of substance abuse, I also sought to understand ways to ease the burden of generational substance abuse.

A literature review combined with data gathered from personal interviews forms the basis of the data analyzed and reported in this thesis. The resulting data is a collective viewpoint of effective approaches in establishing a sense of permanence for First Nations children-in-care; helping them develop a healthy identity; and defining “the best interest of the child”.

Governments and communities invest significant amounts of money into attempting to create permanency for First Nations children-in-care. Government policy

makers and adoption practitioners struggle with creating permanent placements for First Nations children-in-care. More research, particularly by Indigenous scholars, is helping to identify which practices are effective. As the profile of what enables permanency emerges (McDonald, Press, Billings & Moore, 2007; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006; Warming, 2006), the answers to recognizing and removing the barriers to permanency becomes known. Key themes included creating healthy identity (Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.] 2009; Carriere, 2007; Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002); cultural intelligence (Cheng, 2007; Griffer & Perlis, 2007; Wilson, 2007; Kienzle & Husar, 2005); and closed versus open adoptions (Adoption Council of Canada website, 2003; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Esau, 2000). Examining these themes and sharing this knowledge with those invested in caring for these children is the focus of this paper.

The difference in child-rearing philosophies between First Nations and Western society is what each culture considers to be in the best interest of the child. This is a complex and emotional issue. Negotiating best interest of the child lengthens the time it takes for these children to find permanent homes. Adoption in Canada considers the best interest of the child when making placement decisions, which is interpreted in an individualistic society as one family adopting or caring for the child. Snow and Covell (2006) note that First Nations' understanding of the best interest of the child is a collective approach, suggesting the First Nations community will look after a child-in-need. There is little understanding in Western society of the cultural differences that exist between a collectivist, shared society versus an individualistic Western culture. Cultural identity and understanding is at the root of this discussion. Lack of cultural understanding

(Carriere, 2007; Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke & Baker-Evans, 2005; Adoption Council of Canada website, 2003) may prevent First Nations children-in-care from achieving the self-confidence that comes from healthy identity formation.

In order for First Nations children to form a healthy cultural identity, the adoptive parent/s must know, understand, and advocate for the cultural needs of the child. This means connecting with those individuals familiar with the child's biological culture, along with learning to advocate within the Western community for the child's culture, so communal acceptance occurs. Differences exist between First Nations and Western cultures that can create misunderstanding of the values, attitudes and behaviours of each culture, although regional and demographic differences would exist within and across each culture. Indigenous scholars (Kundouq [Green, J.] & Qwul'sih'yah'maht [Thomas, R.], 2009) warn against assuming all First Nations are traditional with knowledge of their language and culture. There is diversity within each community. Exploring the role of cultural intelligence in learning to decipher the nuances that exist within First Nations cultures, and between First Nations and Western cultures, may strengthen efforts in creating permanency for these children.

The term Aboriginal is used to describe "Aboriginal peoples" as a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, n.d.). The Canadian constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples: Indians (commonly referred to as First Nations), Métis and Inuit. For the purposes of this study, the term First Nations will be used as it reflects the specific group that was studied. Many aspects of the discussion may apply to all Aboriginal peoples, as defined above. The term "Indigenous peoples" refers to ethnic and racial

groups of people who inhabit a particular geographic area, and who are considered to be the first peoples of that area (Wikipedia, n.d.). The term “Western society” is used to describe the dominant society in North America that was originally Anglo-Saxon. There is no universal depiction of any culture, or of any people. Therein is our challenge as humans as we try to interact with each other.

From a Western perspective, I may feel that we can try to control the direction of the discourse, while First Nations people may feel that the Creator will lead the way. This differs from the Western concept of power and control over their environment as resting within the individual. In general, First Nations’ peoples have a spiritual life and connection to nature that shapes their perspective. First Nations creation stories speak of humans as being equal to all creation, and reinforce the necessity to work together and seek spiritual guidance in governance and social relations. The cultural lens that is used in interaction between the cultures in governance, social services, health and education is at the centre of this conversation.

### Literature Review

Jeannine Carriere's research on *Promising Practices for Maintaining Identities in First Nations Adoption* (2007) was rich in describing what adoptees felt they needed for permanency; ways to strengthen First Nations cultural identity; and policies and practices that have worked in both First Nations and Western adoption agencies. Further readings dwelled on the practice of foster care, permanency planning which involves establishing long-term relationships and a sense of belonging for children-in-care, and adoption (including how foster children/adoptees felt about their experiences). Other readings included topics such as adult/children of alcoholics; "healthy" families; recovery from substance abuse; cultural intelligence; First Nations identity; adoptive identity; Cree and Blackfoot traditions and history; and First Nations communication styles. Barriers to healthy identity formation, along with ways to overcome the incongruence between the two cultures and viewpoints, were also examined.

Ideas situating this study emerged from the literature review included enabling healthy identity, open custom adoption, cultural intelligence and healthy lifestyle, and are further elaborated below.

#### *Enabling Healthy Identity*

According to Brendto, Brokenleg and Van Brockern (2007), cultural identity is one aspect of character formation that cuts across all cultures. For fostered or adopted children, this means leaving their birth family, and being immersed in a very different culture. For First Nations children moving to a Western home, this means dealing with the loss of their natural family and environment, along with differences in clothing, diet, language, and spirituality. Presumably, most people that foster or adopt children are

conscious of how to deal with traumatized children. Yet, as most aspects of culture are unconscious, there are unspoken elements of thoughts and attitude that emerge in school, and at home, that affect cultural identity and pride.

The theme of creating cultural identity is repeated in the *Circle of Courage Philosophy*, where Brendto, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) note four dimensions that help First Nations children become resilient: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Similar themes are echoed in the works of Carriere (2007), McCreight (2002), and Sieta, Mitchell and Tobin (1996). Children are nurtured in their cultural tradition through familial relationships. When familial relationships break down, the adopted source becomes the new “teacher”, reinforcing the importance of the adopted source being familiar with the cultural needs of the children.

Cultural identity is about the reality or environment in which people act and interact. A First Nations child may be accepted into a Western foster or adopted home and loved; however, if part of the child’s being that belongs to their birth culture is not accepted, the child’s identity formation is skewed. According to Jeannine Carriere (2007), in her study of the relationship between connectedness and health of First Nation adoptees, the loss of identity that First Nation adoptees experience can be minimized. Factors that adoptees have identified as being important in helping to establish an identity were: finding people who looked like them; learning about their health history; sense of belonging to “similar” people, especially those adopted into non-First Nations families; and accurate information on their tribal background. Research shows that cultivating cultural identity and a sense of belonging may help, along with opportunities to talk about

the gifts that First Nations and Western people can give to adoptees, to bring them stability and a sense of belonging.

Lack of cultural understanding between First Nations and Western society gets in the way of stability, belonging, and pride which children crave. Researchers agree (McDonald, Press, Billings & Moore, 2007; Carriere, 2007; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006) that development of a healthy identity begins early and is undermined by a variety of factors. For children-in-care, reunification with family, foster care, kinship care and adoption are ways to stabilize the children when the birth family breaks down. These in-care alternatives are where the children's identity is shaped. There is a growing body of research on how each of these ways of living best influences identity development.

Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke and Baker-Evans (2005) identify adoption as a risk factor in development of a healthy self-esteem, although they did find that early parental bonding and identity style were some variables in helping to predict healthy self-esteem in adoptees. Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, and Esau (2000) consider identity development a life-long process that involves integrating personal self with relationships within the family, and relationships with the social world outside the family. They cite social changes like the shift from complete confidentiality about birth families, to partial disclosure of medical information about the biological family, and the more recent shift to open relationships between the adoptee, his/her adopted family, and his/her birth family that has helped adopted children develop a healthy identity. This is especially important in transracial adoption where there are obvious physical differences between the adopted child and the adopted family.

Delays in negotiation related to First Nations or transracial adoption ultimately affect the child-in-need. Permanency planning, especially the practice of concurrent planning in foster care is important as timely decision-making and prospects for long-term placements are vital. Although reunification with family is usually the initial goal in child intervention, concurrent planning for adoption is conducted in case the birth family cannot provide the appropriate care for the child. Tilbury and Osmond (2006) talk about permanency planning as being necessary to help children achieve permanence, stability, and personal and cultural identities. Decreasing the placement and adoption finalization timeline is especially important so that the adoptive family and the adoptee are secure in the knowledge that legally the child is secure.

Western adoption philosophy is beginning to incorporate open adoption so that the child may continue to have contact with the birth family. This is especially important with First Nations adoption, while a search for extended family occurs. This approach helps the child deal with his/her developing identity by helping the child see how s/he fits into the adopted family, and discovers where s/he has obtained his/her biological characteristics (Carriere, 2007; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Esau, 2000). It is common for adoptees to want to know where they get their characteristics, to the extent that some report being “consumed” by needing to know this information.

In transracial adoptions, open adoption helps the child remain connected to their racial or ethnic community, and may help them deal with racism that s/he will face in other communities. Social changes like the advent of birth control and legal abortion, along with societal acceptance of single parenting, have resulted in fewer babies being available for adoption (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler and Esau, 2000, p.380). This led to a

focus on adoption of special needs children and an increase in transracial adoptions. Closed adoptions were the norm – for confidentiality, and as some adoptive parents feared the child might be influenced by contact with the birth family.

Adoption is an emotional investment, as well as a financial investment. Helping a child remain connected to “unhealthy” parents is a challenge and a risk. Legally, the adopted child “belongs” to the adoptive family; however, research has shown that contact with the birth parents, or extended family, can help the child’s identity formation if all parties are in agreement. Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Eau (2000, p.384) note that open relationships where adoptive parents and birth families collaborate on the child’s behalf, increase the child’s socioemotional development, which is measured in middle childhood. In Western society, the child does “belong” to the parents while in other cultures a more communal approach to child-rearing exists. It is common in First Nations families for the grandparents to raise the first-born grandchildren, or to be intimately involved in rearing the children (Glenbow Museum website, 2009; T. Chief Calf, personal communication, May 2009).

Knowledge on brain development (Drover, 2008; Steinhauer, 1996) indicates that strong attachment is necessary between the child and caregiver for crucial brain development. Drover writes that when a caregiver holds and interacts with an infant, physiological changes occur that stimulate brain connections. Children-in-care are extremely vulnerable and are unable to make strong attachments if they experience multiple placements, or repeated removal and return from homes. Timely parental assessments and early permanency planning are urged so that children-in-care can attain attachment and stability as early as possible. This supports the need for early

intervention, however, it may not meet the needs of children-in-care if they do not have contact with extended family, or continuity through extended relationships. Research suggests that the older the child, the more challenging the adjustment; however, for the sake of the child, being placed early is important as is maintaining contact with the birth family, or extended family (McCreight, 2002).

Early attachment, including through being held tenderly, with the caregiver helps establish the emotional and social capacity that children need as they develop. This is difficult to shape as the child matures. There is evidence that a lack of early attachment and poor brain development are related to addictions later in life, emphasizing the need to connect early with children (Perry, 2005). Positive relationships with those invested in the child, like extended family or teachers, help reinforce the child's concepts of self-worth. Although attachment theories are not well accepted by Indigenous scholars (Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.], p. 19) as these have not been tested on First Nations children within an Indigenous context, there is sufficient research on brain development and attachment that suggests it is important information for ensuring that continuity and consistency exists for First Nations adopted children.

#### *Open Custom Adoption*

According to the Adoption Council of Canada (2003), in an article profiling open custom adoption, most First Nations children-in-care are adopted by non-First Nations families in closed adoptions, which prevent First Nations children from connecting with their familial culture. Following a moratorium on adoptions of First Nations children by non-First Nations (Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.]) in 1996, the government of British Columbia enacted two pieces of legislation. *The Adoption Act* and the *Child,*

*Family and Community Service Act* emphasized the need to connect First Nations children-in-need with extended family; openness in adoption; custom adoption; and the need for cultural planning (Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.], p.24). In 1997, Alberta's *Policy Directive on First Nation Adoption* (Peacock, 2009) required consent from a child's First Nations chief and council prior to adoption.

Although cultural planning requires non-First Nations foster and adoptive parents to expose First Nations children to their culture, it can be difficult to find cross-cultural opportunities for families to do this. First Nations and non-First Nations differing concepts of suitable placements for children-in-care delay permanent placements for First Nations children-in-care. Delays prevent children from establishing stable relationships that are necessary for emotional stability, yet closed adoption prevents the First Nations community from knowing one of its own.

Open Custom Adoption was initiated by the Yellowhead Tribe Services Agency (YTSA), which combines the traditional custom adoption practices in First Nations communities, with the legal requirements for adoption (Adoption Council of Canada, 2003). Custom adoption involves a First Nations committee of elders that help designated caseworkers find appropriate homes for First Nations children-in-care. The YTSA combines a full range of services on participating reserves that include child protection, custom kinship and foster care, and custom adoption. Services include intervention and enhancement agreements to help children remain with, or close to, their birth families while circumstances that led to child protection services are rectified, if they can be. Similar open custom adoption programs have been initiated in British Columbia and Manitoba. In the meantime, where First Nations children are placed with non-First

Nations families, open adoption is encouraged where children have more information about their families and open relationships with the children's extended family and First Nations community.

Another technique (Pennell, 2009) that is beginning to be used in child welfare is Family Group Conferencing. This technique brings children, their parents and families, and community members together to expand supports for the children-in-need and their family with a goal of avoiding adoption outside the First Nations community. The conference is conducted within the First Nations culture and language, offering cultural safety for those involved (Pennell, 2009, p.79). This approach has merit as a promising practice; however, it takes time to gather family and community together, and to build trust within the group, so that the children's best interests will be met.

### *Cultural Intelligence*

According to Margaret Byrne (2007), cultural intelligence involves developing an awareness of and the corresponding skills to overcome prejudice. Learning to assess and react to those from other cultures is an important personal and professional skill. This is linked to cultural competence as the premise with cultural intelligence is that one develops competence in interacting effectively with other cultures.

Immigration has changed North America from a predominantly White, Christian society to a multi-racial and multi-religious society with corresponding personal and social adjustments that citizens must make. Globalization, and the gift of technology, must be balanced with cultural understanding, and the ability to adapt behaviour within a cultural context (Griffer & Perlis, 2007). Lack of cultural knowledge affects private

industry and public institutions that deliver healthcare, education and social services (Cooper, Calloway, Thomas, Simonds, 2007).

Intercultural awareness courses deal with immigrant populations, which may share some cultural dimensions with First Nations peoples; however, the reason for immigration to this country is usually based on need or want. First Nations people have lived here far longer than other settlers. Once nomadic peoples, they were forced to remain on reserves, which was a significant adjustment for them. The federal government attempted to train First Nations peoples in farming; however, it was difficult, especially with the substandard supplies and equipment that were provided by the government (Crowshoe & Mannes Schmidt, 2002). Unlike their Western neighbours that own and preserve their land and crops individually, First Nations peoples live on land that is collectively shared. For them, this collectivist approach is central to their way of life, yet many live and work off-reserve, necessitating an understanding of how an individualistic Western world operates.

Both Western and First Nations populations still struggle to understand the cross-cultural differences that were exacerbated by colonialization. Social problems like substance abuse, poverty, and unemployment have made life on a reserve difficult. As much as people and programs try to fix this situation, the problems continue and negative perceptions by Western people about those living on reserves continue. Racism is a reality that continues to pervade elements of education, health, social services, and economic development (Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.], 2009; St. Denis, 2002). There are scholars who discount the value of cultural competence as a solution to reducing racism (Newkirk & Rutstein, 2000, p.113-116) as these programs appear to

promote tolerance; their position being that people would rather be loved than tolerated. Others caution that culture is dynamic, always changing, as are people, and generalizing about cultural attitudes and behaviours can be as dangerous as complete ignorance about a particular culture (Maither, 2009).

The closest comparison of cultural dimensions between First Nations and Western culture involves a cultural awareness model developed by Charles Horejski and Joe Pablo (2007), with the assistance of a number of individuals representing Crow, Blackfeet, Salish, and Assiniboine/Chippewa First Nations societies. The dimensions give those working with traditional First Nations cultures a glimpse of how their values, behaviours and attitudes may differ from dominant North American culture. While the authors recognize these are generalizations and the tone of the writing is factitious, the knowledge shared helps those interacting across the two cultures.

The dimensions that Horejski and Pablo propose are similar to Trompenaar's and Hempden-Turner's (1998) cultural dimensions that distinguish cultural behaviours as those connected to relationships to people, to time, and to the environment<sup>1</sup>. The researchers provide several practical suggestions for non-First Nations interacting with First Nations tribes that reflect differences between First Nations peoples and Anglo-American. The dominant society to which they refer, and with whom they interact, is American. Horejski and Pablo advise remembering that as an Anglo-American, you are the foreigner on-reserve – it is up to you to learn about and adapt to First Nations' ways; and to not assume you are always "right". Other suggestions include learning to respect traditional and spiritual beliefs and practices; developing relationships with staff and First Nations residents so you can slowly learn about their culture and specific family

relationships; and making yourself as available as possible as First Nations clients do not always make and keep appointments.

Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, and Simonds (2007) note the individualistic/collectivist dimension is about the relationship between the individual and the groups to which s/he may belong. In an individualistic culture, individual achievement is valued; in a collectivist culture, the needs and goals of the individual's immediate and extended family override the needs of the individual. There are degrees of individualism and collectivism characteristic of each culture. Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, and Simonds cite other research (Stewart, Danielian, & Foster, 2007, p.27; Kluckhohn, 1963; Hall & Hall, 1987 p.16; Ting-Tomney & Oetzel, p.129) that describe cultural patterns and displays which help differentiate cultures from a number of dimensions. These, however, are all based on nation states.

From an economic perspective, developing cultural intelligence is good for people and for business. A Health Canada (2009) report on the health of First Nations people in Canada cites economic development, labour force participation, educational attainment, and culture as important non-medical determinants of health. Crowshoe and Manneschmidt (2002) speak to the cultural differences in health standards, child protection and business processes that could be negotiated through practices such as *the Blackfoot framework for decision-making and mediation processes*. Moving from cultural intelligence to positive behaviours that are engrained in cross-cultural competence can help identify the nuances between different cultures – nuances that can develop or destroy a relationship.

Although an extreme example, there are other costs to not cultivating cultural competence. Cheng (2007) uses the Virginia Tech Massacre<sup>2</sup> as an example of miscues by the perpetrator's family and professionals that may have been avoided if cultural context had been applied through Seung-Hui Cho's contact with the professional and medical community. According to Cheng, examining our own biases and cultivating a sense of cultural humility is necessary to shift our thinking outside our own culture and across generations, especially in an increasingly flat and technologically savvy world. Learning to communicate across cultures is the new business imperative that leaves those who remain uni-lingual and uni-cultural at a disadvantage (Wilson, 2007; Griffer & Perlis, 2007; Kienzle & Husar, 2005).

### *Healthy Lifestyle*

The North American or Western lifestyle is not the healthiest. The World Health Organization (1948) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. A communal lifestyle has benefits for communities that do not translate well into a North American "individualistic" lifestyle. North Americans are thought to have a healthier lifestyle than other countries due to economic opportunities and access to quality medical services. There is, however, a growing body of research (Landale, Oropesa, Ilanes, Gorman, 1999) that indicates that the first generation of immigrants from other countries is actually healthier overall, regardless of their socioeconomic status. This is due to their strong cultural and social networks, and higher expectations created by their move to a new country. This status dissipates as the second generation is exposed to the stressors of

discrimination; lower expectations; poverty; racism; inadequate housing; and negative health habits.

The health of First Nations and Inuit in Canada (Health Canada, 2009) shows a higher body mass index than the rest of the Canadian population, demonstrating greater risk for developing diabetes. The shift from a traditional First Nations diet of low-fat protein from dried meat to eating high-fat and high-sugar foods common to the North American diet, has not been healthy for Aboriginals. Other risk factors and wellness strategies related to health and Aboriginal peoples are outlined on the Aboriginal Health and Wellness Strategy website ( <http://www.ahwsontario.ca/>).

. (should include the website here as your reference)

Addiction has a long-term impact on children and families, which is not unique to any particular ethnic group (Breshears & Young, 2004) although there are higher instances of minorities becoming involved with the child welfare system for a variety of reasons. Breshears and Young warn child welfare workers against assumptions of ethnic or racial reasons for substance abuse. Untreated parental addictions has a damaging effect on children that can follow them into adulthood (Turney, 2007; Dayton, 2004), reinforcing the need for the treatment for the aftereffects of parental substance abuse treatment for children-in-care.

The results of colonialist residential school policies are well documented. In the 70s the rapid increase of Indigenous children-in-care was attributed to federal policy of integration, child welfare laws that were extended to reserves, and the liberalization of liquor laws that were extended to reserves in the 1950s (Strega & Carriere, Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.]); 2009; p.98). Although Canadian statistics on drinking patterns

indicates a higher rate of abstinence from drinking for Indigenous peoples than the general population, the Indigenous peoples have a higher percentage of heavy drinkers than the general population (p.223). This is attributed to substance abuse and dependency that can occur with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as traumatized people often use alcohol and drugs to anesthetize or dissociate their emotions from traumatic events (p.226).

## Method

Qualitative research methodology is appropriate to best answer the research question of understanding how healthy cultural identity can be managed effectively for First Nations children-in-care. Using grounded theory (Eaves, 2001) allows for theory development founded in a comparative data analysis of data collected through interviews and field research. Data collected through methods such as field research, interviews, and focus groups are analyzed through constant comparison to identify patterns and relationships between patterns, resulting in a theory. Reporting of the data will be separated into three chapters: *Interview Results*, which reports feedback from participants; *Other Significant Findings*, describing other areas for future study; and *What Works*, a compilation of the results from participant feedback, data from the literature review, and my personal and professional experiences.

Eaves notes (2001, p.656) that grounded theory (GT) has its roots in the symbolic interaction tradition, which focuses on the interaction between the meaning people attach to events, and the symbols that they use to express those meanings. Written when Eaves was a first-time researcher, Eaves' synthesis technique was adapted from the works of recognized grounded theorists (Charmaz, 1983; Chelser, 1987; Corbin and Strauss, 1990) and provided clear instruction on using GT successfully. As a first-time researcher myself, I found comfort in using an established technique to enhance validity of the research. The use of memo writing to capture the evolution of the project, along with coding and categorization techniques using a constant comparison method for analyzing data, did provide a systematic approach to help focus the research. Interview notes, memo notes and literature were analyzed and researched further as the project evolved.

Six individuals were interviewed. These individuals were not a random representative sample of a population consistent with quantitative research. Rather, the individuals were chosen to provide data that would be rich in the lived experiences of the participants. This is consistent with theoretical sampling used in developing theory that is “grounded” in the data (Charmez, 2006).

A judgment sampling technique was used to identify a small target population. Other participants were identified by group members, which is consistent with a snowball sampling method. Interviews were conducted across three groups: bi-cultural First Nations individuals, an Indigenous scholar and a non-First Nations former child welfare caseworker. The specific target population of bi-cultural and bilingual First Nation participants was chosen, as they were a generation that bridged the gap between traditional First Nations’ ways and their own First Nations’ children that live in both First Nations and Western societies. Their voices conveyed knowledge of traditions that would enable their children to understand the value of their heritage, while learning to thrive in a bi-cultural world.

Foster /adoptive families were not interviewed directly but their perspective is reflected in feedback from the participants that reflect both First Nations and Western perspectives. These were specific foster or adoptive parents from Western society that had fostered or adopted First Nations children and made a point of remaining connected to the children’s First Nations community. Both First Nations and non-First Nations participants cited these parents as helping to keep children connected and comfortable with both cultures by bringing their own biological children to events, so an understanding of their adopted sibling’s culture was shared in the families.

The child welfare case worker, as a former case worker/supervisor with over 30 years experience in the field, would be familiar with child protection, kinship care, foster care and adoption, and the nuances of working with First Nations and Western families. Two of the bi-cultural First Nations participants were former child welfare caseworkers, while two of the bi-cultural participants were elders. Indigenous scholar Jeannine Carriere was interviewed regarding her understanding of changes that may have occurred in the child welfare field since her article *Promising Practice for Maintaining Identities in First Nation Adoption* was published in 2007. Carriere's research with First Nations adoptees was a significant influence on the direction chosen to go with "healthy identity". Jeannine Carriere is Métis; an adoptee; an adoptive parent and past foster parent; and a former worker in a variety of child welfare settings. Carriere is the author of several books and evaluations of federal/provincial policies and practices related to Indigenous Child Welfare, and a professor in the University Of Victoria School Of Social Work. The combined lived experience of participants resulted in data rich in experience with children-in-care, foster and/or adoptive families, First Nations culture, and Western culture.

As a non-Indigenous scholar, I realized I would need a guide to help me find a way to identify and connect with First Nations people who would be willing to become involved in this study. I asked for assistance from a colleague, Tom Chief Calf, who provided advice and a connection to the bi-cultural participants and former case worker. Tom is a bi-cultural and bilingual member of Kainai First Nations. I contacted Jeannine Carriere, after reading her work on connectedness and healthy identity in First Nations' adoptees.

In researching Blackfoot culture I learned that language, action, venue and song (Crowshoe, Crow Eagle, J. and Crowshoe, M, 2006), were ways that Blackfoot people present and process information. Out of respect for this tradition, I asked Tom the best way to relate to those with whom we were requesting an interview. Tom indicated that only one of the participants was traditional and it would be appropriate to offer a gift of tobacco or blanket. Venues for the interviews varied. One interview took place on the reserve at a community office; one at an office in Lethbridge where the respondent practiced as an elder; and two took place at a social services agency boardroom.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview format. An interview guide and consent form (Appendix B) were developed, and either emailed to participants, or hand-delivered. The bi-cultural guide described the project to potential First Nations' participants, asking them to share their knowledge, to describe what they wanted First Nations children to know, and to share ideas on attaining stability for these children. Guidance on how to approach the elders was important so that trust was formed. The purpose and intent of the research was described to participants by Tom, who invited the participants to a meeting at a venue of their choice. The actual interview was preceded by Tom explaining the purpose and process of the research, while I, as the researcher, followed with the interview. First Nations participants provided verbal consent. Written consent was received from Alec, the former caseworker and from Jeannine Carriere.

Participants were anonymous, which prevented the opportunity for a focus group or sharing circle. Participants were given an assumed name for the project. I chose names that were Christian-based, as all were Christian. Each name was chosen after looking at meanings of names and attaching that name to each individual, after I had met

them in the interview. I realized later that I should have asked them to choose their own name before we began the project. The names I chose were presented to the participants in their written interview transcripts.

Information was shared with each participant to confirm that the interview notes reflected a shared understanding of their thoughts and our discussion during the interviews. Prior to sharing the interview notes, participants' thoughts and discussion were coded, arriving at categories, sub-categories and overall themes.

Interview notes were transcribed and coded line-by-line (Charmez, 2006; Eaves, 2001) using "in vivo" coding that pays attention to the participants' language and meanings. Focused coding followed, by using the most frequent codes that interviewees identified. Focused coding led to themes that were prioritized according to how frequently they had been mentioned by the participants. Some themes not mentioned by all participants were still considered significant and insightful, which are mentioned in *Other Significant Findings*. Themes that emerged from the data included language; spirituality; acceptance; safety for the children; parenting; open adoption; cultural planning; impact of residential schools; and connecting to the community.

Each participant's discussion and overall themes were provided to them individually for feedback and clarification. Recommendations for future research, for minimizing political barriers, and for future interaction and learning between the two cultures were made. These recommendations are a compilation of the participants' knowledge of the two cultures; the social services community; political realities; and from what I read and heard from numerous sources.

Although this study focuses on what works for creating healthy cultural identity for First Nations children-in-care politics and power do enter into the equation. Getting past the politics and concentrating on shared understanding can bridge this gap in understanding the best interest of the child. All participants shared their experience with First Nations children-in-care outside their respective political or organizational roles. This independent study was conducted outside the realm of First Nations and/or Western politics or organizations. Although this may run contrary to First Nations collectivist perspective, for this phase of discovery I felt it was important. This reasoning was shared with the participants.

There were changes in the methodology that occurred once the literature review and background research began. As I learned more about the target population, I realized that there were some limitations to the amount and depth of information gathered. As a non-Indigenous scholar, a newcomer to the area, and a non-First Nations person, I realized that delving into this topic may be considered intrusive. Until I was able to establish a relationship with the people involved, small steps were required. There were also political realities in both non-First Nations and First Nations cultures that were getting in the way of stability for First Nations children-in-care. Although my preference was for an action research project, the limitations of gaining trust, maintaining anonymity and time constraints were not conducive to action research. It is my hope that the participants may be interested in further research with a wider range of participants.

## Results

### *Interview Results*

Interviews were conducted with Christen, Daniel, Enoch and Mattin, four bi-cultural and bilingual men of Blackfoot heritage; Alec, the non-First Nations former caseworker; and Jeannine Carriere. All participants were parents, and of a generation that had children or grandchildren who were already very engaged in technology, and touched by changes that globalization has wrought in recent years.

First Nations participants had lived and worked both on- and off-reserve, were experienced with local First Nations and federal/provincial politics associated with funding, and could be characterized as upcoming elders. Articulate and energetic, they used stories as analogies to illustrate their point about the learning and modeling aspect of their culture. Optimism and pride in their heritage was evident, along with an underlying recognition that long-standing issues still get in the way of acceptance of First Nations people. Alec has considerable experience as a former child welfare case worker and supervisor, especially with First Nations foster care and adoption families. Alec brought child welfare experience from several cultural perspectives and had been involved in non-First Nations and First Nations-specific training around attachment, fostering and adoption. Jeannine Carriere has considerable practical and academic knowledge of First Nations, child welfare practice and fostering/adoption.

The results are described as in the participant's voice – based on their intuition, and backed by their education and experience. These results were categorized by prioritized themes that emerged from the interviews. Results were separated into three categories: *One Voice*, that spoke to all participants' views; *Aboriginal Voice*, that

included the Blackfoot and Métis participants; and the *Non-Aboriginal Voice*, which included the Western former caseworker.

### *One Voice*

#### *Children First (Within a Cultural Context)*

All participants indicated that a safe home for children was paramount, although a home within the child's cultural community was preferred. Participants recognized the value of all cultures, not only First Nations. If a safe home with a child's birth family, or kinship care were not possible, then a home that provided stability and consistency would be best. They acknowledged, however, that connection to the children's birth family would help them find people who looked like them and could teach them about their culture and extended family. Comprehensive cultural planning was mentioned as an emerging practice to facilitate a cultural connection for the child between the adopted family, the birth family, and the appropriate cultural community.

#### *Parenting*

Parenting was considered the most important element in maintaining a healthy identity for children-in-care. Participants felt families were still at-risk and needed more help than provided by existing programs. The number one concern for participants was safety for the child, and placement in a home with responsible, confident, and competent caregivers. Being with a healthy family was considered the best approach, as long as there was cultural continuity, openness and safety for the child.

Participants felt that foster/adoptive parents needed to take an interest in the child's culture, as it was an integral part of their being. Several participants talked about the families who made significant sacrifices to foster/adopt children in their care, many of

whom brought their biological children to cultural events so the whole family learned about and respected First Nations' culture.

Participants described some foster/adoptive parents who had resisted contact with the First Nations community, as they viewed it as unhealthy, or may have found it difficult to connect to people with quite different customs. As well, there are First Nations foster or adopted children that do not see themselves as part of the First Nations culture and have no interest in expanding contact or knowledge. This may be a result of living in a family with cultural biases; however, trying to continue contact through a variety of cultural events may help normalize contact with First Nations culture for those children and their families.

#### *Open Adoption*

Open adoption was suggested, especially for First Nations children. Although not articulated as such, the emerging practice that works well for First Nations is open custom adoption, which allows elders and agencies to work together to find the best available homes. Participants suggested connecting with the birth family and working together to benefit the child.

#### *Cultural Knowledge*

Participants all said that sharing cultural knowledge with the children was important for all cultures. Children would benefit from a connection to their ancestors, while living with a family that was able to provide stability and consistency in their lives. Cultivating knowledge specific to First Nations' children, such as having First Nations children and their foster/adoptive families participate in cultural activities both on and off reserve, are discussed in *Cross-Cultural Connections* (p.46).

*Racism*

Although positive steps are being taken in acknowledging non-Western cultures, racism was mentioned as an issue that continues to harm children and adults. Most people have underlying attitudes about other cultures, which is especially damaging to transracially fostered or adopted children. Acknowledging individual attitudes about other cultures is the first step in cultural competency, which reinforces the need for development of cultural intelligence.

*Acceptance*

Participants spoke of acceptance by the Western community as necessary for adults and children to maintain a healthy identity. Regardless of whether the children live with First Nations parents or non-First Nations parents, acceptance of the First Nations culture was important at school and in the wider community. Acceptance at an economic level was mentioned as significant to First Nations peoples who come to cities to live, to shop and access services.

*Aboriginal Voices**Spirituality*

The Creator is the core of First Nations culture and the centre of most stories told by First Nations. Blackfoot participants all described their personal relationship with the Creator as a source of strength and kindness, and the source of strength for Aboriginal peoples. Some First Nations are gifted with a mystical insight of ancient and ancestral knowledge, although this must be nurtured by elders who are knowledgeable about appropriate practices and insights. Many First Nations members are Catholic and have had to marry the concepts of Catholicism and the Creator. Some priests have begun to

accept this union, considering the link between the faiths as taking different roads to reach the same destination. The Blackfoot participants are all Catholic, yet their faith in the Creator is sound.

### *Language*

Participants felt that Blackfoot, or other First Nations languages, were the key to their children's survival in both worlds. Christen talked about language being the most important aspect of culture as it is difficult to accurately translate concepts without the familiarity with the language. Mattin called language a way for people to learn about the kindness and spirituality of Blackfoot people. Participants felt that Blackfoot was necessary for children to preserve the traditions and heritage that is part of their identity, and English was necessary to facilitate their survival in the Western world. In adulthood, they would need a formal education, along with business, communication and technological skills.

### *Healing the Adults*

Along with stories of traditions, spirituality, societies, and morality, came comments about the severe generational effects of trauma experienced by First Nations peoples at residential schools. Reference to residential schools was made to acknowledge the reason for prevailing issues on reserve that make it difficult to find the number of healthy families necessary for the number of First Nations children that need to be placed. Although many traditions are being reinstated, the long-standing impact of residential schools is a reality, which is what the participants wanted to reinforce. Participants spoke of healing. Each person's place in the healing continuum is different. One participant spoke of healing that was taking place through acknowledgement of the

past; rest, reflection and healing; moving forward to redefine and redirect; and opening doors to the future through spirituality and sharing of knowledge.

### *Hope and Optimism*

Research shows that optimism can be learned (Seligman, 2006), which helps guard against depression and helplessness. There was an unspoken optimism among the participants. One elder spoke of hope and optimism and described the key to healing as the ability to focus on the future: “Be positive, believe in yourself, experience laughter and joy in your life... celebrate and move forward.” He characterized anger as the enemy that feeds on people’s pain and preoccupation with the past. The past cannot be changed; the future can.

### *Courage to Change*

First Nations peoples are undergoing another cultural evolution, although at different stages. One participant spoke of respect being earned by action, by doing what you say you will do, and proving your credibility through action. This is what the elders have taught the children in the past, and that is being reinstated through societies. One participant suggested looking at similarities between the cultures, rather than focusing upon the differences.

Participants thought that First Nations had demonstrated leadership by bringing Blackfoot songs and language to schools and wanted to have this courtesy reciprocated. A sincere attempt by foster/adoptive parents and the community to attend spiritual events would be welcome as First Nations appreciate sharing these events. Such attendance at events is a strong and consistent message of respect for First Nations children and community.

Integrity, wisdom, truth and courage were described as First Nations values for which elders seek in children and young adults as future leaders. Life, family and people are valued. Those with courage and the willingness to change stand out; giving others the courage to change. Blackfoot participants all agreed that bi-cultural and bilingual elders, working closely with traditional elders, was necessary to move the children and their culture forward to the future.

### *Economic Development*

Three First Nations participants noted that business and money-management skills needed development on reserve, which is an area where bi-cultural and bilingual competencies would help. Those that have bridged both worlds can help those on reserve to create solid economic development opportunities. Looking to Western ways to accomplish this may be necessary, albeit with First Nations values and strengths interwoven into the projects. It was felt that a stronger welcome by the Western community would help First Nations people feel more comfortable about partnering in economic initiatives off-reserve.

### *Non-Aboriginal Voice*

#### *Early Attachment*

Alec, the former child welfare caseworker, made similar observations as the Blackfoot participants, with a few exceptions. Alec brought up research on early attachment that had been used to form the philosophy in the Western social services field. Early attachment was not discussed specifically with the Blackfoot participants, although their perspective coincided with Alec's from an early placement/adoption perspective.

Alec noted early works on brain development as noteworthy in understanding the significance of early attachment for children-in-care. He emphasized the importance of security of an adopted family over foster parents as giving parents and children more stability. Most foster parents try to adopt the children in their care. When a First Nations band does not want to relinquish rights to a non-First Nations family, it lengthens the time of uncertainty for the child. Long-term attachment is harder to establish for the older child. There is urgency in placing children early, as the age of the child when adopted affects the whole family. Alec indicated that each family has its own culture, with each person having a place within that culture that requires love, acceptance and negotiation.

#### *Other Significant Findings*

Some topics which emerged from the literature review, or in the discussion with participants, were not identified as effective practices, yet may be valuable for further study or action.

#### *Exploring Cultural Dimensions*

One limitation of this study is that actual cultural dimensions between First Nations and Western philosophies were not specifically explored with the participants. There are philosophical differences between First Nations and Western societies that create misconceptions of each culture. Exploring the cultural dimensions in a group format would be valuable in having participants share their perceptions of the dimensions with the other cultures. As noted, it was difficult to find cultural dimensions that compared First Nations culture with Western societies. Horesjski and Pablo's (1993) comparison was between American culture and the Blackfeet Nation, which is based in the United States. Comparison of these two cultures produced some valuable

information. We know that differences arise within and across cultures that necessitate a comparison closer to home for Blackfoot First Nations and the Lethbridge area. How would these be different in interpreting cultural dimensions in Northern Alberta, where Cree First Nations bands reside, or in British Columbia where other bands reside?

Exploring other dimensions, such as those noted under *Cultural Intelligence* (p.20) within a First Nations and Non-First Nations cultural framework,<sup>3</sup> would enable cross-cultural understanding. Dimensions include concepts such as mono-chromatic versus polychromatic time; “doing” versus “being”; concept of equality; status associated with achievement versus Ascription; and human control of the environment versus human integration with environments and conflict resolution.

#### *Politics, Policy Makers and Protocols*

One participant cited politics as an issue in advocating effectively with both First Nations and Western politicians and policy makers. Chief and council are elected officials that should be engaging in protocols with their elected equivalent. Elders are respected for their wisdom, spirituality and ancient knowledge, not political acumen. Some traditional elders speak Blackfoot more fluently than English and the nuances of English are not always understood. Respecting the role of elders in protecting First Nations culture is important, as is engaging in appropriate protocols. Utilizing bi-cultural and bilingual leaders, with strong ties to First Nations culture, would benefit maintaining sacred aspects of First Nations culture while moving the culture forward into new ways of knowing.

### *Sharing Knowledge*

This study was done on an individual basis with participants outside their professional or political affiliations. As the study was anonymous, the opportunity for sharing of information collectively was not available. There is potential for action research, especially using an Aboriginal talking circle format. Having participants work and decide collectively on the nature and outcome of the research would enable shared understanding and motivation to address issues raised.

### *What Works for First Nations Children-in-Care*

The following is a summary of knowledge gained from the literature review, from memo writing conducted throughout the research in response to constant comparison of data, and from the knowledge shared by participants in the study. These are my insights into what has worked in other studies and situations, and what may work with future populations of First Nations children-in-care. Perhaps utilizing some of these practices can help lead to healing across generations and across cultures.

### *Focus on the child*

Literature speaks to the importance of cultural identity that cuts across all cultures (Brendto, Brokenleg and Van Brokern, 2007), and the need to lay the groundwork early to help form healthy identity (McDonald, Press, Billings & Moore, 2007; Carriere, 2007; Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Tilbury and Osmond (2006) also suggest that permanency planning, especially concurrent planning during foster care is important to reduce timelines for adoption finalization and to help children achieve permanence, stability and personal and cultural identity. The link to early attachment and brain development (Drover, 2008; Steinhauer, 1998) indicates that children-in-care are vulnerable when

multiple placements occur, reinforcing the need for continuity. This suggests the need to focus on the child, while taking into consideration their physical, emotional, cultural and spiritual health and their safety. The “best interest of the child” has a cultural context that must be considered.

Participants talked about focusing on the child, although a preference would be for a First Nations placement, if possible. Enoch noted that the most effective approach for First Nations children-in-care is to connect with the birth family and the cultural community, if possible, and try to heal the family before the children have to come into care. “Be my friend” was his philosophy, along with sharing in creating child-centred solutions for the sake of the child and the community.

#### *Consider Parenting a Privilege*

The importance of parenting was reinforced by literature and by feedback from participants. Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke and Baker-Evans (2005) speak to early parental bonding as important in adoption. Participants spoke favorably of parents who actively pursued appropriate cultural activities for their First Nations fostered or adopted children. All participants had a deep regard for those who parent effectively.

There are many reasons for children to come into the care of child protection services, including parental addictions or mental illness. Breaking free from addictions is difficult, if not impossible, for some people. When addictions lead to neglect and abuse, the damage to children can be long-term (Turney, 2007; Dayton, 2004), although not always irreversible (Perry, n.d.).

I suggest that parenting is a privilege. Even though biologically anyone can contribute to conception or give birth to a baby, being a parent that guides that baby to

adulthood is what counts. This applies to all people in all cultures. For those who cannot parent a biological child, s/he can be a partner in helping to give a child a healthy life and identity. That means working collaboratively with foster/adoptive parents, extended family, First Nations community and child welfare workers to establish a secure, safe environment for the child.

### *Cross-Culturally Enhanced Social Work Practices*

A safe environment for a child is paramount; however, social work practice is moving toward trying to keep children in troubled families through family enhancement and wrap-around services. Giving families time to heal takes considerable resources in both staff and funding. Concurrent permanency planning is done at the same time to ensure if removal from the birth family is necessary, at which point supports are then put into place for the child. This involves cultural planning and visits with birth parents or extended family, so a sense of continuity can exist for the child.

Evidence is clear that early attachment is important for children, although some Indigenous scholars dispute this as it is the rationale for early adoption. This may not be as helpful for First Nations children if it is taking time for an appropriate placement. Early attachment is necessary but may perhaps be accomplished with a core of consistent, combined adopted/birth family that will nurture the child, hold her tenderly, and keep her safe, within a cultural context. That requires faith and a strong collaboration between all parties in the best interests of the child. Attaching to the cultural community may be the best thing for the First Nations child and it is incumbent on families, practitioners, politicians and policy makers to make this happen.

Healing itself may take several generations, until the balance is restored between the First Nations ways of mentoring children in ancient knowledge, and understanding the language and ways of Western society. One source of healing may be initiating social work practice with First Nations (Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao [Carriere, J.], 2009) that is anti-racist and anti-oppressive. As Sarah Maiter notes (2009, p.63), a focus on social justice is emphasized with more recent approaches to social work; however, workers struggle with an anti-oppressive approach as there are legal repercussions for leaving children in a harmful environment. Child welfare workers see children that are harmed in many ways from all cultures. Their legal and moral responsibility is to ensure the safety of children-in-need. However, learning to use a First Nations lens may point to grandparents, or extended family members, who can care appropriately for First Nations children-in-need of intervention.

Another source of healing may be working with therapists such as Bruce Perry, a physician and expert in child maltreatment, attachment and helping adults gain freedom from addictions. Perry's work on six core personality strengths (Recovery Road Map, n.d.) outlines effective strategies for helping adults with addictive behaviours gain control of their lives.

### *Cultural Planning*

Research participants cited cultural planning for all transracially fostered or adopted children as important. Cultural planning has been in place for several years in British Columbia and Alberta. There have been issues in practice as it was a new process and one that was not widely understood. Carriere's research and report (2009) on cultural planning for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia

resulted in an emerging theory that noted that cultural planning for First Nations adoptions is essential, must be applied consistently, with supporting resources to build an extended family for the child – ensuring exposure to cultural, linguistic, historical and ancestral knowledge. This research should be shared with social work practitioners and policy makers in other jurisdictions. Cultural planning already exists in some jurisdictions; however, intercultural training, connection to extended family and community, where possible, and evaluation and monitoring are elements that strengthen this process. Carriere's report (2009) on cultural planning is a good resource for looking at effective practices.

#### *Open Adoption and Custom Open Adoption*

The success of custom open adoption is being documented. Carriere (2009) describes custom adoption in British Columbia by Lalum'utul Smun'eem Child and Family Services (LS), and Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency in Alberta as proven techniques for First Nations children-in-need. These agencies are delegated to provide governance and administration of adoptions for their communities. Custom open adoption is a best practice that requires relationship building, time, financial and human resources, and community support.

Jeannine Carriere (personal communication, April 30, 2009) spoke of the need for adoption workers to make connections within the First Nations community in order to build trust that the child's culture and place in the community will be honoured, regardless of where a child is placed. Relationship building on a personal and political level to ensure support is necessary to ensure these techniques continue. Appropriate funding to ensure these services survive is important.

Open adoption is a concept with which Westerners may have difficulty, as I once did. Bringing up a child has enormous emotional and legal responsibilities and for Westerners, that involves “ownership” or control of the situation. I would argue that First Nations communities have a similar sense of “ownership” regarding their children, although they consider children on loan from the Creator (Kundouqk [Green, J] & Qwul’sih’yah’maht [Thomas, R], 2009).

There is risk involved with letting your foster or adopted child interact with a family that is dysfunctional. Foster children are still at risk if missteps occur in dealing with the child or their birth families. It takes courage for foster/adoptive parents to risk maintaining contact with the child’s birth family, yet there is risk in not maintaining contact. Brenda McCreight gives good information on maintaining open communication and developing strategies for parents to nurture their foster/adopted children (2002). Martin Brokenleg’s *Circle of Courage Philosophy* program is becoming widely used with First Nations children fostered and adopted by parents in Canada and the United States (Tom Chief Calf, personal communication, March 9, 2009).

### *Cultural Competency Models*

Cross-cultural practitioners suggest that developing competence in all cultures is impractical and unrealistic. Adapting research on cultural patterns to First Nations and non-First Nations focus, and collaborating with local cultural awareness practitioners will strengthen cultural understanding within the community.

If other models used in the community do not address cultural competency, then perhaps a model that combines research from two sources would be useful in developing a competency model that looks at leadership at the personal and organizational level in

order to shift attitudes and behaviours. Researchers Connerley and Pedersen (2005) outline a model that incorporates needs assessment, self-awareness, knowledge and skill acquisition, and transfer of knowledge that could be adapted from a personal and organizational perspective. Rothman's work (2008), although based on immigrants arriving in the United States, encourages a social work practitioner's model for knowledge acquisition (p.38) that asks comprehensive questions about the client's values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and experiences so that their culture and worldview is understood. Adapting this to a First Nations-Canadian context may be useful for contextualizing the client's behaviour, and for serving as a guidepost for personal and organizational behaviour.

### *Cross-Cultural Connections*

Developing one-to-one cross-cultural relationships that expand to the community can be effective. First Nations participants noted that joyous events that bring both cultures together were non-threatening ways for children, parents, and the larger community to observe, develop trust, and build relationships. Daniel spoke of children as being the key to reversing the lack of knowledge between the cultures, and that exposure to language, song, dance and music helps children connect to each other joyously.

There are a number of positive relationships being developed in Southern Alberta that encourages cultural awareness and connection. The *Lethbridge Herald* recently reported a Transition Powwow in Fort Macleod, Alberta that honoured students moving from kindergarten to elementary, elementary to junior high, or junior high to high school. The celebration was based on a traditional Blackfoot powwow and included dance performances by the children, a traditional feast and attendance by dignitaries from Blood

and Piikani reserves, the RCMP and Blood Tribe police. More schools are celebrating children's milestones with powwows that honour both Aboriginal and Western ways of celebration.

Promotion of services like North Star (Aapatsi'Kakatosi) Outreach Program<sup>4</sup> that helps First Nations families and individuals who live in Lethbridge, the Cultural Awareness and Competency Program at First Nations Council of Lethbridge<sup>5</sup>, and the Blackfoot Cultural Program that is offered to foster and adoptive parents of First Nations children, need to continue. These services are having positive results in Lethbridge and its surrounding area in cultural awareness.

Sharing of ancestral knowledge and basic life skills (Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002) was traditionally done through societies, which were age-graded for teaching functions like hunting, policing, and so forth. Competence was highly valued, which First Nations children learned through repetition and mastery. Although these societies diminished as Blackfoot population and ways of life declined, these are being reinstated as a way to engage First Nations children and youth, and expose foster and adopted children to the ancient ways of learning traditional life skills and language (personal communication by Christen and Mattin, May 7, 2009). Creating opportunities for Western society to be part of First Nations celebrations and traditions broadens knowledge and promotes pride in First Nations children and families.

I would argue that enhancing economic development on-reserve is important, especially where First Nations communities seek to keep First Nations children-in-care within the community and on-reserve. Looking to economic development projects that have combined elements of both cultures would enable successful business relationships.

Western culture demands, particularly in the retail or customer service sector, consistency in hours of operation, type of service, and so forth can be contradictory to the Aboriginal cultural values. First Nations culture demands strong attachment to people within the community, which necessitates attendance at celebrations, such as funerals or memorial services, which can be unpredictable. Understanding these elements and building a cross-cultural workforce and a cross-cultural customer base that can accommodate both cultures may make for successful business relationships. Incorporating elements from both cultures may help cultivate a better work-life balance.

We know what works to maintain health based on considerable research on health and nutrition (Aboriginal Health & Wellness Strategy, 2007). Sharing this information with both communities can help incorporate the many aspects of health into First Nations lifestyle. Some non-profit agencies have grocery shopping and cooking classes for low-income families to teach them how to squeeze good nutrition out of a small budget. Expanding this to incorporate cross-cultural cooking encourages both cultures to learn from each other.

### *Language is Important*

First Nations participants stressed the importance of language, as so much of what is spoken in one language, often gets lost in translation. Maintaining the language will help young children more fully understand the traditions of their ancestors. Language includes verbal and non-verbal communication. Learning some of the nuances of behaviour and a few simple greetings in Blackfoot may go a long way to developing better relations between the two cultures.

Lethbridge Mayor Bob Tarleck was recognized as gaining respect during his public engagements by greeting Blackfoot elders in the audience personally and by greeting the crowd with a few Blackfoot words (Daniel, personal communication, May 6, 2009). The Blackfoot population in southern Alberta contributes economically to business in numerous ways. Finding ways to advocate for First Nations business leaders on Boards of Directors of financial institutions, and businesses in the region, was a recommendation by one participant. Examples of small, but significant measures that the community can make, include learning basic Blackfoot greetings so that Blackfoot heritage is recognized when Blackfoot people shop or access services.

#### *Strengthening Technology on Reserve*

Participants realize that each generation is becoming increasingly technologically savvy. Learning to communicate effectively with a younger generation is important. Finding ways to understand how they communicate would help understand the context of their behaviour. Jeannine Carriere (personal interview, April 30, 2009) notes that technology is a good way for foster and adopted children to maintain contact with their extended family. Although face-to-face contact is preferred, once a relationship has been established it is easier to use technology to visit through MSN (instant messaging networks), telephone, videocam/webcam, or email. Social networks like Facebook are great for sharing pictures and updating family and friends on what is happening. Learning a little about the child's world goes a long way. Developing technology on reserve would help maintain this connection so all generations can communicate with each other, and with other communities.

Children are already technologically savvy. Christen (personal communication, May 7, 2009) noted that he was confident that discussions will occur in the next decade that bring First Nations children into a better world, and influence the next generation. He felt his children's generation is astute and better prepared to bridge both worlds. They would build the schools, teach the children, and through a variety of cross-cultural strategies, there would be less need for child protection services.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study are offered as a viewpoint of what practices work best to establish a sense of permanence for Aboriginal children-in-care; how to help them develop a healthy identity; and what is “the best interest of the child”.

How is healthy identity formed and maintained for First Nations children-in-care? The literature review outlined the factors that adoptees have identified as important (Carriere, 2007) for healthy identity. This study confirmed ways to establish permanency, continuity, and consistency for children-in-care. Research participants echoed similar thoughts on giving children-in-care a sense of belonging by focusing on the child, parenting, open adoption, cultural planning, spirituality and language.

What is the resulting theory? Based on the voices of participants in this study, the “best interests of the child” were child-centred, ensuring the child was with a healthy family, with considerable focus on cultural considerations, maintaining contact with birth family and birth community, and finding what works for each child in their particular situation. For First Nations participants the hope would be for a placement with family. The role of a community that learns to understand and overcome racism, through concerted efforts to understand and reach out to those from other cultures, goes a long way toward acceptance for children, their parents and their culture.

What is Western culture’s role in enabling healthy identity? As our culture was the cause of First Nations alienation and resulting social issues, then we should be part of the solution. The solution is not imposing our standards on First Nations culture, but by working collaboratively to understand how each culture can enable children to thrive, and to enrich society as a whole. The collective focus should be on the children.

*Reflections*

Until I began this project I did not understand the depth of pain and loss that was experienced by First Nations children and families. As a third generation Ukrainian Canadian I had experienced mild discrimination. Being White, however, I can easily pass as a member of the dominant culture and forget that power and privilege do exist in a White society. I did not realize the extent of the harsh existence that prevailed at the schools, or the cultural context of why the children were away from their families. The continued loss is the way in which First Nations knowledge is traditionally shared – communally, through mentoring and exposure to societies and spirituality, and through kindness and generosity toward each other. Consequently several generations of cultural learning and parenting skills have been lost. Cultural pride and a sense of identity were diminished as the children who returned from residential schools felt a sense of shame, rather than pride.

There is a long history of misconceptions related to First Nations culture. I was surprised how difficult it was to find information on cultural dimensions based on First Nations' culture that would illustrate the different values, beliefs and attitudes that get in the way of cultural understanding.

As a researcher I did not assume that there were higher instances of addictions among First Nations, just that the effects of addictions on children are tremendous and often the reason for child welfare intervention. Removal of several generations of children from their mentors, exposure to unhealthy Western eating habits, alcohol, and continued poverty created sustained problems on reserves. Not all First Nations have addictions, the same way that not all non-First Nations peoples have addictions, yet there

are generational effects of alcohol. I ascribed many of the problems on reserve to addictions and easy money. Without healing and sustained economic growth, some people turn to supports like drugs - to anesthetize despair, or to sell drugs for profit. People need a purpose in life, pride in work (paid or unpaid), and accomplishment.

Although the intent of this study was to share knowledge, the Blackfoot participants did not get an opportunity to hear my story, as I felt it was more important to take the research time in hearing their stories. I may have been intimidated by being a non-native, non-social worker and consequently did not want to talk much as I did not want to be seen as the Western know-it-all. I was there to listen; however, I feel they would find my perspective interesting, especially about what I learned from the process.

My worldview begins with an individualist child-centred approach; however, I wanted the opportunity to share reasons for this view and learn from the First Nations worldview. I sought the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal culture because I wanted a practical venture into another culture that would result in useful knowledge. I now understand the importance of maintaining familial and community connections for children-in-care, especially First Nations children.

Another reason I sought this opportunity was my personal relationships with non-First Nations families that have been affected by the generational effects of substance abuse. Like families of any culture they struggle to help heal their own family members that are inherently good, yet addicted to alcohol or drugs. Although the reasons for the substance abuse may be different than First Nations people, they all struggle to understand their loved ones and struggle to survive the emotional turmoil. Finding ways

to ease this burden, and help heal children and adult children of alcoholics, is a puzzle which I would like to help solve.

Problem-solving for me has always been solution-focused and finding the way for all parties to focus on the solution, regardless of philosophical differences. When a problem is as significant as helping children-in-care find permanency, time is important. Children do not have the luxury of the time required for political negotiations. However, I have learned that developing enduring relationships and negotiating effectively does take time, so whatever supports are necessary to wrap around children-in-care to maintain safety, security and consistency is essential. Those who sincerely want to help these children need to come to the table with that goal in mind. For that to occur, adoptees and adoptive parents, practitioners and policy makers need to work together, to learn about and respect, other ways of knowing.

I am an optimist. I understand the need for healing, yet do not believe that focusing on the negative helps most situations. I echo Mattin's comments on being positive and believing in you.

I expect that my faith in others and myself will prevail and good things will happen. I am also analytical and a planner so all pieces quite often fit together. I admit "doing" is an important part of my character, and I am trying to take time to reflect on others.

I am a believer. I believe in myself and have an innate belief in others. I expect that people can achieve great things. People need a believer – someone to give them strength until they can regain their own strength. For some it is God, or the Creator, while for others it is nature. Knowing the Creator is with you is great; finding an earthly

believer helps, too. The participants interviewed are earthly believers who can share their optimism with others.

## NOTES

1. Specific dimensions include the meaning of time, competition among people, control, definition of self, social interaction, material possessions, personal space, individual freedom, learning process, family, children, older persons, and religion and spirituality.
2. Cheng (2007) uses the Virginia Tech Massacre as an example of miscues by the perpetrator's family and professionals that may have been avoided if cultural context had been applied through Seung-Hui Cho's contact with the professional and medical community. It is possible that Cho's unusual speech pattern that made him extremely self-conscious in speaking out loud and the target of mercilessly teasing, may have been attributed to a speech disorder, rather than English-as-a-second-language problem. Cheng notes that Korean culture sees a non-typical child as bringing shame to a family, preventing them from seeking professional help. Cheng further notes that Cho's teachers may have taken his reluctance to speak as part of second-language acquisition, rather than what may have been a form of autism (p.38).
3. Chart developed by writer based on cultural patterns and displays described in Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, and Simonds (2007) in *Intercultural Communications: A text with readings*. This may be useful in adapting to First Nations and non-First Nations' perspective. The dimensions are outlined in Appendix A.
4. More information about North Star (Aapatsi'Kakatosi) Outreach Program can be found at [www.opokassin.org](http://www.opokassin.org)
5. More information about First Nations Council of Lethbridge can be found at <http://www.acleth.ca/projects.php>
6. Literal translation of English to Blackfoot: A Conversation with people other than us: Help Indian abandoned children feel well as a person. *Sitsipssat ohp o'kia'pitapi<sup>6</sup> Sspommihtaa niitsitapi ii'ksskitaitstaki sokimmohsi itapiiyi*
7. Literal translation of English to Blackfoot. *Nitsiniyi'taki* (I am grateful)....
8. Literal translation of English to Blackfoot. *Nitohkoitapiiyi* (I received a gift)...
9. Literal translation of English to Blackfoot: *Niksiksisttssi<sup>8</sup>* ...I am hopeful the time will come when all *ii'ksskitaiksi* (abandoned children) will be treated as *minii'pokaiksi* (special children).

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APPENDIX A – COMPILATION OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

PATTERN	NORTH AMERICAN *	NON-NORTH AMERICAN *
▲ Activity	“doing” associated with results, visible accomplishment	“being” associated with having a natural position in society
▲ Social Relationships	Concept of “equality” among middle class; less formal social conventions	“equality “ may be demeaning to the individual or their ascribed role in society; formal social conventions
▲ Motivation	People are the product of their achievements; “driven” to succeed	People have ascribed positions through birth, traditional status, etc
▲ Perception of World	Human controls environment; world seen as material to be used for benefit of humanity; people are unique among living beings and stand apart from nature. People feel they can make the world better for the future.	Humans are part of nature and strive for integration with the environment, rather than control. Fatalistic sense of human role in shaping environment
▲ Perception of Self and Individual	Separate identity; autonomy is encouraged from young; resist authoritative control preferring persuasion and appeal to individual; fragment relationships so that work and personal lives are separate; rational concept of time is lineal, flowing in one direction	Ascriptive caste and class in some cultures; compliance with tradition; reacts to others as whole persons finding it difficult to work with person of different beliefs and ethical code
▲ ▲ Time (Hall & Hall, 1987) p.129 Ting-Toomey & Oetzel)	M-Time: Monochromatic concept of time: Rational concept of time is lineal, flowing in one direction increasing ability to concentrate on one thing at a time.	P-time: Polychromic concept of time: simultaneous occurrence of many projects and many people with emphasis on connecting with people rather than completing transactions.
▲ ▲ Conflict Resolution	M-time, individualistic using a linear-sequential approach characterized by problem-solving and decision-making activities	P-time, collectivist approach with a spiral holistic viewpoint where rhythm of interaction between people must be restored, issues remain unsolved

Derived from Intercultural Communication: A Text with Readings (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007).

▲ ( Stewart, Danielian, Foster, 2007, p. 33-37; Kluckhohn, 1963).

▲ ▲(Hall & Hall, 1987, p.16; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, p. 129).

\* Referenced American culture, which is similar to Canadian.

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

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### Consent Form for “Helping Aboriginal Children-in-Care Develop a Healthy Identity”

**Name of Participant**

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**Contact Information:**

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Role/ Relationship to Research Project:**

(circle role)

First Nation Elder / Foster or Adoptive Parent / Foster or Adoption Worker

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### Introduction

You are being invited to participate in this research project because of your experience/ involvement with Aboriginal and Western culture and/or experience with fostered and adoptive children and families.

### Purpose of Research

Permanency for Aboriginal children-in-care is more challenging due to the difference in the Aboriginal and Western world view of “best interests of the child”, that lengthens the time it takes for Aboriginal children to find permanent homes. The purpose of this proposed research is to identify what Aboriginal children-in-care need to gain a strong cultural identity and how that process can be understood, shared and developed.

The research question seeks to understand how healthy cultural identity formation can be managed effectively for Aboriginal children-in-care.

Bridging the gap in cultural understanding between the two worlds may be the answer to helping Aboriginal children-in-care achieve a healthy identity formation. Sharing this knowledge between the two cultures can create understanding and respect for these children and the community.

## APPENDIX B

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### **Nature and Expected Duration of the Subject's Participation**

Your participation is requested for an interview and possibly a sharing circle, depending on the desires of the group. Interviews will be from two hours to half a day, with a follow-up once interview information has been transcribed. Interviews will be scheduled to use time as effectively as possible, within the capacity of the participants and the timelines required in completing the research and thesis.

### **Questions to be Asked**

Information from the interviews will be recorded, transcribed and each participant will be shown a copy of the transcript so that they decide what they prefer to be included. Some of the questions that participants may be asked include:

- What they feel is important to provide stability for Aboriginal foster and/or adopted children?
- What do their “children” need to know about their biological family and culture?
- What does Western society need to know about your culture?
- What are the best ways to share this information?

### **Consent to Allow the Session(s) to be Tape Recorded:**

The researchers prefer to tape the session(s) so an accurate record of the discussion can be completed. Once a transcript of the session is complete, the tape will be destroyed.

Do you agree to have the session taped under these conditions?

### **Privacy, Confidentiality and Anonymity**

The privacy of individuals involved in this research project by: only revealing the relationship of the participant to the research (elder, foster or adoptive parent, foster or adoption worker); general details about their background; along with information that is relevant to the research. Information collected during the interview will be transcribed and reviewed by the participant prior to release of any information.

The researchers will inform the participants when they are approached that they may withdraw from the study at any time. They will be asked if any information they provided may still be used in the study, if not it will be completely withdrawn.

### **Harms and Benefits**

Any anticipated harm to participants is controlled by ensuring the privacy and anonymity of the participants. There is no financial cost to participants or financial gain from this research.

## APPENDIX B

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The likely benefits that justify asking subjects to participate:

Benefits to researcher are that unanswered questions to a social issue will emerge with recommendations for action. The research also meets the requirements of obtaining a Master of Arts degree in Professional Communication with Royal Roads University.

Benefits to participants are that they have a vested interest in this research. The project gives the participants an opportunity for action, either by personal or collective action, or by conveying their knowledge and gaining insight into a social issue that concerns each of them.

Benefits to society results from bringing together people from diverse worldviews to focus on the question of intercultural competence and permanency for Aboriginal children-in-care will benefit these children and families and society overall.

### **Disclosure of conflicts of interest**

Both the researcher and the co-researcher work for a government agency that develops policy and works directly with clients. Any statistical information that is used related to policy and practice will come from public information. The research is conducted independently of any organization – government, band or social service agency.

Those invited to participate in the research may refuse to participate, and may also withdraw at any time. The researchers ask that this be negotiated prior to withdrawal, without any pressure.

### **Research Project Verification**

To confirm the information described about this research project, please contact Faculty Project Supervisor/Advisor, Josh Guilar at 250-391-2681, or [Joshua.guilar@royalroads.ca](mailto:Joshua.guilar@royalroads.ca)

### **Participant Consent**

I agree to become a participant in the research project as described and I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time.

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Participant

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Date

Consent may be provided verbally or in writing.