

Running head: SEVEN SPANS THICK: ABORIGINAL RESILIENCE

Seven Spans Thick: Exploring Resilience from the Perspectives of  
Aboriginal Peoples Living Off-Reserve

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### Abstract

Building on the limited foundation of asset-based research in Aboriginal communities, this study explores how Aboriginal peoples living off reserve experience and perceive resilience. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Aboriginal members of a small, non-native community. Themes emerging from the interviews highlight the importance of connections to family, culture, community, land, and public services, as well as to a sense of life purpose. These results support and expand existing resilience theory, and relate to social determinants of health and social capital theories. Implications of the study demonstrate the importance of a holistic approach to personal well-being, responsibility for which is balanced between the individual and society, and which requires careful negotiation between Aboriginal and mainstream cultures.

### Résumé

Puisque la plupart des études sur les questions autochtones se concentrent sur les problèmes et les conflits, on oublie souvent d'examiner la force caractère et la persévérance démontrées par les peuples autochtones. Le sujet de cette recherche est le bien-être et la réussite des personnes autochtones qui habitent hors-réserve. Les entrevues ont été faites avec cinq individus autochtones dans une petite communauté au Québec. Les thèmes qui en ressortent démontrent l'importance des liens avec la famille, la culture, la communauté, la terre, et les services sociaux, ainsi que l'importance d'avoir une 'raison d'être'. La théorie de résilience est à la fois soutenue et élargie par ces résultats, qui se rapportent aussi aux théories sociologiques comme le capital social. Cette étude démontre la valeur d'une approche holistique au bien-être, et souligne l'équilibre de la responsabilité entre l'individu et l'état. Elle souligne aussi l'importance qu'il faut porter aux négociations entre les différentes cultures.

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I would first like to thank the individuals who agreed to share their stories with me in this research study. I am honoured to have had the chance to hear about your lives and I hope that I have done your experiences justice in this work. Your strength and contributions to the community are what first provoked my questions about Aboriginal resilience.

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## PROLOGUE

My interest in Aboriginal resilience comes from a number of observations and stories. Paradoxical observations of healthy, inspiring, involved Aboriginal individuals and shocking statistics and negative news stories about Aboriginal peoples and communities make me wonder what helps some people do well in the face of so many risk factors. One story in particular gave a sense of urgency to my interest in Aboriginal resilience. It was told to me by a friend who went on a boat tour of artists in Northern Canadian communities. While on the trip, she met a young Inuk woman who was a talented throat singer. My friend was struck by the beauty and vision of this Inuk woman, who had great plans for her future. Several days later, the boat got word that this young woman had committed suicide after a fight with her boyfriend which resulted in a night in jail for them both. It appeared that the failure symbolised by a night in jail was too much for her, causing her to end her life. This story illustrates for me the fragility of well-being for many Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and has motivated me to learn more about the factors that help to protect or promote health.

Although motivated to learn more about Aboriginal resilience, I had considerable doubts as to whether I, as a White woman, was the best person to research this topic. Research in Aboriginal contexts has a poor track record, as it has tended to be conducted “on” Aboriginal people in an exploitative, oppressive manner. While weighing the potential consequences of my research, I decided that it was preferable to do something carefully than to do nothing at all. Fook (2004) writes, “Often people freeze into inaction because they have constructed their situation as involving unresolvable tensions” (p. 25); I believe that it is possible to find a way forward among these tensions. I have endeavoured to make the research process collaborative and honest. This thesis was designed and conducted with the above-mentioned Inuk woman in mind, in the hope that a better understanding of resilience will contribute to Aboriginal well-being.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	2
<b>Résumé</b> .....	3
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	4
<b>Prologue</b> .....	5
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	6
<b><u>CHAPTER ONE Introduction and Literature Review</u></b>	
Introduction.....	9
Review of the Literature .....	11
Aboriginal Context in Canada	
<i>Historical overview</i> .....	11
<i>Present Context</i> .....	13
Deficit versus Asset-Based Research.....	14
Resilience as a Framework for Research .....	16
<i>Introduction to Resilience Theory</i> .....	16
<i>Debates and Critiques of Resilience</i> .....	19
<i>Resilience Research in Aboriginal Contexts</i> .....	23
Research Questions .....	27
<b><u>CHAPTER TWO Methodological Process</u></b>	
Philosophical and Theoretical Framework .....	28
<i>Phenomenology</i> .....	28
<i>Grounded Theory</i> .....	30
Study Design	
<i>Sample</i> .....	30
<i>Data Collection</i> .....	32
<i>Data Analysis and Verification</i> .....	33
<i>Presentation of Results</i> .....	35
<i>Dissemination of Research</i> .....	35
Ethical Considerations .....	36

**CHAPTER THREE Results**

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## Individual Narratives: Portraits of Resilience

<i>Linda</i> .....	38
<i>Anne</i> .....	41
<i>Joseph</i> .....	44
<i>Lucie</i> .....	50
<i>Tracy</i> .....	54

**CHAPTER FOUR Analysis: Major Emergent Themes**

---

Connection to Family.....	57
Sense of Self and of Purpose .....	60
Aboriginal Culture .....	62
Remembering and Forgetting .....	67
Spirituality.....	68
Connection to Land.....	69
Solidarity and Gathering Together.....	71
Education and Knowledge .....	73
Contact with Social Services .....	75
Community Characteristics.....	76

**CHAPTER FIVE Discussion: Themes to Theory**

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## Resilience Theory

<i>Supported Theoretical Concepts</i> .....	80
<i>Theoretical Debates</i> .....	82
<i>Resilience Theory Broadened</i> .....	83

## Additional Theories .....

<i>Social Capital</i> .....	85
<i>Social Determinants of Health</i> .....	89

## Emerging Tensions and Balances .....

<i>Agency and Determinism</i> .....	91
<i>Them and Us</i> .....	93
<i>Resistance and Resilience</i> .....	94

## **CHAPTER SIX Limitations and Future Directions**

Research Limitations .....	96
Implications of Research Findings.....	97
<i>Practice Implications</i> .....	98
<i>Research Implications</i> .....	101
<i>Policy Implications</i> .....	103
Concluding Remarks.....	104
<b>References</b> .....	106
<b>Appendix A:</b> Letter of Introduction.....	115
<b>Appendix B:</b> Consent Form .....	117
<b>Appendix C:</b> Interview Guide.....	119
<b>Appendix D:</b> Questionnaire .....	121
<b>Appendix E:</b> Follow-up Letter.....	122
<b>Appendix F:</b> Tri-Council Policy Statement Certificate .....	123
<b>Appendix G:</b> Ethics Certificate.....	124



## CHAPTER ONE

The paradoxical representation of both difficulty and wellness within Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> communities presents interesting questions for social work research. There is a stark contrast between shocking social statistics<sup>2</sup> about Aboriginal populations, and Aboriginal examples of success and well-being at both individual and community levels (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), and much to be learned from the phenomenon of resilience, or well-being in the face of adversity (Masten, 2006). Resilience is particularly relevant in Aboriginal contexts, where the effects of colonisation and oppression continue to impact the well-being of many Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities (Chansonneuve, 2005). Using resilience as a framework for this study provides a way of acknowledging the adversity faced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada while concentrating on positive outcomes and successes.

The focus on negative statistics and events concerning Aboriginal peoples tends to eclipse examples of strength and capacity in native communities across the country (Richmond, Ross, & Egeland, 2007). Most research on Aboriginal issues is deficit-based; an approach that overlooks what is working well in communities while maintaining a system in which people have to prove that they have extensive needs in order to receive resources (Bartley, 2006). This is in contrast to an asset-based perspective in research, which provides a valuable way of identifying strengths and capabilities and results in capacity-building policies and services (Morgan & Ziglio, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with current terminology, the term Aboriginal is used in this study to describe all Indigenous Peoples in Canada, which includes Métis, First Nations and Inuit people (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2003). Specific peoples or nations are named when they are the focus of the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> These statistics include suicide rates 8-36 times the national average (MacNeil, 2008) or domestic violence rates of 39% (Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003).

Combining the phenomenon of Aboriginal resilience with the need for asset-based research, this study is designed to learn from Aboriginal individuals demonstrating resilience through leadership and engagement in their community. The research questions on which the study is based are: What do Aboriginal individuals living off-reserve consider to be important influences in their lives? What factors do these individuals attribute to their resilience? How can Aboriginal resilience be fostered in non-native communities? The purpose of this research is to explore Aboriginal experiences and perceptions of resilience, with the goals of better understanding what helps people do well in the face of difficulty, learning ways to promote resilience, and broadening the relatively narrow, Western definition of resilience to include Aboriginal perspectives.

In order to meet these objectives, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five Aboriginal individuals from a small community in Quebec. Participants' Aboriginal identities include Cree, Inuit, Métis, and Mi'kmaq. These individuals were asked to share their definitions and stories of resilience, and their thoughts on what fosters and contributes to Aboriginal resilience in off-reserve communities. Analysis of these interviews reveals common themes that substantiate and expand the construct of resilience, giving rise to debates and applications of the theory. Tensions between agency and determinism, Aboriginal and 'mainstream' cultures, and resistance and resilience arise throughout the interviews.

The following pages of this first Chapter discuss in greater detail the literature on Aboriginal issues, asset-based research, and resilience theory, and the connection between this literature and the research questions. The second Chapter focuses on the

research methodology, including ethical considerations. Results are presented in Chapter Three, where individual narratives of each respondent are summarized. Following these results, Chapter Four explores in detail the ten major themes emerging from data analysis. The fifth Chapter relates these themes to theoretical framework of the study, demonstrating areas of substantiation, debate, and theory development. Finally, limitations and implications of the study are presented in Chapter Six, including future directions for social work practice, research and policy.

## Review of the Literature

### *Aboriginal Context in Canada*

#### *Historical Overview*

In order to situate this study, it is important to review significant historical events which continue to impact the well-being of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The arrival of travelers and explorers in present-day North America marks the beginning of a series of major changes in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Although Aboriginal peoples and explorers had sporadic contact as early as 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the time of Columbus, Cabot, and Cartier that the encounters grew more extensive (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples RCAP, 1996). This time was characterised by commercial relationships, dependence of explorers on the skills and knowledge of the Aboriginal peoples, and a degree of cooperation and mutual benefit between Aboriginal peoples and settlers. With the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this relationship deteriorated as infectious disease, war, relocation and colonisation took Aboriginal lives, land, families, and culture (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000). By the time of Confederation, Aboriginal peoples were perceived by the new government as a “problem”, and official policies of

assimilation were adopted under the Indian Act. The Indian Act controlled (and still controls) Aboriginal identity and status, land rights, cultural practices, governance, and “almost every area of the daily life of Indians” (RCAP, 1996, p. 281).

Starting in 1879 and continuing for over 100 years, church-run residential schools for Aboriginal children were mandated by the new Canadian government. Separating children from their families and communities, these schools were designed to re-socialise and assimilate children into a non-Aboriginal way of life. Their initial purpose was “to kill the Indian in the child” (RCAP, 1996, p. 365). Connections to Aboriginal language, culture, traditions, and stories were severed and prohibited, to be ‘replaced’ with 19<sup>th</sup> century European, Christian ideology (Kirmayer et al., 2000). Formal reports of neglect and abuse at the schools were made as early as 1907, but the Department of Indian Affairs was reluctant to intervene once it had given over responsibility to the churches (RCAP, 1996).

As the failures of the residential school system intersected with the rise of social concern for Aboriginal peoples in the 1950s, child welfare became a new area of intervention. With the idea that Aboriginal peoples should receive the same social services as ‘mainstream’ Canadians, child welfare services expanded onto reserves (Bennet, Blackstock & De La Ronde, 2005). This resulted in the dramatic rise in the apprehension of Aboriginal children, dubbed the “Sixties Scoop” (Bennet et al., 2005). Although Aboriginal children only comprised 4% of the population, they represented 40% of children in care by the end of the 1960s (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Most of these children were fostered or adopted into non-Aboriginal families, separated from their siblings, and never returned to their families or culture. While some children were

apprehended as a result of serious abuse or neglect, most of the children were removed from homes where poverty necessitated crowded living conditions or the absence of parents, or where the parents' experiences at residential school hindered their ability to care for their children (Bennet et al., 2005).

### *Present Context*

The oppressive policies of the Indian Act, the residential school system, and the Sixties Scoop are linked to many of the current problems in Aboriginal communities (Chansonneuve, 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2003). The devastation caused by these policies is evident: Aboriginal peoples have an average suicide rate five to seven times the national average (Health Canada, 2006), and are disproportionately represented in rates of incarceration, physical and mental illness, domestic violence, and substance misuse (Chansonneuve, 2005). This leads many people to consider the Canadian government to have carried out cultural genocide against Aboriginal peoples (Bennet et al., 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2000). The recent emergence of detailed stories about the devastating effects of residential schools has prompted the creation of organisations such as the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Indian Residential School Survivor Society. It is clear that the health and well-being of Aboriginal peoples have been compromised throughout the time of contact, settlement, and colonisation, and that this compromise continues today.

According to the 2006 census, there are just over one million Aboriginal people in Canada, representing approximately 4% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2008<sub>a</sub>). Of the Aboriginal population, 60% identify as First Nations, 34% as Métis, and 5% as Inuit. Aboriginal cultures are diverse, with 11 major languages spoken in 60 different dialects,

and numerous distinct nations and traditions (Kirmayer et al., 2003). Although 22 reserves are excluded from census calculations because of incomplete enumeration, the data indicates that more than half of Aboriginal peoples in Canada live off-reserve, in urban or rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2008<sub>b</sub>). Despite some of the highest average rates of poverty, illness, suicide, unemployment, and incarceration in the country (Kirmayer et al., 2003), the health and well-being of Aboriginal communities vary considerably. For example, whereas the suicide rates of some Aboriginal communities are among the highest worldwide, suicide is virtually nonexistent in many other communities (Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde, 2007). It is this variation that provokes questions about resilience and provides hope in the face of complex societal challenges.

#### *Deficit versus Asset-Based Research*

The terrors of our nature and the world remind us forever how vulnerable we are. Hence biological and behavioral scientists have spent a great deal of time, energy, and resources exploring the roots of our aggression, alienation, disease, and unease. What is often overlooked, but seems more awesome and miraculous, is our resilience as a species. (Werner & Smith, 1982, p. 152)

Although pathologically-focused research contributes important knowledge and understanding, it has several limitations. As discussed by Morgan and Ziglio (2006), deficit models tend to define people only in terms of what they are lacking, and to portray these needs as necessitating external professional intervention. This has the perverse consequence of pressuring people to prove that they are worse off than others are in order to justify resources or services, impacting the sense of capacity and worth of the individual or community (Morgan & Ziglio, 2006). Wade (1995) discusses the deficit-based approach at an individual level, explaining that a focus on pain, disorder, and deficits consolidates victim status and hinders the person from identifying his/her

capabilities. In the case of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the problem-focused model has a stereotyping effect, fostering the assumption that deficits are inherent to Aboriginal peoples and are experienced equally by all native communities and individuals.

The deficit model dominates research in Aboriginal contexts, clearly establishing the devastating effects of colonialism, forced assimilation, geographic relocation, residential schools and the 'sixties scoop' (Chansonneuve, 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). This literature explores the symptoms of these detrimental events among Aboriginal peoples, including high rates of physical and mental illness, substance misuse, family violence, and suicide (Chansonneuve, 2005). Deficit-based studies demonstrate that Aboriginal peoples have significantly lower health outcomes than the general Canadian population, but little research has explored the strengths and capability of these communities.

“When we investigate what makes someone strong instead of what causes weakness, we are more likely to identify that which bolsters health” (Ungar, 2005, p. xx). As suggested by Ungar, an asset-based model promotes the strengths and capabilities of individuals or communities by highlighting examples of what is already working well. This has a positive impact on health promotion and protection, and fosters self esteem and sense of agency (Morgan & Ziglio, 2006). In addition, Bartley (2006) points out that a shift from deficits to capabilities has a transformative effect on social policy development. Morgan and Ziglio (2006) call for more asset-based research to balance existing evidence provided by pathogenic studies. Resilience offers a valuable framework for a move towards an asset-based approach to research.

*Resilience as a Framework for Research**Introduction to Resilience Theory*

The construct of resilience was first systematically studied in the 1970s by researchers in the field of developmental psychology who, when investigating the developmental risk factors for psychopathology, observed that a portion of high-risk children coped unexpectedly well (Masten, 2006). This phenomenon caught the attention of psychologists and psychiatrists, who designed studies to identify risk and protective factors, create models of resilience, and promote resilience in practice and policy (Garmezy, 1974; Masten, Morison, Pellegrini & Tellegen, 1990; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1982).

One of the first resilience studies was undertaken by Norman Garmezy, who studied the etiology of schizophrenia and was intrigued to observe high-risk children demonstrating surprisingly healthy development (Masten & Powell, 2003). This prompted the creation of “Project Competence”, in which Garmezy and his students initiated longitudinal studies of competence, risk and resilience in youth. Other influential longitudinal resilience research includes the Kauai Longitudinal Study by Werner and Smith (1982), which found that one out of ten high risk children in the study “managed to develop into competent and autonomous young adults” (p. 153). These early investigations into resilience provide an important introduction to the phenomenon.

The great insight of these pioneers was not simply in recognizing the diversity of outcomes . . . but in realizing that the study of resilience in these children’s lives had the potential to inform practices and policies aimed at changing the odds for positive development. (Masten, 2006, p. 3)

*Levels of analysis in research.* Resilience research has since expanded beyond the field of developmental psychology to include numerous studies of resilience at the family



level (Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002; Lietz, 2006) and in the context of child welfare (Gilligan, 2006; Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006). These studies support the asset-based approach, which aims to enhance the capabilities and strengths of children and families rather than emphasising what is not working well. In a mixed-methods study by Lietz (2006), family experiences of risk, functioning, and strengths were explored through surveys and interviews. When discussing the results of the research, the author writes, “these findings may even suggest that strength building may be a more strategic intervention than reducing risk when working with families” (Lietz, 2006, p. 580).

In addition to these individual and family- based studies, resilience research has also focused on community and cultural levels of analysis. The construct has been applied to the community level by researchers such as Blackstock and Trocmé (2005) and Chandler and Lalonde (1998). Arthur, Glaser and Hawkins (2000) present a study on prevention planning in communities in the United States, highlighting the importance of evidence-based predictors of health and behaviour outcomes to community-level resilience. Broadening the research spectrum even further, an international team of researchers have investigated the meaning and experience of resilience across cultures, exploring the social construction of the term and expanding the predominately Western perspectives in the existing literature (Ungar, 2004; Ungar, Clark, Kwong, Makhnach, & Cameron, 2005).

*Defining resilience.* These numerous studies on resilience define and operationalise the phenomenon in different ways. For example, Masten (2006) defines resilience as “good adaptation in a context of risk” (p. 4), whereas Ungar (2004) writes,

“resilience is the outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy” (p. 352). The way in which researchers define resilience impacts how the study is approached. Some studies select specific behaviours as indicators of resilience, such as safer sex (Chewning et al., 2001) and academic performance (Mykota & Schwean, 2006), whereas other studies select as indicators the absence of behaviours such as suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) or alcohol misuse (Torres Stone, Whitbeck, Chen, Johnson, & Olson, 2006). Other studies examine large pools of data for correlations between positive outcomes and plausibly related factors. For example, Richmond et al. (2007) analysed data from the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey and found that social support was associated with higher levels of self-reported health status. Finally, a handful of qualitative studies have investigated resilience directly, by asking individuals to reflect on factors that supported or hindered them in the face of difficulties (Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller, & Morrissette, 2005; Ungar et al., 2005).

There are two fundamental elements common to all of these conceptualisations of resilience: exposure to some sort of challenge or adversity, and a positive outcome. As discussed by Masten (2006), these two components are subjective judgements; what constitutes a ‘challenge’ or a ‘positive’ outcome will differ depending on who is asked. This judgement presents the first major debate in the operationalisation of resilience. While most scholars of resilience agree there are multiple forms of adversity, there is considerable debate as to how to interpret and define ‘success’, ‘positive outcome’, or ‘good adaptation’.

*Debates and Critiques of Resilience*

*What counts as resilient?* Richman and Fraser (2001) question whether resilient outcomes are only those that are exceptionally successful, or whether average functional competence can be considered a resilient outcome. Do people demonstrate resilience when they survive or when they thrive? Hauser, Allen and Golden (2006) pose the question, “Should competence be defined by capacities that a culture deems necessary, or by the absence of impairment, or by both?” (p. 5).

A wide range of positions on this debate are represented in the literature: Ungar (2004) describes a social constructionist approach where individuals define positive outcomes for themselves, Lalonde (2006) uses the absence of a negative indicator (suicide) as a positive outcome, and Hauser et al. (2006) measure resilience by above-average positive functioning (close, constructive relationships, high levels of social and emotional development). Canavan (2008) describes this debate as “one of the most significant challenges for resilience as a concept” (p. 3), and one without a resolution in sight. In order to move forward in this debate, Masten (2006) concludes, “it is important when judgements about resilience are made (in research, practice, or policy) that the criteria for judging positive outcomes be clearly indicated” (p. 5). Making explicit the selected criteria for resilience acknowledges the existence of other indicators of positive outcomes.

*Resilience as a Western ideal.* A related debate that features in much of the literature is the cultural relevance and context of resilience. Rigsby (1994) criticises the Americanisation of resilience, asserting that it is a “quintessentially U.S. concept” (p. 85). Barton (2005) points out that “the notion of defying the odds, exceeding expectations,

overcoming adversity, and the like fits well with an individualistic society's competitive ethos" (p. 142). Rather than dismissing resilience as an inherently individualistic, American ideal, Ungar (2004) explains how it has been predominantly conceptualised by Western professionals, and writes, "the bulk of the resilience literature is based on a Eurocentric view of the world" (p. xvii). He advocates for the expansion of the construct of resilience to represent the experiences of minorities, marginalised groups, and diverse cultural realities.

Ungar (2004) argues that a social constructionist approach to resilience allows for alternate, culturally appropriate definitions of success, health and well-being. The author acknowledges the complexity that this approach brings to the debate, suggesting, "A constructionist discourse need not, however, be an excuse for absolute relativism with its implied anarchy between competing definitions of health" (p. 357). Barton (2005) supports this dynamic approach, explaining that resilience is a relative phenomenon rather than a mechanical, linear process. Viewed in this way, Barton (2005) argues that that many of the limitations of resilience research can be transcended.

Alternative conceptualisations of resilience and of the value attributed to coping positively with adversity can be found in numerous cultures. One example of non-Western understanding of resilience comes from the Iroquois legend of the Peacemaker and the creation of the Iroquois Confederacy. Paul Wallace, an ethnohistorian who was adopted into the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation in 1949, explains the legend of Deganawidah, the Peacemaker. Deganawidah tells the chiefs that their skin must be seven spans thick in order to be able to withstand the adversity and criticism faced by

leaders (Wallace, 1946/1994). This image illustrates a Mohawk conceptualisation of resilience dating back at least several centuries.

*The trait trap.* Deganawidah does not specify whether chiefs are born resilient or whether resilience is available to everyone. Some of the language used to describe resilience suggests that it is a personal trait, a sort of invincible phenotype. Children who demonstrate normative or exceptional development despite numerous risk factors are often said to ‘have what it takes’ or to have ‘the right stuff’ to withstand adversity. Garmezy (1982) once described children demonstrating resilience as “invulnerable . . . keepers of the dream” (p. xix). Despite this initial tendency to understand resilience as an individual characteristic, there is a general consensus in the literature that resilience is an outcome of complex processes involving external and internal factors rather than an inherent personal attribute (Hauser et al., 2006; Lalonde, 2006; Masten & Powell, 2003; Ungar, 2005; Werner & Smith, 1982). Masten and Powell (2003) write, “Resilience is not a trait of an individual, though individuals *manifest* resilience in their behavior or life patterns” (p. 4). Lalonde (2006) cautions against the trait trap, explaining,

“it is dangerous because traits are rarely taken to be malleable, and if resilience can only be identified but not fostered (you either “have what it takes” to overcome adversity or you don’t), and if risk factors are ubiquitous and inevitable (poverty will be with us until the meek inherit the earth), then we are left with little in the way of real motivation or useful tools to design prevention and intervention strategies” (p. 54).

Proponents of resilience indicate that positive response to adversity is a dynamic and evolving process, rather than a permanent state of being. As Masten and Powell (2003) articulate, resilience theories must recognise that no person should be expected “to be doing well every minute of the day, under all imaginable circumstances, or in perpetuity” (p. 4). Adherents to this perspective explain that every person has a breaking

point or a limit to the adversity they are able to withstand (Hauser et al., 2006; Ungar, 2005).

*Universally accessible outcome?* At the other end of the spectrum from the ‘trait trap’ is the potentially harmful idea that if one person can survive and thrive in the face of adversity, then everyone else should be able to as well. This idea overlooks the constraints and oppression faced by many individuals, and is often used to justify a neo-liberal agenda of cutting back services in the name of personal responsibility (Canavan, 2008; Jordan, 2006; Ungar, 2005). Lalonde (2006) warns against this interpretation of resilience, suggesting that it leads to the presumption that a set of ideas or practices that work well in one context can be applied to others as a one-size-fits-all recipe for resilience. Somewhere between the two extremes of resilience as a phenotype and resilience as a universally attainable goal lies the idea that, when a person “accesses communal health resources and finds opportunities to express individual resources, so too will resilience be experienced” (Ungar, 2005, p. xxiv).

*A Pollyanna concept?* A major criticism of resilience research is that it reframes misery by glorifying adaptation to adversity, which can deflect attention away from underlying inequality or oppression (Bartley, 2006; Canavan, 2008). As a result, the consequences of structural inequality can be overlooked when policy makers and social work practitioners are blinded to “the concrete awfulness that some children and parents face in their lives at an individual level” (Canavan, 2008, p. 4). Resources and energy are then spent facilitating positive adaptation to difficult circumstances, rather than changing the difficult circumstances directly. There is no obvious resolution to this tension between immediate micro needs and macro level inequality, but Canavan (2008) reminds

advocates of resilience that “effective reflective practice should at least ensure that collective social responses stay on the practice agenda” (p. 5).

Despite these debates and criticisms, the construct of resilience appears to demonstrate a certain amount of... resilience. Even though the construct poses significant challenges in terms of ideology, research design, and practical implication, most researchers are determined not to abandon resilience altogether. Canavan (2008) is frank about its appeal: “Practitioners and policy-makers are excited by this research for the simple reason that it offers hope in the face of the often intractable difficulties children and families face in their lives” (p. 2).

#### *Resilience Research in Aboriginal Contexts*

“If the concept of resilience can be stretched to apply to First Nations, as I believe that it can, then the best chances for success lie in the efforts of First Nations to reassert cultural sovereignty and to expand the indigenous knowledge base that has allowed them to adapt to and, in some cases, overcome the climate of adversity.” (Lalonde, 2006, p. 68)

The extensive deficit-based literature confirms the first condition for the application of resilience in an Aboriginal context: adversity. Lalonde (2006) notes it is “relatively straightforward” (p. 58) to show that Aboriginal peoples face particular adversity or risk. He lists the losses of land, cultural and religious traditions, and the systematic removal of children from families among the numerous factors demonstrating the higher burden of risk faced by Aboriginal peoples.

Despite this ominous list of risk factors, there are examples of Aboriginal individuals and communities who demonstrate the second condition for resilience: positive outcomes in the face of adversity. Zimmerman, Ramirez, Washienko, Walter and Dyer (1998) point out that in spite of the systematic efforts to eliminate Aboriginal

communities in North America, native cultures and traditions still exist, and some are even thriving. It is easy to lose sight of this resilience among the high averages of pathological indicators. As discussed by Lalonde (2006), if the rates of poor health and social malaise were “uniformly high in each and every Aboriginal community or group, then there would be no hope for demonstrating resilience” (p. 59), but this is not the case.

Existing research on Aboriginal resilience has been conducted from various perspectives. The majority of studies examine resilience in the context of a particular social issue, such as mental health, child welfare, suicide or substance abuse (Borowsky, Resnick, Irelands, & Blum, 1999; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Mykota & Schwean, 2006; Torres Stone et al., 2006). For example, Chandler and Lalonde (1998) investigate the relationship between cultural continuity and suicide in Aboriginal communities in British Columbia. This longitudinal study found that communities engaged in cultural preservation and restoration had considerably lower rates of youth suicide. In a subsequent study, Hallett et al. (2007) found that communities in which a higher percentage of residents had a conversational knowledge of their Aboriginal language were associated with few or no instances of youth suicide. This body of research provides important insights into protective factors such as traditional practices (Torres Stone et al., 2006), social relationships (Borowsky et al., 1999), and community resilience (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005).

In addition to this issue-focused research, a small number of asset-based studies examine the phenomenon of resilience itself. In a quantitative study, Richmond et al. (2007) found that social support had a strong impact on self-reported thriving health of female respondents. Fuller-Thomson (2005) investigated the role of grandparents in First



Nations communities, describing their involvement as a sign of strength and resilience in the family. On a more theoretical level, Brokenleg and van Bockern (2003) developed the “Circle of Courage” resilience model based on traditional Aboriginal principles of positive youth development.

Though still uncommon, some researchers have explored culturally-specific definitions and experiences of resilience and health. Michael Ungar and an international team of researchers have initiated the International Resilience Project (IRP) across fourteen cultures, including an Innu community in Newfoundland (Ungar et al., 2005). This unique project seeks to understand “commonalities and differences in how the construct is understood across cultures and contexts” (Ungar et al., 2005, p. 2). In interviews, Innu youth and elders emphasised the importance of cultural integration in understanding resilience, as well as the significance of community events, elders, and self-esteem (IRP, 2006). Several graduate theses have investigated resilience demonstrated by Aboriginal peoples, focusing on an American Indian reservation (Evans, 1997), First Nations youth in Northern Quebec (Flanagan, 2002), and on residential school survivors (Nichol, 2000). These research projects all highlight the importance of cultural context, self knowledge and social support in maintaining well-being.

Although more than half of Aboriginal peoples in Canada live off reserve, there is a paucity of resilience research with this population. As discussed by Brown et al. (2005), off-reserve Aboriginal issues do not directly fall under the jurisdiction of federal, provincial or municipal governments, and so off-reserve Aboriginal perspectives on challenges and opportunities are often overlooked. Notable exceptions include Brown et al. (2005), who conducted a participatory action research study in which several

Aboriginal youth living in inner city Winnipeg were asked to share their experiences, ideas about healthy communities, and opinions about the future. Participants discussed experiences of racism and exclusion, as well as positive opportunities for participation in their community. Another study focused on the experiences of urban Aboriginal peoples was conducted by Cardinal (2006) in the Greater Vancouver region. This research sought to evaluate the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples living in the region, and to examine the sustainability of the community. Cardinal (2006) describes sustainability as “most tangible in an urban setting, and requires the involvement and equity of all segments of society” (p. 219). Cardinal’s study found that the quality of life of urban Aboriginal peoples was significantly lower than that of other residents in the area, and the author suggests that the situation is exacerbated by a lack of awareness of and research with off-reserve Aboriginal peoples.

One of the obstacles to the exploration of Aboriginal experiences of resilience is the oppressive history of research in Aboriginal communities. A one-sided “taking” of knowledge and information by researchers has exploited many individuals and communities (Nielsen & Gould, 2007). In a chapter about the relational world view, based on his presentation at the Resiliency in Families Series, Cross (1998) describes his concerns with the sharing of Indigenous knowledge. Explaining his ambivalence about ‘owning’ words or ideas once they have been written and published, Cross (1998) says, “Just as our land has been appropriated in the past, our thoughts and ideas are slowly slipping away into other peoples’ ownership through copyright” (p. 144). Warning researchers against this colonisation through research, Nielsen and Gould (2007) make

numerous recommendations, including particular attention to reflexivity on the part of the researcher and a collaborative approach that emphasises reciprocity.

### *Research Questions*

The study presented here is designed to contribute to the body of research focused on the resilience of Aboriginal peoples living off reserve. I asked the questions: What do Aboriginal individuals, who are engaged members of a non-native community, consider as important influences in their lives? What factors do these individuals attribute to their resilience? How can Aboriginal resilience be fostered in non-native communities? The stories shared by research participants provide insight into Aboriginal experiences and perceptions of resilience. This has the potential to expand Western notions of resilience to reflect Aboriginal voices, and to inform future research questions and the development of strength-based policies, services and programs.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Methodological Process

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Freire, 1970, p. 39)

#### *Philosophical and Theoretical Framework*

In order to situate the following methodology and research design, I will begin by introducing the philosophical assumptions on which the study is based. The ontological premise of this research is that multiple realities exist, creating diverse perspectives on resilience and on the meaning of life experiences. This ontological position makes qualitative research an appropriate methodology, as “When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities” (Creswell, 2007, p. 16). From among the many forms of qualitative inquiry, this study is primarily phenomenological in its design (Moustakas, 1994), although the analysis of theoretical constructs is also influenced by the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

#### *Phenomenology*

According to Moustakas (1994), the aim of phenomenological research is “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Phenomenological researchers identify a phenomenon in human experience, such as grief, mothering, or resilience, and gather the perceptions and descriptions of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A composite description is then developed from common elements of individual accounts of the experience, providing an enhanced understanding of the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (1994) recommends the

phenomenological approach “to examine a phenomenon and the meaning it holds for individuals” (p. 40). The phenomenon in question in this research project is resilience, and the purpose of the study is to understand the meaning of resilience to participants.

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy, particularly in the works of Edmund Husserl (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl emphasized the value of knowledge based on intuition and perception, and believed that “transcendental phenomenology . . . precedes, and makes possible, the empirical sciences, the sciences of actualities” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). This foundation of phenomenology honours the individual meaning ascribed to experiences, allowing for multiple realities and making room for the contribution of Aboriginal voices.

The current philosophical perspectives on phenomenology are too numerous to discuss here, but Creswell (2007) distinguishes between two main approaches: *hermeneutic* phenomenology and *transcendental* or *psychological* phenomenology. The primary difference between these two approaches is the voice of the researcher. Hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretive process in which the researcher mediates between the different meanings, whereas transcendental phenomenology is a descriptive process where the researcher ‘brackets out’ his/her experiences and preconceptions in order to see the phenomenon as though for the first time (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). While influenced by the transcendental approach, this study follows more of a hermeneutic process in that interpretation has an important role in the analysis of interviews.

### *Grounded Theory*

Within the greater framework of phenomenology, this study is also influenced by the grounded theory approach. Developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory is based on the assumption that social phenomena are evolving and complex, and should not be forced into pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Creswell, 2007). The explicit goal of grounded theory is the development of theories based, or 'grounded', in data from the field (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Proponents of grounded theory have taken the methodology in different directions, including the postmodern, constructivist interpretations of Charmaz (2006) and the systematic procedures developed by Strauss and Corbin (2008). Common to all of these perspectives is the idea that the people who experience a phenomenon have important perspectives and insights from which a theory can be generated to better understand the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007).

This study utilizes 'small g' grounded theory, in the sense that while the research does develop resilience theory based on the data gathered in the interviews, it is not designed as a grounded theory study. Grounded theory is used to inform the theoretical analysis in order to more fully understand the gap between individual experiences and the high level theory of resilience. New light is shed on the construct of resilience through participants' perceptions and experiences, and the theory is expanded by their insights.

### *Study Design*

#### *Sample*

In order to explore the experiences of and perspectives on resilience of off-reserve Aboriginal individuals, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with community members representing various degrees of community involvement. These

individuals all live in the small towns of a semi-rural municipality in Quebec. According to the 2006 Census, this municipality of just over seven thousand has an Aboriginal population of approximately 3% (Statistics Canada, 2008<sub>c</sub>). The population density is 13 people per square kilometre. Although respondents live in several towns in the municipality, most are engaged in one central village.

As discussed in the review of the literature, the selection criteria for resilience is highly contextual and culturally specific (Masten, 2006; Ungar, 2003). For the purpose of this study, the criterion of community engagement is used as an indicator of resilience. Interviewees represent a variety of forms of engagement in the community, ranging from everyday involvement and participation, to community organisation and leadership. Their involvement in the community makes them role models and examples of success to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members. This selection criterion has been applied in other research studies as an indicator of resilience (Nichol, 2000).

Potential participants were identified using purposive snowball sampling (Padgett, 1998), beginning with several individuals in prominent positions of leadership in the community who were known to me. These people then recommended other potential respondents. A total of 4 women and 1 man participated in the research. My initial goal was to conduct a maximum of six interviews in order maintain the integrity of each respondent's story. Time constraints limited my ability to continue to follow the recommendations of participants. A sample size of 5 falls within the sampling range recommended by Creswell (1994) for phenomenological research, which should have a maximum of 10 interviewees.

### *Data Collection*

I first contacted potential participants by telephone, when I briefly described the study and asked for permission to send a letter of introduction. Participants who were interested in the study then received a letter explaining the project and inviting them to participate (see Appendix A). All individuals who were contacted expressed an interest in participating in the research, and were asked to select an interview date and time according to their schedules and preferences. Prior to the interview, informed consent was discussed, and willing participants completed the consent form (see Appendix B). Individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants in a location of their choice. All interviews were digitally recorded and were conducted according to an interview guide (see Appendix C). At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their educational background, primary language, and their self-rating of personal well-being (see Appendix D). Two out of the five interviewees did not complete the questionnaire because of time constraints or unforeseen obligations which resulted in their immediate departure after the interview. As a result, questionnaire results are not included in the analysis of the data.

The interview guide and questionnaire are influenced by the questions developed by Ungar et al. (2005) in their International Resilience Project, and were developed in collaboration with the Roots of Resilience<sup>3</sup> research project under Dr. Kirmayer (McGill University, 2008). In both of these studies, teams of researchers went through an extensive process of consultation and discussion to develop interview questions about resilience that provided room for personal meaning while maintaining the basic integrity

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<sup>3</sup> The Roots of Resilience project is an interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers in Canada and New Zealand with the goal of studying the factors that promote resilience among Indigenous people across the lifespan. See website listed in references: McGill University (2008)



of the construct. The interview guide was designed to elicit insights into success and strength in an Aboriginal context in terms of personal and traditional stories shared by interviewees.

#### *Data Analysis and Validation*

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were reviewed several times prior to coding. Quotes relevant to participants' experiences of resilience were then selected; a process termed horizontalization by Moustakas (1994) to describe the equal value assigned to all quotes. These statements were then grouped into themes, or “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). This open coding process is appropriate to both phenomenological and grounded theory approaches, as it allows the data to determine the codes rather than imposing pre-existing codes onto the data (Padgett, 1998). Ten major themes emerged from the interviews as shared components of the experience of resilience of Aboriginal peoples living off-reserve. These themes were then analysed in light of the theoretical framework of the study, and the contributions of the data to high-level theories were identified. The 'grounding' of theory in interview themes revealed areas where theoretical concepts were supported, debated, and broadened. This process also involved the inclusion of additional theories in order to reflect the experiences of participants.

After having transcribed and analysed all five interviews, I conducted member checks (Flick, 2006) with each of the interviewees to ensure that the transcripts and summaries remained true to what they shared in the interviews. Each participant was provided with a copy of the transcript and their own narrative summary, and was asked to verify the content of their interview (see follow-up letter Appendix E). Member checking

is a particularly important practice in anti-oppressive research because interviewees have the opportunity to revise the integrity of the results, and have the final say on how they are portrayed in the report. Padgett (1998) comments on the impact of member-checks, stating, “because respondents’ perspectives are not only honored but valued as authoritative, this can be an important step in guarding against researcher bias” (p. 100). In addition, Creswell (2007) lists member checking as one of eight validation strategies in qualitative research, explaining that the credibility of the study is enhanced when participants are invited to assess the data.

According to Creswell (2007), triangulation is a strategy in which corroborating evidence from different sources provides a deeper, more credible analysis. The primary source of data triangulation in this study comes from links between the data and existing theory and research. These comparisons are explored in depth in Chapter Five. Another source of verification comes from my own observations of the community while volunteering at the Festival organized by one of the participants and during informal visits to the community prior to the research study. These observations of the community’s social structure are consistent with the themes that arose during the interviews. In addition, collaboration with the Roots of Resilience research project (McGill University, 2008) provided the opportunity to triangulate the data with preliminary results from interviews in other communities, which were conducted with a similar interview guide. This collaboration also provided a context for peer feedback and consultation with Aboriginal researchers (Padgett, 1998).

### *Presentation of Results*

As discussed by Padgett (1998), analysis of qualitative interviews often reveals that the data should be presented as distinct narratives in order to maintain the integrity of each story. Considering the importance of the personal construction of meaning around the idea of resilience, participants' perspectives are a central component to the findings. As such, each participant is presented through a summary of their interview in the results section.

In an article reflecting on her own research process, Hyde (1994) comments, "limiting the research agenda to only "giving voice" was an abdication of responsibility to link data from informants with broader theoretical frameworks to advance social change" (p. 184). She explains that a lack of analysis "reifies and isolates subjects' voices, denying them and ourselves essential integration of knowledge from a variety of sources" (Hyde, 1994, p. 184). Thus a discussion of the themes, theory and research implication is presented after the individual narratives. These reflections and interpretations place the data in the wider context of existing research and social policy. Silverman (2005) emphasizes the importance of the researcher's interpretations, stating, "if we can draw out appropriate implications from these stories, moving from the personal to the practical, then we will have achieved something more substantial than merely providing some kind of experiential comfort blanket" (p. 17).

### *Dissemination of Research*

Results of the study are disseminated through this Master's thesis. Future dissemination may also take place in collaboration with the Roots of Resilience study, since de-identified copies of the five interview transcripts have been shared with this

international research team. Findings will also be disseminated to the research community in a format suggested by the research participants. Most participants recommended the creation of a collaborative piece between themselves and the researcher to be submitted to the local newspaper with the goal of raising awareness of Aboriginal issues while presenting portraits of local resilience. This notion of “giving back” through a mutually beneficial research process is of particular significance in Aboriginal contexts where studies have often involved the investigation of traditional knowledge with no associated benefit to the community (Bruyere, 1998). Providing the findings in a useful format to the community is one component of ethically sound research (Nielsen & Gould, 2007).

#### *Ethical Considerations*

An ethical concern in this study is my position as a non-native researcher. Although there is no official body to oversee research with Aboriginal members in the selected community, the fundamental principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) (Assembly of First Nations, 2007) have informed the research design and process. Through procedures such as member checking, informed consent, inviting suggestions from respondents, and consulting with Aboriginal colleagues, I have worked to base this study on OCAP principles in the absence of a formal governance structure. I have completed a certificate on the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (see Appendix F), and have reviewed the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples (Panel on Research Ethics, 2009). The Research Ethics Board of McGill University has reviewed and approved this study (see ethics certificate Appendix G).

Since I am familiar to the research community, an ethical concern arose from the possibility that participants might feel social pressure to participate in the study. The informed consent process was designed to make clear to participants that they were under no obligation to participate, and that there would be no negative repercussions if they chose to withdraw or not participate in the research. That none of the potential participants are relatives, close friends, or previous clients decreases the likelihood of any specific power dynamic between me and any of the participants.

An additional area of ethical concern relates to the degree of confidentiality that can be ensured in the study. Some participants chose public locations for the interview, and others chose to share their interview experiences with other community members. Given the small number of participants, the uniqueness of their stories, and the size of the community, there are practical limits to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed to individual respondents and to the community. This was discussed in the informed consent process, and identifying information has been carefully altered in the write-up of the study. Participants have been given the choice to be identified in the results provided to the community (see consent form Appendix B). Additional ethical considerations are incorporated into the discussion of the study's limitations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Results

Alongside each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of resistance (Wade, 1995, p. 201)

In the following pages, each of the participants will be presented through a summary of his/her story and thoughts on resilience. Since the interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to nearly 2 hours, the participants' narratives vary in length and in detail. The names of respondents and identifying details have been changed to maintain individual and community-level confidentiality. All participants indicated their willingness on the consent form to be directly quoted. In these quotes, emphasis is indicated by the use of italics. Narratives are presented in the order in which interviews were conducted.

#### *Individual Narratives: Portraits of Resilience*

##### *Linda*

I approached Linda about an interview because of her engagement in the community, including her involvement in a local women's group, her participation in the Autumn Festival (an annual event organised by Aboriginal community members), and her work as a seamstress. She was eager to share her story, as well as her thoughts on resilience. Linda was initially invited to participate in this research because of her apparent success and resilience, and her story shed a new light on this resilience by revealing a particularly challenging childhood.

Linda was born on a Cree reserve northeast of Edmonton where she lived until she was 5 years old, at which time she was placed in a non-native foster home. As a child Linda lived with a total of six foster families because of the abuse and alcoholism in

her home on the reserve. After living with a white foster-mother from the age of 7 to 16, Linda remembers the shock of returning to the reserve as a teenager. Some things she had forgotten, such as the lack of running water, but other things were new, such as the exclusion she experienced as the result of being perceived as “too white”.

In her late teens Linda moved from her father’s home to another foster family, and then to her brother’s home in Saskatchewan. She ended up in Yellowknife where she developed a friendship with the drummer of a band from Quebec. The drummer invited her to come to Quebec with him, and she travelled to the research community with him in 1983. It was in this community where Linda met the man who would become her husband, and where she decided to settle her family. Linda explains that getting married and having children was life-changing for her. Her role in her family helped her to leave behind alcohol addiction and gave her the desire to reconnect with her Cree heritage.

When reflecting on important influences in her life, Linda explains the central role of her foster mother. She describes how her foster mother taught her important skills, and encouraged Linda and her brother to take pride in their native heritage. Her foster mother’s advice has become an integral part of Linda’s own views on resilience. Taking pride in her native identity was not always easy for Linda, who experienced racism and stereotyping.

I’m not sure where I’d hear it- maybe from other people, or I read it or whatever, that the natives were no good for nothing. You know, we were just a bunch of drunks- worthless. So I had that, kind of like the shame of being native? And I didn’t want really anybody to know that I was native?

Linda explains the changes in support from the community over the years. “Well the first few years there was nothing. I had no, no, nothing at all until Lucie moved here.” For the first 15 years that Linda lived in the community, she felt that there was no

support. Linda says that the arrival of Lucie, a Métis woman, “was like a God-send”. She credits Lucie’s arrival with her reconnection with her native heritage and culture. Linda now participates in a prayer night and a sharing circle in the community, and feels that these meetings provide her with the opportunity to support other people as well as to receive support.

When reflecting on her role in fostering Aboriginal resilience, Linda emphasises the importance of raising awareness of native culture and history through both formal and informal means. She explains her plans to raise awareness and understanding by writing an article in the local paper for June 21<sup>st</sup>, the summer solstice and National Aboriginal Day. She is also interested in teaching a craft course for children based on traditional skills such as tanning hides and making leather.

The receptivity of the community is clearly an important aspect of Linda’s own resilience, as well as her views on Aboriginal resilience in the community. When first creating a place for herself in the community, Linda was one of two native people that she knew of, but she found that she was welcome. In regards to the success of the Autumn Festival, she explained, “It’s been great because people are *interested*, and they ask *questions*.” She says that people sometimes ask her if she is going to be involved in various events or activities, making her feel as though her participation in the communities is appreciated and even sought out.

Linda has concise recommendations for non-native communities that want to support Aboriginal resilience. She names support groups or sharing circles as an effective way of bringing native community members together, and she highlights the importance of spreading cultural awareness in the community.



Linda's story demonstrates a kind of resilience that is easily overlooked in the search for extreme examples. Linda's childhood of transition was marked with both abusiveness and love, and her current life is one of quiet accomplishment and well-being. She considers herself to have been "fairly successful" in making through the challenges in her life, and says that she feels "very well".

*Anne*

During the initial stages of research in the community, it was suggested to me that I contact Anne for an interview because of her involvement with a local women's group. Although Anne is not in a formal position of leadership in the group or in the community, her quiet determination and life story provide an important perspective in the exploration of Aboriginal resilience. As with Linda, Anne's story and thoughts on well-being are the sorts that are sometimes passed over when dramatic stories of resilience are sought. Born in the mid-1930s, Anne is the eldest of the research participants.

Anne is an Inuk woman, born in Northern Quebec near James Bay. Her family moved with the seasons and the hunting opportunities. When Anne was 10 years old, her father was approached by an Anglican priest and a Roman Catholic priest to send Anne and her sisters and aunts to residential schools. Her father brought her to the school by dog-team, where she spent the next 3 years in classes. In 1950, Anne got tuberculosis and spent 4 years in a hospital near the school.

That time... 1950 a lot of people got sick. From *everywhere*. Indians and Inuit, the hospital was just *packed*. Even hallways. And some of them were very sick.

During her 4 years in the hospital, Anne learned to write Inuktitut from the patient in the bed next to hers. She credits this skill acquisition with many of the opportunities that

followed in her life, in addition to providing her with the precious means to stay in touch with her father.

Anne's life post-tuberculosis involved more change. When she recovered, she returned to her family to find that she did not want to live in the crowded conditions of their home. With her father's blessing, Anne moved to a northern town where worked as a nurse's aid in the hospital for 4 years. In 1958, Anne and her sister travelled to Ontario, where they moved to the city and discovered the challenges of navigating urban life without a good grasp of English. With the help of a social worker, the sisters found work and lodging as live-in housekeepers. They both quit these jobs after a year. Anne then found work as a translator on a medical ship with Indian Affairs, and spent her summers touring the North by ship, translating for the doctors, social workers, dentists, and x-ray technicians.

Anne's life in the community began in 1970, when she moved to her husband's cottage with her husband and son. She continued her work as a translator until she became ill from the building where she worked, at which point she and her husband delivered mail together in the community for 8 years. She describes this time as one of self-sufficient isolation. "I never bothered with the neighbours before; me and my husband always go and keep company each other, and do our own things..." In part because of this independence, Anne had a particularly difficult time when her husband died. Anne's husband was her primary source of support and companionship, and his death meant that she had to begin to build her own social networks in the community.

Anne's contact with her family is a continuous theme in throughout her life. After her first Inuktitut letters to her family from the hospital, she maintained contact

with them in this way until her father died. She is still very close with her sister, who lives in the nearest city. Anne and her sister speak on the phone every day, and Anne visits her often, staying as long as she likes. She speaks in Inuktitut with her sister so that they won't forget their language. Anne also mentions her brother, who lives on a reserve an hour north of community, and her son, who lives with her.

Anne has acquired other sources of support in the community since her husband's death. She has a network of friends who she goes for walks with and who drive her to the city to see her sister. Her involvement in the women's group has been a particularly important source of friendship. Anne also makes use of formal community resources, such as the transportation offered by the local CLSC for medical appointments.

The rural environment of the community is a major source of well-being for Anne. She appreciates the natural setting of her home, and the clean air and water. Anne explains that she used to believe that living in the country was a luxury reserved for the upper-class.

I used to think, maybe only rich people can live in the country- I used to think that. I wanted to have a house, a home in the country- home when I am retired. I've got it - lots of land! yeah, I got my dream!

Although Anne values her semi-rural life, she admits feeling somewhat isolated and finds transportation difficult to arrange.

I am so alone here, I don't know... I don't know- what is going on in other- outside. See? [gestures out the window at the woods] Sometimes I've said, 'hey! I'm phoning you I'm just checking out if I'm not alone in this world?!'

When asked about the most important aspect of maintaining strength and well-being as an Inuk woman, Anne emphatically states "no drinking, no smoking". She refers to the changes in Inuit culture throughout the interview, suggesting that drugs,

alcohol, and money are causing deterioration in communities like the one she grew up in. Anne explains how a promise that she made to her father as a young woman never to touch alcohol has kept her healthy and strong throughout her life.

When I arrived at Anne's home for the interview, she was in the process of embroidering intricate beadwork on a miniature pair of mukluks. She is involved with an Inuit cultural centre in a nearby city, and is proud of her Inuit heritage. Anne's resilience is evident in these efforts to keep her traditional skills and language alive.

### *Joseph*

My hopes were high when I invited Joseph to participate in the research project. His involvement in the community, his knowledge as a hereditary chief, and his personal story provide a strong example of resilience. The morning of the interview Joseph hosted a sunrise ceremony as part of the local Autumn Festival, and when we had finished speaking he went to his office at a nearby museum. He is deeply involved in spreading knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal traditions and ways of being, both among Aboriginal peoples and non-native peoples.

Joseph was born on a reserve in New Brunswick. He is the second of nine children who were born over a 20 year span. Joseph's father's involvement in the military brought the family to Germany for several years when Joseph was 10 years old. As a result of having rickets as a child, Joseph entered the school system late and feels as though he never truly caught up.

When I left the reserve I still didn't comprehend what the alphabet was- the English alphabet. And then I started in Germany and, by then I was like trying to play a catch-up game, and they kept transferring me to the next class and I would just land running, still thinking about the stuff that I should be knowing or learning in grade two! But anyway. . . it was that kind of an experience in my

school, that I was running and running and running and I never got a really good elementary or even secondary education.

Joseph dropped out of grade 10 at age 19 and got married a year later. He had three daughters early in the marriage, and got his carpentry license. While working construction jobs in New Brunswick and in the United States, Joseph was elected to the band council. It was at this time that the 1969 White Paper was being debated on his reserve. While on the band council, Joseph disagreed with the chief's tendency to take whatever the government wanted to give them. Joseph did not think that the reserve was prepared to take over the administration of its own affairs, and knew that the money promised by the government would not go far in building up infrastructure and social programs.

Joseph believes that his political and social views were strongly influenced by his family's move to Germany and his exposure to other cultures.

I was realistic because I grew up, I went off the reserve, I grew up off the reserve and I knew how most people were surviving- they were paying taxes, paying telephone, electric bill, maintenance for their houses and so on, but the people on the reserve had no inkling about this kind of mentality and so they didn't have an idea that that 200, 000 dollars was not going to get us what, what Indian Affairs was telling us we were going to get.

As a result of these views, Joseph left the band council in disagreement with the chief, and ran against him 2 years later without success. As he predicted, the federal money ran out before the houses were completed and well before any social infrastructure could be established. Joseph is sceptical about the expectations of the government regarding the successful financial administration in the absence of human resource development on reserves.

I think it was a reaction by the government of Canada by dropping the money on the table, on the laps of- you know- here handle your own welfare, and I think

there was an expectation that they were going to mishandle it anyway because of the level of human resource development that was lacking in the reserve to do this kind of thing. And so all across the country I mean, the programs kind of flip-flopped here and there and the Indian never got a fair shake in the whole thing. And even today I think they've never even caught up yet- they haven't even stood up to brush themselves off from this whole big onslaught of reserve development, reserve life, and running the whole reserve. And new chiefs come in and they don't have any kind of education- they're popular in the community, but they make it in as chiefs, you know, 'I'll hire so-and-so and so-and-so, and show me how to run this thing'

After his work on the council, Joseph moved off reserve and worked in a series of jobs related to Aboriginal welfare. He started as a correctional officer in a local jail, and was promoted to a probation officer with the provincial justice department. This job came to an abrupt end when Joseph hit a moose on his way home from work and spent the next 3 months in the hospital. He expended all of his sick leave and vacation pay with the department, so he says "they had nothing to hold me there anymore, so they gave me my pink slip while I was in the hospital upside down on my bed!" While he was still in hospital, the head of the parole office in a nearby city offered Joseph work as a parole officer, which he accepted. Continuing his involvement in native social issues, Joseph then worked as a welfare officer for the Department of Indian Affairs. Another major car accident in the family brought this job to a close when Joseph's father was hit and killed by a car driven by an inebriated colleague of Joseph's. Shortly after this devastating event, Joseph returned to education at age 27.

During this next phase of his life, Joseph dedicated himself to university and to a variety of summer work. He found that his original interest in psychology developed into a focus on anthropology, which allowed him to explore Aboriginal history and ways of life. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Political Science and with several new additions to his work experience, including work as a student

coordinator for Indian Affairs. By the time of the Oka crisis in 1990, Joseph was working as a literacy coordinator for the provincial government in New Brunswick. In the aftermath of Oka, Joseph was involved in several commissions investigating Aboriginal issues in Canada.

This turbulent time also led to a separation from his wife. Joseph's increasing involvement in Aboriginal politics and his interest in his role as a hereditary chief did not match his wife's interests at the time.

all the kids had grown up and they are all gone to university, and she was kind of going in a different lifestyle, you know, partying, drinking, younger generation and stuff like that and I was kind of more involved in the spiritual aspects where, where drinking isn't, doesn't... I mean you don't bring out a case of beer and say 'let's have a pipe ceremony' you know, so these two things have to be... you kind of have to withdraw if you're going to do spiritual work

Joseph then moved to Ontario, where he stayed with his eldest daughter, enrolled in a Master's program in Canadian Studies, and met his current partner, a woman from France who had also separated from her spouse. Joseph moved to the research community with his partner in 1993.

The focus of Joseph's Master's thesis illustrates his views and experiences of Aboriginal culture. Analysing education systems, Joseph concluded that he is an example of a middle-ground educated person who has experience in both the traditional Aboriginal knowledge system and the mainstream education system. He believes strongly in the usefulness of mainstream educational tools in enhancing Aboriginal understanding, and says that his personal resilience is due in part to this combination.

I went back into the school system and kind-of used those tools from that school system to help me understand more about *my* own culture in a more organised process. And to be able to be put it down on paper and analyse it and come up with some means of enhancing our culture and our language and our tradition and our ceremonialism and so on, despite all the intrusions and despite the adversity

Joseph also emphasises the areas in which the sharing of Aboriginal knowledge is different from the mainstream approach. He frequently highlights that most Aboriginal cultures do not impose things on others- whether in regards to the imposition of values, stories, opinions, or teachings. This was particularly relevant when I asked him about traditional stories or teachings on resilience.

. . . So the stories are really an encyclopaedia- storytelling. But they're not really meant to say, you know, 'here's the moral of the story, you should listen to this, you can't do that' I mean, that's not the Indigenous way of relating to others. We don't impose our values on others.

He describes Aboriginal teachings and storytelling as 'open thinking' or thinking out loud by an elder or a teacher, and he explains that it is up to individuals to position themselves in the stream of the teachings. This is in contrast to the mainstream system of directed learning approaches and externalisation of thoughts and advice.

Joseph is familiar with the concept of resilience as it applies to Aboriginal cultures and peoples as a result of his work on Commissions and as the reviewer of articles on the subject. While he appreciates the value of the concept, he is concerned that examining the resilience of residential school survivors will be used to absolve the government of its responsibility to address the needs of these survivors. When asked about Mi'kmaq conceptualisations of resilience, Joseph describes 'hardy survivors', who have knowledge, wisdom, and good physical health.

When reflecting on his own resilience, Joseph emphasises his family, his role as a hereditary chief, and his education as the major contributions to his life. Joseph has many opportunities to share with others how he has gotten through difficulty, and he highlights his roles as a chief, a university professor, and a museum curator.



There are several characteristics of the community that Joseph names as helpful in making him feel at home and included. He mentions being drawn to the area because of people who were attached to the land and who were living in relationship with the land. The spiritual openness of many community members was another important factor for Joseph, as well as the respect and welcome he received from many people living in the village.

I think my sense of how I connected to village and the people here, I mean, places to eat, you know, people that I can relate to what they're doing, you know and I somehow hang around almost feeling like I'm part of them, and they're respecting me, they're respecting my knowledge, and they're telling me, you know, 'hang out! I feel good when you're around!'

According to Joseph, the way ahead for non-native communities to support the resilience of their Aboriginal community members is to examine what is being taught to their children and to address the lack of knowledge and understanding.

I think it's very important for us to understand each other and a lot of the adversity I think comes from the lack of knowledge . . . So there is a lot of misunderstanding, and children when they're not educated properly they grow up espousing those kind of values- family values- that could be harmful to others

Joseph also brings up Edward Said's idea of Orientalism and the dangers of thinking in terms of "them and us". He suggests that communities must balance the provision of support with the awareness that Aboriginal community members may not want special treatment, or to be treated as though they were highly fragile or 'other'.

The richness and depth of Joseph's life and thoughts are challenging to summarise. His story is full of awareness of adversities and strengths, and he has a contagious passion for a future of collaboration. Joseph's insights into resilience apply to personal, family, community and national levels, and his thoughts demonstrate a realistic but fiercely optimistic view of humanity.

. . . with Aboriginal people and all the other diversity of Canadians that are there! That we come together as a family and go forward and resolve our differences in this way; it's part of this negotiation process that nothing comes cut and dried, it's got to be worked on, manipulated, and moulded in such a way that it comes out to be a collectivity

*Lucie*

Lucie is a prominent Aboriginal member of the research community, and was strongly recommended to me for this research project by other participants. This Métis woman owns a native store in the community and for the past six years she has been organising an Autumn Festival to celebrate Aboriginal culture and the harvest. Lucie was busy with the Festival at the time of the interview, but was glad to participate in the research. Her story and insights have important implications for the development of Aboriginal resilience.

Lucie grew up northeast of Montreal with her Métis mother and her father from France. Her father was an important character in her childhood, and according to Lucie, "he was the one who valued our native heritage in our family. But he never forgot about his own". As a young woman, Lucie met a First Nations man from northern Manitoba who she describes as "the real McCoy. Like he looks like he's coming out a page of history." She had two children with this man, who was conflicted by the tension between his traditional culture and the mainstream Canadian culture. This was not an easy time in Lucie's life, and after 4 years she moved back to Quebec with her two children.

Lucie moved to the research community in 1999 because she felt that she would have a place there. She was impressed by a community effort to rebuild a bridge, and was drawn to the community by the symbolism of this gesture. Despite her profound sense of purpose and place in the community, Lucie had difficulty arranging childcare in

the community for her children. The daycare was charging the provincially subsidised rate of \$5 per day, but expected clients to pay for full-time salary for their vacations. This was not a viable option for a single mother receiving social assistance, so Lucie moved to the nearest city with her children. She participated in a program at a local development centre for single mothers to help them set up their own businesses, and subsequently opened a store in the community. Although it was “extreme” to commute back and forth from the city in order to work at her store and to keep her children in the community school, Lucie remembers the opportunities that arose from commuting with her children.

my son was young then, he says ah, ‘oh, *wow*’, and he’s looking, and as we drive in, we could see the river and all the- we call it- the fog- we call it the spirit of the river, rising from the river, and my son said ‘mom! This is where the clouds are born!’ Ah! This brought tears to my eyes! And I’m like ‘thank you so much for his vision of yours, and I *love* to hear these things’ and this is from having the transportation I was able to say- this is a gift from being- you know, to me it was worth it because you know, we had this opportunity to live something that others wouldn’t?

Lucie and her children moved back to the community in 2008, once Lucie was confident in the stability of her finances.

When asked what sort of support she had when she first arrived in the community, Lucie was clear that there was no tangible support available.

none. . . . none from the outside world, my children were my strength because I could look at them thinking, I know I do the right thing because I see them happy

With the strength she got from her children, Lucie invested herself in creating a place for her family in the community.

so I really *slowly*, progressively, ah, embraced this place one day at a time, one sunrise at a time. And getting to know people slowly and surely, you know like it became a journey of acceptance, and then by talking to people when I opened a store

Lucie has built up an extensive social network in the community, as well as a successful business, which are important supports in her life. The receptiveness and support of the community towards the Autumn Festival has contributed to Lucie's place in the community and to the success of the Festival.

Lucie sees herself as having a clear role in fostering the resilience of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultures. Starting with her responsibility to her children, Lucie explains that her role in their lives, as a mother, is to bring them up "in the field of understanding and *not* accusation". From this responsibility, Lucie also believes in the importance of educating others, both native and non-native, and does so in the context of her store and of the Festival. Lucie's emphasis in all of these opportunities to share knowledge is to create "a place of understanding" among people. She feels that she has a good understanding of native and non-native perspectives because of her experiences with her native mother and French father. Lucie received feedback from an Algonquin elder at this year's Autumn Festival about the healing effects of this 'place of understanding' that is created by her work.

Lucie bases her bridging role in the community on the importance of peoples' relationship to the land. She explains that our link to each other and to life is our need to survive and to have a relationship with the earth. The Autumn Festival grew out of this idea, coupled with the commonality of the need to gather.

my position in the Autumn Festival is to say, okay. If this is a need for human beings to gather around something that will help them to cheer, let's gather around harvest . . . Let's cheer the earth for what it gives to us . . . it opens a door to people from all culture of the world because it connects us to the basic survival.

Lucie describes aspects of the contemporary market, such as credit and sourcing cheap labour overseas, as dangerous to our relationship to the earth and to the resilience of cultural traditions.

Lucie acknowledges that challenges and adversity sometimes result from her prominent leadership roles in the community. Rather than taking the challenges personally, she tries to look at what she can learn from them while keeping criticisms in perspective of her accomplishments.

I had challenges, you know, where *accusations* come my way, you know, accusations of me being a one woman show for not giving up, and I had accusations of ah, all kinds... and I just took it as healing opportunities. Whatever came my way as a defeat was a way to understand what I was dealing with in the broader picture. Okay, because I took the lead on something that I value and I didn't say *why*, it was misinterpreted. So how can I correct it?

So I always have to stay in a position of, *why* the bridge, you know? And not take things personal when they come my way, and that was tough because, um, because, I was... I was trying to do good for so many years without knowing that what I was doing is not good. It is great. It's great because it's together. Because it's for the Earth

Lucie gives numerous of examples of overcoming adversity, using stories about fish, hockey games, and the rebuilt bridge to illustrate her point.

A theme that recurs throughout Lucie's interview is that of intergenerational gatherings. According to Lucie, this is the most important aspect of Aboriginal resilience. She speaks of the collaboration between a local hereditary chief, the scout group, and community members in the construction of an harbour modeled after one that the chief helped his grandfather build. Lucie emphasises that it is not the actual labour put in by the children, but rather the fact that they are developing a sense of ownership, spending time with their elders, around what those elders were around when they were children.

We need to bring the seniors, the elders from all culture of the world, with our kids. So the kids see that, ‘one day I’ll be that *old?*’ . . . And we have, like, fifteen kids and parents around you know, gathering, and the kids were just nourishing the moment. They were not contributing to put the nails, but they were *around* what [the chief] was around when he was a kid. And this was wonderful.

Lucie is an encouraging example of resilience. As a young, single, Métis mother of two children she has managed to create a successful business and a popular annual Festival that celebrates Aboriginal cultures and the gifts of the land. Several other interviewees make reference to the important role that Lucie has played in their lives by reconnecting them with their heritage and by facilitating a monthly women’s sharing circle. Lucie’s extensive and thoughtful engagement in the community is difficult to summarise. Her commitment creating a place of understanding demonstrates resilience at personal, social, and cultural levels.

### *Tracy*

Tracy’s background as a native child adopted into a non-native family from birth provides a unique perspective on Aboriginal resilience. She is involved in the community through her work at an alternative pre-school, her participation in community events, and through her life with her teenaged daughter. Currently in her mid-thirties, Tracy is the youngest of the participants and is the only one to have lived in the community her entire life.

Tracy’s adoptive parents were working in Kuujjuaq, Quebec when they met her biological parents. Her adoptive parents had one child (a son), and according to Tracy, “they [biological parents] said, you only have one kid. So we’re going to have a kid for you. And they [adoptive parents] were like, oh! Okay!” The new adoptive parents returned from Kuujjuaq with one month old Tracy as a gift from their Inuit friends.

Tracy grew up with her adoptive parents on their farm, completing primary and secondary school in the area. After she had finished school, Tracy worked in Europe as a nanny, which provided her with a new perspective on Canada and what she could go back to. She returned with an appreciation for her position of relative privilege, and a sense of Canada as her home. A year later, she had her daughter Katy, who Tracy names as the biggest influence in her life.

Tracy's interest in her native heritage has evolved over time. She recalls her first visit with her biological parents at age 10.

I remember thinking to myself, well I already have a family, so I don't really need to have another family... I remember that, and just remember thinking how odd it was to have family I had up north come and see us.

She became more interested in her biological family in her late teenage years when one of her sisters came from Kuujjuaq to visit.

That's when I started getting more interested because well, I was more grown-up. And then slowly we had contact, and we'd call once in a blue moon and say hi, and I realised when I was in my twenties I really wanted to get to see where I was from, and know...

At this point, a man from the community who had moved to Kuujjuaq connected Tracy and Katy with a government grant to go north to visit their biological family. They went when Katy was 11 years old, 2 years before the interview. It was an intensely emotional 2 week trip. Since this trip, both Tracy and Katy have thought of moving to Kuujjuaq, but are waiting for Katy to finish high school before seriously considering it.

Tracy describes the difficult circumstances that she noticed in Kuujjuaq: high number of suicides, the effects of alcoholism on families, and the children being left alone by parents who were going to the bar. It is this last observation that intensifies Tracy's desire to return to Kuujjuaq, because she considers working with children to be

her forte and she wants to help. She is aware of the lack of resources in health and education in Kuujuaq, and speculates that it would have been more of a challenge to demonstrate resilience in her life if she had not been adopted.

Having grown up in the community, Tracy finds it difficult to isolate factors that helped her feel as though she had a place in the community. She says that she has always felt included, and that she feels somewhat protective of the area. Tracy appreciates the spontaneous gestures of support and kindness demonstrated by community members and businesses. She also names the open-mindedness of people in community as an important factor, and the generous, non-judgemental atmosphere.

Although Tracy's life has predominantly been one of inclusion and belonging, she also mentions experiences of racism and ostracism. She describes her observations of shopping with her mother in a nearby city.

I'll see how some of the people treat her, and then they don't realise that *I'm* with her and they're like- it's a different thing. Whereas when they realise that she's with me, or she's my *mother*, they treat me a little better.

Tracy maintains her sense of self and well-being in these situations by trying not to dwell on them. Another form of differential treatment in Tracy's life has been as the result of the division between First Nations and Inuit cultures. She finds that Inuit culture and peoples are looked down upon by First Nations peoples.

Tracy responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to share her thoughts and experiences, and continued to share her thoughts for some time after the end of the interview. She considers herself to have been generally successful in making it through difficulty, and has a high sense of well-being. This was the last interview of the study.



## CHAPTER FOUR

## Analysis: Major Emergent Themes

There are a number of themes common to the interviews that describe the participants' experiences and thoughts on resilience. These major themes range from family connectedness to experiences with formal social services. While some themes reflect the 'mainstream' understanding of resilience, distinctly Indigenous ideas also emerge, such as connection to land and the importance of both remembering and forgetting in maintaining well-being. This chapter will explore these themes, progressing from personal to community-level ideas.

*Connection to Family*

In the context of an individual person, I think their exposure back to family, their connection back to family is the number one most important element that contributes to social health and social safety. ~ *Joseph*

Each of the participants highlights the role of family in their lives. Despite their wide range of family experiences, which include adoption, foster families, and long-distance relationships, family connections are central to the well-being of all of the participants.

Specific family relationships are named by several participants as instrumental components of their resilience. When asked about significant influences in her life, Linda cites her foster mother as the most important factor in the development of her personal strengths.

I would probably have to say my foster mom. She instilled in me the love of reading, and crafts. She taught me how to knit, crochet, and embroidery, and all that kind of stuff. And just to go for it, you know... She kept encouraging me, you can do whatever you want- if you set your mind to it, you can do it.

Anne also refers to specific family members when describing important influences and sources of support in her life. She emphasises how close she was with her husband, as well as the ongoing support she receives from her sister. Anne describes the strength of her relationship with her father, with whom she exchanged letters until his death in 1968. She tells a story about a promise that she made to her father in her early twenties that has helped her avoid drugs and alcohol in her life. When she asked her father if she could go to work at the hospital in Moose Factory, she says her father thought about it for a while.

he's *thinking* about it first, and he said, 'daughter? I've heard- somebody told me, I heard that alcohol destroys a person's life... I want you to promise me you'll - you will never touch it, alcohol, and if you want to go back to work Moose Factory I'll let you go- unless- no alcohol.' 'Okay- Thank you dad!' I kept my promise.

To the time of the interview, Anne has kept this promise to her father, and says that this is what has kept her healthy and strong. The life-changing impact of parental guidance is also described by Lucie, who explains how her mother's advice helped her move on from a difficult relationship and a time of depression.

I embraced it for four years up to a point where I was having trouble waking up in the morning. And that's when my mother said to me, 'if you cannot wake up with the birds in the morning, you know that your spirit is heavy. Because you had the gift of life, and that life is to be *embraced* when the sun rise.' And then I was there with my two kids, waking up with the birds, and *waah* it was hard.

In addition to these important familial relationships, several of the female participants highlight the strength they have gained from motherhood and from their children. Linda explains that becoming a mother was a turning point in her life, giving her the resolve to lead a healthy, alcohol-free life, as well as the desire to reconnect with her cultural heritage. Lucie also speaks of a cultural responsibility to her children, describing, "I had *children* from that. So I have a responsibility as a mother to bring my

children in the field of understanding? And *not* accusation.” Lucie emphasises that her children are a source of strength and inspiration for her, helping her to persevere when things are difficult. Tracy also describes the impact of motherhood on her life, explaining that she is motivated to “to be a good mom. Or be the best mom that I can be”.

The role of grandparents also arises across several interviews, both in personal and general terms. Joseph makes numerous references to the central role his grandparents played in his cultural education, particularly in preparing him to become a hereditary chief. He makes explicit connections between his resilience and his family.

I attribute my resilience to my family- my mother, my father, and all my siblings, and my grandparents that kind-of, made it a point to educate me and make sure that as a hereditary chief that I would lead with dignity and respect and honour.

so it was my grandmother that educated me, with my grandfather and my great-grandfather. It was them that educated me since I was a child, that someday this guy is going to be a hereditary chief and he needs to know- he needs to know what all that responsibility is about.

Echoing Joseph’s sentiments on the intergenerational transmission of values, Lucie speaks passionately about grandparents and their fundamental role in the strengthening of Aboriginal resilience- both on a cultural and an individual level.

My answer to you is make sure we don’t lose track of our elders and our seniors. We have to make sure that we include them and that they have a say and we have time to listen to them because it is precious to us, you know, like they’re the keepers of stories. The elders, or seniors of *all* cultures, are the one who have the knowledge. . . . We need to make sure in the process of transition in our life, if we have to transition to a divorce or a separation that includes the children, we should not, for any price lose track of the grandparents. We are the one responsible to make sure the grandparents have a relationship with their children.

Always having had a close relationship with her own grandparents, Tracy’s point of reference when it comes to resilience is her adoptive father’s side of the family. Her

grandparents came to visit each year from Europe, and Tracy saw her adoptive aunts and uncles frequently.

. . . three of them were born and were living as young children during World War Two and they're in Holland and my grandparents are raising them in Holland throughout the war. . . but meanwhile they've all, you know, found happiness by coming to Canada, and just having my grandparents come each year with me growing up has just been enough, and seeing that they're successful in starting over again.

It is evident that family connections have played a central role in the development and maintenance of resilience in the five interviewees. Close attachments, guidance and teachings, and parenthood have helped the participants to overcome difficulty in their lives- even when those difficulties have also been related to family. According to participants, family connections have helped to mediate the potentially devastating effects of alcoholism and childhood abuse, numerous foster home placements, removal from family for placement in a residential school, and the sudden loss of a parent in an accident.

#### *Sense of Self and of Purpose*

**CH** (Interviewer): Let's say you could say just one thing to someone about maintaining well-being despite difficulty in your life, what would it be?

**Linda**: I would have to say just knowing who you are- like knowing your strengths.

Having a sense of purpose and an understanding of personal strengths is another major theme in the interviews. For all of the participants, having a sense of identity and a role in the community are important components of their resilience, which shape how they contribute to the resilience of Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

Several participants connect their personal strengths with their role in fostering Aboriginal resilience. Tracy speaks specifically of her experience and abilities in

working with children, describing that this is how she would like to make a change in Kuujuaq.

I wanted to help- there were so many children up there for example, because that's my main occupation is looking after kids- that's my forte... You know, I connect with kids.

Joseph's official role as a hereditary chief is evidently a significant part of his identity, and he describes the spiritual leadership inherent to the role and the impact of this on his behaviour.

you kind of have to withdraw if you're going to do spiritual work, and be *mindful and guarding* how you conduct yourself, because all of a sudden if you're a spiritual person to the public you literally and actually belong to *them*, and so if you start drinking and you know, carousing around well that's the kind of mentality they just won't even come and listen to you or participate in your ceremonies.

Lucie sees her role in the community as that of a bridge between non-native peoples and Aboriginal peoples and culture. Her identity as a Métis woman makes this symbolism all the more appropriate. She explains how the rebuilding of a bridge in the community was part of what drew her to move there.

I thought by moving to a place where people can gather together and rebuild a bridge- I thought, this is it. This is my people. The bridge for me is *so* symbolic, because I feel like I am a bridge? And I'm *needed* to get from one shore to another, but I cannot choose one or the other. So it makes me find a place in the story of life, where I was never one or the other- I was always the link. So if I am a link and these people got together to *build* this bridge, I thought you know what? These people have what I have, and I have a place here.

Lucie also speaks about her gift of attracting people together, and how she has used that to create the Autumn Festival. She sees her gifts and her role in the community as an important responsibility.

I understood all along that if I had a gift of gathering people, if I have a gift of being a bridge, I will use it properly, and I will make sure that one each shore I have people who *wants* to take that bridge.

On a more individual level, Linda speaks of the importance of identity and pride. Part of Linda's ability to overcome difficulty and Aboriginal stereotypes comes from her decision to "just try to be my *own* person? And create my *own* identity". Linda remembers her foster mother's advice on how to cope when things were difficult.

I remember growing up and there was just like- being proud of who you are. It doesn't matter who you are, like just be proud of who you are. And in the foster home I was in, she used to say well you know, be proud of who you are. You're Indian, be proud of it- don't be ashamed of it. And in that community, it was just my brother and I were the only ones there that were native.

Linda's concluding words focus on the strength of women, and the importance of recognising her identity as a woman and being proud of it.

Having a sense of purpose and of self is described by research participants as important to successfully navigating difficulty and to developing a sense of place in a community. Participants also touched on the spiritual, psychological, and social growth that comes with the awareness of personal strengths and purpose.

### *Aboriginal Culture*

And when I met the father of my children, who is from the northern Manitoba- *He's* the real McCoy. Like he looks like he's coming out a page of history. Like his skin is *rough* and winterised, like he's got muscles under his cheekbones to allow him to survive the winter, and he can *hunt* and these things . . . And to meet the father of my children, which was from like, really entering the door of all this living culture for its goodness? And all... and the rest. ~Lucie

*Connection to culture.* As introduced by Lucie, Aboriginal culture is a prominent theme throughout the interviews. The participants talk about culture in many different ways, making reference to personal experience, traditional values and knowledge systems, and the merging of Aboriginal cultures with 'mainstream' Canadian culture.

The development of a personal interest in Aboriginal culture arises in all of the interviews. When describing her move to a non-native foster home at a young age, Linda says, “So I lost all my traditions and culture and everything”. It was not until she had children of her own that Linda felt truly reconnected to her Cree culture. Also having grown up in a non-native family, Tracy explains that her interest in her Inuit heritage increased through her teenage years. By the time she was in her twenties, Tracy says, “I really wanted to get to see where I was from and know.” While Anne spent the first years of her life with her Inuk family, she was separated from them for 7 years when she was in residential school and subsequently in hospital with tuberculosis. It was during this time in the hospital that Anne learned to write Inuktitut from the patient in the bed next to hers.

So, we started out short letters, like short ones- two or three? She write to me, my next-bed, she write to me, I try to answer back. If I don't make it, she corrects it. Then we keep on doing it until I know how to write Inuktitut. So I started to my-writing to my father and aunt and um.. contact with them.

For Anne, this knowledge of Inuktitut provided her with opportunities to work as an interpreter and a translator. These personal cultural connections are described by all of the participants as a source of strength and identity, and an important component of their well-being.

The acquisition and teaching of Aboriginal traditions and skills is another important cultural connection for the participants, and a way of sharing their culture with the broader community. For Lucie, her store provides “a door to a living culture” in the community. She speaks of the meaning behind the native art and cultural artefacts in the store, saying “these objects, if I am not in the store, sharing their story? They're sleeping.” For her, the Autumn Festival is another way of promoting and sharing

Aboriginal skills, stories, and traditions, both with local community members and with other Aboriginal peoples. Joseph participates in this Festival by hosting a sunrise ceremony at which he tells the creation story and teaches participants about tobacco offerings, the peace pipe, and smudging traditions. Evidently, Joseph's role as a hereditary chief and his work at the museum and as a professor at the university are important opportunities for him to remain connected to his language and traditions, and to share his culture with others. On a less public scale, both Linda and Anne make native jewellery and crafts as a primary way of celebrating their cultures and engaging with other Aboriginal peoples in the area. Linda explains that she appreciates informal, spontaneous opportunities to share her culture with others in the community.

I could be at the cashier line up, or the bank line up or whatever and someone might mention something about, you know, my earrings or my clothes or somethin', and then I'll tell them, you know... the traditions- how it's made, what the colours symbolise, stuff like that.

*Intercultural dynamics.* The comparison and integration of non-native Canadian and Aboriginal cultures is another theme common to the interviews. Linda remarks that "in the white community, women are not equal as men", and she suggests that women need to learn that they do have a place and that they are strong. Using the sharing circle as an illustration, Linda explains that women are treated as equals in the native community. Comparing aspects of mainstream culture that can conflict with Aboriginal values and ways of being, Joseph lists directive approaches in education, the imposition of values on others, the sense of ownership of property, and the externalisation of thoughts and feelings. Joseph believes strongly in the benefits of cultural integration, and comments that his childhood exposure to many cultures through his father's involvement



in the military contributed to his personal development. He also discusses this integration in his Master's thesis.

I said, 'is there a middle ground approach to learning where we can draw from this and draw from this? The mainstream education system and the Aboriginal traditional knowledge system and find a comfortable zone somewhere where we can grab the two and use it to enhance our own development

Joseph explains that the tools he gained from the mainstream education system helped to reinforce the grounding and the knowledge passed on to him by his grandparents. He credits this complementary mix of cultures as having an important role in his personal resilience.

Lucie emphasises the meeting of mainstream and Aboriginal cultures in reference to the Autumn Festival. She explains how everyone has a role in sharing knowledge at the Festival, and that this symbolises change from historical divisions between Aboriginal peoples, rural settler communities, and the government.

Ironically, it's the people from the government that were interpreters of the plants, and the First Nations were celebrating earth, and sharing about *why* these colours, *why* these regalias, *why* this . . . what was interesting is to see that the native people said, '*oh my God, Lucie. I once came by these shore in the canoe, and we were so not welcome. For me to dance near the river [at the Festival] - it's true to our native prophecies that we will once become one.*'

*Cultural tensions.* Participants also discuss times when they experienced cultural dissonance in their communities and the push-and-pull of 'home'. Linda describes feeling like an outsider when she returned to her family on the reserve at age 16. She was shocked by the lack of physical infrastructure, such as a house without running water, and by the social ostracism that she experienced.

When I went back to the reserve, I wasn't welcome there either because they didn't like the way I *dressed*, didn't like the way I *talked*, didn't like the way I *acted*- they said, you're too *white*. But how can, you know, that was surprising me- you know, how can I be too white? I'm native!

Anne does not mention social ostracism upon returning to her home community, but she does remember a sense of discomfort when she returned home at age 17.

I went back home, I didn't like... the way they lived. They used to call that little house- they lived six, seven, all of them in one little house. They used to call that matchbox, where they lived. Very crowded. No privacy, I didn't like it anymore. So I asked my father, 'I can get a job in a hospital if I want to...'

Despite this dislike for her family's living conditions, Anne is nostalgic about how Inuit people 'used to be' and provides her perspective on the negative changes in Inuit culture.

Inuit... Inuit - they used to be real Inuit before. Nice, very comfortable with- *friendly, helpful*, help each other with everything. Now, not any more. They just kill each other. Alcohol. Drugs. They change a lot. They're *scary* now, these days. Sometimes I'm really scared to go *home* nowadays.

Having visited Kuujjuaq for the first time 2 years prior to the interview, Tracy reflects on her biological 'home'. On one hand, she describes the joyful reunion with her biological family when she and her daughter Katy went to visit.

as soon as we got to the airport, and saw one of my sisters that obviously looked like me, and I was looking at her and, we were looking at each other, and then we hugged for... ever and we were both crying . . . when we came back from up north, we were so- Katy and I were so touched by all our family- and just felt so much love

On the other hand, Tracy is realistic about what she calls "the harsh side of Kuujjuaq"- the aspects of her biological home that make her hesitant to move there and that make her speculate what her life would have been like if she had never left.

really gritty stories of families being torn apart by alcoholism, which is really touchy subject, but not? And that's really... I can't... I can't understand. And I saw people, like families up there, that were happy but I saw people up there that were lost.

If I was not adopted I'm sure I'd be having a harder time because I'd be up north probably. And I don't know what the outcome would be? But maybe it would be good, but I know, just seeing other family members or friends of my family

members from up north, seeing how they're kind of more negative against White people or, you know, I can see how they see it but they let it get them down

When it comes to her adoptive family home, Tracy describes how she gained an appreciation for all that she had when she spent a year away from home. She names this sense of home and of privilege as something that bolstered her resilience.

**CH** (interviewer): Are there specific things in your life that have helped you overcome difficulty?

**Tracy:** Going to be a nanny in Europe before Katy was born. I was able to see Canada as my, you know, home, and being able to see what I had there, what I have here . . . and what I could come back to.

### *Remembering and Forgetting*

Another thing too is just forgetting. Trying to forget about the past- like just forget who I was and just try to be my *own* person? ~Linda

When maintaining well-being in the face of difficulty, a common theme that arises is the balance between remembering and forgetting. While the value of preserving, promoting, and sharing memories, experiences, traditions and knowledge is evident across all the interviews, several participants also mention the value of forgetting or creating distance. Although Linda names her cultural reconnection as an important component of her personal resilience, when asked what helps her overcome difficulty, she talks about leaving aspects of her past behind. When Tracy is asked what advice she would give a fellow Aboriginal community member who was experiencing racism and ostracism, she talks about the ability to “just let it flow- just let it flow off your back.” While she believes that this reaction is beneficial, Tracy also shares that she has come to expect a certain amount of racism in her life. She says, “sometimes I will get angry or upset about it but then I realise oh, well, you know it's to be expected. Which is kind of sad.”

This balance between holding onto things and leaving them in the past is illustrated by remarkably similar stories told by Joseph and by Lucie. When describing her father's move to Canada from France, Lucie tells a story about leaving negative experience behind.

In France the doctors, they travelled to your *home* when you are sick, and one of the doctors, my father believed that he was responsible for the death of his mother? And he couldn't bear the idea of living in the same village with the same doctor and every time he would *see* him, this young, tall man with no aggressivity felt anger, and the anger was so great that he thought he's better off leaving home.

Joseph's story of leaving anger behind also relates to his father, although in his case, Joseph explains how his father was killed in a car accident by one of his colleagues from the Department of Indian Affairs. His colleague had been drinking, and was unable to avoid Joseph's father who was walking along the side of the road.

I didn't want to work with this guy that killed my father, I kind of felt sorry for him in one way, but I kind of felt vengeful in some way inside of me. I didn't want to work with him in case something happened that I might just maybe lose my temper and go haywire and maybe end up hurting him or something, I don't know, I didn't want to be there, I didn't want to expose myself to this kind of encounter with him.

The maintenance of well-being despite adversity, according to the participants, involves both the preservation and promotion of memories and tradition, and the ability to leave some memories and experiences behind.

### *Spirituality*

I think maybe a lot of it has to do with spirituality. Like, the way we say it is the Creator put us here to look after the earth and not to misuse it- animals also. And that goes for people. So I think it's just, you know, just doing good, and being helpful as much as you can.

*~Linda*

Participants often discuss coping with adversity in spiritual terms. When describing how she thinks about resilience and adversity, Tracy talks about karma, and

believes that ‘what goes around comes around’. Although Lucie does not explicitly discuss spirituality, she talks about needing a way to understand her place in life and in her culture. She reflects on a difficult time in her life, and explains that “I couldn’t link everything to my *life*, and to his life, and to my kids’ life.” On several occasions in the interview Lucie mentions that adversity must be addressed in “a field of understanding, and not in a field of accusation.” As with Lucie, Joseph’s interview is steeped in implicit spiritual references, such as his emphasis on “respect, dignity and honour”. Joseph talks about incorporating these values into his leadership as a chief, his traditional ceremonies, the way he treats his body, and he names them as an important defence against adversity. The expressions of spirituality in the lives of participants range from formal meetings to a worldview that sees everything that can cast a shadow as a spiritual entity. These spiritual views help participants contextualise and understand adversity, and are a source of strength for them.

#### *Connection to Land*

Sometimes when I go home uh, I say to – ‘son, I’m going to breathe out for a minute after night before I go to bed, I’m going to *breathe out!*’ I could feel the difference- the *air!* from the city!  
~Anne

The natural environment and connection to the land is a major emphasis in all of the interviews. In the quote above, Anne expresses profound appreciation for the space, the clean water, and quality of the air in the community, particularly in contrast to her sister’s apartment in the city. In her mid-seventies, Anne walks outside every day, and considers these walks one of her sources of strength. Linda also talks about the importance of her natural surroundings, and when asked about her move to the community, she says, “I liked it here because of the *trees* and the *hills...*” Joseph also

refers to the land when reflecting on what helped him create a place for himself in the community. “I think what drew me to people here were people that were more attached to the land? They seemed to have some kind of a symbiotic relationship with the land.” Joseph names several community members who make their living through activities related to the parks and rivers surrounding the community. He also talks about one community member in particular, saying “then I run into somebody else, who has lived off the grid here and to me, he was really the total embodiment of an Indigenous person”.

The importance of the land is a major emphasis in Lucie’s interview, and a point of reference in all of her stories. She speaks about her father’s connection to the land, and her concern that the current focus on quantity over quality “is very dangerous for the human spirit, you know, in our relationship to the earth.” When talking about examples of resilience, Lucie describes how the fish “teach us to go upstream, to have courage” and how the river “is the one that serpents- together we go around obstacles.” Lucie emphasises the centrality of the Earth to the Autumn Festival,

Let’s come together and gather around Autumn and have diversity presented to you, and the commonality there is to cheer for Mother Earth. Let’s cheer the earth for what it gives to us, and that it heals our heart, it heals our self because we eat healthy

It’s like, why do we care for Mother Earth? It’s for the sake of *her*, offering shelter to us, you know, like, Mother Earth is offering shelter to us, she needs us to care

It is evident from all of the interviews that an appreciation for the earth and a connection to the physical environment is a source of strength and well-being for all of the participants.

*Solidarity and Gathering Together*

You know, ethnologists, sociologists, like all these ‘ists’ will tell you, that if we look at Canadian- I mean, *social* behaviour, we humans *need to gather* in a group that is *massive* and to understand that what we’re going to witness is according to what we like. ~Lucie

The need to meet with others and to support one another is a recurring theme in the interviews when it comes to successfully navigating adversity and becoming engaged in the community. As mentioned by Lucie in the above quote, the need to gather around something positive provided part of the impetus for the organisation of the Autumn Festival. Lucie also refers to a women’s group that she helped organise in the village. The group includes several Aboriginal women, and is open to any women in the community.

We get together and once a month we share stories, and as we share stories we enter a door of privacy? And then we find amazing support. And so if one is not feeling well, she will be noticed. And she will have the strength to address what’s going on, because she trusts. And then with the young ones, we can go and help.

This sharing circle is named by Anne as an important source of friendship, and Linda says the group is a good way to give and receive support, calling the meetings “encouraging and uplifting”. Linda is thankful that Lucie has moved to the village and has provided opportunities to connect with Aboriginal peoples and culture. She says that “it was nice knowing there was someone else out there that understood why I needed this.” Linda also has a sense of solidarity in her Friday night prayer meetings, at which participants sing, pray and share their stories. She believes in the reciprocal benefit of these meetings.

It’s knowing and understanding that there’s other people out there that went through the same thing *I* did . . . so sharing and opening up with other people is eye-opening for me and also for them. . . . not just people helping *me*, but *me* helping *others*.

Both Linda and Tracy suggest that Aboriginal people in the community could benefit from the creation of a support group, naming the opportunity to come together as a fundamental part of fostering the resilience of Aboriginal members of non-native communities.

The creation of a social network is at the top of all participants' lists when it comes to feeling at home in the community and receiving support. Tracy names her friends as her main source of support, and as the ones with whom she shares how she has coped in the face of difficulty. For Anne, making friends and forming a social network became of particular importance after the loss of her husband. Living in a rural community without a driver's license, Anne's friendships have practical benefits as well as emotional ones. She names a list of friends and neighbours who help her get to the city so that she can visit her sister, describing how she plans her trips around their work schedules. Anne also describes the importance of having friends to go for walks with and to talk with on the phone. She speaks highly of her friends and their place in her life.

They helps me *a lot*. I don't feel lonely no more! I phone them, they phone me, I know their phone. I know their phone when I feel lonely- have a little chat- it helps me a lot. . . . The women are very... I don't know what I would do if I didn't meet them.

Joseph describes how social networks can function like "little family units", and he believes that this sense of family helps to foster resilience in the community. He gives an example of how these relationships can help to promote well-being by explaining his sense of family towards an Inuit artist in the community whose drinking had become a problem.

Now he's gone to find help and I was part of that- getting him to help himself, and I think that's- in some way I feel responsible to him, he's not my family, he's not



even my *tribe* you know, he's a totally different cultural group and linguistic group, but still, he feels like a brother to me and I care for him, you know, and I want something good to happen for him

Joseph feels that there is a sense of solidarity and community among the Aboriginal people in the village, but explains that each of them also have their own personal networks of friends "which are not *mutual* friends".

It is evident from the interviews that connecting with others in the community, developing friendships, and gathering together in groups are a major component of resilience and of engagement in the community. From the descriptions of participants, their social networks are an important source of solidarity, as well as providing more personal opportunities to give and receive support, understanding, and love.

#### *Education and Knowledge*

I think it's very important for us to *understand* each other and a lot of the adversity I think comes from the lack of knowledge and the lack of ah... 'I don't know you, I don't know your traditions, I don't understand why you pick up something and do it that way while I would do something in another fashion'  
~Joseph

Participants in the research project made numerous references to education and knowledge when discussing their own resilience and the future of Aboriginal cultures and peoples. This is one of the areas that Joseph is most passionate about, and he believes that his mix of traditional knowledge and mainstream education has helped him demonstrate resilience in his life. He speaks about the lack of education and human resource development on reserves, and the elected chiefs' lack of knowledge. In his experience, Joseph has noticed a lack of native perspectives in public education, making it challenging to apply concepts to his cultural reality. Ultimately, Joseph found a way to take the best of both forms of education, and used mainstream tools to enhance and

reinforce his Aboriginal understanding. He invests much of his time teaching both Aboriginal and non-native peoples about Aboriginal history, culture, and traditions. He believes strongly in the potential of education to positively affect the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society.

...come and share and really open up this knowledge divide that we have about one another. So that we can instil more understanding and better relationships. I mean there's some people you're not going to be able to change, I mean, you're not going to change their opinions, but I think the effort to minimize the ones that are *not* knowledgeable I think is a big positive step.

The spreading of cultural knowledge and awareness are seen as important ways of the future by Linda and Lucie as well. When asked what is needed for Aboriginal people to succeed in non-native communities, Linda suggests an increased awareness by the general community. She recommends "some kind of a class or something like that, just so they have the knowledge and understanding". This awareness is one of the goals of Lucie's store and the Autumn Festival. She advocates for an experiential approach to this education, and draws in the importance of intergenerational teaching by making sure to involve all generations. According to Lucie, the children will learn "by osmosis" just by being around the traditions that their elders were around as children. Many topics come up in her store, and Lucie takes the opportunity to explore them with her customers. She gives the example of taxation, and explains that some customers react strongly to having to pay tax in a native store.

I'm living under all the benefit of a community that our tax goes for the roads and water and all that, so I contribute to that, and I benefit from it! So for me, this is where I stand, and then I said, 'do you want to discuss further or this is just a random comment? Because I have information for you' you know, 'I *can* go there, it's *okay*, but where do your comments stand? Is it in a field of understanding or is it in a field of accusation? Like, let's talk.' And then they're like, 'oh no, no, no, no.' or sometimes, they'll say yes. And I give them web link

to go get answers, that are not from me and that don't link to them emotionally to me

The provision of information, the bridging of cultural realities through awareness and understanding, and the improvement of Aboriginal education both on and off reserve is seen by participants as a vital part of fostering the resilience of Aboriginal individuals and communities. Participants refer to the sharing of knowledge through informal interactions in the community, organised events, and public institutions.

#### *Contact with Social Services*

Several of the research participants mention their involvement with social services at some time in their lives. For Anne, these have primarily been helpful, supportive interactions. She remembers how difficult it was when she first moved from the north in her early twenties, particularly because she spoke little English. A social worker helped Anne and her sister to find work and housing. In her present life, Anne names transportation as one of her major challenges, and explains that she can always rely on the Centre Local de Services Communautaires (CLSC) for rides to appointments at the hospital or with the doctor. Lucie also describes some positive experiences with social services, including her time on social assistance as a young single mother, and her participation at a Local Development Centre (CLD) where she took a course for single mothers on how to start her own business. This provided her with the grounding to open her own store and to leave social assistance.

Participants also shared less positive experiences with social programs. Although Lucie needed and appreciated the \$5 per day subsidised daycare plan in Quebec, she found that it was not closely monitored in the research community. She was unable to keep her children in the local subsidised daycare because the caregivers required parents

to pay 2 weeks of full-time salary for their vacation. As a result, Lucie had to move out of the community to a nearby city where she had more childcare options until her children were older. She spent several years commuting from the city to her store in the community, bringing her children with her so that they could attend the local school.

Tracy's limited experience of social services was negative on a personal rather than organisational level. Tracy describes having visited an Aboriginal women's centre in a nearby city when she was in her late twenties. "I just remember feeling a little snubbed because they were all Indian and I wasn't, and... there's a definite difference between... between their people and our people." Since this experience of exclusion, Tracy believes that there is a "strong difference" between First Nations and Inuit peoples and has a limited sense of solidarity with the First Nations members of the community. Tracy also reflects on the lack of medical services in Kuujjuaq, and expresses concern for her family's health.

Experiences with social services have had a long-lasting impact on the lives of participants. The repercussions of negative experiences continue to be felt nearly 10 years later, and the protective impact of positive experiences continue to help participants thrive and maintain their well-being.

### *Community Characteristics*

I guess I'm territorial too, of this area- but I like to see new people come in and meet them. Like one of my closest friends moved here seven years ago, and I feel that she's part of the community, but there's some people that try to define 'here' as what they think it is- even though they haven't lived here for as long as I have. . . . I know all the farmers, or the families who have been here for years. ~Tracy

Tracy has lived in the research community since she was one month old, and clearly feels as though she knows the community well. A final major theme from the

interviews is the characteristics of the research community. Participants name a number of aspects of the community that they feel have helped them come through difficulty successfully, and have helped them engage in the community and develop a sense of place. They also describe areas of weakness of the community, which pose challenges to the maintenance of their well-being. It is with these aspects of the community that this discussion begins.

*Characteristics hindering resilience.* The major area of weakness in the community in terms of supporting its Aboriginal members is the lack of awareness and knowledge. Linda explains that she finds there is a lack of understanding in the community about Aboriginal culture. “One thing I have realised is that they’re not knowledgeable, they’re not informed of how the natives live, how we think... Like our culture, our traditions.” Joseph also points out the lack of knowledge in the community, as well as the implications of this weakness, such as misunderstandings and the passing on of misinformation to future generations. Both Linda and Lucie are clear that they had no support when they first moved to the community, and that they had to create awareness around them as they went. For Tracy, this lack of knowledge translates into experiences of racial profiling, where she feels as though she gets “the third degree” from police officers.

The community in question is part of a small, rural municipality. While participants appreciate some of the implications of this, it also creates feelings of isolation. Tracy highlights the lack of an Aboriginal community, which is aggravated by her sense of distance from First Nations culture. Although she mentions the importance

of her friends, Anne speaks several times about her isolation in the community, emphasising that she does not know what is going on outside of her personal circle.

*Positive community characteristics.* Despite these issues of isolation and limited knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, participants elaborate on many positive characteristics of the community. One of the most prominent characteristics mentioned by the participants is the general environment of inclusion and acceptance in the community. Linda describes how she felt when she first arrived: “coming from out West, you know, people were curious and they just wanted to get to know me and ... And I didn’t find any prejudice here either; not openly anyways. Yeah- I was welcome here.” Tracy also explains that she has always felt included in the community, and that she finds that “the people that live here, they’re really open-minded.” When reflecting on reactions from the community, Anne explains that people respond positively to her involvement in the women’s group. Joseph has also experienced this positive response to his participation in the community, and he says that feels as though people respect him and his knowledge. The receptiveness of the community to Aboriginal culture and tradition is particularly important to Joseph. He describes a conflict in the community regarding the construction of a small strip-mall, and the openness to his suggestion during a community meeting of having a talking circle rather than a shouting match.

I said, ‘I want everybody to be able to express *why* they want and why they don’t want. And we’ll pass the eagle feather around.’ And so we did that. And I think that was one the major steps that this community took to allow me to kind-of act as a conciliator and a peace-keeper, and we were able to end up with a really decent discussion in the end

Joseph also gives the example of the community’s support of the Autumn Festival as another illustration of the acceptance of Aboriginal culture.

Beyond passive acceptance, several participants describe an active interest in Aboriginal cultures and peoples in the community. Linda explains that people seek her out and ask questions about her traditions or her involvement in community events. She finds this encouraging, and it helps her feel like a part of the community. Linda and Joseph both connect the cultural and spiritual diversity of the community with its openness and exploration of indigenous cultures.

The strong community spirit and social energy that exist in the community are important factors to the participants. Tracy names the informal gestures of kindness in the community as particularly important in supporting her well-being, such as when the staff at a local ski hill raised money to replace her stolen snowboard. Lucie also appreciates the ability of community members to mobilise and organise themselves around a cause.

Participants appreciate the unique characteristics of the physical, social, cultural and political environments of the community, and attribute their personal resilience in part to the community itself. In turn, their actions and involvement as resilient individuals contribute to the growth and development of the community.

These emergent themes provide a detailed picture of the perspectives and experiences of the research participants. In the following section, these themes will be examined at a theoretical level. By moving from the specific and concrete examples of participants to a more abstract level, the implications and contributions of the interviews can be better understood.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Discussion: Themes to Theory

*Resilience Theory*

The themes which arose from the interviews relate to resilience theory on several levels. While some of the major components of resilience theory corroborate with themes in the interviews, participants also question the concept, bringing up important debates. Their perspectives on resilience as Aboriginal peoples also bring new ideas to the theory, some of which echo other studies of Aboriginal resilience. Through their interviews, participants expand, limit, confirm, and challenge the concept of resilience.

*Supported Theoretical Concepts*

As discussed in the previous chapter, participants made connections between their resilience and their families, their positive relationships with others, their sense of confidence and purpose, and their coping strategies. These are commonly cited factors in the resilience literature. Positive adult-child relationships and/or a positive relationship with an adult are among the most fundamental aspects of resilience (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003, Ungar, 2004). Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2005) describe positive attachment as the need for belonging, or “the opportunity to establish trusting connections” (p. 132). All of the participants describe their attachments to a parent, grandparent, or foster parent in the interview, and elaborate on the value of these relationships. It is interesting to note that Linda emphasizes the importance of her relationship with her foster mother in spite of numerous life experiences that demonstrate attachment-related risk factors, such as childhood abuse, foster home placement, and parental alcoholism (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003).



Participants also substantiate the idea that achievement is an important component of resilience. Commonly described in resilience literature as *mastery* or *competence*, this aspect of resilience describes an individual who is good at something and can successfully apply him/herself (Brendtro et al., 2005). In the interviews, participants talk about the strength that they get from having a sense of purpose and an awareness of personal gifts or a “forte”. This has a circular effect, reinforcing other important factors such as self-esteem and direction or purpose (Ungar, 2004).

Dion Stout and Kipling (2003) list a “sense of control over one’s life” (p. 10) as another commonly-cited factor in resilience. The connection between well-being and individual agency is discussed at length by Sen (1999), who describes the intrinsic value in the freedom to live one’s life as one wants to. In this study, participants’ independence and power are evident in their choices to create their lives and homes in a new community. There are numerous examples of how participants have exercised control of their own lives, through decisions to create distance from anger, to view criticism as an opportunity for growth, or to forget hurtful times of the past. Participants all view themselves as partially in control of their own well-being, describing the importance of personal choice in maintaining health. These choices include avoiding alcohol, ensuring connection with family, accessing public services, and treating the body with respect and dignity. The balance between individual agency and structural determinism will be discussed in a subsequent section.

The participants’ use of this autonomy and agency to help other people is another component of resilience theory that arises in much of the literature. Altruism, generosity, or sharing is named as a core element of resilience by several authors (Brendtro et al.,

2005; Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003; HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997). As discussed by Dion Stout and Kipling (2003), altruism can be considered a “mature defence” (p. iii) that helps people overcome adversity. Participants describe how this sense of responsibility to others feeds back to reinforce other important factors, such as feeling as though life has a purpose and creating significant relationships with others.

### *Theoretical Debates*

Although the above examples demonstrate areas in which the interviews support resilience theory, participants also share thoughts and experiences that bring out the debates surrounding the concept. The debate around the trait trap discussed previously is relevant to participants’ experiences. The idea that people do not demonstrate resilience at all times of their lives, under all circumstances is well illustrated by the participants. Interviews do not indicate that these individuals have a particular ‘hardy gene’ that helps them withstand adversity; participants provide examples of un-resilient times in their lives when healthy decisions were not evident or easy.

Another debate discussed in the literature review that comes up in the interviews is the idea that if one person can be resilient, so should everyone else. Speaking about residential school survivors, Joseph expresses concern that focusing on examples of resilience will “absolve the responsibility of the government and Department of Indian Affairs”. While it is encouraging to have examples of resilience and success, Joseph’s concern is well supported; these examples must not eclipse issues of oppression or structural inequality (Canavan, 2008).

*Resilience Theory Broadened*

While the experiences and perspectives of participants are described in part by mainstream resilience theory, there are areas in which participants' insights into Aboriginal experiences of resilience broaden the predominantly Western understanding of the construct. Themes of cultural connection, balance, and connection to the land hold an important place in the resilience of participants. These ideas are beginning to emerge in current literature as common to Indigenous experiences of resilience.

Cultural connection and knowledge of Aboriginal language are described as important protective factors against suicide in First Nations youth by Chandler and Lalonde (1998) and by Hallett et al. (2007). These authors refer to these connections as "cultural continuity" (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, p. 208), describing indicators such as self governance, land claims negotiations, and the provision of health and educational services. Dion Stout and Kipling (2003) suggest that a strong sense of Aboriginal identity acts in combination with high self-esteem to have a protective effect. Knowledge and practice of cultural healing traditions is discussed by Hunter, Logan, Goulet and Barton (2006) as empowering to both communities and individuals. Considering the longstanding efforts in Canadian society to contain, eliminate, or assimilate Aboriginal cultures, there is substantial adversity facing Aboriginal peoples who currently want to connect with their cultural heritage. Participants in this study discuss their decisions to seek out opportunities to learn, practice, or teach their traditions. They emphasise how important this cultural foundation has been in maintaining their identity and well-being. These interviews support the preliminary research on the value of cultural connection in the resilience of Aboriginal peoples.

The conventional definitions of resilience often measure positive outcomes according to “normative phases of development” (Masten & Powell, 2003). According to these standards, well-being is measured by factors such as academic or professional achievement, social behaviour, and absence of pathology. Participants in this study present a broader understanding of positive outcomes, demonstrating an emphasis on balance and holism. In explaining the Mi’kmaq words for resilience, Joseph says,

the person is knowledgeable, he’s educated, he is wise and has rational thinking, and he is careful what he eats and makes sure that his state of health is in good shape, that his mind is in good shape so that his hearing and his eyes and his sense of smell and mouth is- it is done in a very sacred manner, kind-of connected to his heart.

Joseph then goes on to explain the native teaching that your whole body is your brain, with contributions from all of the senses and connected to the heart. These holistic perceptions of health and well-being are common to Indigenous worldviews, and broaden the understanding of positive outcomes or success in resilience theory (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003). Shah (2004) explains that Aboriginal definitions of health address physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being and that for well-being to exist, “there must be harmony among all these components” (p. 276).

Finally, the participants’ emphasis on the land and the natural environment provides another Aboriginal perspective to resilience theory. Although none of the participants were born in the community or even in the area, they all discuss an attachment to their natural surroundings and to the space in which they live. Anne and Linda talk about the strength that is gained from being in nature, Lucie explains the solidarity that comes from celebrating the Earth, Joseph remembers feeling at home in the community because of people who were connected to the land, and Tracy describes her

sense of place that arises from knowing the area so well. Despite a general awareness of the importance of land to Aboriginal peoples created by publicity surrounding land claims, protests, and ‘living off the land’ traditional ways of life, there have been few formal attempts explore the connection between a relationship with the land and well-being or resilience. In his editorial introduction to a Pimitiwasin journal issue dedicated to Aboriginal resilience, Neil Andersson (2008) brings the importance of land to the forefront.

There is no unified Indigenous view of resilience, as different sources reflect varying degrees of integration with the Western view and different degrees of displacement from the land; many Indigenous views of resilience are based on their relationship to the land. (p. 3)

#### *Additional Theories*

Resilience theory is the primary framework for this research project. While resilience provides a meaningful way of structuring and understanding the study, other theories arose during the analysis of the interviews. In particular, theories of social capital and social determinants of health contribute valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The following sections introduce these theories and their contributions to the research analysis.

#### *Social Capital*

*Overview of social capital theory.* “The theory of social capital is, at heart, straightforward. Its central thesis can be summed up in two words: relationships matter.” (Field, 2003, p. 1). While Field condenses social capital theory down to its core in his introduction, there are many books dedicated to the debate and analysis of the topic. There is a general consensus that the three main thinkers on social capital are James Coleman, Pierre Bourdieu, and Robert Putnam (Franklin, Holland & Edwards, 2007).

Coleman's model is based on rationalism, and the idea that social capital is the by-product of self-interest (Field, 2003). Field (2003) explains how this integration of social and economic theories creates a view of social capital shared by the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Bourdieu's thinking on social capital is influenced by Marxism, and he is particularly interested in social hierarchy, power, and class conflict (Field, 2003). This leads to an understanding of social capital that is a "highly group-specific, context-dependent, and *socially stratifying* resource" (Lewandowski, 2007, p. 20, original emphasis). Putnam popularised social capital theory through his publication *Bowling Alone* (2000), in which he argues that social capital is declining in America. Putnam's communitarian, functional view of social capital describes "connections among individuals- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). His belief in the importance of social capital is evident in his concern about its apparent decline.

"What is at stake is not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride . . . schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken, that our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital" (Putnam, 2000, p. 27)

All of these theorists have their supporters and their critics. Criticism ranges between accusations of circular theories, naïve optimism (Coleman), under-emphasising the role of the state (Putnam), and over-emphasising the elite and the role of kinship (Bourdieu) (Field, 2003). And yet, despite these critiques, social capital theory remains useful and meaningful. "In drawing our attention to the ways in which networks and shared values function as a resource for people and organisations, the concept of social capital has earned its share of the social scientific limelight." (Field, 2003, p. 43)

*Social capital and resilience.* So as not to lose sight of how social capital theory fits into the larger framework of resilience, it is worth briefly examining the connections between the theories. Putnam (2000) is clear about the positive implications of social capital: “of all the domains in which I have traced the consequences of social capital, in none is the importance of social connectedness so well established as in the case of health and well-being” (p. 326). Supporting this idea, and quoting a study by Durkheim from the late nineteenth century, Field (2003) explains that “the idea that social cohesion and health are related is at least a century old” (p. 57). This association is suggested to be due to the material assistance, healthy norms, mobilisation, and immune system stimulation brought about by positive social capital (Field, 2003). Ledogar and Fleming (2008) describe social capital as a resource for Aboriginal resilience, and present a model accounting for both community and individual level considerations. In addition to providing individuals and communities with important resources for resilience, Field (2003) suggests that trust and self-confidence also result from a rich social network, supporting personal resilience and well-being.

*Social capital theory applied.* As evidenced by participants’ emphasis of their familial, social and community relationships, it is clear that these connections are an important source of strength, opportunity, and support. Woolcock (2001) provides a useful framework for the investigation of these relationships by distinguishing between *bonding*, *bridging* and *linking* types of social capital. Bonding social capital “denotes ties between like people in similar situations” (Field, 2003, p. 42), and is described by Putnam (2000) as “sociological superglue” (p. 22). According to Putnam (2000), bonding social capital can provide crucial social and psychological support for members

of a community who may otherwise be marginalised. Participants in the research are clear about the importance of their relationships with other Aboriginal people in the community, and the solidarity and personal support that result from these relationships. Linda connects her resilience to the opportunity to meet together as a group of Aboriginal people. “That’s what worked well for me, was having other people around- other natives around, and understanding.”

On the other hand, bonding capital can be exclusive because of the inward-focus and homogeneity of the group (Field, 2003). This potentially negative impact of bonding capital describes Tracy’s sense of exclusion as an Inuk woman from a First Nations group in a nearby town. Bonding social capital can be an important source of reciprocity and solidarity, and the potentially isolating effect of these strong ties are mediated by evidence of “bridging” social capital in the community.

Woolcock (2001) describes bridging social capital as the more distant ties linking different groups together. Putnam (2000) continues with his toolbox metaphor of social capital, referring to bridging social capital as “sociological WD40” (p. 22). These ties are said to foster inclusiveness, generating broader relationships and facilitating the exchange of new information (Putnam, 2000). This is something discussed at length by Lucie, who even employed a “bridge” metaphor to describe the creation of a place of understanding between native and non-native community members. Participants illustrate these bridging connections in the community through stories of informal conversations in cashier line-ups, formal events such as the Autumn Festival, and open groups such as the sharing circle. There is evidence in all five interviews of efforts to build up bridging capital both on the part of Aboriginal community members and in the general



community. This complements the solidarity and reciprocity of the bonding social capital, keeping its exclusivity in check.

A final distinction made by Woolcock (2001) is the description of linking social capital. This type of social capital “refers to relationships between people that operate across explicit, formal or institutionalised power or authority gradients” (Baum, 2007, p. 113). Lucie describes how she has reached out to political programs to find support for the Autumn Festival, as well as to outside Aboriginal communities to garner their support and participation in the event. In addition to these examples where linking social capital benefits the community by increasing its resources, Joseph provides examples where his work provides a link to other, more formal organisations to their benefit as well. His contributions to the museum and to the university provide these institutions with valuable resources and information.

Social capital theory helps to describe the tremendous value of relationships in the lives of participants, and provides a framework for understanding how the different types of relationships contribute to the resilience of the participants and the community. The existence of both strong bonding and bridging capital helps to explain the existence of Aboriginal solidarity and mobilisation, without the creation of an isolated or marginalised tight-knit group.

### *Social Determinants of Health*

The idea that social conditions have an impact on health is sometimes difficult to assert in an era when individuals are increasingly seen as the primary agents of their own lives. (Saggers & Gray, 2007, p. 2)

At the risk of endorsing a deterministic approach to health and well-being, it is worth examining the contributions of social determinants of health theories to the

analysis of these interviews. Raphael (2004) explains that social determinants of health are “the economic and social conditions that influence the health of individuals, communities, and jurisdictions as a whole” (p. 1). These conditions traditionally include resources such as health and social services, childhood living conditions, housing, educational and employment opportunities (Raphael, 2004). Theories of social capital and social inclusion are also increasingly common to this list of resources (Labonte, 2004). Although participants in the research study assert that they are in part responsible for their own well-being, they also describe the importance of their experiences with social and health services, the value of their educations, and the importance of good housing and infrastructure in the community. Anne gives a specific example as she describes her reliance on transportation provided by the CLSC in order to get to medical appointments and check-ups. As discussed previously, each participant also names the importance of their sense of inclusion and belonging in the community.

The particularities of the social determinants of indigenous health are explored in a book edited by Carson, Dunbar, Chenhall and Bailie (2007), which is focused on Aboriginal peoples in Australia. A chapter is devoted to the discussion of ‘place’ as a determinant of indigenous health, explaining the inseparability of culture and land in for many indigenous cultures, and the impact of place on indigenous health. Pat Anderson is quoted in this chapter as describing the primacy of place and culture for Aboriginal peoples.

Our identity as human beings remains tied to our land, to our cultural practices, our systems of authority and social control, our intellectual traditions, our concepts of spirituality, and to our systems of resource ownership and exchange. Destroy this relationship and you damage - sometimes irrevocably - individual human beings and their health. (Burgess & Morrison, 2007, p. 190)

Burgess and Morrison (2007) explain that determinants of indigenous well-being are often abstract combinations of relationships with land, body and spirit. These authors suggest that personal identity is inseparable from place for Indigenous Australians, and they elaborate on the connections between place and mastery, governance, and social integration and cohesion. These ideas are supported by other studies, such as the findings of Chandler and Lalonde (1998), which indicate a connection between land claims, cultural continuity, and low suicide rates among First Nations groups of British Columbia. This emphasis on land and place as a social determinant of indigenous health is reflected in the interviews. As discussed previously, each participant discussed the impact on well-being of their natural environment and their attachment to their place in it.

#### *Emerging Tensions and Balances*

The themes and theoretical contributions that emerge from the interviews give rise to increasingly abstract discussions. Before moving on to discuss the implications of this research study, the most prominent tensions will be explored in light of the perspectives and experiences of participants.

#### *Agency and Determinism*

The tension between individual agency and structural determinism is ongoing in social, health, and psychological studies. Without entering into an extensive review of the debates, this discussion will take the approach that the responsibility for resilience and well-being lays neither exclusively with the individual nor with the society. It is simplistic and unnecessary to select one extreme over the other; most intelligent debates acknowledge that both individual freedom and social structure have an impact on health and resilience (Jordan, 2006; Sen, 1999). In this study, all of the participants share ways

in which they take responsibility for their own resilience, while also attributing their well-being to resources and opportunities provided by social structures.

The balance of responsibility for well-being between society and individual is thoroughly examined in the literature. Sen (1999) explores this debate in great detail, with an underlying focus on agency and freedom.

Any affirmation of social responsibility that *replaces* individual responsibility cannot but be, to varying extents, counterproductive. There is no substitute for individual responsibility. The limited reach and plausibility of an exclusive reliance on personal responsibility can best be discussed only after its essential role has first been recognized. However, the substantive freedoms that we respectively enjoy to exercise our responsibilities are extremely contingent on personal, social, and environmental circumstances. (p. 283-284)

While Sen depicts individuals as active agents of their own destinies, other authors are more cautious about placing too much responsibility with the individual. Byrne (2005) explains that individualist perspectives result in the blaming the socially excluded for their marginalisation, and create the division of people into worthy and undeserving categories. In his analysis of social policies, Jordan (2006) writes that “social order based on individual choice is fragile” (p. 131), and explains how this model is built on assumptions of self-motivation and self-improvement. Jordan (2006) also introduces the term “stalled well-being” (p. 123) to describe the impact of neo-liberal discourses of autonomy and responsibility.

They could produce statistics to show that mainstream households were better off as a result of all the changes around them, and that this was through their own efforts. But the evidence on well-being is far more ambiguous. Mainstream individuals did not *feel* better; self-assessments of happiness, taking in all aspects of their lives, showed no gains, and some declines. (Jordan, 2006, p. 123)

It is evident that conceptualisations of resilience must take into account the impact of both individual choices and social structures, as well as the relationships between these

two forces. Participants in the research project speak about using their own agency in order to create change in the social structure around them, while also receiving support from it. In the interviews, there is no judgement or shame in seeking help or depending on others. It seems appropriate to give Sen (1999) the last word on this topic.

The arbitrarily narrow view of individual responsibility- with the individual standing on an imaginary island unhelped and unhindered by others- has to be broadened not merely by acknowledging the role of the state, but also by recognizing the functions of other institutions and agents. (p. 284)

### *Them and Us*

Another tension or area of balance between extremes arises in regards to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Participants in the study speak on several occasions in terms of ‘them’ and ‘us’. Linda uses this distinction to explain the knowledge gap in the community, and her role in teaching others about Aboriginal culture. Joseph, while also using this distinction to describe native and non-native knowledge systems, addresses the danger of creating distance between “us” and “them”. He brings in Edward Said’s ideas of Orientalism, and the process of essentialising the ‘other’.

You know, all of a sudden native people seem to be a... kind of an oddity. People are in ‘awe’ about them, but in real sense the mindfulness that they are there and *different* kind-of speaks to a group of people not understanding what those people are all about.

As Aboriginal people living in a predominantly non-native community, the well-being of research participants depends in part on their ability to balance their identity in the community as a distinct subpopulation “us” and as a member of the community, “we”.

The balance between identifying with the community and as an Aboriginal person also applies to a cultural level. All participants in the research take a middle ground

approach to their Aboriginal heritage, away from the extremes of abandoning it altogether for ‘mainstream’ culture or living in isolation from all things non-native. Participants describe their well-being as resulting in part from this way of life. This is reflected in participants’ choices to remember, or to practice, aspects of their heritage that give them pride and strength, and to forget or create distance from aspects of their pasts that hinder their well-being. In describing human capability, Sen (1999) describes the focus on “the ability- the substantive freedom- of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have” (p. 293). The participants all speak of how much they value their choices to integrate their Aboriginal traditions and culture with their lives in a non-native community.

#### *Resistance and Resilience*

In the movement away from psychopathology towards more strength-based models, stories of resistance often appear within discussions of resilience. Participants in this study incorporate their own examples of resistance, such as Anne’s decision to quit her job as a live-in housekeeper, or Lucie’s refusal to pay for the full vacation time of her subsidised caregivers and her subsequent removal of her children from the program. Responding to adversity or oppression, whether or not it is based on Aboriginal identity, is part of resistance and is part of the participants’ experiences of resilience.

In his analysis of social capital, Putnam (2000) suggests that social capital is often most easily created in opposition to someone or to something. The presentation of resistance as conducive to the cultivation of social capital reflects a number of stories told by participants. The opportunity for Joseph to act as a peacekeeper arose from the community’s opposition to the construction of a strip-mall, and Lucie tells how the

destruction of a bridge brought the community together and provoked collective action to have the bridge rebuilt. Taking the importance of resistance to another level, Labonte (2004) puts forward that anger is an important source of mobilisation. While the experiences and perspectives of participants do support the importance of resistance and the value of uniting around a cause, their stories also evidence that anger is not a good foundation for resilience or for well-being. Several participants even mention conscious decisions to avoid basing their lives on anger.

The participants' positions in these over-arching debates and tensions can best be described as places of balance. These themes form the basis for the subsequent discussion on the implications of this research project in terms of social work practice, research and policy.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Limitations and Future Directions

*Research Limitations*

There are several limitations to this research study that must be made clear before examining its implications. There are many ways to investigate resilience in an Aboriginal context; the sample could be based on gender, age, geographic location, on/off reserve, or Aboriginal subgroup. These options, as well as their relative advantages and limitations, were explored in the beginning stages of this research study. The research was ultimately conducted with a “convenience sample” where the community was known to the researcher (Padgett, 1998, p. 51), resulting in a particularly heterogeneous sample that includes Inuk, Mi’kmaq, Métis, and Cree identities, a variety of early life experiences, and diverse forms of community involvement. While this produced rich, in-depth data, the research is evidently not representative or generalisable. The number of participants also limits the application of the research results. A sample size of 5 is appropriate to phenomenological research, but is evidently not meant to produce data that applies to all Aboriginal peoples.

It is clear from the narrative accounts of participants that a sense of place and attachment in a home community is a central component of their well-being. Participants were born in vastly different Aboriginal communities, and the diversity of their childhood experiences and living environments limit the conclusions that can be drawn from this study about life-long connections to a particular place. However, despite the different origins of participants’ families, participants all discussed a common attachment to their



current community and to the land where they now find themselves. This results in profound insights into community characteristics that support or hinder resilience.

As a result of its broad focus on resilience, this study has relatively broad implications for social work. Since social work was not the direct subject of the research, the resulting implications for practice and policy are rather general. Even strength-based social work services tend to be centred around deficit and need, and in this study, attention was directed to assets, rather than deficits or pathology.

My own identity and social location create additional limitations. As a middle-class, university-educated, white woman, there are differences between my social location and those of the participants. Despite my efforts to engage in collaborative, empowering research, my identity as a non-native person creates distance from participants and influences the study design, interview process and analysis. For example, the selection criterion of engagement or leadership in the community may have excluded other stories of Aboriginal resilience from individuals less concerned with community participation. In addition, I am familiar with the research community and with some of the participants. Participants may have emphasised or downplayed aspects of their experiences or the community because of these pre-existing relationships.

#### *Implications of Research Findings*

“For the policy-maker and the practitioner, the strength of resilience should be in its capacity to be operationalised into concrete sets of strategies and actions, the value of which can be assessed” (Canavan, 2008, p. 6)

This research study brings up a number of considerations in the application of social work, whether in direct practice, research, or policy development. Some ideas are relevant to all applications of social work: the importance of a reflective, collaborative

approach, the benefits of an asset-based framework, the multiple levels of resilience (individual, family, community), and the obvious assertion that there is much variation between Aboriginal peoples, cultures, communities, and experiences. This discussion is based on the understanding that social work has been used as a tool of colonisation, and that a positive future of social work with Aboriginal peoples always requires an analysis of power and careful attention to avoid paternalistic, oppressive attitudes.

### *Practice Implications*

Before discussing the implications for social work practice that arise from analysis and theoretical discussions, it is important to first highlight the suggestions and recommendations made by research participants. As presented in earlier sections, participants all highlight the value of cultural connections, family, and social support. In all fields of social work practice, workers should strive to create and support opportunities for cultural expression and for the enrichment of close relationships. All four of the women interviewed named support groups as one of the most important factors in fostering the resilience of Aboriginal peoples living in a non-native community.

In addition to the emphasis on family and social relationships, participants suggest that there is a need for education and awareness in the broader community on Aboriginal cultures and issues. While an Aboriginal initiative such as the Autumn Festival is evidently an excellent example of public education, the onus need not always fall to Aboriginal peoples to raise awareness about native culture and history. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professionals have a responsibility to educate themselves and others on the history and current circumstances of Aboriginal peoples. Participants explain that improved curriculum in public schools, courses geared towards adults, and informal

education through community events all contribute to increased awareness of Aboriginal histories and cultures. According to participants, this awareness creates an environment of acceptance and understanding, feeding into community-level inclusiveness and resilience. This ‘bridging’ social capital complements the bonding relationships that are built up through support groups, cultural events and family relationships.

Participants also name the importance of being able to take care of their practical needs through access to health services, transportation, childcare, and education. The longstanding role of social work in linking people with information or resources should not be underestimated. In the absence of appropriate or accessible services, social workers have a responsibility to advocate for their creation. Individuals cannot be empowered to take control of their own well-being if they lack the necessary resources to do so. Each participant connects social and public services with their well-being and resilience, whether in terms of good quality education for their children, opportunities in post-secondary education, access to fully-equipped health care facilities, or subsidised childcare. For Lucie, access to social assistance provided her with the ability to transition from her life in Manitoba to her life in the current community, and the opportunity to take a business course for single mothers proved to be life-changing for her. Linda is the only participant who disclosed childhood contact with child welfare services, and although she does not comment on the process of this contact, she does credit her strength and well-being to her stable, loving foster family, and mentions that she and her brother were kept together in their foster home.

By researching and understanding what is fundamentally important to individuals, such as a positive relationship with a caring adult, a sense of purpose in life, and a

connection to culture, social services can strive to preserve or promote these elements in difficult circumstances. Despite the imperfections in public and social services and the damaging effects of the imposition of these services on Aboriginal peoples in the past, these interviews indicate that accessible, appropriate services provide opportunities for personal initiative and the development of resilience.

As with external resources, it is also important to support internal resources such as spirituality, coping philosophies, and a sense of purpose. Participants emphasise the impact of being able to integrate both positive and negative life experiences in a way that preserves individual well-being. Being able to make sense of the world and of one's place in the world is an individual process that fosters confidence and resilience. Social workers have a role in helping people discover and expand these internal resources. Participants use language such as *forte*, *gift*, *role*, or *purpose* to describe their capabilities and how they view their place in the community. Wade (1995) reminds practitioners that when people are confined to "speaking their pain" (p. 176), they are encouraged to see themselves as dysfunctional, less capable than others, and perhaps even deserving of adversity. Focusing on the capacities of individuals to overcome adversity and encouraging stories of resistance and strength helps to reinforce resilience.

As discussed in the analysis, while participants' experiences and perceptions are described in part through the mainstream understanding of resilience, they also contribute distinctly Aboriginal perspectives. In social work practice, there must be room for Aboriginal ways of knowing, for personal meaning and for the expansion of constructs beyond the predominantly Western understandings. For example, if the interview guide

had focused only on mainstream ‘protective factors’ in resilience, participants would not have had the space to share their thoughts on the importance of the land.

Finally, the social justice aspect of social work is a major implication of this research. As discussed in previous sections, neither determinism nor agency fully explains resilience. The ability to successfully exercise one’s agency depends on a responsive, inclusive environment. Labonte (2004) reminds practitioners, “we should not let the warmth of our inclusive ideal smother our anger over exclusivity’s unfairness” (p. 258). A focus on resilience and strengths does not have to take the place of action against social exclusion. In fact, the interplay between the individual and the social environment are well illustrated in resilience theories, providing strong evidence for the value of social justice work. Dion Stout and Kipling (2003) discuss the responsibility to change destructive environments: “In an Aboriginal context, this responsibility includes the need to combat prejudice and to support Aboriginal people in their pursuit of self-determination, healing and sustainable social and economic development” (p. 21).

### *Research Implications*

As discussed in the review of the literature, this research is designed to address the paucity of off-reserve, resilience-based research with Aboriginal peoples. Cardinal (2006) explains that this is an international issue that should not be overlooked any longer.

Almost no countries or organizations report on the condition of Indigenous populations living in urban areas, even though they often face systematic discrimination, oppression, and poverty in such areas. Significant barriers to equal opportunities in housing, education and employment confront urban Indigenous people. (p. 218)

Considering that more than half of Aboriginal peoples in Canada live off-reserve (Statistics Canada, 2008<sub>b</sub>), continued research of the experiences and perceptions of Aboriginal people living in non-native contexts is particularly important for informing community development, social work practice, and social policy.

It is interesting to note that respondents in this study emphasised the importance of particular characteristics of the research community. The exploration of community characteristics in terms of Aboriginal resilience and well-being is a noteworthy area of potential research.

Another major theme of potential research interest is the significant impact of relationships on respondents' well-being. Jordan (2006) discusses how these connections have been boiled down to a reliance on others in a service economy.

Both neo-liberal and Third Way models of society neglect the human dimensions of relatedness- intimacy, the quality of family and friendship relationships, community as convivial association (rather than social control), and citizenship as belonging and solidarity. In restructuring institutions for the expression of individual choice, they have neglected the role of services in providing interpretative frameworks for these choices. (p. 216)

This author postulates that well-being may be associated with voluntary (rather than service-oriented) relationships, and suggests this as an area of possible research. All four of the women in this study emphasise the importance of their relationships to their children, associating their responsibility as mothers with the development of their own resilience and strength. The connection between mothering, altruistic responsibility, and resilience is another interesting topic for future investigations.

The value of strength-based research is well-established. Morgan and Ziglio (2006) explain that "asset models tend to accentuate positive capability to identify problems and activate solutions, which promotes the self-esteem of individuals and

communities” (p. 2). The asset-based approach of investigating what is working well for individuals and communities creates a deeper understanding of what to do, rather than what not to do. In addition, the asset-based research process itself can contribute to confidence and strength by provoking positive reflection. In this study, Anne did not initially consider herself to be a particularly resilient person. During the course of the interview, she gained confidence in her accomplishments and the positive decisions she has made throughout her life, and at the end of the interview commented on her role in the research project as an expert and as a teacher. I am convinced that research is not only a means to an end, but that it can also be an end in itself.

#### *Policy Implications*

The most prominent policy consideration emerging from this research is the need to balance individual and societal responsibility for well-being. In terms of individual Aboriginal peoples or Aboriginal self-governance, the reflections of participants indicate that agency is most meaningful when support and education are provided along with responsibility. Sen (1999) reminds readers that state support does not necessarily mean spoon-feeding, and that many other organisations are involved in the support of individual well-being.

There is a difference between “nannying” an individual’s choices and creating more opportunity for choice and for substantive decisions for individuals who can then act responsibly on that basis. The social commitment to individual freedom need not, of course, operate only through the state, but must also involve other institutions: political and social organizations, community-based arrangements, non-governmental agencies of various kinds, the media and other means of public understanding and communication. (p. 284).

The environment in which individuals make decisions about their well-being is complex, and social policy has to account for the interplay between individual, community, and state. Jordan (2006) writes, “The big issue for social policy is how to link personal experience, enabled through individual rights, with a social context conducive to well-being” (p. 207). This social context is discussed by participants, who share numerous examples of the community’s ability to care for itself, including Lucie’s description of the sharing circle as an event where someone is “noticed” if she needs support. These examples challenge current social policy, which often translates the population health model into residual, professional services. For example, the research community has a sizeable hospital and a fully staffed CLSC, but is currently struggling to raise funds for a community centre. This does not reflect what participants describe as central to their well-being. Results of this study suggest that the social policy that will foster resilience is one that supports community capacity.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

The resilience demonstrated by the 5 research participants is evidently the result of complex interactions between external and internal resources. The experiences and perceptions of these individuals indicate the importance of connections to the successful navigation of adversity: connections to family, land, culture, community, and to a personal sense of purpose. Alongside the emphasis on connectedness is the importance of balance: between physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being, between Aboriginal and mainstream cultures, and between individual and societal responsibility. These findings provide insight into the experience of resilience for off-reserve Aboriginal individuals, and indicate practical and theoretical directions in the promotion of



resilience. It is my hope that this research has contributed to what Joseph describes as “The Great Unfolding. As you’re growing up, in these cycles- I call them cycles of learning- every year you learn something else and you keep learning and adding...”

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## Appendix A

## Letter of Introduction

Dear ,

I am currently working on my Master's thesis at McGill University. The topic of my thesis is the resilience (or well-being despite adversity) of Aboriginal peoples living off-reserve. Since the majority of studies on Aboriginal issues focus on deficits and problems, there is a lack of awareness of the strength and perseverance demonstrated by many Aboriginal peoples. In addition, most studies of resilience are based on Eurocentric ideas of what helps people survive and thrive in the face of challenges. There is not very much research on Aboriginal perspectives or experiences of resilience, and I am interested in hearing your story and your insights. I have always been impressed and interested by the strength and involvement of Aboriginal community members [in your community]. Through this study I hope to learn more about your traditions and your ideas on well-being.

I am writing to invite you to participate in this research project. The purpose of the study is to learn from Aboriginal community members' experiences of strength, and to hear ideas on how to foster Aboriginal well-being in a non-native community. If you chose to participate, I will ask you to meet with me for one interview lasting no longer than an hour and a half. Your participation in this project would be confidential and completely voluntary. The McGill Research Ethics Board has approved this research.

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor if you have any questions. If you would like to be involved in this project, please contact me at the information below.

Thank you for your time,

Charlotte Hardie  
[phone number and email address]

Supervisor: Dr. Wendy Thomson  
[phone number and email address]

Cher

Je suis en train de compléter ma thèse pour ma maîtrise à l'université McGill. Le sujet de ma recherche est le bien-être et la réussite des personnes Autochtones qui habitent hors-réserve. Puisque la plupart des études sur questions Autochtones se concentrent sur les problèmes et les ennuis, il ya une manque de conscience de la force et la persévérance démontrées par les peuples Autochtones. Il n'y a pas beaucoup de recherche sur les perspectives ou les expériences Autochtones du bien-être, et j'aimerais entendre votre histoire et vos idées. J'ai toujours remarqué sur la force et l'engagement des individus Autochtones dans votre communauté. J'espère pouvoir apprendre plus au sujet de vos traditions et vos idées sur le bien-être.

J'aimerais vous inviter à participer dans cette étude. Le but de la recherche est de mieux comprendre les expériences Autochtones de force et de persévérance, et d'examiner comment promouvoir le bien-être des personnes Autochtones. Si vous voulez participer, je vous demanderai de me rencontrer pour une entrevue qui durera entre 60 et 90 minutes. Votre participation dans cette recherche sera confidentielle et volontaire. Le projet est approuvé par le Conseil sur l'Ethique en Recherche de McGill.

N'hésitez pas à m'appeler ou à contacter ma superviseur si vous avez des questions. Si vous aimeriez participer à cette recherche, s'il vous plait me contacter à l'information ci-dessous.

Merci de votre temps,

Charlotte Hardie  
[Courriel et numéro de téléphone]

Superviseur: Dr. Wendy Thomson  
[Courriel et numéro de téléphone]

## Appendix B

## Consent Form

**Title of Research:** Seven spans thick: Exploring resilience from the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples living off-reserve

**Researcher:** Charlotte Hardie, Masters of Social Work student

**Contact Information:** [phone number and email address]

**Supervisor:** Dr. Wendy Thomson [phone number]

The purpose of this research study is to learn from Aboriginal community members' experiences and perspectives on resilience. The things that help people do well despite challenges and problems have mainly been researched in non-Aboriginal contexts. This study intends to gather the ideas of Aboriginal individuals living off-reserve on the topic of strength despite adversity. Through this form, I would like to formally ask for your participation in this study.

Your participation will involve an interview in a location of your choice, lasting approximately one hour. In order to make sure that I don't miss anything you say, I will be tape-recording our interview. You may stop the tape or the interview at any time. If there are questions you do not want to answer, you may refuse. After the interview, the tape will be transcribed and then stored in a secure place. Only myself and my supervisor Wendy Thomson will have access to this identifying information. In the month following the interview, I will contact you once to make sure that I have properly understood the meaning of what you shared during the interview.

Transcripts will also be shared in collaboration with the research team working on the Roots of Resilience Project under Dr. Laurence Kirmayer. All identifying information will be removed or altered in these transcripts, and they will be labelled with a code and kept in a secure place at the Culture and Mental Health Research Unit at the Jewish General Hospital. The Roots of Resilience study is a project that seeks to better understand indigenous experiences of well-being and resilience through the stories of Aboriginal people. By agreeing to share an anonymous transcript of your interview, your perspectives and insights as an Aboriginal person living in a non-native community will be included in this larger study. The research coordinator of this study can be reached at [phone number].

What you share will be written up in a thesis, and may be published or presented in the future. In these documents, your real name will never be used, and details of your story will be changed so that other people will not identify you or your community.

A summary of the results will be provided to you and to the community in a format to be decided by research participants. It is your choice whether or not you want to be identified in this document or presentation.

You will receive \$20 compensation for your participation in the study, and you will be reimbursed for any transportation and/or care-giving costs associated with your participation.

---

I agree to be tape-recorded YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to being directly quoted (without my name attached) YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to share the transcription of my interview with the Roots of Resilience Project (with all identifying information removed) YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I want to be identified in the results summary provided to the community YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I understand this consent form and agree to this interview.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

## Interview Guide

**Tape #:** \_\_\_\_\_**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_**Pseudonym:** \_\_\_\_\_**Start time:** \_\_\_\_\_**End time:** \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this interview is to better understand what helps people do well despite challenges or difficulty. This phenomenon is described as ‘resilience’, or the ability to be well in the face of adversity. I am interested to hear your story of resilience, and to hear about any traditional descriptions of resilience, as well as your ideas on how to support the resilience of Aboriginal peoples living in non-native contexts such as this one.

**A. YOUR STORIES OF RESILIENCE**

**Preface:** I am interested in hearing *your own* stories of resilience. These first questions are about your personal experiences.

- 1) **Please share your story with me: where did you grow up? How did you come to live in this community?**
  - a. **What have been some of the most important influences in your life?**
- 2) **What specific things in your life have helped you to overcome difficulties?**  
Ways of thinking, relationships, family/friends, community, environment, culture, other things?
  - a. **What are your main sources of support?**

**B. LANGUAGE, STORIES AND EXPRESSIONS RELATED TO RESILIENCE**

**Preface:** The next questions are related to the particular words, expressions, or traditional stories that you might use to describe how you have gotten through life challenges. These could be in English or any other language you know.

- 3) **How is the idea of doing well in the face of difficulty expressed in your culture? Are there traditional expressions, stories, and words to describe success despite hardship?**
  - a. **How have these stories or expressions helped you?**

### C. SHARING KNOWLEDGE

**Preface:** I would like to know how you pass on knowledge to others about getting through life challenges.

- 4) **How do you share your experiences of getting through challenges with others?**
- 5) **How do you see your role in fostering Aboriginal strength and well-being?**

### D. RESILIENCE IN A NON-NATIVE COMMUNITY

**Preface:** I would like to learn what has helped you demonstrate resilience and engagement in this community.

- 6) **How did you create a place for yourself in this community?**
  - a. **What was helpful in that process? How do people in the community respond to your involvement?**
- 7) **What do you think that Aboriginal peoples need in order to succeed in non-native communities?**
  - a. **What do you think is the most important thing that a community can provide to support the well-being of its Aboriginal members?**

### E. FUTURE OUTLOOK

**Preface:** Looking ahead to the future, I would like to know what you think should be known about fostering Aboriginal well-being.

- 8) **Based on your experiences, how do you think Aboriginal resilience could be strengthened in this community?**  
**How do you see the future of Aboriginal peoples in this community?**
- 9) **If you could tell someone only one thing about maintaining well-being as an Aboriginal person, what would it be?**

### F. FINAL QUESTION

- 10) **We have now reached the end of the interview- is there anything else you would like to add?**



## Appendix D

## Questionnaire

1. How would you like these results to be shared with the community?
  
2. Would you like to be involved in that?

**Demographic Information**

1. **Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Age:** 18-30 31-45 46-60 61+
3. **Aboriginal Identity:** Inuit Métis First Nations: please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
4. **Highest level of education:** Primary Secondary College University
5. **Language of education:** English French Other: \_\_\_\_\_
6. **Languages spoken** (please identify as many as apply):  
English French Other: \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Occupation:** \_\_\_\_\_
8. **Number of years living in La Pêche municipality:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please respond to the following questions by selecting only one of the available options**

- 1) Overall, how successful do you feel you've been in making it through challenges:  
 Not at all successful  
 Somewhat successful  
 Successful  
 Fairly successful  
 Very successful
  
- 2) Overall, how well would you say you feel:  
 Not at all well  
 Somewhat well  
 Fairly well  
 Well  
 Very well

Appendix E

Follow-Up Letter

Dear

Happy New Year! I hope that 2009 is off to a good start for you and your family.

In the three months since our interview this fall, I have been coding and writing up my thesis. Thank you again for your participation; I am honoured that you took time to share your thoughts and experiences with me.

I am sending you the word-for-word transcript of our interview and a summary (in my words) of what you shared with me. Please look over the documents and mark down anything that you would like to correct, add or remove. Once you have done this, please return the revised documents to me in the envelope provided. If you are satisfied with the documents as they are, simply let me know so that I know that you have received them. You will notice that I have changed your name and identifying information; if you would prefer a different name, please let me know.

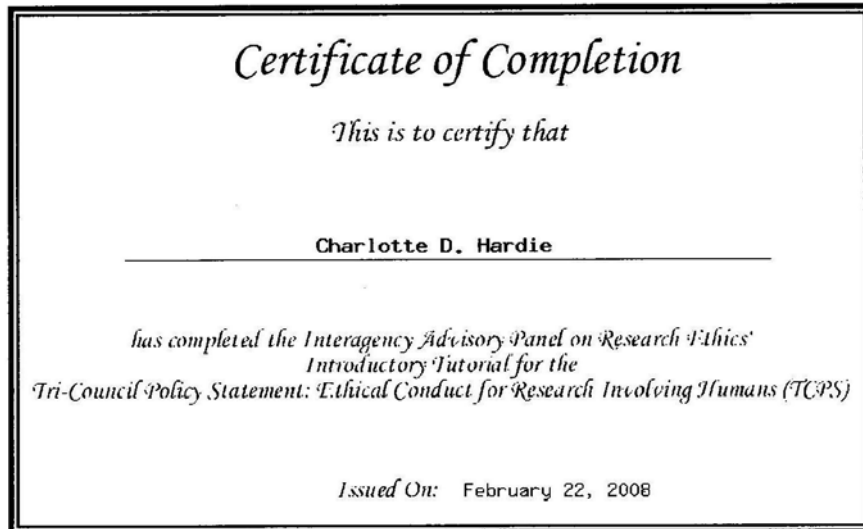
The purpose of this process is to provide you with the opportunity to let me know if I am accurately reflecting your story and ideas, and to give you the final word on what is included in the research. I am hoping to submit my thesis within the next month, and will let you know when the final version has been approved.

With thanks,

Charlotte Hardie  
[Phone number and email address]

Appendix F

Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethics Certificate



Appendix G

Ethics Certificate



Research Ethics Board Office  
McGill University  
1555 Peel Street, 11<sup>th</sup> floor  
Montreal, QC H3A 3L8

Tel: (514) 398-6831  
Fax: (514) 398-4644  
Ethics website: www.mcgill.ca/researchoffice/compliance/human/

**Research Ethics Board II**  
**Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans**

**REB File #:** 277-0308

**Project Title:** Seven spans thick: exploring resilience from the perspective of First Nations community leaders

**Principal Investigator:** Charlotte Hardie

**Department:** Social Work

**Status:** Master's student

**Supervisor:** Prof. Wendy Thomson

**Funding Agency and Title (if applicable):** SSHRC master's fellowship

This project was reviewed on March 18, 2008 by

Expedited Review   
Full Review



Mark Baldwin, Ph.D.  
Chair, REB II

**Approval Period:** May 1, 2008 to April 30, 2009

This project was reviewed and approved in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects and with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct For Research Involving Humans.

- 
- \* All research involving human subjects requires review on an annual basis. A Request for Renewal form should be submitted at least one month before the above expiry date.
  - \* When a project has been completed or terminated a Final Report form must be submitted.
  - \* Should any modification or other unanticipated development occur before the next required review, the REB must be informed and any modification can't be initiated until approval is received.