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# Emotional and Spiritual Challenges of Aboriginal Foster Parents

Richelle L. Bird

*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor

Dr. Jason Brown


*The University of Western Ontario*

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EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL CHALLENGES OF ABORIGINAL FOSTER  
PARENTS

By

Richelle Bird

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

Western University

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## **Acknowledgments**

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This study highlights the importance and impact of family, whomever that family may be. To my own family I express my immense appreciation for the love and support you have always given me. To my parents in particular I am forever grateful for your encouragement in any and every goal I have ever wished to pursue; I certainly would not be at this point in my academic career without your ongoing and unconditional support.

Lastly I want to extend my thanks and thoughts to all of the foster children and parents I have had the immense pleasure of working with, and learning from. Your stories sparked my interest in this area, and continue to drive my desire to be a part of this field of study.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to identify the emotional and spiritual challenges faced by Aboriginal foster parents. Interviews were conducted with a total of 83 Aboriginal foster parents in a central Canadian province. The interviews were conducted over the phone and participants were asked two questions: “What are the emotional challenges that would cause you to consider quitting fostering?” and “What are the spiritual challenges that would cause you to consider quitting fostering?” Responses to the questions were sorted by participants and analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Seven concepts emerged in response to the first question including: 1) Defending Integrity, 2) Loss of Hope, 3) Unresolved Conflict, 4) Abuse, 5) Fear for Safety, 6) Burnout, and 7) Resentment. Three concepts emerged on response to the second question including: 1) Meaninglessness, 2) Being Alone, and 3) Religious Restrictions. The concepts were compared to and contrasted with the fostering literature.

*Keywords:* Aboriginal, foster parents, foster children, emotional challenges, spiritual challenges, supports.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The Aboriginal population of Canada is 1.4 million, or 4.3% of the national total and growing (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2010 [AANDC]; National Household Survey, 2011). While non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada experienced their “baby boom” post WWII, Aboriginal peoples are currently in the midst of a baby boom (Boe, 2002). The rapid rise in population has been attributed to increasing fertility, mobility and migration rates. Additionally, more individuals are identifying as Aboriginal who may not have in the past (AANDC, 2010). Off-reserve Aboriginal peoples have been identified as the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011). At present over half of the Aboriginal population live in urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2011).

While First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013) have different histories and relationships to the federal government (AANDC, 2013), there is also considerable variation within each group. There are multiple languages spoken, approaches to local governance, traditional practices, relative wealth and experience of poverty, as well as geographic locations and community sizes from the far north to the south, east and west. For each community, the central importance of children and families, as well as well as ties to the land, are fundamental. Therefore, the losses of life, freedom, expression of tradition and children that have accumulated following European contact have delivered major negative effects on each generation experienced across communities. There is a great deal of resiliency among the Aboriginal population and strengths that must be recognized. It is essential that efforts to enhance self-governance be made. In the area of child welfare, self-



governance is underway and as part of that effort, increasing recognition is being paid to recruitment of Aboriginal staff at all levels. The focus of the present study was to explore emotional and spiritual issues related to the retention of Aboriginal foster parents.

### **Historical Trauma**

Aboriginal peoples in Canada have experienced widespread trauma with effects carrying across generations following European contact (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). This history began with exposure to disease to which Aboriginal peoples had no previous exposure or resistance. The reserve system resulted in the relocation and confinement of Aboriginal peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Cultural practices were also banned (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2008). During the 1960s the “child welfare” response to problems resulting from assimilation efforts was to “scoop” children from their families and communities and adopt them out into non-Aboriginal families (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; McCormick & Wong, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2002).

Colonization was enforced through the Indian Act, created in 1876, which outlined the federal government’s actions concerning status, bands and reserves. This Act is intrusive and paternalistic (Coates, 2008). It allowed the Minister to manage money belonging to communities, as well as holding power to approve or disallow local bylaws (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). The Act also denotes legal status (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004), and determines land base (Coates, 2008). An amendment to the Act in 1920 made attending state sponsored schools mandatory and allowed officers to enforce attendance by pursuing and arresting truant children (“An Act to Amend the Indian Act”, 1920, A10, as cited in Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). The Act does indicate that

the federal government has a unique relationship to First Nations peoples, so in that way it remains a key element in Aboriginal governance in Canada (Coates, 2008).

The traumatic effects of these losses are evident in emotional challenges felt across generations. The severity of trauma is significant in its nature and impact (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). The separation of children from families and communities has affected parenting capacity in subsequent generations, manifesting in rates of neglect that contribute to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care (Trocme, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004). Aboriginal children represent only 3%-25% of the children in Canada but make up between 21%-85% of the population of children in out of home care (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). The number of Aboriginal children placed in non-Aboriginal out-of-home care is increasing (Trocme, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004). While Aboriginal children are overrepresented in Canada's foster care system it is important to note that there are numerous Aboriginal children that do not reside in out of home care, living with their families and communities.

Given the colonial history and overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care, the low number of Aboriginal foster parents is especially concerning. A way to prevent the loss of cultural knowledge (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004) is by placing Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care with Aboriginal foster parents. The discrepancy between the number of Aboriginal children in care and the number of Aboriginal foster homes means this is often not possible and demonstrates the need to recruit and retain Aboriginal foster parents. However, little is known about the experiences of Aboriginal foster parents and whether the methods to recruit and retain Aboriginal foster parents are similar or different from efforts with non-Aboriginal foster parents. The present study has

potential to contribute to research and practice with Aboriginal foster parents by identifying emotional and spiritual issues they indicate are particularly salient to their decisions to quit fostering.

### **Rationale for the Present Study**

The placement of foster children in their home communities within extended family and relational networks is essential to facilitate and maintain cultural connections (Petten, 2000). However there are not enough Aboriginal foster parents to meet the need. Aboriginal foster parents who are providing care are well positioned to inform the system about ways to be more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities including the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster parents. While multiple challenges have been described in previous research little has been done to identify, from Aboriginal foster parents' own perspectives, what would make them consider quitting. Significant among the types of challenges faced by foster parents are the emotional difficulties faced by many foster children as well as addressing the spiritual needs they have. The perspectives of Aboriginal foster parents about what emotional and spiritual challenges would make them consider stopping foster parenting is essential knowledge for counsellors, policy makers and researchers.

### **Relevance for Counsellors**

A positive relationship between foster parents and agency staff has been found to be a central contributor to foster parent satisfaction and placement success (Baum, Crase & Crase, 2001; 2009; Denby, Rindfleisch & Bean, 1999). In order to facilitate a positive relationship between Aboriginal foster parents and practitioners it is necessary for practitioners to have a working knowledge of the challenges faced by this group. This

includes an understanding of cultures as well as concerns that may be specific to Aboriginal foster parents. In addition, the emotional toll that fostering can take on foster parents is well documented (Leschied, Roger, Brown, den Dunnen & Pickel, 2014; Anderson, 2013; Daniel, 2011b; Buehler, Rhodes, Orme & Cuddeback, 2006; Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003; Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). It is necessary for practitioners to develop an awareness and understanding of this emotional impact, as well as how it may manifest in Aboriginal foster parents' personal lives. Such knowledge is essential to promote the retention of Aboriginal foster parents.

### **Relevance for Policy Makers**

There is a clear need for Aboriginal foster parents (Blackstock & Bennet, 2003; Daniel, 2011a). Findings from the study can assist policy makers to make efforts for targeted recruiting and retaining of Aboriginal foster parents. This research also brings to light the necessity of acknowledging and including cultural values and beliefs in the implementation of policy and practice aimed at working with Aboriginal peoples in child welfare. When considering recruitment and retention efforts aimed at Aboriginal foster parents it is important to explore culturally relevant alternatives to policies and practices. For example, given the importance of connection in many communities, it may be beneficial to consider ways to implement this sense of connection into policy and practice such as via the recruitment of foster "communities" to care for children where caregiver skills are spread across different adults. Further, the results of this study may be utilized by policy makers to support the need for funding initiatives on Aboriginal capacity building as well as foster parent support and training efforts. Finally, it is important to consider the need for development of Aboriginal foster parent associations.

## **Relevance for Researchers**

The results of this study are also relevant to researchers. There is considerable research to inform recruitment and retention of foster parents in general, but little of it is specifically based on the needs of the Aboriginal community. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out of home care in comparison to the underrepresentation of Aboriginal foster parents makes it critical for researchers to determine factors that increase the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster parents. More specifically it is necessary for researchers to identify which factors increasing recruitment and retention are universal across foster parents, and what factors are specific to increasing the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster parents. Determining universal and specific factors would allow researchers to study which factors influence Aboriginal foster parents decision to continue or quit fostering. Once the specific challenges and factors influencing low recruitment and retention rates in Aboriginal foster parents are more thoroughly understood, strategies and supports can be put in place to help address challenges.

## **Structure of The Thesis**

The purpose of Chapter 1 is to identify the purpose of this research, highlight its relevance and potential uses. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and includes an overview of factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out of home care, as well as identifying reoccurring themes within the literature exploring the emotional and spiritual challenges of foster parents. Chapter 3 is a description of the methodology and overview of concept mapping as utilized in this study. Chapter 4 is a description of the results. Chapter 5 is a comparison and contrast between the existing

foster parenting literature and the results of interviews with Aboriginal foster parents in the present study to identify similarities and differences.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Foster care includes treatment foster care, customary care, private foster care, family-based (parent model) group homes and kinship care (Ekins, 2010). Foster care provides organized and time-limited family care for children who have experienced or are at risk for neglect or maltreatment at home (Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001). It is considered to be a temporary solution for children involved with child protection services (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Permanency goals will differ from child to child depending on the nature of the case; however reunification with birth parents is the preferred option (Anderson, 2013; Corser & Furnell, 1992).

Approximately three-quarters of all children who receive out of home placements are in foster care (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Foster homes are approved by child protective services and foster families care for one to several foster children at a time (Rodger, Cummings & Leschied, 2006). It is estimated that nearly 70,000 children in Canada are currently living in foster care (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003, as cited in Marquis, Leschied, Chiodo & O'Neill, 2008). With 35,000 foster homes in Canada (Canadian Foster Family Association, 2009), foster parents make up the largest group of service providers in the child welfare system (Leschied, Rodger, Brown, den Dunnen, & Pickel, 2014).

There is a shortage of Aboriginal foster parents (Petten, 2000). Aboriginal foster children are overrepresented in the foster care system while Aboriginal foster parents are underrepresented. There has been considerable research on contributors to placement success and foster parent retention. However, little attention has been paid to the experiences of Aboriginal foster parents in general as well as more specific needs in the

areas of emotional and spiritual wellness. Since it is important for Aboriginal children in care to remain close to their families, communities and cultures, Aboriginal foster parents are best positioned to provide the care that is needed.

A literature review was conducted in order to develop a more thorough understanding of the spiritual and emotional challenges faced by foster parents, particularly Aboriginal foster parents. This proved to be challenging, as there is a limited amount of existing research documenting the experience of Aboriginal foster parents, with the majority of the literature pertaining to the experience of non-Aboriginal foster parents. In general the literature on emotional challenges centered on: removal of children from the foster home, feeling like one cannot do enough, the children's needs are beyond foster parent's capacity to manage and placement breakdown. Literature on spiritual challenges focused on: dealing with too much difference, transcending different belief and value systems as well as inability to integrate foster child into the family.

### **Emotional Challenges of Fostering**

The role of a foster parent is perhaps unlike any other career as the line between one's personal and professional life is necessarily vague; thus, a particular set of emotional challenges emerges. First, the experience of having children removed from one's care is often an inevitable occurrence and one that may result in hurt on for the foster parents. Second, foster parents generally desire to improve the child's life and due to the situations and circumstances that result in children being placed in out-of-home care, when foster parents feel unable to do enough, feelings of distress, guilt and failure can occur (Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003; Tyebjee, 2003). Finally, the experience of caring for children with high behavioural and emotional needs has also been found to be



a key emotional stressor for foster parents (Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007; Heflinger, Simpkins, & Combs-Orme, 2000; Kortenkamp & Macomber, 2002; McCrae, 2009; McMillen, et al., 2005; Sawyer, Vandivere, Chalk, & Moore, 2003; as cited by Cox, Cherry & Orme, 2011). The experience is challenging unto itself, but the stress is exacerbated when these trials result in placement breakdown (that is, when the foster child is moved from one foster home to another). In this section, research highlighting foster parents' emotional challenges is reviewed.

**Children removed from the home.** One challenge that foster parents experience is acceptance of the often-temporary relationship with children in care. This temporary relationship has been identified as one of the most challenging experiences of being a foster parent. In a study of foster parents, Buehler, Cox and Cuddeback (2003) asked participants what they found difficult about fostering and a central response was when children returned to their birth parents (Anderson, 2013; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Daniel, 2011; Fish & Chapman, 2004). In Daniel's (2011) study, a participant described the experience of having a foster child leave as comparable to "losing a piece of herself" (p.915).

Anderson (2013) postulated that it is the closeness of the foster child - foster parent relationship that makes the loss especially difficult. In many homes, foster children are included in intimate family moments like vacations, holidays, reunions and other celebrations (Heller, Smyke, & Boris, 2002), become attached to biological children (Anderson, 2013) and are part of some of the family's most cherished memories. The role of a foster parent requires them to raise the children in their care as if they were their own and then give them up without hesitation (Anderson, 2013; Heller, Smyke & Boris,

2002;). Foster parents who protect themselves from the hurt of their loss by remaining distant from the child risk negatively affecting the child (Heller, Smyke & Borris, 2002). Those who are unable to easily give up children in their care because of strong emotional attachment run the risk of being labeled with separation issues and being over controlling (Anderson, 2013).

Difficulties associated with separation of a foster child from foster parent(s) are also exacerbated by poor facilitation by the agency. Researchers have noted the distress foster parents experience over poorly planned child transitions out of the home (Buehler et al., 2003). Additionally, there has been research on the desire by foster parents to be better prepared to deal with the emotions the loss brings up (Buehler et al., 2006) as well as the need for support by their workers to deal with these transitions (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

Foster parents may find it challenging to support the relationship between foster children and their birth parents (Buehler et al., 2006). If a foster parent opposes the child's permanency plan, it can result in being viewed as sabotaging (Anderson, 2013). It is therefore expected that, despite reservations, foster parents work alongside the agency to facilitate and support the relationship between foster children and birth families to the point when the birth family can be reunited (Corsner & Furnell, 1992). Foster parents have noted that having a child returned to what they viewed as an unsuitable environment would be a reason to quit fostering (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Rhodes, Orme & Buehler, 2001).

**Feel they cannot do enough.** Researchers have found that a desire to improve a child's life is one of the central positive aspects of fostering that participants identify

(Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Tyebjee, 2003). Efforts made by foster parents include creating an environment of normalcy, feelings of acceptance, as well as providing children with loving parents (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). Many foster parents identified the desire to protect children from harm as primary motivators to foster (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

The desire to improve the lives of the children in their care is not only an internal motivator for foster parents, but an external expectation as well. In their role as caregivers foster parents are expected to provide children with a safe and secure environment (Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003). Foster parents are also expected to provide a higher level of care than birth parents (Buehler et al., 2006). Anderson (2013) describes foster parenting as being under the public spotlight with both successes and failures reflecting on the Crown, making it closely watched and scrutinized. Indeed, foster parents are not only subject to higher standards of care but more likely to experience complaints and allegations of misconduct from different sources such as the community, CAS, foster children and/or biological parents (Anderson, 2013). High expectations on this role make it unsurprising that many foster parents are disappointed when they feel unable to do enough for the children in their care.

The feelings of disappointment foster parents experience in their own capabilities to improve children's lives may be worsened by foster children who can appear to be unappreciative of the efforts made (Adnopo, 2007; Harden, 2004; Rosenfeld, Wasserman, & Pilowsky, 1998). In some cases children display attachment styles that inhibit them from forming a healthy attachment to their caregivers. This can result in distress for the foster parents who may feel helpless to comfort an infant that shows no

desire to be comforted (avoidant attachment style), or who appears to be inconsolable (anxious/ambivalent attachment style) (Fish & Chapman, 2004).

When foster parents have been caring for a child, particularly when it has been for a long period of time, they may experience guilt if they choose not to adopt (Anderson, 2013). Freundlich and colleagues (2006) found that several of the foster parents in their study had chosen to proceed with an adoption because they were concerned about the future outcome for the foster child if they chose not to adopt. When faced with the worry that their best efforts to protect and raise the foster child are not enough for the child or the system and the realization that they are unable to make the care arrangement permanent through adoption, foster parents may consider quitting.

**Caring for high needs children.** The proportion of children in out of home care with significant emotional and behavioural problems is nearly two thirds (Heflinger, Simpkins, & Combs-Orme, 2000; Kortenkamp & Macomber, 2002; McCrae, 2009; McMillen et al., 2005; Sawyer, Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007; Vandivere, Chalk, & Moore, 2003; as cited in Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011). Clausen and colleagues (1998) postulated that about three fifths of the children in out of home care who had emotional and behavioural problems needed intensive treatment. Those with significant behavioural and emotional problems often have experience with several different placements (Rosenfeld et al., 1998).

The issues that foster children present with are broad in nature and can include numerous emotional and behavioural characteristics that are distressing. The *Willingness to Foster Scale—Emotional & Behavioral Problems (WFS-EBP[40])* designed by Cox

and colleagues includes behaviour problems exhibited by foster children that are present in the literature (Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011). For example, inappropriate sexual behaviour, vandalizing property, cruelty to animals, suicidal ideation and self-harming, as well as a host of behaviours specifically directed at the foster parents such as disrespect, rejection and manipulation (Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011). In addition, concern about the potential for physical damage to their home is a salient issue for many foster parents (Brown & Rodger, 2007).

The care required to meet the needs of children with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties is a common stressor for foster parents (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Rodger et al., 2006). Paley and colleagues (2006) note that foster parents caring for children with behavioural issues have higher levels of self-reported stress. It has also been noted that stress is a prominent factor in foster parents' decisions about whether to continue to foster (MacGregor et al., 2006).

Fostering children with high needs may be more challenging than necessary with a lack of agency support and knowledge (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; MacGregor et al., 2006). Foster families who cared for children with higher behavioural and emotional needs emphasized their desire for more support from the agency/worker during a crisis with the child (Macgregor et al., 2006; Roger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Similarly, many foster parents have expressed concern that they do not feel adequately prepared and trained to deal with the high needs of the children in their care (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Heller, , & Borris, 2002. Without support, foster parents caring for children with high emotional and behavioural needs may consider quitting.

**Placement breakdown.** Placement breakdown as defined by Berridge and Cleaver (1987, cited in Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011) is an unexpected ending that was not planned for. Heller and colleagues (2002) found that when caring for children with difficult to manage behaviours, many foster parents did not reach out for assistance until they were so overwhelmed that the stability of the placement was in jeopardy.

When a placement ends because of a negative situation or crisis, it can leave a long lasting, harmful impression on both the child and the caregivers (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003). The difficulty of this outcome can produce a wide range of emotions for foster parents processing the removal of the child. Foster parents may experience a sense of disappointment in themselves when a placement ends suddenly (Minty, 1999; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000 as cited by Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). It can be both extremely painful and difficult for foster parents to address their feelings of loss and grief after a problem in the placement led it to end unexpectedly (Fish & Chapman, 2004). The distressing experience of a placement breakdown can lead foster parents to consider quitting (Brown & Bednar, 2006).

### **Spiritual Challenges**

Spirituality can be understood and expressed in a wide range of ways. A search of the fostering literature revealed very little attention to the concept of spirituality specifically, while there was research in the areas of religion and cultural worldview. The research highlighted the effects of difference between the foster parent and foster children which is consistent with the evidence that members of dominant cultures make up and vast majority of foster parents providing care and that members of minority cultures are highly represented and overrepresented in the foster child population (Daniel, 2011).

Such differences can contribute to numerous challenges for foster parents managing the tasks that occur when caring for children from different cultures. Foster parents may experience challenges when attempting to include or acknowledge a child's differing beliefs and values into their own homes and lives. Finally, the process of integrating a child into one's home can be a challenge. This section explores these topics in greater depth.

**Different cultures.** Foster home placements for children are often determined by availability (Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, & Reid, 2009). Situations that result in a child being removed from the biological family are also urgent. Due to this urgency, cultural differences between foster children and foster parents are rarely considered or attended to in placement decisions. The results of poorly matched placements can negatively influence the relationship between foster parents and foster children (Adnopo, 2007).

In a study conducted with transracial caregivers and their Black children, the challenges of living in communities and attending schools that were predominantly Caucasian were identified (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). While this study was conducted with adoptive parents, it is possible that foster parents, particularly those fostering for substantial lengths of time, may face similar challenges when caring for children of a different ethnicity. Indeed, foster parents have identified talking to foster children about their ethnic identity as a difficulty (Daniel, 2011). However, a recent study reinforced the need for and benefits of foster parents speaking with their birth and foster children at home about ethnic and cultural differences when the foster parents were of a different ethnicity than the foster children (Leve et al., 2012).

It is important to note that between foster parents and children of the same cultural background there can also be great variations in beliefs, language, traditions and practices. For example, the greater the distance that an Aboriginal child is taken away from her or his home community, the greater the chance of experiencing cultural differences with foster parents, even when the foster parents are Aboriginal (Garrett & Garrett, 1994). Foster parents have noted challenges accessing resources for foster children when they lived away from their cultural community. Daniel (2011) found that for foster parents who lived off reserve, awareness and engagement in cultural activities that were part of life in the community declined and had a negative impact on their ability to foster the cultural development of those children.

Finally, foster parents may not anticipate caring for a child from a different cultural background than their own. Anderson (2013) notes that one of the expectations of foster parents is to gain cultural competency, which includes learning about the foster child's culture, customs and values. Foster parents who are unable to effectively foster children of different cultures and backgrounds may find they are not viewed by the agency as a preferred placement and are less likely to have children placed with them (Anderson, 2013) leading to a decision to quit.

**Different values and belief systems.** When children in out of home care are placed with foster parents of a different background than their own it is necessary for foster parents to think about how values, beliefs and traditions are held and practiced. One challenge foster parents experience is developing cultural receptivity. Cultural receptivity is defined by Coakely (2006, as cited in Buehler et al., 2006), as the tolerance



and appreciation for different cultures, displayed through a willingness to engage in culturally relevant activities that can foster and maintain a child's culture.

Foster parents caring for children in transcultural placements often make efforts to blend their values with those of the foster child and do so without giving up their own values and beliefs (Brown et al., 2009). However, they also reported having to set their own values aside at times in order to promote the best interests of the child. Some foster parents found it difficult to accept new beliefs and incorporate them into their family's pre-existing belief system, particularly when these beliefs were contrary to one another. For example, foster parents have discussed the challenges that arise when foster children use their differences as a means to get their own way or as an excuse for negative behaviour (Daniel, 2011).

It should also be noted that workers make judgments about foster parents based on their perceptions of caregivers' willingness to accommodate cultural differences in foster children. Due to the relatively limited amount of time workers spend in the foster home, opinions can be formed very quickly (Anderson, 2013). Anderson (2013) notes that one factor that could quickly change a worker's opinion is when she or he views the foster parents as too religious. Such an observation could lead both the workers and agency to question the foster parents' ability to accommodate the child's belief system when it is different and potentially offensive to their own (Anderson, 2013).

A further challenge that parents in transcultural placements face includes the expectations that they should not only be aware and knowledgeable about a child's culture, beliefs and traditions, but that they should be the ones responsible for keeping the

child engaged in said beliefs (Brown et al., 2009). In addition, caregivers felt they were perceived as denying a child's heritage if they did not actively cultivate it (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). It is important to note that not all foster parents may be willing to accommodate differences that are present and engage in cultural activities within the community, leading to the potential to decide to quit fostering.

**Challenges integrating the child into the family.** The integration of a child into a foster home is important for a successful placement. The interaction between characteristics of the child and foster parents is more influential than any characteristic alone (Doelling & Johnson, 1990). Therefore, the relationship between foster parents and foster children is key, and boundaries are important. Anderson (2013) reinforces the importance of foster parents remaining aware that the children in their care are not their own. This issue emerges at different times such as when decisions are made about whether or not to include the foster child in the family vacation and parent comfort level with a foster child referring to them as "Mom" and "Dad" (Anderson, 2013). There are no clear rules for how to integrate a child into the family and such ambiguity can be a potential source of stress.

Some of the challenges integrating a foster child may be provoked by happenings outside of home. For example Audet, and Home (2004, as cited in Daniel, 2011) found that families with children of different ethnic backgrounds who were easily recognized as being different we were often stared at by others or asked inappropriate questions. Similarly, foster parents also acknowledged the challenges of getting their own extended family to accept children from racialized groups (Daniel, 2011). It was also noted that foster and adoptive parents felt ill prepared to deal with the racism their child experienced

(de Haymes & Simon, 2003). Indeed, in Daniel's (2011) study with transracial and transcultural foster and adoptive placements, participants experienced challenges obtaining necessary services for the children in their care due to discrimination.

In addition, integrating a foster child into the home can be difficult when the child does not want to be a part of that home. An additional layer of stress is added when foster parents experience resentment from the child's biological parents (Anderson, 2013), which can add further challenges for foster parents who may already be experiencing resistance from a foster child. A foster child's ties to biological parents may be very strong. Anderson (2013) describes the challenges this loyalty can create for foster parents. Behaviours such as acting out after access visits, making allegations against the foster parents, running away in public and complaining about the foster home can all contribute to difficulties in foster parents forming a relationship with the children in their care (Brown & Rodger, 2007; Anderson, 2013), and thus integrating them successfully into the home.

Finally, in many cases, there are other children in the home. The challenges that occur when a foster child does not get along with the biological children or other foster children are significant. In Brown and Rodger's study (2007), foster parents described the presence of conflict between foster and biological children. It can also be difficult for foster parents to balance their time between the foster child(ren) and their birth child(ren) (Anderson, 2013). While separate time for biological members of the family is important to carve out, it is challenging and can result in the foster child feeling left out and resentful. The stress the presence of this problem, as well as integration challenges more

generally, may place on the relationship between foster children and foster parents may contribute to the decision to quit fostering.

## **Summary**

Foster care is a critical resource that needs to be rescued (Leschied et al., 2014). Increasing demands and decreasing placements are evident across all children and caregivers in the system but most pronounced among Aboriginal foster children who are overrepresented and Aboriginal foster parents who are underrepresented. It is essential to recognize at a policy level the need for self-governance in child welfare and leadership by the Aboriginal community for Aboriginal children and families, as well as on the ground level through explicit measures in practice that promote recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster parents. There is a considerable base of literature, recently reviewed in detail by Leschied et al. (2014), to inform recruitment and retention efforts. There has been little attention in the literature on the experiences of Aboriginal foster parents. It is therefore important to consider the possibility that challenges experienced by Aboriginal foster parents are potentially different as well as similar to foster parents' experiences that are already reported in the literature.

The focus in the present study on the emotional and spiritual experiences of Aboriginal foster parents is based in the emotional healing that is underway in response to the needs of generations affected by traumatic losses stemming from colonial efforts. Spirituality is key to healing. While there has been some attention in the literature to the emotional challenges of foster parents, there has been far less on the topic of spirituality in its broad sense, and instead, attention to the topics of cultural diversity and worldview.

Emotional challenges that appear in the literature center on the return of children to birth families, the high needs of children who come into foster homes, the feeling that foster parents cannot meet the needs of foster children in their care, and finally, having a placement break down. The spiritual challenges that emerged from a review of the literature focused on the breadth of cultural difference between foster children and foster parents, the ability to find commonality or balance between different belief and value systems, as well as ability to integrate the foster child(ren) into the home.

It is not known if there are similarities and differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal foster parents regarding the reasons they might consider quitting. The purpose of the present study is to identify, from the perspectives of Aboriginal foster parents themselves, the emotional and spiritual reasons why they might consider quitting. The approach to data collection and analysis procedures appear in the next chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out of home care makes the retention of Aboriginal foster parents essential. It is important to develop an understanding of the challenges experienced by Aboriginal foster parents in order to develop appropriate supports to address spiritual and emotional challenges. To further explore this topic, telephone interviews were conducted with Aboriginal foster parents in a central Canadian province. In total 83 participants were interviewed and asked to identify the challenges they experienced. Their responses were collected and analyzed using a procedure called concept mapping (Trochim, 1989).

Concept mapping is a mixed methods approach that is distinctive because it involves quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Wheeldon, 2010). Concept mapping involves participants viewing all responses and then sorting them into categories based on what makes sense to them. The researcher is responsible for assigning descriptive names to the categories the participants create. As the researcher is not involved in the sorting of the data, her influence on how participants choose to group the responses is minimal. Due to the central role participants have in sorting the data, versus the relatively small role the researcher plays in data sorting, the resulting analysis is closely aligned with participant experiences.

The mixed format of concept mapping makes it an effective way for diverse groups of individuals to express their ideas and represent the meanings through visual means (Trochim, 1989). The adaptability of concept mapping for obtaining the ideas and experiences of broad ranges of individuals makes it an ideal method for studying diverse ranges of individuals in different settings. For example, the method has been used for

exploring client's experiences of counselling (Bedi & Alexander, 2009). Paulson and Worth (2000) also used concept mapping to more thoroughly examine the client experience of therapeutic factors that address suicidal ideation. Concept mapping has been used to investigate the psychosocial support needs of diverse sexual minority youth (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2010), Korean working mothers (Phang & Lee, 2009) and Aboriginal foster parents (Ivanova & Brown, 2010). This methodology has been used to organize literature pertaining to treatment of early psychosis (Catts et al., 2010) and to obtain staff perspectives on the effectiveness of a supported employment program for individuals with severe mental illnesses (Trochim, Cook, & Setze, 1994).

The process of concept mapping included six steps (Trochim, 1989). These steps were: 1) preparation, 2) generation, 3) structuring, 4) representation, 5) interpretation and 6) utilization. This thesis utilizes existing data. The data were previously collected as part of a large-scale study of Aboriginal foster parents in 2010. The ethics approved protocol for the complete study is included in the appendix. The interpretation of multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis results in the concept maps herein was performed by the author. The following section explains the procedures followed in the study.

## **Procedure**

**Preparation.** In preparation for this initial step a randomized list of telephone numbers of all licensed foster parents in a central Canadian province was obtained through the Department of Family Services and Housing in 2010. Foster parents who answered the call from the researcher were provided with a description of the study. They

were also asked, “do you identify yourself as an Aboriginal person?” and “have you fostered an Aboriginal child?” Those who identified themselves as Aboriginal and had fostered an Aboriginal child were invited to participate. Once verbal consent was obtained, participants were asked several open-ended questions. Two of those questions were the focus of the present study and included: “What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?” as well as “What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?”.

**Generation of responses.** Researchers took notes during the telephone interviews. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they were interested in participating in the second phase of the study. Participants were told that during the second stage all unique responses given by all participants would be provided, and that they would be asked to group them together based on the content of the responses. The researcher kept a list of interested individuals for the sorting task.

Data were collected until there were no unique responses across three interviews for all questions in the large-scale study. This required more interviews to reach saturation for some questions. This meant that for some questions, such as those presented herein, there were more participants than unique responses for analysis. Data collection continued until 83 interviews had been completed. Participants from northern, southern, east and west regions of the province participated, as did those from rural areas, small communities, reserves as well as larger urban centres. Participants had fostered for an average of 15 years and the majority (73%) were female. The average age was 51 years and only one quarter were providing kinship placements at the time of interview.



**Structuring of responses.** Three individuals involved in data collection independently reviewed all responses to the questions. Whenever a response was identified as unclear or redundant, it was discussed by the group and a decision was made by unanimous vote. If a response was deemed to be redundant, it was removed for the purpose of analysis. If a response was deemed to be unclear it was edited for clarity. A total of 43 unique responses remained for the question focusing on emotional challenges and a total of 19 for the question focusing on spiritual challenges.

Individuals who were willing to participate in the sorting task were mailed out complete lists of responses by question. Each response was printed on a separate slip of paper. Each response also had an ID number assigned to it. The slips of paper were presented in random order and participants were asked to group them together, by question, in whatever way they wished. There were 25 foster parents who expressed interest in participating in the second half of the study, and were thus sent the sorting package. A total of 11 sorts were returned for the emotional challenges and a total of 13 sorts were returned for the spiritual challenges.

**Representation of responses.** The sorted responses that participants returned were analyzed using two statistical procedures. The Concept System (Trochim, 1987) was used to analyse the sort data. The first procedure was multidimensional scaling. Multidimensional scaling utilized a proximity matrix to represent dimensions as distances between the items in the matrix (Trochim, 1989). Multidimensional scaling was used to create a two-dimensional map representing the statements participants generated in the initial phase of data collection. The distance between responses showed the frequency with which participants grouped them together.

The second analysis was cluster analysis, which utilized the results from the multidimensional scaling analysis to identify clusters of responses. In this analysis individual statements were grouped into clusters on the map that represented similar concepts. There are different approaches to conducting a cluster analysis with debate in the literature as to the effectiveness of each. Ward's method was utilized because it was found to give more straightforward and interpretable solutions (Trochim, 1989).

A bridging index for each response and cluster was determined. The bridging index was a value between 0.00 and 1.00. This index reflected the degree to which responses bridged or grouped together with others responses near it on the map. A low bridging index was indicated by a value between 0.00-0.25 meaning that the response was rarely sorted with responses in other areas of the map. A high bridging index was indicated by a value between .075-1.00. A high value meant that participants sorted the response with responses in further areas of the map and not only with those responses nearby.

**Interpretation of maps.** To decide on the most appropriate number of concepts for each map, the writer and her advisor reviewed the maps with different numbers of clusters. For the question "What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?", maps with 10, 8, 7, and 6 clusters were reviewed before determining that the 7-concept solution fit the data best. For the second question "What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting fostering", maps with 5, 4, 3 and 2 clusters were reviewed before deciding that the 3-concept solution fit the data best.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were used to decide the appropriate number of concepts for the maps. The responses contained in each concept were reviewed in each of the maps. This was done to determine which of the solutions contained the highest consistency of content within concepts and differences in content between concepts. The average bridging indices were also used to make the decision about the most appropriate number of concepts, with low average bridging indices favoured over high average bridging indices on the maps. The concepts were labeled based on responses they contained, and the responses with the lowest individual bridging index helped identify the most salient content in a concept and helped determine the assigned label.

**Utilization of maps.** The concept maps that were constructed on analysis of the data are presented in Chapter 4 and in Chapter 5, the results of the study are compared to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

### **Summary of the Methodology**

In order to gain a more accurate understanding of the unique experience of Aboriginal foster parents, 83 were interviewed over the telephone. As part of the interview from the larger study, each was asked to respond to two open-ended questions including: “What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?” as well as “What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?”. Responses were analyzed using concept mapping which is a quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Wheeldon, 2010). Participants were asked to review all responses by question and sort them into groups. The sort data were analyzed with multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. The resulting concepts were labelled by the researcher and described in Chapter 4.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of the study was to identify, from the perspectives of Aboriginal foster parents themselves, the emotional and spiritual reasons that would make them consider quitting fostering. During telephone interviews participants were asked the questions: “What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?” and “What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?” The responses were edited for clarity and redundant responses were removed. There were a total of 43 unique responses to the first question and 19 to the second question. These responses were provided to foster parents who had agreed at the time of interview to participate in the sorting task. They grouped responses together and the data were analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Concept maps were created. The maps are presented in this chapter.

### **Emotional Challenges**

A total of 43 unique responses were obtained to this question and sorted by 11 participants. The sorts were analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Results are presented in Table 1. A 7-concept solution was determined to best represent the data and is presented in Figure 1.

The bridging index was used to determine the most central responses in each of the concepts. Responses that had a low bridging index indicated that participants more frequently grouped them with responses in the same concept. Alternatively, a high bridging index indicated that participants frequently grouped them with responses in other concepts as well as their own (Trochim, 1989). Using the individual bridging

indexes an average bridging index was calculated for each concept. Lower average bridging index values indicated greater cohesion among responses within that concept.

Figure 1: What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?

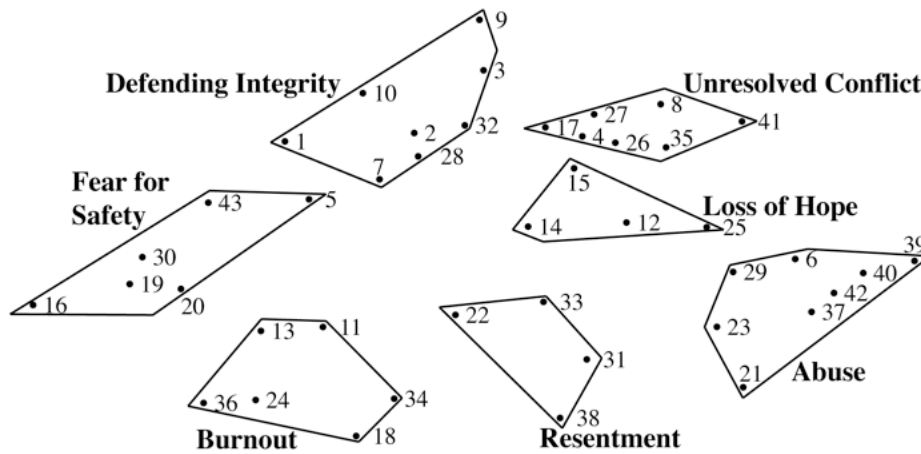


Table 1: Concept Items and Bridging Values for Concept Map

Concept and Response	Bridging Index
Defending Integrity	0.24
32. not validated by the system	0.03
28. lack of responses by workers	0.04
7. children taken for no reason	0.08
2. agency not believing me	0.10
3. allegations	0.33
1. a parent got physical with me	0.37
9. constantly being questioned	0.41
10. constantly degrading you	0.58

Loss of Hope	0.10
15. feeling misunderstood	0.03
4. attachment with a child they take away	0.04
12. disrespect	0.11
14. feeling like you don't make a difference	0.14
25. kids running away	0.17
Unresolved Conflict	0.14
26. lack of accountability	0.00
27. lack of communication	0.07
17. having biological parents involved	0.08
35. professionals taking forever	0.11
8. clash between social worker and home	0.20
41. when children get returned to bad situations	0.41
Abuse	0.40
29. lose the child's trust	0.22
6. child cutting herself	0.29
37. steady pressure of disobedience	0.29
42. when the kids do not want to listen	0.39
23. inappropriate conduct	0.40
40. very destructive	0.41
39. ungrateful for anything	0.47
21. if the kids threatened us	0.74
Fear for Safety	0.58

5.	being intimidated	0.29
19.	husband leaving	0.53
30.	marriage	0.53
43.	you feel like you are nobody	0.54
20.	if one of our own children was being abused	0.57
16.	harm to my own children	1.00
Burnout		0.49
13.	exhaustion	0.34
11.	death	0.43
24.	just couldn't handle it anymore	0.52
36.	sickness from the stress	0.53
34.	overwhelming	0.54
18.	health reasons	0.61
Resentment		0.46
33.	our children were angry	0.27
22.	if you were not getting breaks	0.35
31.	my own kids got jealous	0.47
38.	trauma	0.73

**Defending integrity.** This concept was comprised of responses that affected the personal integrity of foster parents. Several responses related to challenges with agencies and agency workers. For example “not validated by the system” and a “lack of responses by workers” reflected challenges that arose when foster parents worked alongside the

agency. “Children taken for no reason” indicated a sense of distress and hopelessness when a foster child was removed from a home.

Other responses in this concept reflected personal challenges in relation to foster parent integrity such as “a parent got physical with me” and “constantly degrading you”. Several responses appeared to indicate a lack of trust between the agency and foster parents. The responses “agency not believing me”, “allegations” and “constantly being questioned” reflected a lack of trust. The last response had a relatively high bridging index (0.41) indicating of all responses in the concept it was the most likely to have been sorted with responses in other clusters. The average bridging index for this concept was low (0.24) which indicated that responses in it were frequently grouped with each other and rarely with responses in other concepts.

**Loss of hope.** This concept included responses that reflected feelings of hopelessness. The responses “attachment with a child they take away” and “feeling like you don’t make a difference” reflected the challenging nature of the role of a foster parent. “Feeling misunderstood” and “disrespect” were indicative of internal emotional processes experienced by foster parents that contributed to a loss of hope. The response “kids running away” indicated a powerful contribution to feelings of hopelessness from a loss of control and perhaps sense of failure. This concept had a very low average bridging index (0.10) and the lowest bridging index of all concepts on the map indicating that responses were consistently grouped together and rarely with responses in other concepts.

**Unresolved conflict.** This concept included responses that expressed challenges foster parents faced when dealing with conflict. One area of conflict was between foster



parents and workers. Responses that indicated tensions between staff and parents included “professionals taking forever” and “clash between social worker and home”. Other responses in this concept seemed to exemplify challenges associated with the roles and responsibilities of agencies and workers, including “lack of accountability” and “lack of communication”. Finally, there were responses within this concept that seemed more reflective of the challenges foster parents experienced in relation to the foster children and their biological families such as “having biological parents involved” and “when children get returned to bad situations”. With an overall bridging index of 0.14 this concept had a very low average and the second lowest average bridging index on the map, indicating that the responses within it were often grouped together by participants and rarely grouped with responses in other concepts.

**Abuse.** This concept included responses that outlined the emotional challenges which ensued when foster parents dealt with issues surrounding abuse. Some of these responses appeared to be in relation to the foster parent and foster child relationship such as, “lose the child’s trust”, “when the kids do not want to listen”, “ungrateful for anything” and “if the kids threatened us”. Other responses seemed to be more reflective of the foster child’s behaviour as opposed to the relationship between foster parent and child. Responses like “child cutting herself”, “steady pressure of disobedience”, “inappropriate conduct” and “very destructive” all referenced externalizing behaviour on the part of the foster child.

One response in this concept had a high bridging index. “If the kids threatened us” had an index of 0.74 indicating that it was frequently sorted with responses in other

concepts. The overall bridging index for this concept was moderate at 0.40 indicating that responses within it were occasionally grouped with responses in other concepts.

**Fear for Safety.** Responses in this concept centered on foster parents' experiences of fear. Responses included "being intimidated", "if one of our own children was being abused" and "harm to my own children" represented the experience of fear when the foster parent's personal safety or the safety of their family was threatened. "Harm to my own children" had a very high bridging index (1.00) indicating that it was often grouped with responses in other concepts, such as Abuse.

Other responses in this concept reflected foster parents' experiences of feeling unsafe when their relationship with their spouse was in jeopardy, including "husband leaving" and "marriage". Finally, the response "you feel like you are nobody" represented a threat to feelings of self-worth. This particular concept had a moderate average bridging index (0.58), but relative to other concepts on this map it was the highest. Responses in this concept were occasionally sorted with responses in other concepts.

**Burnout.** The concept of burnout as an emotional challenge to fostering was indicated by several responses. Some responses in this concept reflected foster parents' experiences of burnout in terms of fatigue, such as "exhaustion", "just couldn't handle it anymore" and "overwhelming". Other responses in this concept were more reflective of the physical repercussions of burnout, like "death", "sickness from the stress" and "health reasons". The bridging index for this concept was moderate (0.49) and the second highest

of concepts on the map, which indicated that responses within it were occasionally sorted with responses in other concepts.

**Resentment.** Responses in this concept reflected foster parents' experiences of resentment as a challenge to fostering and a potential reason to quit. This concept included responses that highlighted resentment experienced by foster parents' biological children, such as "our children were angry" and "my own kids got jealous". The response "if you were not getting breaks" represented resentment foster parents felt toward an agency when they were not receiving adequate respite and relief. Lastly the response "trauma" was included in this concept, indicating a foster parent's resentment towards agency, staff, or foster children if/when they experienced vicarious trauma or a personally experienced a traumatic event while fostering. However it is important to note that this response had a high bridging index (0.73), indicating that it was frequently sorted with responses in other concepts, such as Fear for Safety or Abuse. This concept had a moderate average bridging index 0.46 and third highest on the map, which indicated that responses within it were occasionally grouped with responses in other concepts.

### **Spiritual Challenges**

In total 19 unique responses were received for this question and sorted by 13 participants. The sorts were analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis and results are presented in Table 2. A 3-concept solution was determined to best represent the data and is presented in Figure 2.

The bridging index was used to determine the most central responses in each of the concepts. Responses that had a low bridging index indicated that participants more frequently grouped them with responses in the same concept. Alternatively, a high bridging index indicated that participants frequently grouped them with responses in other concepts as well as their own concept (Trochim, 1989). Using the individual bridging indexes an average bridging index was calculated for each concept. Lower average bridging index values indicated greater cohesion among responses within that concept.

Figure 2: What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?

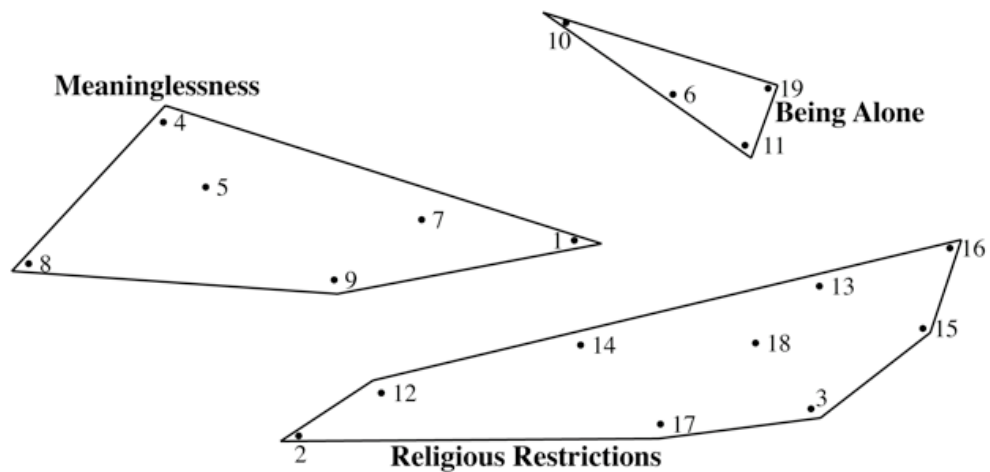


Table 2: Concept Items and Bridging Values for Concept Map

Concept and Response	Bridging Index
Meaninglessness	0.43
1. asked not to live by what I believe	0.00
7. if I couldn't find meaning in all of this	0.12

9.	marital problems	0.23
5.	deal with despair all the time	0.50
4.	couldn't keep a positive attitude about my contribution	0.70
8.	kids test you to see if you care	1.00
Being Alone		0.27
6.	don't get any back up	0.15
11.	no one will listen	0.16
19.	when you don't get the support	0.17
10.	my credibility was challenged	0.60
Religious Restrictions		0.25
18.	trying to force the kids	0.00
14.	switch your religion or beliefs for theirs	0.01
13.	pushing religion on kids	0.08
17.	too headstrong on one religion	0.21
3.	certain things that we don't believe in, like pow-wows	0.29
15.	told I couldn't let my foster son go into traditional ceremonies	0.30
12.	not able to assemble with other church people	0.31
16.	told I had to make kids go to church	0.34
2.	can't get my child to church	0.67

**Meaninglessness.** This concept included responses that reflected foster parents compromise of their personal values and beliefs. The response “asked not to live by what I believe” was reflective of the sacrifices foster parents felt forced to make to appease agencies and workers. Other responses in this concept appeared to represent foster

parents' experiences of a loss of meaning in their work such as "if I couldn't find meaning in all of this", "deal with despair all the time" and "couldn't keep a positive attitude about my contribution". Based on the responses in this concept it appeared that the experience of meaninglessness foster parents experience crept into other areas of their lives as well, such as "marital problems".

Finally, the response "kids test you to see if you care" was included in this concept. Perhaps this response conveyed feelings of meaninglessness experienced when foster children felt the need to test a foster parent's commitment and devotion by acting out. However, it is important to note that this particular response had the highest bridging index possible (1.00) indicating that it was frequently grouped with responses in other concepts. The average bridging index for this concept was 0.43 and the highest of the concepts on this map, signifying that responses within it may were occasionally grouped with responses in other concepts.

**Being alone.** Responses in this concept reflected challenges that arose when foster parents felt inadequately supported. Some of the responses in this category signified foster parents' experiences of not receiving sufficient support from agencies and workers during times of need, such as "don't get any back up" and "when you don't get the support". Other responses in the concept seemed more indicative of the challenges foster parents experienced when their opinions and proficiency were ignored or invalidated including, "no one will listen" and "my credibility was challenged". This concept had an average bridging index of 0.27, which was moderate and indicated that responses within it were occasionally grouped together with responses in other concepts.

**Religious restrictions.** This concept was comprised of responses that expressed challenges when attempting to incorporate religion into their home. Some of the responses related the challenges that occurred when foster parents attempted to instil their beliefs on the children in their care such as, “trying to force kids”, “told I couldn’t let my foster son go into traditional ceremonies” and “can’t get my child to church”. Other responses seemed more representative of the compromises foster parents were asked or required to make in order to incorporate the beliefs of the child in their care such as “switch your religion or beliefs for theirs”, “certain things that we don’t believe in, like pow-wows” and “not able to assemble with other church people”.

Other responses in this concept were indicative of challenges that occurred in relation to the agency’s role in governing and monitoring religion in foster children’s lives. Responses such as “pushing religion on kids”, “too headstrong on one religion”, and “told I had to make kids go to church”, all seemed to reflect the frustrations foster parents experienced when agencies or workers dictated the necessity of religion for children in care. The average bridging index for this concept was low at 0.25 as well as the lowest of all three concepts on the map. The low value indicated that the responses in the concept were seldom grouped with responses in other clusters.

## **Results Summary**

The purpose of the study was to identify, from the perspectives of Aboriginal foster parents, the emotional and spiritual reasons they might quit fostering. During telephone interviews with participants they were asked two questions including a question about emotional and another about spiritual challenges in their work.

In response to the question “What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?” 11 Aboriginal foster parents sorted the 43 unique responses provided. Multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis were performed on the sort data which resulted in seven concepts including: 1) Defending Integrity, 2) Loss of Hope, 3) Unresolved Conflict, 4) Abuse, 5) Fear for Safety, 6) Burnout and 7) Resentment.

The concept, Defending Integrity, was comprised of responses that were reflective of foster parents struggles with the foster care system as a whole such as “not validated by the system”, “lack of responses by workers”, “a parent got physical with me” and “allegations”. Loss of Hope included responses that demonstrated feelings of hopelessness experienced by foster parents regarding the children in their care such as, “feeling misunderstood”, “attachment with a child they take away” and “feeling like you don’t make a difference”. Unresolved Conflict included responses that were reflective of foster parent’s experiences of conflict within the system including, “lack of communication”, “lack of accountability”, “clash between social worker and home” and “when children get returned to bad situations”.

The concept Abuse contained responses that explored challenges with foster children’s behaviour such as “lose the child’s trust”, “steady pressure of disobedience”, “inappropriate conduct” and “very destructive”. Fear for Safety was made up of responses that pertained to foster parent’s experience of feeling unsafe, including “being intimidated”, “husband leaving” and “if one of our own children was being abused”. Burnout contained responses that reflected the highly stressful nature of the role of foster parents such as “exhaustion” and “just couldn’t handle it anymore”. Finally, Resentment was comprised of responses that emphasized the frustration that occurred when the



demands of fostering overrode other areas of life such as, “our children were angry”, “if you were not getting breaks” and “my own kids were jealous”.

Thirteen Aboriginal foster parents sorted the 19 unique responses to the question, “What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting fostering?”

Multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis were performed on the sort data, which resulted in three concepts including: 1) Meaninglessness, 2) Being Alone and 3) Religious Restrictions. The concept of Meaninglessness contained responses that reflected the struggles foster parents experienced when asked to compromise personal values and/or find meaning in their work and included the responses “asked not to live by what I believe”, “if I couldn’t find meaning in all of this” and “deal with despair all the time”. The concept of Being Alone included responses that characterized the lack of support foster parents often experienced such as “don’t get any back up”, “no one will listen” and “when you don’t the support”. Finally, the concept Religious Restrictions included responses that highlighted the challenges occurring when the spiritual beliefs and practices of the foster parents differed from those of the child in their care or the agency including responses such as, “switch your religion or belief for theirs”, “pushing religion on kids” and “told I couldn’t let my foster son go into traditional ceremonies”.

Chapter 5 will further discuss the findings of the current study and will explore possible implications from said findings.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to identify, from the perspectives of Aboriginal foster parents, the emotional and spiritual reasons they would consider quitting.

Telephone interviews were conducted with 83 Aboriginal foster parents in a central Canadian province. Responses to the focal questions for the present study were provided to foster parents who agreed to participate in the sorting task at the time each was interviewed. The sort data were analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. In this chapter the results of the present study are compared to the literature.

### **Emotional Challenges**

Seven concepts emerged from analysis of sorted responses to the question “What are the emotional challenges that would make you consider quitting fostering?” These concepts included: Defending Integrity, Loss of Hope, Unresolved Conflict, Abuse, Fear for Safety, Burnout and Resentment. Defending Integrity included responses that emphasized foster parents’ experiences of not being validated by the system and the workers. Loss of Hope reflected foster parents’ experiences with losing hope in their work. Unresolved Conflict was comprised of responses that challenged foster parents’ experiences in relation to unresolved conflicts with various individuals involved in the foster care system including biological parents and agency workers. The concept Abuse detailed the challenges foster parents encountered regarding foster children’s challenging behaviours such as self-injury, inappropriate conduct and aggression. Fear for Safety included threats of harm to foster parents’ relationships such as those with their partner and children, as well as concern for their own safety. The concept Burnout included

responses that expressed foster parents' experiences with compassion fatigue in their roles as caregivers in the foster care system. The concept Resentment reflected of the frustrations that built through experiences of vicarious trauma and the inability to get a break from fostering.

**Defending integrity.** In this concept foster parents referred to a number of challenges they experienced as a part of working in the child welfare system. These included issues of trust between the agency, workers and foster parents, conflict with biological parents and having children removed from care. Responses in this concept also encompassed foster parents' perceptions of constantly being questioned, being subject to allegations and feeling degraded by the system. Responses in this concept were consistent with findings from existing research.

Past research with foster parents highlighted in detail the emotional turmoil experienced when children were removed from the home (Anderson, 2013; Buehler et al., 2003). This challenging experience was exacerbated by poor preparation and facilitation on the part of the agency and workers (Buehler et al., 2003; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). The impact of having a child removed from one's care was a salient emotional concern for foster parents to the extent that many have listed this as a reason for quitting, particularly when the child was being returned to what they perceived was a harmful environment (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Having a child removed from one's care has numerous emotional implications for foster parents. However, it can also result in foster parents' credibility being damaged; potentially furthering the need for them to feel obligated to defend the integrity of their work.

Foster parents were expected to uphold higher standards of care than are non-foster parents. Anderson (2013) noted this as a result of foster parents being under a public spotlight. Along with these higher standards came an increased likelihood of complaints, investigations and allegations. The high rates of allegations and complaints against foster parents demonstrated just how prevalent this issue is. It was vital that complaints and allegations be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly in order to ensure the wellbeing of foster children. However the emotional toll a false allegation has on a foster parent was significant.

**Loss of hope.** This concept contained responses that highlighted foster parents' experiences of losing hope in their role. Responses referenced feeling misunderstood and disrespected. These issues were consistent with past research.

The feeling that foster parents did not make a difference appeared in past literature which highlighted a desire to make a difference in children's lives as a central motivator to foster (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Tyebjee, 2003; Brown et al., 2011). Different challenges that occurred for foster parents contributed to feelings of being unable to make a difference in the lives of foster children. These challenges included foster children who seemed unappreciative of a caregiver's efforts (Harden, 2004; Rosenfeld, Wasserman, & Pilowsky, 1998; Adnopo, 2007).

In addition, the loss of hope when a child was taken away was disheartening and cited numerous times in the literature as one of the most salient emotional challenges foster parents experience (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Fish & Chapman, 2004; Daniel, 2011; Anderson, 2013). In addition to being its own unique challenge, the experience of

having a child removed was viewed by foster parents as a personal failure on their part (Minty, 1999; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000, as cited in Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), further contributing to feelings of not being able to do enough. Responses in this concept also highlighted children running away as a contributor to feelings of losing hope. Past research identified this as a salient challenging behaviour foster parents coped with (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003; Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011).

Aboriginal foster parents in the present study identified their experience of feeling disrespected. Past research has indicated foster parents desire to be respected and acknowledged for their effort ( Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001; Sanchirico et al., 1998). Unfortunately, it has been noted that foster parents often felt unappreciated and unrecognized for the work that they did (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002).

**Unresolved conflict.** Responses in this concept highlighted the challenges associated with conflict. A foster care team was often comprised of those with a range of interests and expertise including foster parents, agency workers, biological parents as well as professionals (e.g., social workers and psychologists). Due to the extensive nature of the foster care network it is perhaps unsurprising and even expected that conflict occurred. There are numerous potential barriers that could contribute to foster parents' experience of unresolved conflict, including: insufficient communication between the foster parent and agency/staff, infrequent meetings between foster parents and workers, and geographical distance potentially impacting foster parents ability to regularly meet with agency staff.

Aboriginal foster parents in the present study identified the difficulties when they felt there was a poor fit between the social worker and the home. This finding was evident in past literature (Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003; Spielfogel, Leathers, Christian, & McMeel, 2011; Anderson, 2013), which clearly highlighted this as a salient concern among foster parents. A lack of communication was also listed as a notable challenge which was consistent with literature highlighting the importance of effective communication between the foster parents and the agency/workers as a contributor to the motivation to continue fostering (Rhodes et al., 2003; MacGregor et al., 2008; Sanchirico et al., 1998). In addition, foster parents have noted a lack of information for dealing with emotional, psychological and behavioural concerns of children to be challenging (Whiting & Huber, 2007). A need and desire for support, information and effective communication with professionals was consistent with the concerns identified by Aboriginal foster parents in the present study.

Research has found the temporary nature of foster care as one of the most emotionally challenging aspects for caregivers (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Fish & Chapman, 2004; Daniel, 2011; Anderson, 2013). Participants in the present highlighted the distress experienced when a child was returned to what they perceived as a negative environment, which was consistent research that detailed the same difficulty (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001), or did not agree with the established permanency goals for the child (Anderson, 2013).

Aboriginal foster parents also identified challenges and potential for conflict with the involvement of a foster child's biological parents. This was consistent with past

literature, as well as the nature/purpose of the foster care system. It was an expectation that foster parents would work alongside the agency toward a child's permanency placement goal despite any misgivings they had about it. Reunification with biological parents is often viewed as the preferred option and foster parents are often required to work alongside the agency, workers and birth parents in order to achieve this goal (Corser & Furnell, 1992; Anderson, 2013).

**Abuse.** Aboriginal foster parents identified a number of challenges related to abuse. In this concept the term abuse was used to describe a variety of behavioural, emotional and psychological concerns foster children presented with. This finding was consistent with research that identified caring for high needs children as one of the most salient challenges experienced by foster parents (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Rodger et al., 2006).

Foster parents in the present study identified children's behaviour as a significant emotional challenge. Past research has indicated a broad range of challenging behaviours and conditions with which foster children come into care. Cox and colleagues' *Willingness to Foster Scale—Emotional & Behavioral Problems (WFS-EBP[40])* identified 40 types of common behaviours that foster children displayed (Child Welfare Institute, 1987; Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1993; Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003, as cited in Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011). Consistent with responses in the present study, this list included the behaviors suicidal behavior and self-injuring, physical attacks, disobedience and trouble at school (Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011). The emotional and behavioral difficulties that children in foster care had were documented in multiple studies (Heflinger, Simpkins, &

Combs-Orme, 2000; Kortenkamp & Macomber, 2002; McCrae, 2009; McMillen et al., 2005; Sawyer, Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007; Vandivere, Chalk, & Moore, 2003, as cited in Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011).

Losing the trust of foster children was another emotional challenge acknowledged by Aboriginal foster parents in the present study. Research has found that the ability of foster children to develop healthy attachments with their caregivers was vital to a successful placement (Buehler et al., 2006). To facilitate this healthy attachment, foster parents needed to gain trust from the children in their care. Because many children come from backgrounds where they experienced neglect or abuse they had difficulties trusting and forming secure attachments (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). The challenging process of building trust reinforced why it was so difficult for foster parents to lose this trust (Barth, Crea, John, Thoburn, & Quinton, 2005) which was occasionally the interpretation by foster parents when children seemed ungrateful for their efforts (Harden, 2004; Rosenfeld, Wasserman, & Pilowsky, 1998; Adnopoz, 2007).

**Fear for safety.** This concept included responses that highlighted Aboriginal foster parents' experiences of fearing for their safety while fostering. In this concept the responses demonstrated what they considered to be a threat to their safety. Being intimidated, as well as the fear, and/or experience of having one's own children exposed to, or experiencing abuse/harm were noted as salient concerns. This fear for one's own safety, as well as for the safety of one's family has been identified as a prominent concern in prior research with foster parents (Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011). Anderson (2013) described the stress that followed when a foster family's safety was compromised, or a member was a victim of violence.



Additional fears about the stability of family relationships and healthy self-esteem were noted. Fearing the safety of one's marriage, as well as experiencing a partner leaving was also addressed in this concept. The strain fostering put on relationships was documented (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Anderson, 2013). Foster parents also expressed the impact their own self-concept had on their perception of their safety. More specifically, Aboriginal foster parents expressed feeling like they were 'nobody' impacted their perceptions of their safety. This was related to feelings of not being recognized and credited for the work they did (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002).

**Burnout.** In this concept, Aboriginal foster parents described the experience of burnout in their role as caregivers. The inevitable blurring of foster parent's personal and professional lives created a workplace environment that was unique. Foster parents lived with their work (the children in their care), and with the exception of relief, were exposed to it continuously. Stress, exhaustion and burnout were conditions that occurred too often in their line of work and reflected in the low retention rates observed among Canadian foster parents (Daniel, 2011), as well as the commonality of placement breakdowns (Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001; Laan et al., 2001). Features of burnout can include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and dissatisfaction with one's accomplishments; research has demonstrated that a sense of personal accomplishment can help individuals cope with the first two characteristics of burnout (Maslach, & Jackson, 1981).

The physical effects of stress were expressed as salient factors that would impact a foster parents' decision to continue fostering. The overwhelming nature of the role was identified as a significant emotional challenge, as well as not being able to handle the pressures and stress of the job. Feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities and nature of

the position were exacerbated by a lack of agency support and guidance (Denby et al., 1999; Baum et al., 2001; Daniel, 2011), which has been found to be a significant contributor to foster parent stress and placement breakdown.

**Resentment.** This concept reflected foster parents' experiences with feelings of resentment in the areas of challenges with birth children, respite as well as traumatic events they experienced in the role. One challenge identified by Aboriginal foster parents was frustration from their biological children in reaction to foster children. The literature has documented challenges that arose integrating a foster child into the home when the child did not get along with the family's biological children (Rodger, 2007; Anderson, 2013). Foster parents also expressed their displeasure when they were not receiving sufficient respite (Buehler et al., 2006). Finally, previous research and findings from the present study highlighted the upsetting nature of experiencing threats to one's self, and/or biological family (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2003, as cited in Cox, Cherry & Orme, 2011; Anderson, 2013). The prevalence of this particular concern in the literature reiterates the severity, and potentially traumatizing experience of this particular challenge.

### **Spiritual Challenges**

The concept map for the second question, "What are the spiritual challenges that would make you consider quitting fostering?" was made up of three concepts. These concepts were Meaninglessness, Being Alone and Religious Restrictions. The concept of Meaninglessness reflected the challenges that arose when foster parents were unable to find significance in their role, including difficulty in maintaining a positive outlook in an

often-distressing occupation. Being Alone touched upon a lack of agency support and the experience of having one's credibility called into question. The concept Religions Restrictions included barriers to incorporating religion/spirituality into children's lives, as well as feeling pressured to integrate it into their homes. These concepts were compared to the existing literature.

**Meaninglessness.** In this concept Aboriginal foster parents expressed the difficulties faced when they were unable to find meaning in their work. Responses in this concept were consistent with existing literature in relation to the recognition of limits to one's belief systems when they differed from those of the foster child, effects of despair on family relationships and perceived lack of appreciation by the foster children in their care.

Spirituality has been reported as a way of creating meaning within the foster family (Gillium & O'Brien, 2010). Additionally, past research has shown that spirituality can help foster parents find clarity about their role in their foster children's lives, as well as role in the system which provided them with a purpose to communicate more honestly with children and workers (Furmnan, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004). Foster parents' beliefs may, however, contrast with the children in their care, as well as the agency and workers. Anderson (2013) noted that if a worker perceived foster parents as being too religious, it impacted the likelihood of placements in their home. Thus foster parents may find themselves lessening their expression and practice of their beliefs and values in order to obtain placements.

Aboriginal foster parents in the present study also expressed feelings of meaninglessness when they were experiencing difficulties within their marriage. Past literature has documented the strain that fostering put on numerous relationships, including the relationship with one's partner (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Anderson, 2013). Meaninglessness from this experience was derived from feeling alone in coping with many challenges as a foster parent.

Aboriginal foster parents noted the challenge of having feelings of despair and inability to maintain a positive attitude about their work. This was consistent with past literature. Having children removed from the home, feeling as though they were unable to make a difference in a child's life or do enough for the children in their care have all been noted by foster parents as disheartening events (Anderson, 2013; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003; Daniel, 2011; Fish & Chapman, 2004; Freundlich et al., 2006; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Additionally, past literature has touched upon the difficulties of caring for foster children who appear unappreciative of foster parents' best efforts to support and care for them (Adnopo, 2007; Harden, 2004; Rosenfeld, Wasserman, & Pilowsky, 1998).

**Being alone.** In this concept Aboriginal foster parents reported the challenging experience of being alone in their work. This included feeling that they "don't get any back up", as well as inadequate support. This was consistent with research that demonstrated the detriment of a poor working relationship between foster parents and agency workers (United States General Accounting Office, 1989, as cited in Denby et al., 1999). Particularly when caring for high needs children, a strong rapport between

foster parents and agency staff was critical in ensuring the best possible care and treatment for a child (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; MacGregor et al., 2006).

Past research demonstrates the need for a support network to provide both emotional support as well as guidance through the child welfare system to help foster parents understand the system, access services and advocate for themselves (Anderson, 2013; Ayon, 2011;). Opportunities to network with other foster parents, peer mentors and support during crises were extremely beneficial to improve foster parent wellness, as well as reduce stress (Anderson, 2013). A strong network of supportive peers was especially relevant for foster parents living in small, rural communities, and/or on a reserve where access to services was limited (Anderson, 2013).

Aboriginal foster parents also expressed the challenge of feeling that “no one will listen”, and having their reliability called into question. Previous research with foster parents has identified the feeling of having one’s credibility questioned to be a significant challenge (Anderson, 2013). A lack of communication between foster parents and agency workers has been identified in past research as a prevalent concern amongst many foster parents and influenced their motivation to continue fostering (Rhodes et al., 2003, MacGregor et al., 2006; Sanchirico et al., 1998).

**Religious restrictions.** Aboriginal foster parents described the numerous challenges they experienced around religion, including what practices were important for the foster children to be involved in and how to handle differences between the foster families’ values and traditions and those of the foster child. This was also consistent with the literature where the pressure was noted for foster parents to avoid being perceived as

denying a child of her or his heritage if they did not help children to actively develop it (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). In this concept Aboriginal foster parents expressed the challenges they faced when they felt restrictions and pressures were put on their own spirituality and practices, or dictated by the system for the foster child (Brown et al., 2009).

### **Discussion Summary**

Participants' responses to the first question "What emotional challenges would lead you to consider quitting fostering?" resulted in seven concepts including: Defending Integrity, Loss of Hope, Unresolved Conflict, Abuse, Fear for Safety, Burnout and Resentment. These findings were similar to past research with non-Aboriginal foster parents which referenced the same emotional challenges as those in the present study. Aboriginal foster parents in the present study identified the emotional distress that occurred in reaction to children being removed from their care. The hurt and sadness over children leaving the home has repeatedly been identified in past research as one of the most emotionally challenging experiences for foster parents (Anderson, 2013; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Daniel, 2011; Fish & Chapman). Aboriginal foster parents also identified feelings of losing hope and feeling disrespected as emotionally challenging. Conflict was also acknowledged as distressing. Areas of conflict occurred between foster parents and agency staff and/or professionals, as well as between foster children and biological children. Abuse, and similarly concern for one's safety, as well as the safety of one's biological family were also noted as salient emotional challenges. Burnout and resentment were also very similar to the experiences

of non-Aboriginal foster parents' reasons for considering quitting as evidenced through the comparison between the present findings and existing literature.

Responses to the second question "What spiritual challenges would lead you to consider quitting fostering?" were sorted into three concepts including: Meaninglessness, Being Alone and Religious Restrictions. Non-Aboriginal foster parents have expressed their experience with spiritual and religious restrictions (de Haymes & Simon, 2003; Anderson, 2013). Similar concerns were identified by Aboriginal foster parents regarding the challenges of incorporating religion/spirituality into the household or limiting one's own religious beliefs in order to promote those of the child. Aboriginal foster parents also expressed their experience of meaninglessness in their role. This was consistent not only with past research that documented the use of spirituality as a way of creating meaning in ones role as a foster parent and cross-cultural research that described the challenges apparent when foster parents and foster children had different belief systems (Gillium & O'Brien, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The main finding of the study is that challenges for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal foster parents appear to be very similar. The existing literature based on experiences of non-Aboriginal foster parents' reasons for quitting overlapped considerably with those of Aboriginal foster parents in the present study. Because many of the identified challenges have appeared in past literature with non-Aboriginal foster parents, constructs and themes from existing research may be used to inform recruitment and retention efforts for Aboriginal foster parents. However, differences in how these

challenges might be perceived, as well as historical and cultural considerations are highlighted. This information could prove useful in helping to increase the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal foster parents.

**Limitations.** The participants in this study were representative of a previously under-studied population. However while the sample was likely an accurate representation of licenced Aboriginal foster parents living in Manitoba, additional research would be needed to explore whether these findings would be relevant to Aboriginal foster parents throughout Canada.

The methodology of concept mapping is effective in that it allows participants, in this case Aboriginal foster parents, to identify and elaborate on the challenges they experience. However it does not enable the prioritization of which emotional, and spiritual challenges are the most concerning. Furthermore while notes were written by the Research Assistants during the interviews the interviews were not recorded, thus making it possible for some information in participants' responses to have been missed.

## **Implications**

**Implications for Practitioners.** This this study further contributes to knowledge and understanding of this population by simply asking Aboriginal foster parents directly about their experiences, something that has previously not been done.

There is a need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of cultural differences between and within Aboriginal communities. This could be particularly salient for counsellors who are working with Aboriginal foster parents and Aboriginal foster children who have different belief systems. For example, there is a great deal of



diversity within the Aboriginal population in relation to beliefs, with some following a Traditional path, others following a Christian path as well as some following other paths. In some communities, belief systems may be blended. Given the richness and diversity found between and within First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples as well as the shortage of Aboriginal foster homes available the potential for cross-cultural fostering by Aboriginal foster parents and Aboriginal foster children is quite high. Given the importance of family and community in many Aboriginal communities the experience of having a child removed from one's care might be perceived differently by Aboriginal foster parents.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal foster parents have identified the distress when children are removed from the home as one of the most salient challenges in fostering. However given the history of Aboriginal children being removed from the home to attend residential schools and during the "60's scoop" (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; McCormick & Wong, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2002) Aboriginal foster parents may experience the grief of having a child removed from their care differently than non-Aboriginal foster parents.

The importance of good rapport between foster parents, agency staff and other professionals has been acknowledged as vital in promoting placement success. As beneficial as it is for agencies and foster parents to have a strong rapport, these relationships can include tension and conflict. Not surprisingly this relationship can be stressful on both parties and can contribute to placement breakdown. It is imperative that practitioners are aware of, and recognize the emotional toll fostering can have on foster parents as well as how this may manifest itself in their personal lives.

A deep connection between all things is respected in many Aboriginal communities and reflected in the essence of ceremony, which represents the interconnections. The essentiality of connection to nature and others may be overlooked in Western healing practices making them potentially less relevant for Aboriginal peoples. Traditional healing is not only successful but well received among many members of the Aboriginal community. It may also be instrumental to a sense of self-determination when utilized instead of, or in conjunction with Western psychological offerings, which have also been found to be less effective, and have been received, by some, as another form of colonization. Thus it is crucial that non-Aboriginal counsellors who do not have this experience and knowledge are aware of these potential views towards the services they provide to Aboriginal peoples. It is also necessary for professionals to adopt an open attitude toward the use of traditional, cultural knowledge and practices, or referring clients to individuals who can provide such service.

A supportive social network where members have opportunities to share experiences was found to be helpful in not only increasing foster parent satisfaction, but intention to continue fostering as well. Furthermore, an effective support network can help foster parents better manage the risks and stresses that are unavoidable in this line of service. Creating support and educational groups specifically for Aboriginal foster parents could be beneficial in increasing their satisfaction and desire to continue fostering.

Being asked to not live by one's beliefs was identified as a salient spiritual challenge by Aboriginal foster parents in the present study. Historically, being asked to not live by one's beliefs was not new. The reserve system, residential schools, as well as

the “1960’s scoop”, were all efforts to assimilate. Given the losses and historical trauma as well as contemporary oppression experienced by Aboriginal peoples, it is possible that the experience of being asked to not live by what they believe in would be a very significant challenge for Aboriginal foster parents and quite different in meaning than for non-Aboriginal foster parents.

**Implications for Policy Makers.** While the results of this study indicate that challenges experienced by Aboriginal foster parents are similar to those of non-Aboriginal foster parents, differences affecting recruitment do exist. Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal foster children in particular, are significantly more likely to live in poverty than are non-Aboriginal peoples. As income is a factor influencing approval for fostering it is imperative that this issue be addressed. The housing shortages in many communities are absolutely fundamental to resolve. In addition, it is necessary that once approved for fostering, Aboriginal foster parents be provided with the same income/resource supplements used to help retain non-Aboriginal foster parents.

**Implications for Researchers.** There are different measures used to assess foster parent potential such as the Potential for Foster Parenthood Scale and the Foster Parent Potential Scale. While these measures contribute to our knowledge about foster parents and foster care, there are limitations to their generalizability. There is a need for more evidence based support and intervention for Aboriginal foster parents. In order to design and test such interventions it is necessary to first have an understanding of the specific needs the interventions are geared toward in order to promote Aboriginal foster parent satisfaction, and thus recruitment and retention.

Finally, the present study highlights the similarities in challenges experienced by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal foster parents. Thus future research may benefit from exploring challenges faced by foster parents from varying geographic locations. For example there may be differences in the challenges faced by foster parents who live in rural, remote locations, such as reserves, as opposed to the challenges faced by foster parents who live in suburban locations or large cities.

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## Needs and Challenges of Aboriginal Foster Parents

### LETTER OF INFORMATION\* (Phase 1)

\*Will be read to potential participants over the telephone.

#### Introduction

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a Graduate Research Assistant at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the needs and challenges of Aboriginal foster parents and would like to invite you to participate in this study.

#### Purpose of the study

The aims of this study are to describe the motives, needs and challenges faced by Aboriginal foster parents in Manitoba.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute telephone interview at a time that is convenient for you. During the interview you would be asked about your experiences as a foster parent, what motivates you to foster, what you need to be a good foster parent, and what would make you consider quitting fostering.

At the end of the interview, I will ask you if you are interested in helping us group the results together after all of the interviews are finished. If you are interested, I will get your contact information and follow up with you in about 8 weeks. That part of the study will take about 20 minutes for the telephone call and about 60 minutes to group the results.

#### Confidentiality

Direct quotes from the first telephone interview will be used in the second part of the study, but WILL NOT include identifying (i.e. names or locations) information. The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential. No names will be used in the report.

### Risks & Benefits

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

### Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your status as a foster parent.

### Compensation

In appreciation for your assistance with this part of the study you will be given a \$40 grocery store gift certificate.

### Questions

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Manager, Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at 519-661-3036 or [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca). If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Jason Brown



## Needs and Challenges of Aboriginal Foster Parents

*Jason Brown, University of Western Ontario*

### CONSENT\* (Phase 1)

\*Will be read to potential participants over the telephone.

Has the nature of the study been explained to you?

Have all questions have been answered to your satisfaction?

Do you agree to participate?

Response to the questions that follow will be considered evidence of consent.

Aboriginal Foster Parents Study – Questionnaire (Phase 1)

Screening question:

“Are you an Aboriginal person?”

If “yes”, then 1-9:

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1) What motivates you to foster?

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2) What do you need emotionally to be a good foster parent?

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3) What do you need spiritually to be a good foster parent?

---

4) What do you need physically to be a good foster parent?

---

5) What do you need mentally to be a good foster parent?

---

6) What emotional challenges would make you consider quitting foster parenting?

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7) What spiritual challenges would make you consider quitting foster parenting?

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8) What physical challenges would make you consider quitting foster parenting?

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9) What mental challenges would make you consider quitting foster parenting?

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Demographics:

Gender (circle one): Female, Male

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Aboriginal Status (circle one): Métis, First Nation, Inuit

Location \_\_\_\_\_ (city, town, village)

Months at current location \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years Fostering \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Foster Parents in Home \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Current Foster Children \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Current Aboriginal Foster Children \_\_\_\_\_

Total Number of Foster Children Cared for \_\_\_\_\_

Total Number of Aboriginal Foster Children Cared for \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Kinship Placements (child and foster parent had preexisting relationship) \_\_\_\_\_

The second part of the study involves grouping together the responses from the first part. If you agree to participate in second part you will be asked to group together responses to questions from the first interview. We will mail a copy of all responses and ask you to group them together in any way that makes sense to you. We will follow up with you by telephone after the package has arrived to answer any questions you might have, and also arrange a time to call you back to get your responses over the telephone.

Can we contact you to help us with the second part of the study (group the statements)? Yes / No

If yes, ask "May we keep your name and telephone number on record and contact you again when we are ready to start the grouping task"? Your name and telephone number will be kept confidential, and your responses in the grouping task will be anonymous.

All contact information is to be recorded on a separate sheet

-----DETACH-----

Sorter Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

-----DETACH-----

Honorarium Mailing Instructions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Needs and Challenges of Aboriginal Foster Parents

### LETTER OF INFORMATION\* (Phase 2)

\*Will be read to potential participants over the telephone.

#### Introduction

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a Graduate Research Assistant at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the needs and challenges of Aboriginal foster parents and would like to invite you to participate in this study. We had been in contact with you before about this same study, and you were interviewed. At that time, you had indicated that you were willing to be contacted to participate in the next part of the study. That is the reason for my call.

#### Purpose of the study

The aims of this study are to describe the motives, needs and challenges faced by Aboriginal foster parents in Manitoba. In this second part, we will ask you to group together all of the responses made to the questions from the previous interviews.

If you agree to participate in this part of the study you will be asked to group together responses to questions from the first interview. We recently mailed a copy of all responses and asked you to group them together in any way that makes sense to you. We are now following up with you by telephone after the package has arrived to answer any questions you might have, and also arrange a time to call you back to get your responses over the telephone. The telephone call will take approximately 20 minutes.

#### Confidentiality

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential. No names will be used in the report.

#### Risks & Benefits

There are no known risks to participating in this part of the study.

### Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your status as a foster parent.

### Compensation

In appreciation for your assistance with this part of the study you will be given a \$50 grocery store gift certificate.

### Questions

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Manager, Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at 519-661-3036 or [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca). If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Jason Brown.



Needs and Challenges of Foster Parents

*Jason Brown, University of Western Ontario*

CONSENT\* (Phase 2)

\*Will be read to potential participants over the telephone.

Has the nature of the study been explained to you?

Have all questions have been answered to your satisfaction?

Do you agree to participate?

Completion of the grouping task will be considered evidence of consent.

## Grouping Task Instructions (Phase 2)

UWO Letterhead

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Foster Parent,

I understand that you have recently talked to \_\_\_\_\_ (Graduate Research Assistant), who is assisting me with a research project, and have agreed to group responses to our survey questions. I want to thank you for your help with this project. Your continued participation is strictly voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential. In this package you will find small bundles of paper in different colors. Each color is for a different question. The colors should not be mixed together. A different response is written on each slip of paper. The responses are printed separately so that you can move them around and group them into piles in whatever way makes sense to you. I find it easiest to do this using a large table so I can spread the responses out, and then move them together into piles. Please use all of the responses. You can have as many or as few piles as you want.

You will also find blank forms in this package. Use the form that is the same color as the responses. Write the numbers of the responses that you grouped together. Give them names if you wish.

For example:

Pile 1 included responses 23, 45, 73, 12 & 24, and was called "understand each other"

Pile 2 included responses 3, 2, 67, 56 & 35, and was called "difficulty following rules"

Pile 3 included responses 67 & 66, and was called "learning about another culture"

....and so on, until you have used up all of the responses

\_\_\_\_\_ (Graduate Research Assistant) will call you back in a week to answer any questions you have. Please do not hesitate to call us at \_\_\_\_\_ any time or via email, if you want more information. We would like to get your responses over the telephone, if possible. \_\_\_\_\_ (Graduate Research Assistant) will arrange that with you when she calls.

Sincerely,

Jason Brown,

Assistant Professor

Pile	Label (optional)	Statement Numbers
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		

\*please use back of sheet if necessary

**Richelle L. Bird**

**CURRICULUM VITAE**

**EDUCATION**

**Western University**

Masters of Arts in Counselling Psychology

September 2013- April 2015  
London, ON

**University of Guelph**

Honours Bachelor of Arts-Psychology

September 2008-October 2012  
Guelph, ON

**AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS**

Graduate Entrance Scholarship

2013 & 2014

University of Guelph Dean's List

2010, 2011 & 2012

**Research Contributions**

Brown, J., Kapasi, A., & Bird, R. (Accepted) (2014). Caregivers of children who are prenatally exposed to alcohol. Parenting: Behaviors, Cultural Influences and Impact on Childhood Health. New York: Nova.

Safdar, S., Bird, R., & Townsend, B. (2012, July). *Fashion attitudes and Behaviours as predictors of acculturation strategy in Chinese, Indian, and Canadian students*. In S. Safdar (Convener) & F. van de Vijver (Discussant), *Acculturation and Empowerment*. Symposium conducted at the International Congress of Psychology. Cape Town, South Africa (July 22-27).

**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

**Research Internship**

University of Guelph, Faculty of Social Sciences

January-April 2012  
Guelph, ON

**CLINICAL EXPERIENCE**

**Intern Counsellor**

Student Development Centre, Western University

September 2014-Present  
London, ON

**After Care Group Co-Facilitator**

Quintin Warner House

June 2014- Present  
London, ON

**FASD- A Night Out Group Co-Facilitator**

Merrymount Family Support and Crisis Centre

March-August 2014  
London, ON

**RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

<b>Teaching Assistant</b> Faculty of Education, Western University Ontario,	September 2014- April 2015 London, ON
<b>Summer Student</b> Quintin Warner House	June 2014 London, ON
<b>Residential Support Worker</b> Treatment Foster Care	September 2012- January 2014 Cobourg, ON
<b>Summer Student</b> Community Living West Northumberland	June-August 2013 Cobourg, ON
<b>Child and Youth Worker</b> Treatment Foster Care Northumberland	December 2012- January 2013 Cobourg, ON
<b>Special Friend Program Volunteer</b> Kinark Child and Family Services	September 2012- August 2013 Cobourg, ON
<b>Post-Partum Depression Group Volunteer</b> Guelph Community Health Centre	January-April 2012 Guelph, ON