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# The Power of Silence and the Price of Success: Academic Achievement as Transformational Resistance for Aboriginal Women

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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THE POWER OF SILENCE AND THE PRICE OF SUCCESS:  
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AS TRANSFORMATIONAL RESISTANCE  
FOR ABORIGINAL WOMEN

(Spine Title: Transformational Resistance For Aboriginal Women)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Dawn M. Lavell Harvard

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
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entitled:

**The Power of Silence and the Price of Success: Academic  
Achievement as Transformational Resistance**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Using an anti-racist feminist framework, and revised concepts of resistance, this qualitative study utilizes traditional Aboriginal Sharing Circles and personal interviews for a culturally sensitive exploration of the experiences of successful Aboriginal women in mainstream post-secondary institutions. The research focuses on two questions. What barriers confront Aboriginal women in mainstream post-secondary institutions generally, and how were these particular Aboriginal women able to overcome the challenges they faced, i.e. what coping strategies and support mechanisms had, in their experience, facilitated academic achievement and persistence?

Analysis revealed how experiences of discrimination, and an awareness of societal inequities, in combination with a belief in the possibility of social change, appeared to increase motivation and persistence. Coping strategies commonly included: ‘passing’ as non-aboriginal, becoming strategically invisible and/or deliberately silent, learning to “play the game,” and learning how to pick the battles worth fighting when avoidance was not possible. Aboriginal families generally, and mothers, grandmothers, and other female kin specifically were found to encourage and support academic achievement. Women-centered networks, positive relationships with both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal faculty and staff, a demonstrated institutional commitment to Aboriginal initiatives, and the creation of Aboriginal specific spaces provided important sources of support in mainstream institutions. This study reveals how, rather than being seen as assimilation, achievement in mainstream educational institutions can be interpreted as a form of covert internal resistance for Aboriginal women. [Aboriginal, women, academic achievement, post-secondary, resistance, transformational resistance, race, gender]

## Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the Great Spirit for providing me with the opportunity and the spiritual strength to complete this work, and for providing me a great many days in which to do it.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to the Research

*Education is your most powerful weapon. With education you are the white man's equal; without it you are his victim, Chief Plenty Coups, Crow Tribe. (quoted in Garcia & Ahler, 1992, p. 15)*

#### *Research Question*

Mainstream education systems have been historically, and continue currently to be, integral to the process of marginalizing, subjugating, and oppressing Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> peoples. Therefore, in order to begin the necessary process of conceptualizing the kind of culturally appropriate reforms that might improve the educational attainment levels of Aboriginal students, we must first identify the obstacles faced and the cultural and personal sacrifices made, by those students who have, at least according to conventional definitions, been able to achieve success within mainstream educational institutions. With this goal in mind, along with the knowledge that Aboriginal women are currently experiencing increased educational attainment (in comparison to Aboriginal men) this study focused on the following questions. What barriers confront Aboriginal women in mainstream post-secondary institutions generally? How were these particular Aboriginal women able to overcome the challenges they faced, i.e. which coping strategies and support mechanisms had, in their experience, facilitated academic achievement and persistence?

#### *The Purpose of the Research*

The purpose of the research is to uncover and develop the critical concepts that will enable an understanding of how it is that Aboriginal women, who are arguably among the most marginalized of all Canadian citizens (Dion-Stout & Kipling, 1998), are

currently experiencing increasing academic success, especially in comparison to Aboriginal men, as evidenced by post-secondary enrolment and graduation statistics. To that end this study will: 1) examine and identify the difficulties, cultural conflicts, attitudes, aspirations and survival strategies of female Aboriginal students who have persisted in post-secondary programs; 2) develop the critical concepts that will allow for an understanding of how Aboriginal women specifically, despite numerous barriers, were both able and willing, to benefit from the current educational system; and subsequently 3) identify guiding principles which will hopefully provide direction for future educational policies and practices aimed at increasing overall Aboriginal student persistence at the post-secondary level.

#### *Rationale*

*Educators, your systems have failed, and are continuing to fail, the Indian people. I say our people are casualties rather than failures. Educators try their best to make us believe that we are the failures rather than themselves, and many of them succeed.... (Cardinal, D., 1971, p. 11)*

Throughout much of history, as L. T. Smith (2002) suggested in her foundational work on research and Indigenous peoples, the non-aboriginal voice has had the power to define the issues, frame the discussions, and provide the perspectives from which to understand the world around us, and the Aboriginal experiences therein (see also D. Mihesuah, 2003). History is about power, L. T. Smith explains, insofar as it is “the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others” (2002, p. 34). The silencing of diverse accounts, the exclusion of alternative perspectives, and the marginalization of those without power are, therefore, integral to the construction, legitimation, and maintenance of history as the story of the powerful. Consequently, those

who are attempting to introduce alternative perspectives often struggle to have their depictions recognized as valid especially when, or perhaps specifically because, they do not conform to the dominant portrayals.

Although he is speaking specifically of the Orient, Said (1994) explained how writers presume some “precedent, some previous knowledge ... to which he refers and on which he relies” for the construction of meaning without which the work would be incomprehensible (p. 20). The “techniques” of representation “rely upon” certain “conventions and agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects” and not actually upon that which they claim to be representing (Said, 1994, p. 22). Said suggests further that each work “affiliates itself with other works...” (p. 20) and the congruence within a body of literature was often “due in part to the fact that they frequently refer to each other” (1994, p. 23). McConaghy (2000) concurred, suggesting that as a “body of texts” previous works often set the standards against which new works will be judged and in so doing “censure what can and cannot be said” by subsequent authors thereby contributing to the difficulties faced by those who attempt to challenge dominant portrayals and perceptions by introducing alternative perspectives (McConaghy, 2000, p. 27).

Given the historical attitudes towards culturally different peoples generally, and ‘uncivilized’ Aboriginal populations specifically, it is not surprising that Deyhle and Swisher (1997) and Kouritzin (2004) claim many of the theories historically advanced in mainstream research have focused on the traits of the Aboriginal people themselves, or their culture, as the source of educational failure. Often researchers focused on the cultural community as “the sole source of the problem” which resulted in a convenient failure “to analyze... the wider social economic and policy contexts” in which the

communities existed (L. T. Smith, 2002, p. 92). When Aboriginal students were themselves consistently “viewed as a problem” (Cajete, 1994, p. 188) we cannot see, as Curwin Doige (2003) suggests, that perhaps “Aboriginal students often fail because the system fails them” (p. 7). Indeed, L. T. Smith (2002) explained,

A continuing legacy of what has come to be taken for granted as a natural link between the term ‘indigenous’ (or its substitutes) and ‘problem’ is that many researchers, even those with the best of intentions, frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues. (p. 92)

Unfortunately, the “logical outcome of analyzing social problems in terms of the deficiencies of the victim” has traditionally been the “development of programs aimed at correcting those deficiencies,” or rather simply put, attempts to “change the victim” (Ryan, 1971, p. 8).

In their 1988 study, Bickel and Papagiannis, described how “most social and educational research” focused on the “characteristics of individual students rather than the characteristics of the socially structured environments in which they live” and learn (p. 144). According to Apple (1989) the failure to locate the issue in the larger political-economic context, by focusing on the supposed deficiencies of the Aboriginal students as an “educational problem” with “primarily an educational solution,” is not only apt to lead to inappropriate solutions but is, in fact, “itself part of the problem” (p. 206). In order to put an end to the perpetual victim blaming, Battiste explained “we must acknowledge the colonial shadow through a thorough awareness of the sociohistoric reality that has created the current context” if we are to begin healing (Battiste, 1998, 24). Fortunately, as D. Cardinal pointed out, sustained efforts to convince Aboriginal peoples that “we are the failures,” when in fact the education “systems have failed, and are continuing to fail, the



Indian people,” have not been entirely successful (1971 p. 11). As part of the larger political struggle, according to Brant Castellano, Davis, and Lahache (2000), the present generation of Aboriginal peoples have successfully challenged dominant ideologies, opening the doors for critique of the ways in which schooling has been used as a weapon against Aboriginal nations to facilitate subjugation and oppression, rather than as a tool for their liberation (see D. Adams, 1995; H. Adams, 1999; Fear-Segal, 2007; Huff, 1997; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). In the words of Battiste (1998) “Aboriginal peoples throughout the world have survived five centuries of horrors and harsh lessons of colonization” and they are “emerging with new consciousness and vision” (p. 16). Although Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives are still largely marginalized in education systems this paradigm shift has allowed previously silenced voices to enter the dialogue on educational disparity offering new hope for the future. Identifying the ways in which Eurocentric education systems have themselves created Aboriginal student failure, Hampton (1995) called for Aboriginal peoples to abandon such clearly counter-productive models and begin to define ourselves alternatives foundations for educating our people for empowerment and self-determination.

Clearly, if the study of Aboriginal student failure has not only failed to identify appropriate solutions, but is in fact itself part of the larger process of constructing Aboriginal peoples as inferior and thereby justifying their marginalization in society at large, it has become apparent that we must look at the persistence of educational disparity from a new perspective if we hope to generate new insight. As was suggested in Mackay and Myles (1995) study of Aboriginal drop-outs, given our increased understanding of the complex reasons why Aboriginal students abandon the education system, perhaps the

question that ought to be asked is “who do some of them stay?” (p. 171). Clearly, researching the lived experiences of the more academically successful members of the Aboriginal student population has the potential to provide significant insight into strategies for academic and cultural survival, as well as identifying the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people studying in mainstream educational environments. In fact, as Macias (1989) had suggested in her study of the learning strategies of successful American Indian women, it is important that those who have persisted and achieved their academic goals “be given the opportunity to share their own strategies for academic survival” with other Aboriginal students in an effort to increase overall rates of Aboriginal academic achievement (p. 1). Similarly, Reyhner and Dodd (1995) call for the study of Aboriginal people who persevere and succeed academically in order to facilitate a replication of that success (p. 2). Moreover, a focus on success among Aboriginal students would also be instrumental in the deconstruction of the numerous racist stereotypes that contribute to the continual marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in post-secondary institutions and society at large. Thus the larger ideological and political significance of research on the Aboriginal woman’s experience in mainstream academic institutions becomes apparent.

### *Background*

Following the theft of their traditional land base and the consequent loss of their primary means of survival, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century many Aboriginal leaders recognized, and articulated their belief in, the liberating potential of education. Although it was generally perceived to be too late for many members of the community, as it was widely accepted by those in power that attempts at “civilizing” the adults had proven futile, there

remained hope for future generations (Brant Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagne, 2008; Milloy, 1999). Education, it was thought, would be the new buffalo (Stonechild, 2006). Schooling was to provide Aboriginal peoples with the skills needed to survive in the non-aboriginal world thereby bringing an end to miserable living conditions, pervasive poverty, and the dependency upon government handouts. As the following words from Chief Dan George illustrate:

There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp that which is needed for our survival. There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than in the olden days. The long years of study will demand more determination, separation from home and family and demand more endurance. But they will emerge with their hands held forward, not to receive welfare, but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours. Chief Dan George (Chief Dan George & Hirschall, 1974, p. 91)

There is much desire in the hearts of Aboriginal people: desire for education, desire for equality, but most of all the desire for a better life for our families, our communities, and our nations. Unfortunately, after centuries of struggle in the formal education system, Aboriginal peoples are still waiting for the liberation promised while the poverty and misery persist.

Although Canada has been ranked by the United Nations as one of the best countries in the world to live in, according to the Human Development Index, the situation of Aboriginal peoples within Canada remains deplorable. Indeed, the quality of life for most First Nations is comparable to that of Third World countries (Blackstock, 2003). Although individual communities are vastly different in terms of geography, economic opportunity, language, and culture, what nearly all First Nations share is a standard of living that is significantly lower than the average Canadian community. Even

the First Nations with the best socio-economic circumstances met the living standards of only the poorest non-aboriginal communities in Canada (Armstrong, 1999). The circumstances under which Aboriginal people are living are indeed unacceptable, as many communities exist without adequate housing, clean water, or proper sanitation systems (Assembly of First Nations, 2006; Bennett & Blackstock, 2007). Unfortunately, those most affected by poverty are the children. In comparison to the general population, there are disproportionately more Aboriginal children living in poverty, more suffering from disabilities, and more in the care of the child welfare authorities (Assembly of First Nations, 2006). Something must be done immediately if this dire situation is to change.

Most Aboriginal people continue to view education as a primary means of initiating the necessary social, economic, and political changes that would provide a better future for their children, or indeed any future at all (Charters-Voght, 1991). After extensive consultations with Aboriginal communities and political leadership, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1993) clearly identified education as “the single most important issue facing Aboriginal people” today (p. 19) as it is “the key that unlocks the door to the future (p. 161). Certainly, as Brade, Duncan, and Sokal (2003) claimed, in contemporary society education is increasingly “the most frequent vehicle to societal advantages such as wealth and power” and conversely the persistent lack of educational attainment translates into a lack of opportunity for Aboriginal peoples (p. 236). As a direct result of historic and contemporary educational inequities many “Aboriginal people have few employment skills and lack the academic/literacy skills needed to upgrade their qualifications in an increasingly knowledge-oriented labour market” (Government of Ontario, 2007, p. 24) and are therefore often at a distinct

disadvantage in employment competition. It is not surprising that education remains a significant “focal point” in the struggle of Aboriginal peoples to “regain control over their lives and circumstances” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 2). Clearly, the problem of Aboriginal educational failure demands immediate redress and ought to be a priority concern, not only for Aboriginal peoples, but for Canadian society as a whole.

Formal education is critical for the provision of the skills and credentials necessary for success in contemporary society (Brayboy, 2004, 2005; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003 ). Unfortunately, levels of secondary and post-secondary education continue to be much lower for Aboriginal people than their non-aboriginal counterparts in Canada, with a full 50% of those living on reserves having less than high school (Statistics Canada, 2008). Furthermore, while the percentage of the Aboriginal population possessing a university degree has risen from 6% in 2001, to 8% in 2006, they still remain far behind the non-aboriginal population who rose from 20% in 2001, to 23% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Although there have been recent improvements in overall educational attainment levels, Aboriginal peoples have not kept pace with the rates of educational achievement in the general Canadian population. If we are to achieve any measure of equality for Aboriginal peoples, as the Government of Ontario asserted in their *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, “greater efforts are needed to ensure that Aboriginal students succeed at a rate comparable to that of other students in the education system” (2007, p. 6). However, education has itself been “implicated in the processes that contribute to the failure and marginalization” of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian society (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 2; see also

Barman, 1986; Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1987; Freisen & Freisen, 2005; Grant, 1996; Graveline, 1998; Hampton, 1995; Huff, 1997; Milloy, 1999).

Through the mythology of meritocracy, in a land of opportunity such as Canada, we are taught to believe that those who enjoy wealth and privilege “deserve their advantages” (Connell, 1993, p. 27) and, by corollary, that the poor are similarly deserving of their fate. It is assumed that “if only the individual had studied harder... the inequalities in society arising with unemployment could be eliminated” (Apple, 1989, p. 218). It is therefore not surprising that much research on the problem of low Aboriginal educational attainment reflected this belief, i.e., that Aboriginal people are individually and collectively responsible for their own failure. Decades of research focusing primarily on those Aboriginal students who fail has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the “prejudicial, ethnocentric majority attitude that certain cultural groups [such as the Aboriginal peoples] are inherently deficient” and therefore incapable of greater achievement (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993, p. 2). As a result attention is conveniently deflected away from the ways in which inequality is systemically structured, reproduced, and reinforced in society. Furthermore, the perpetual studying of those Aboriginal students who are deemed ‘at-risk’ for educational failure, often prevents the very perception of, much less any understanding of, Aboriginal achievement in the academy.

The experiences of Aboriginal students who have been successful in post-secondary educational attainment have been considerably less well documented and will, therefore, be the focus of this study. While Aboriginal educational attainment levels in Canada still fall well below national averages, according to census data approximately

44% of the Aboriginal population have obtained a post-secondary qualification, while over 42 900 Aboriginals have obtained a university degree specifically (Statistics Canada, 2008). This represents a dramatic increase from a mere 200 in 1969 (Government of Ontario, 2001). Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of those Aboriginal students who have persisted in post-secondary education were women. Contrary to what one might expect, given the well documented extreme poverty, numerous barriers, and multiple oppressions faced by most Aboriginal women (Sinzdak, 2004), they are increasingly outnumbering Aboriginal men in both college and university enrolment and graduation rates (Vermaeten, Crosby, Shantz & Buchmeier, 2001, p. 9). For example, among First Nations populations, according to the 2006 census data 21% of women had college credentials compared to only 14% of men, while 9% of women had university degrees compared to only 5% of men (Milligan & Bougie, 2009). Unfortunately, as Cathro (1993) and Larocque (1990) found, despite increased achievement levels the experience of post-secondary education has not been altogether positive as Aboriginal women in university settings are often faced with racism and sexism, as well as an alienating academic discourse (cited in Dion-Stout & Kipling, 1998, p. 23).

It has been further argued that education itself, or at least as conceptualized and implemented since the early missionary days, has been a “key factor in making Native women invisible and silencing [their] voices” (Almeida, 1997, p. 759). However, recently increasing numbers of Aboriginal women are successfully negotiating a mainstream education system which has, since its inception, disadvantaged, disempowered, and marginalized Aboriginal peoples. As they have apparently found a means of resisting educational disempowerment and are currently achieving greater success in post-

secondary it is, therefore, important to focus on the experiences of high achieving Aboriginal women specifically.

*Study Overview / Format*

Chapter One is the introduction. This section includes an articulation of the Research Question, the specific Purpose of the Research, and the attendant section on the Rationale for pursuing this particular line of inquiry. In order to be as politically conscious as possible, especially given the ongoing debates, I have also included discussion of the appropriate Terminology for use when describing the descendants of the original occupants of North America.

Chapter Two articulates the Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks that will inform the research and guide analysis. A discussion of the importance of choosing an appropriate conceptual framework is followed by a description of an Anti-racist Feminist Conceptual Framework and the key concepts necessary for an understanding of how racism and gender discrimination function in concert to reproduce existing societal inequities and, therefore, the marginalization of Aboriginal women in the academy as well as the larger society. Employing the Anti-racist Feminist Conceptual Framework, a review of Traditional Resistance Theory illustrates the need for a re-conceptualization of resistance taking into consideration gendered responses to the experience of oppression as well as alternative, and perhaps less visible, forms of resistance. This is followed by an exploration of academic achievement as a form of Internal Transformational Resistance.

Chapter Three is the Literature Review which provides an overview of significant studies previously conducted in the field of Aboriginal education. This review covers studies of Aboriginal Academic Failure including those who critique the role of education



systems in reproducing educational inequality, Aboriginal Specific Programs, and the factors influencing Aboriginal student success including Personal Factors, Academic Preparation, Family Support, Socio-economic Status, Home Environment, Culture, Native Language Fluency, Financial Aid, Social Support Networks, Faculty Relations, Campus Environment, Non-linear Approaches, and Gender Differences.

Chapter Four describes in detail the Methodology employed in this study. The chapter begins with an initial examination of the problems inherent in previous research conducted upon Aboriginal peoples, which is followed by a discussion of the key considerations that must inform the development of a culturally appropriate research model. The actual data collection procedures developed for this particular qualitative study of Aboriginal women employ Traditional Sharing Circles, as well as personal interviews, in order to be as culturally sensitive as possible.

Chapter Five is the first chapter of analysis. In this chapter, instead of being interpreted as a sign of assimilation and acceptance of the dominant ideology, the stories of the women reveal how engagement and achievement in mainstream educational institutions can be seen as a form of covert internal resistance to the denigration and subordination of women and Aboriginal peoples in society generally and, therefore, of Aboriginal women particularly. Rather than decreasing motivation, for these women the awareness of structural inequity and systemic discrimination appeared to increase motivation and the desire for educational credentials as a means of working towards social change and a better life for their people.

Chapter Six describes the actual strategies of resistance utilized by the Aboriginal women in this study. Ranging from rare instances of external resistance including

outright confrontation and subversion, as well as the more commonly employed internal resistance strategies - which include 'passing' as non-aboriginal, becoming strategically invisible and/or purposefully silent, learning to "play the game," and learning how to pick the battles worth fighting when avoidance was not possible. This chapter ends with a discussion of the importance of empowerment through internal transformational resistance.

Chapter Seven provides an examination of the sources of resistance. Aboriginal families generally, and the mothers, grandmothers, and other female kin specifically were found to nurture resistance and counter-hegemonic thinking through the articulation and sharing of oppositional knowledges. It is in these primary relationships that counter-hegemonic thought is encouraged, oppositional knowledge is shared, and the sense of self-worth and confidence necessary to challenge stereotypes, overcome barriers, and exceed expectations was developed. Once in the academy and away from kinship ties, women-centered networks become critical for the provision of a sense of connection to Aboriginal community and the maintenance of the commitment to resistance.

Chapter Eight is the final chapter of analysis. This chapter describes various factors within the institution that the participants perceived as influencing persistence and academic attainment. The analysis of the complex role played by teachers, faculty, and staff indicates that it was the nature of the relationship with the student that was important to the women in this study, and not a shared racial identity and/or cultural background. Further analysis indicates the need for a demonstrated institutional commitment to provide the necessary on-going supports for Aboriginal students, faculty, and programs. The final section in this chapter examines the importance of creating Aboriginal specific

safe spaces within what has often been described as an alienating and hostile institutional environment.

Chapter Nine is the discussion. In this chapter the personal cost of engaging in transformational resistance is examined. The conflict between having a career and a family generally, and the difficulty of balancing academic pursuits with the demands of being a good mother and a loving wife specifically, are illustrated. This chapter ends with a discussion of how these women define success in their own lives.

Chapter Ten is the concluding chapter, which offers a summary of the experiences, concerns, and coping strategies of the women, along with a discussion of the implications and limitations of this study, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

#### *Introduction*

This chapter articulates the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that inform the research and guide the analysis. A discussion of the importance of selecting an appropriate framework is followed by a brief description of an anti-racist feminist conceptual framework. This is followed by the key considerations to keep in mind when employing an anti-racist feminist framework for the study of Aboriginal women in the academy including: the specificities of oppression, the conflicts felt by those who are simultaneously fighting both racism and gender oppression, and the historical process of subjugation as it relates to contemporary reality. Subsequently, a description of Traditional Resistance Theory illustrates the need for a re-conceptualization of resistance, moving away from the previous focus on overtly oppositional and ultimately self-defeating behaviours and towards the consideration of alternative and perhaps less visible forms of resistance. Employing a more sophisticated and inclusive definition of resistance, the final section explores how academic achievement can be seen as a form of Internal Transformational Resistance – a concept that is fundamental to the understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal women who succeed in post-secondary education.

#### *Conceptual Framework*

##### *The Importance of an Appropriate Framework*

The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) identified the inherently political nature of research explaining how Aboriginal people have historically been excluded from research decision making processes, and as a result have begun

demanding recognition of the right to control Aboriginal research as part of a larger movement towards self-governance: our right to define that which is of concern to our communities, our right to determine the methods that will be used among our people, and our right to ownership and protection of the resulting knowledge (see First Nations Center, 2005; Brant Castellano, 2004, Battiste & Henderson, 2000). While this debate has often focused on the need for Indigenous methodologies (as the methods employed by researchers in the past were often exploitative), according to noted Indigenous scholar L. T. Smith, given the understanding that it is implicitly ideological, the “conceptual framework that you work in is more important than the methodologies or tools that you use” (in Battiste, 2002, p. 5). In fact, having declared that the process of regaining control over research conducted ‘on’ Aboriginal populations to be part of the larger project of self-determination for First Nations peoples in Canada (see also Alfred, 2004) the First Nations Center of the National Aboriginal Health Organization articulates the significance of the theoretical frameworks that are brought to the research as follows:

Data are not out there existing absolutely. Instead, we (every single one of us) are situated in a social experience. What emerges as problematic from one experience may not be problematic to another experience... What categories emerge as related to the problematic will differ based on social location and/or culture. Although the analysis is undertaken by Statistics Canada and also by outside institutions, the ability to control the epistemology and the creation of the data is central to defining the universe available for analysis or interpretation. (Delsys Research Group, quoted in First Nations Center, 2005, p. 28)

Thus, the argument is taken a step further claiming that data are not simply collected or gathered, but rather they are created, beginning with the choice of the research framework and continuing through the selection of methodology. In her work on feminist theory and education, Bunch (1979) made a similar argument 30 years ago claiming ‘theories’ are based upon available knowledge and experience as well as conjecture and insight in the

process of interpretation, and as a result, reflect the “interests, values, and assumptions of those who created it” (p. 13). Simply put, in such research contexts, that which is found is directly related to where we were looking and that which we were looking for.

Clearly, conceptual frameworks influence the understandings brought to an investigation thereby shaping the definition of the problematic as well as the hypothesizing of potential solutions to a particular paradigm. Indeed, in her analysis of feminist scholarship and colonial discourses, Mohanty (1988) argued that any efforts to understand the nature of oppression and power imbalances in society must acknowledge that we exist as entities in the intersection of multiple facets of identity defining ourselves and being defined by others, simultaneously and alternately by our race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, etc. Having noted how the experiences of gender oppression for women of colour can be distinctly different from those of ‘white’ women, Mohanty explained that the interaction of these multiple facets of identity influence how we experience our social reality and, hence, we cannot simplistically assume that all women are bound together by a common experience of oppression based on the universal application of patriarchal power.

Race and gender are constantly shifting and evolving social constructs marking the boundaries between particular groups, and not concrete categories of biological difference. McLaren and Lankshear (1993) claimed the very notion that human beings possess a “timeless essence or a consciousness” outside of our historical and political conditions is not only outmoded but is in fact dangerous (p. 386). Indeed, as Said (1993) argued, “No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indians, or women, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for

only a moment are quickly left behind” (quoted in Rezai-Rashti, 1999, p. 50). Clearly, the facets of our identities, whether they be related to our gender, our race, or some other aspect of our being, cannot be understood in isolation, as they are never experienced in isolation. Maher and Tetreault (2001) further suggested that “identity is not, in fact, individual but is embedded in a community of discourse” and was therefore always shaped by complex intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender (p. 204). The facets of our identities exist forever intertwined, interacting in complex and ever-changing ways. This conception of the individual as the product of multiple identities is discussed in numerous works including that of Dei (1996), Calliste and Dei (2000), Dua and Robertson (1999), and Hill-Collins (2009).

Having acknowledged the need to advance beyond deterministic conceptualizations of identity and incorporate notions of human agency, post-structuralist feminist theories further clarify that “we don’t find ourselves” which would still be essentialist, nor do we “create ourselves, but rather we act, react with/in the discourses in which we are currently situated” (Ropers-Huilman, 1998, p. 23). Such theories explain how both the dominant and subversive discourses in society are “constantly shifting and changing” in their efforts to maintain or disrupt the existing relations of power and so too therefore is “individual identity” in a constant state of flux (Ropers-Huilman, 1998, p. 23). Just as there is no concrete fixed ‘woman’s experience’ or ‘female subjectivity’, the Aboriginal experience and identity are similarly variable, multifaceted, and dynamic in their fluidity.

As a result of variable historic, geographic, economic, social, and political factors, tribal origins, social classes, and gender, there can be no singular or ‘authentic’

Aboriginal point of view. There exists no universal unity of experience among Aboriginal peoples nor is there a singular Aboriginal 'perspective' upon which to construct our theoretical foundations. However, this need not be a source of difficulty. As Mohanty (1988) had suggested, the attempt to identify such ahistorical universals is theoretically unproductive and any analysis of societal inequity should focus instead on the "material and ideological specificities" that constitute particular groups as subordinate in particular contexts (p. 66). We must therefore analyze how the interaction of racism and sexism function within and impact on the lives of specific Aboriginal women in order to begin the process of understanding the numerous challenges faced by Aboriginal women in general as they struggle for equality in Canadian society.

*An Anti-racist Feminist Conceptual Framework*

Trying to understand the life experiences of Aboriginal women through the lens of either feminist or race theory would be unproductive, since, as frameworks, both theories are necessary and yet simultaneously insufficient. Tucker (1998) argued that as analytical categories gender and race had initially "belonged to separate worlds" with early feminist theories focusing exclusively on the power imbalance between males and females in society (p. xi). Rezai-Rashti (1999) similarly criticized anti-racism theory, having found it to be equally constrained and "unable to move beyond the reductive concepts of culture and community" in order to provide any analysis of the "intertwining and complex relationships between racism and sexism" (p. 47). Indeed, as Cohen (1992) explained, when "trying to explain a complex and multifaceted phenomenon by resorting to a single, simple cause" such theories, and the resulting explanations, are "therefore limited since they tell only part of the story, leaving out those elements which did not fit



into their chosen line of argument” (p. 77, quoted in Rezai-Rashti, 1999, p. 48). As previously argued, human beings are never completely contained within the boundaries of one category of identity, but rather they exist in the constant interplay of these constructs of identity and such understandings must be brought to the analysis.

What is required then is a theory capable of acknowledging and articulating the effects of the interaction of race and gender in the lives of those who are simultaneously ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘woman’. One must also recognize that although these categories are themselves fraught with internal contradiction and fragmentation (see D. Mihesuah, 2003) they are at least a starting point of analysis.

In their examination of the experiences of female Aboriginal and visible minority faculty, citing the work of Dei (1996) Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau (2001) explain how on the most simplistic level, both anti-racist and feminist theories deal with the ways people from non-dominant groups are treated “differentially and unequally” as an integral aspect of the maintenance of current structures of societal inequality and oppression (p. 10). Indeed, they continue, both anti-racist and feminist theories critically examine “individual and systemic oppression” as experienced in contemporary society as well as, and perhaps more importantly, the “relationship between power, equity, and oppression” (Luther et al., 2001, p. 10). While feminist theories are based on the understanding that the oppression faced by women is systemic, pervading all aspects of our lives, leading to major social injustice, anti-racist theory begins with the understanding that racism is the starting point of oppression, exerting its effects on the lives of both men and women (of colour) as particular groups are subject to differential and unequal treatment (Luther et al., 2001). However, an anti-racist feminist framework begins with the principles of both

anti-racist and feminist theories, yet it “moves beyond them as separate discourses” and works to illustrate the ways in which “race, gender, class, and colonialism function together in structuring social inequality” (Luther et al. 2001, p. 10) thereby providing the necessary framework for understanding the experiences of those who are the most unequal in our society.

Calliste and Dei (2000) argue that “understanding gender and race relations is knowing about power relations in society” (p. 12). Based on ideologies of superiority, both racism and sexism function to reinforce access to power and privilege for certain members of our society while simultaneously justifying the exclusion of “others” (those identified as unworthy on the basis of certain characteristics of difference). Lorde (2000) explains how at the most basic level, racism is a belief in the superiority of one race above all others and by extension the right to dominance, while sexism is the belief in the superiority of one sex over the other and a similar right to dominance. In combination such beliefs sustain racialized (white) heterosexual male privilege and construct non-white women as the ultimate subordinates. Hooks (1989) used the concept of interlocking systems of domination to articulate the effect of these multiple sites of oppression in the lives of women of colour. Whether it was called feudalism, colonialism, or capitalism, throughout history these interlocking beliefs have served to justify and reinforce power imbalances thereby perpetuating societies wherein the wealth of the few is built upon the oppression, marginalization, and exploitation of the many.

#### *Focusing on the Specificities of Race and Gender Oppression*

While the goal of anti-racist feminism is the exposition, understanding, and ultimately the deconstruction and elimination of power relations, there is little consensus

of how to go about this enormous task. Dua (1999a) defines anti-racist feminist thought at its most basic level as that which “attempts to integrate the way race and gender function together in structuring social inequality” (p. 9) yet she simultaneously acknowledges that considerable argument remains surrounding how such integration is to be achieved and the primacy of either race, class, or gender in analysis. Whether it is more productive to add race concepts to feminist analysis, or gender considerations to race theories, or how to fit issues of class into either, is still under debate. Moreover, such questions may ultimately prove unanswerable as the saliency of one aspect over the other may in fact be dependent upon context. That said, there seems some agreement on the need to focus the analysis on the specificities of the realities of our everyday lives (Mohanty, 1988; Dua & Robertson, 1999; Rezai-Rashti, 1999; Calliste & Dei, 2000; Razack, 2000; Hill-Collins, 2009) for it is in this context that the oppressed experience the effects of these complex ‘interlocking systems of domination’ (hooks, 1989). Referring to the 1969 work of Hansberry, Hill-Collins (2009) explained that in order to come to an understanding of the universal, one must pay attention to the specific, to the day to day realities of the communities in which we find ourselves (p. 288). Stasiulis (1990) specifically argued that a more complex understanding of oppression, inequality, and the inevitable resistance to such subjugation, could be gained through this focus on “the structural location of particular groups of women in concrete and historically specific social relations and to the accompanying discourses that aid in the processes of denigration, subordination, and exploitation” (p. 290).

It is important to note that Stasiulis’ argument included the concept of resistance. Clearly, our lives may be circumscribed by the circumstances in which we find ourselves,

yet we are not mindless pawns blindly accepting our own subordination as inevitable. Although they are “differentially positioned in their access to the material goods and services of society” (p. 166) on the basis of race and gender, and the opportunities for advancement are thereby constrained, according to Calliste and Dei (2000), human agency must be acknowledged as individuals constantly resist and negotiate the process of marginalization in a myriad of ways and in a variety of situations as they go about their daily lives. It is at this individualistic level that we must understand the workings of gender and race as they impact each of our lives differently yet in combination have the overall effect of maintaining the historical power imbalances. Pointing to the work of other antiracist feminist writers in Canada, Dua (1999a) agrees that the functioning of race and gender must be understood in particular historical contexts – which is, in our case, that of a post-colonial settler society – arguing that race, capitalist relations, and patriarchy are all foundational to the creation and maintenance of the Canadian economy.

Numerous accounts suggest that prior to colonization most tribes were egalitarian: Aboriginal men and women performed gender specific tasks and although the tasks were different they were considered of equal value (D. Mihesuah, 2003; see also Stevenson, 1999; A. Smith, 2005). The economic contributions of women’s labour led to much power and authority in the family and community, while the existence in extended family groupings typically organized around female kinship ties ensured support and protection for the women. The destruction of the traditional way of life eliminated the economic importance of Aboriginal women, and although efforts to impose European patriarchal beliefs were typically resisted, they were not without effect as many Aboriginal men came to believe in the inferiority of women. Schools, churches, and eventually

legislation, all worked in concert to reinforce the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples and the domination of women, and therefore the oppression of Aboriginal women in particular (D. Mihesuah, 2003).

Centuries later, in their analysis of the contemporary situation in Canada, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) found that many Aboriginal women remain burdened by interlocking sources of oppression. As a result, Aboriginal women experience lower levels of education, employment, income, and health than other Canadian women, and suffer higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and poorer health than Aboriginal men (Jacobs & Williams, 2008). The NWAC argued that this situation is the result of the historical compounding of multiple barriers to economic viability as Aboriginal women in Canada continue to face discrimination on the basis of race, class, and gender (Jacobs & Williams, 2008). While such reports certainly confirm the fact that Aboriginal women face increased levels of discrimination, more so than others who share their gender or their race, what is missing from such analysis is an understanding of the complex ways in which these multiple sources of disempowerment act in concert to marginalize particular groups of people, such as Aboriginal women, and how through their own actions individuals react to, resist, or perhaps even reinforce, their own subjugation.

*Conflicted Loyalties: The Intersection of Gender Oppression and Racism*

Racialized women are fighting oppression on at least two fronts and, therefore, identifying the source of oppression (as if there was ever one clear source) or conversely, sites of solidarity, becomes increasingly complicated. In the confines of a patriarchal, racist society our loyalties are conflicted as we struggle for equality, our own men are

simultaneously our partners in the fight against racial oppression and our oppressors in the fight against patriarchy. For example, describing the situation of Black women specifically the following words from the Combahee River Collective have articulated this paradox:

Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. (2000, p. 274)

In such contexts, for those who exist in the nexus of race, gender, and economic oppression, with whom we express solidarity is never a simple question.

Within communities where racism is an ever present reality and the need for racial solidarity is therefore great, Lorde (2000) explained how a Black feminist vision is often “mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people” (p. 291). In the desire for unity, it is feared that any division among the peoples will weaken resolve in the fight against racial oppression. While the family had often been seen as a site of oppression in many feminist arguments, it also functions as a haven for many people of colour who experience daily the assaults of a racist society. As a result many refuse to acknowledge gendered oppression within their own communities. Lorde further explained how many ignore the knowledge that “sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well” (2000, p. 291). The subjugation of Black women within their own families is, therefore, hidden, supposedly in the service of a greater cause. Unfortunately, the resulting silence allows for the proliferation of abuse. In a society that has emasculated men of colour, systemic racism having engendered widespread feelings of powerlessness, problems with domestic

violence are exacerbated. Lorde argued that “violence against Black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured” (2000, p. 291). For those men who are themselves oppressed because of their race, some small measure of power is regained through the oppression of others.

Faced with either condoning the violence or demonizing one’s own culture, in such situations women of colour find themselves in what Razack (2000) called a “classic double bind” wherein the need to protest against such crimes against women and against the men (racialized men) who perpetrate them, “fit snugly into a racist agenda” which needs no further ammunition (p. 48). In her analysis of violence against women in communities of colour, Bannerji (1995) explained how internal division poses a threat to such communities, which can only be held together if silence is maintained about issues of internal power imbalance, gender oppression, and violence against women. Thus gender oppression is ignored (or denied) in the interests of racial solidarity.

In her description of the experiences of South Asian women, Dua (1992) offered another perspective arguing that gendered oppression has often been seen (albeit wrongly in her estimation) as the result of race. In this context, the oppression of women is understood as a result of the adherence to traditional cultural values among racialized peoples. The (mis)treatment of women in other cultures has been perceived (when it is convenient for us to notice) as a signifier of the lack of civilization among the ‘Others’. Indeed, Dua (1992) argued, underlying such notions is the belief that such groups are ‘pre-modern’ and they are perceived as having greater gender inequality than so called modern [westernized] societies. The source of gender oppression for such women is thereby located in their cultures. Therefore, according to such arguments, the

emancipation of racialized women is to be achieved through assimilation into more 'modern' cultures (conveniently overlooking the continued existence of gender inequality in such modern societies). These understandings have the rather convenient effect of blaming oppressed peoples for their own oppression and simultaneously exalting the cultures of modern societies as superior (see also Razack, 2000, for examination of the ways western society demonizes the mistreatment of women in "Other" cultures, while simultaneously accepting the everyday abuse of women in our own society). In addition, as Dua argues, such analyses fail to identify the *specific* ways in which gender oppression is created and maintained in families. South Asian feminist thought suggests that the institution of the family is "transformed in the context of a racist society," understood no longer as simply a site of gender oppression it is also, and just as importantly, a source of support and a refuge against racist attacks from the larger society (Dua, 1992, p. 7). Such arguments point to traditional cultures and the family as a source of strength in the fight against racism. Dua (1992) concluded by suggesting one cannot theoretically prioritize race or gender and that the identification of the cultural basis of oppressive gender relations obscures the historical specificity of the interactions of race, gender, and class in the lives of real women.

Just as we cannot assume that gender oppression is experienced in the same way by all women, we further cannot assume that the interaction of race and gender is experienced in the same way in the lives of all non-white women. As Razack (2000) pointed out, race, gender, class, and sexuality all combine in "site-specific ways to both produce and sustain the positions of various women" (p. 51). It is in these specific sites that I look for increased understanding of the process by which some are oppressed while



others are privileged (although it is never an either/or situation as there are hierarchies of power within all groups). The experience of being gendered can vary greatly depending on race, ethnicity, religion, social class, or sexual orientation, and alternatively the experience of racialization and the construction of racial identity can vary depending on gender. Human beings exist in the constant interplay of these constructs of identity. The result of which is, as Razack has argued, that we are “each constrained differently and unequally, by the same systems,” (2000, p. 52) and therefore the understanding of the complexity of our subjugation lies in the “micro tracing of the interlocking systems in which we are embedded” as a starting of analysis (2000, p. 51). It is this understanding that I brought to the analysis of the experiences of Aboriginal women.

#### *Understanding the Process of Subjugation*

Historically, Aboriginal women in Canada have been formally and systematically discriminated against on the basis of both race and gender. For example, although the right to vote was granted to ‘women’ in the early 1920’s in Canada as they were recognized as persons, it was not granted to Aboriginal peoples (men or women) until the 1960’s. In this case they were denied their rights as women in Canada because of their race. Conversely, until 1985 First Nations women were stripped of their rights to Indian Status if they married a non-native, although the same sanctions did not apply to First Nations men. Many First Nations women were thereby denied their rights as Aboriginal peoples because of their gender (see Lavell-Harvard & Corbiere-Lavell, 2006). While these particular examples provide evidence of the overt intersectionality of race and gender as expressed in legislative acts, which had devastating effects on the lives of Aboriginal women, the more covert forms of discrimination are perhaps more insidious in

nature, as they work in a way that is much harder to isolate and therefore much more difficult to eradicate.

Efforts on the part of colonial powers to subjugate Aboriginal peoples generally and Aboriginal women specifically, began soon after contact and continue to the present day. In comparison to the fundamentally oppressive and sexist nature of the European societies, Aboriginal women in pre-contact communities demanded a tremendous amount of power, respect, and personal autonomy. In the words of A. Smith,

Prior to colonization, Indian societies for the most part were not male dominated. Women served as spiritual, political, and military leaders, and many societies were matrilineal. Although there existed a division of labor between women and men, women's labor and men's labor were accorded similar status. As women and men lived in balance, native societies were consequently much less authoritarian than their European counterparts. (2005, p.18)

In her 2003 work on Indigenous American women, D. Mihesuah similarly claimed that prior to colonization, most Aboriginal groups were egalitarian and "women's and men's roles may have been different, but neither was less important than the other...none were inferior" (p. 42). Having carefully constructed patriarchal relations as not only natural, but in fact as divinely ordained (which the doctrines of a great many religions, including but certainly not limited to Christianity, provide ample evidence of) the mere presence of alternative social structures created a significant threat to the overall social order, thereby necessitating the subjugation and oppression of Aboriginal women. Dua (1999b), Stevenson (1999), A. Smith (2005), and Monture-Angus (1995) all described the myriad of ways in which the colonial imagination constructed the 'myth' of the Aboriginal woman in order to denigrate, disempower, and dehumanize her, thereby serving a racist and sexist colonial agenda. As Shohat and Stam (1994) argued, the real purpose behind the colonial persecution of Aboriginal women was not to encourage the Aboriginal

peoples to become more like the Europeans (especially since at the time the demise of Indigenous peoples and their ways of life was thought to be inevitable and preferable) but rather to “keep Europeans from becoming Indigenes” (quoted in A. Smith, 2005, p. 18). Dua (1999b) similarly argued that departures from the traditional patriarchal nuclear family model were seen as a danger to the social order and that fears of miscegenation were intimately mixed with fear of “degeneration” into so-called “primitive patterns of social and family practices” (p. 254). Clearly as A. Smith concluded, the persecution of Aboriginal women is to be understood as an integral aspect of the battle of white men to maintain control over white women (p. 21).

Dua (1999b) described, how through their missions, the early French colonizers actively worked to replace the functional gender, sexual, and familial relations in Aboriginal communities with patriarchal relationships based on monogamy, discipline, and dependency for women. While such attempts were generally resisted (as the dismayed accounts of missionaries attest), their effect still proved lasting as familial relationships that had served the Aboriginal people well since time immemorial were disrupted. Continuing, Dua (1999b) further described how the arrival of British colonizers brought a more destructive attack on Aboriginal societies and their ways of life. While they had initially been seen as important allies in trade and battle, following the War of 1812-1814, when their services were no longer needed, the Aboriginal peoples became a hindrance to the appropriation of land and the creation of a white settler nation (see Allen, 1992 for more detailed review of circumstances). Moving away from the focus (of the French) on replacing traditional Aboriginal familial relations with those deemed more seemly by Western standards, they began a ruthless attack on Aboriginal

families in general. The British after the war of 1812-14, and the Government of Canada after 1867, through a succession of legislations culminating in the Indian Act of 1876 and a variety of practices and policies thereafter, worked to destroy the ability of First Nations families and communities to function in any form (Allen, 1992; see also Milloy, 1999; Miller, 1996). Customary marriages were outlawed and interracial marriages denounced (a judgement which was still in effect until 1985 in Canada). Residential schools and child welfare policies forcibly separated children from their families thereby breaking critical ties and extinguishing important relationships. Many have argued that such policies were specifically used not to redefine gender and family relationships but rather to destroy them and in so doing breakdown the very foundation of Aboriginal communities (see Monture-Angus, 1995; Dua, 1999b; McIvor, 1999; Stevenson, 1999).

Indeed, arguing education was and still is very much connected to the political power of Aboriginal women, Almeida (1997) explained that through their deliberate alteration of gender roles, the aforementioned educational policies and practices were instrumental in the destruction of the power of Aboriginal women in traditional societies. The disruption of the traditional gender balance in Aboriginal communities has lead to the development of many social ills including widespread domestic violence, family dysfunction, and substance abuse (Almeida, 1997, see also Bowker, 1993; Reyhner & Eder, 1994) and, consequently, the overall weakening of our nations. The effects of such policies and practices are still being felt today as Aboriginal communities struggle to heal their families and repair their communities (Brant Castellano et al., 2008). It is in the context of historical and ongoing persecution of Aboriginal nations, communities, and

families that we must come to an understanding of the current racialized and gendered oppression experienced by Aboriginal women.

### *Theoretical Framework*

#### *Social Reproduction and Education*

Generations of Aboriginal people have believed in the liberating potential of education (Stonechild, 2006). Unfortunately, as time has shown, the education offered to Aboriginal peoples has been anything but empowering and, as is now apparent, was in fact deliberately designed to facilitate their subjugation and oppression. Despite the historical belief that schooling is the “means through which individual potential is actualized” as a result of individual effort and hard work (Dickeman, 1973, p. 8), for many racial minorities generally and Aboriginal peoples particularly most schools were not the panacea they were believed to be. Clearly, formal education is critical for the provision of the “skills and credentials” necessary for success in mainstream society. However it has simultaneously been “implicated in the processes that contribute to the failure and marginalization” of significant numbers of Aboriginal peoples (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 2).

What began as a fundamentally racist and paternalistic belief in the duty of the Church to convert so-called ‘heathen’ peoples to Christianity through education quickly became a government policy of eradicating Aboriginal culture entirely through schooling (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1987; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999). According to Schmalz (1990), during the period when the Aboriginals were forced into “relinquishing their millions of acres,” the government established reserves specifically to “convert the Indians from heathens to Christians and from hunters to farmers” and “schools were built

in an attempt to accelerate the cultural transition” with residential schools being established later to further “isolate them from parental influence” and facilitate the process of assimilation (p. 147). The underlying racist ideology driving such efforts is apparent in the following words:

A thorough training in one of these institutions cuts the cord which binds the Indian to a pagan life, and substitutes civilization in place of superstition, morality in place of vice, cleanliness in place of filth, industry in place of idleness, self-respect in place of servility, and elevated humanity in place of abject degradation. A long as the Indian wears the blanket, wears moccasins and eats roast dog he is worthless... (Topeka newspaper 1890, as quoted in Bordewich, 1997, p. 283)

Widely regarded as a means to “eliminate the Indian problem” schools became a “vehicle for cultural assimilation” (Dehyle, 1992, p. 33).

Colonial governments in both Canada and the United States “consciously” directed their educational efforts towards replacing what they perceived to be unseemly Aboriginal ways with “ways more acceptable to and characteristic of the dominant white middle class” (Wolcott, 1974, p. 412). In the residential schools children were “stripped of their personal possessions, identity, family and tribal associations; given numbers and herded into dormitories where the dehumanizing process of assimilation began” (Deiter, 1999, p. 81). Survivors of such educational institutions recollect the “severe methods of corporal punishment, coercion, and humiliation” that were employed in the effort to eliminate any ties to, or traces of tribal culture among the students (Deiter, 1999, pp. 81-82). The horrors of the residential schools, including widespread physical and sexual abuse, which are now widely considered to be, by definition, genocidal, are a matter of public record and need no further explication here (see Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999).

Under the guise of providing Aboriginal peoples with the skills and knowledge necessary to survive in the dominant society, as Cummins (1992) argued, government

policies of assimilation have used education for centuries now “as a weapon to annihilate” the Aboriginal cultures and languages (p. 15). Indeed, in 1904 a government memo clarified that it was in fact “never the policy of the department,” nor even the design of the schools, “to turn out Indian pupils to compete with the whites” (Deiter, 1999, p. 16). Apparently, despite popular misconception, equality and opportunity for Aboriginal peoples in Canadian society was ‘never’ the goal of the education program implemented for First Nations.

Dickeman (1973) described the process by which the schools inform the minority child that “he must abandon whatever differences he possesses, whatever ethnic identity that has characterized his home and family, if he hopes to succeed” in education and by extension in modern society at large. The dilemma for the student, according to Strouse (1987), becomes quite literally the choice “between the world of the family and the world of the school” (p. 112). Trueba explained that:

...at the heart of academic success, and regardless of the child’s ethnicity or historical background, an effective learning environment must be constructed in which the child, especially the minority child, is assisted through meaningful and culturally appropriate relationships in the internalization of the mainstream cultural values embedded in our school system. (1988, p. 282)

This then, is the very essence of the problem. The Aboriginal student must internalize mainstream, predominantly white middle class, cultural values in order to become educated. Since the two cultures are diametrically opposed in so many fundamental ways, the acceptance of the non-aboriginal culture is believed to necessitate a repudiation of Aboriginal culture. In his study of education in an Innu community, Ryan (1998) found an increasing realization among the Aboriginal people, that not only did the school

system not provide the promised opportunity for vertical mobility; it had altered student attitudes toward their own cultural identity in extremely negative ways.

Moreover, in addition to the clear policy of assimilation for Aboriginal students specifically, it has been argued that the entire mainstream school system itself functions fundamentally to reproduce the existing social order “largely through its legitimation of the world view of the dominant class” (Bourdieu, as quoted in Burtonwood, 1986, p. 29). In their oft-cited work, Bowles and Gintis (1976) declared that indeed the education system functioned to reproduce and legitimate the existing unequal social order, thereby maintaining the status quo, by selecting and socializing students into appropriate roles (for similar analysis of the connection between schools and the maintenance, or reproduction of social order see Warner, Havinghurst, & Loeb, 1944; Floud & Halsey, 1959; Rist, 1970; Dickeman, 1973; Carnoy, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Nasaw, 1979; Anyon, 1981a, 1981b; Giroux, 1981a, 1981b; Wexler, Whitson, & Moskowitz, 1981). Thus, the Aboriginal student must bear “the burden of adaptation” to a social order that perpetuates the oppression and subjugation of his or her own people and, therefore, “finds it impossible to accept the social order” yet has historically had little alternative (T. King, as quoted in Spindler, 1974, p. 75).

Fortunately, as Haig-Brown (1988) found, Aboriginal peoples have successfully and “consistently resisted the onslaught against themselves and their culture” (1988, p. 131). Robinson and Quinney (1985) had argued the lack of academic achievement signified the Aboriginal student’s deliberate refusal “to be brainwashed by the teachings” of a system that was not only foreign, and in direct conflict with their own culture (p. 23), but was actually designed and mandated by



both church and state, to extinguish the Aboriginal culture entirely. In this context, academic failure takes on a larger significance, becoming a symbol of defiance, and cultural survival. According to Armitage (1995) and Deiter (1999), when Aboriginal parents began to doubt the value of the education being provided and refused to hand their children over to the schools, the government threatened resistant families with starvation by withholding necessities such as food, clothing, and supplies. Subsequently, under the Indian Act of Canada in 1894 the governor general was given the authority to commit Aboriginal children to educational institutions regardless of parental cooperation. When resistance continued the Act was strengthened in 1920, declaring all Indian children who did not attend school as delinquent and subjecting their parents to criminal penalties including imprisonment for up to six months (Armitage, 1995; Deiter, 1999; see also D. Adams, 1995).

Aboriginal people continued to resist by hiding their children in the bush. Entire villages would refuse to hand over the children, whereupon police detachments were deployed to seize them unexpectedly (D. Adams, 1995). The strength of the Aboriginal resistance is revealed by the great lengths that church and state have gone to in an effort to counteract it, culminating in the removal of the children from all influence of their families, communities, and cultures and incarcerating them in residential schools (Armitage, 1995; Miller, 1996; Milloy; 1999). Students still resisted the process however, often running away, despite the threat of physical punishment for such acts (H. Adams, 1988). When residential school education was completed, officials often lamented how even the

most “promising of pupils are found to have retrograded and to have become leaders in the pagan life of their reserves” (Barman et al., 1986. p. 7) thus underlining the enduring strength of Aboriginal resistance to the educational process.

Indeed, the current resurgence of Aboriginal traditions, practices, and ceremonies, is a clear indication of how successful this resistance has been. In the words of Manuel “in our struggle for survival, the Indian peoples of North America are entitled to declare a victory. We have survived” (quoted in Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 132). Throughout the centuries long battle against colonialism and attempted extermination, it has been argued that Aboriginal peoples have developed and maintained what Dunbar Ortiz termed “cultures of struggle and resistance” (1992, p. 10). As an integral aspect of such cultures of resistance, the rejection of a system of education that not only devalues traditional cultures, destroys tribal communities, and threatens our very identity as Aboriginal people, while simultaneously functioning to maintain the existing inequitable social order, is not only to be expected (Wax, 1967; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1989; Deyhle, 1989), but is also absolutely vital to the collective survival of Aboriginal nations.

### *Resistance Theories*

Unlike deterministic cultural reproduction theories that do not acknowledge the role of human agency in the process of reproducing the existing social order and maintaining the status quo, resistance theories seek to understand how “individuals negotiate and struggle with structures” in the process of social reproduction (Solorzano &

Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 315). Recognizing the reality that “structural constraints inhibit mobility” for certain groups and that “school practices contribute to inequality” resistance theorists focus on how the negative reactions of students to such constraints ultimately contribute to their own subordinate position in the social hierarchy (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villeneuve, 1994, p. 94). Willis (1977), Macleod (1987), and Foley (1990) all illustrated the ways in which an understanding and critique of oppressive social conditions leads to a rejection of education. Having realized that hard work and individual effort typically do not translate into advancement for members of traditionally oppressed groups, many disengage from schooling as they no longer see any reason to participate in an institution that “cannot deliver on its promise of upward mobility” for all students (Mehan et al., 1994, p. 97).

Subsequently, introducing an understanding of how race factors into the resistant behaviours of students, Ogbu (1987a, 1987b, and 1991) argued that non-immigrant minority groups have over time adapted to racist educational practices by disengaging from schooling as a whole. According to Ogbu’s theories (1987a, 1987b, and 1991), after generations of abuse and oppression at the hands of the dominant society, so-called involuntary minority groups such as African Americans and Indigenous peoples, who did not choose, but rather were forced into their subordinate role in society, predictably do not aspire to join the dominant culture. Nor do they believe in the dominant ideology, i.e., specifically that “individual agency is the primary determinant of social and economic mobility and success” (Carter, 2008, p. 466). Indeed, their lives and those of previous generation have proven the fallacy of such beliefs. Many have come to recognize that “their demeaning experiences, their lack of opportunities for advancement, and their

generally unsatisfactory life situation were and are due to [the] dominant group's exploitation" and not the result of their own inferiority, or lack of effort, as prevailing meritocratic ideologies suggest (Ogbu, 1987, p. 262).

As a result of such critical awareness, according to Ogbu's theory (1987a), non-immigrant/involuntary minority groups disengage from schooling because they perceive quite accurately that the education system is integral to the process of legitimating and reproducing the dominant culture and social structure. Ironically, having perceived school practices as "simultaneously attempting to privilege white, middle-class culture, values and history and degrade those of their own community" the rejection of education and the resulting lack of credentials and earning power, ensures that such minority students will remain subordinate in society ultimately reinscribing existing inequalities (Cammarota, 2004, p. 56).

Furthermore, while Ogbu and Simons argued that it is a belief held by minority students that the "school curriculum is something designed to displace their minority identity" and is, therefore, to be resisted (1998, p. 178), for the Aboriginal student it is, however, not only a belief, but an unquestionable fact. Since its inception, as argued above, the education system was purposefully designed and mandated to replace and extinguish the Aboriginal culture and identity. Resistance has been therefore a positive adaptation for survival. Conversely, from this perspective, as academic achievement was thought to require an adoption of mainstream attitudes, values, and behaviours, success for Aboriginal students has often been seen as a sign of assimilation into the mainstream culture and a betrayal of one's people.

*Transformational Resistance*

According to Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) most resistance research has focused on oppositional student behaviours as a form of personally empowering although ultimately self-defeating resistance that helps to “recreate the oppressive conditions from which it originated” and consequently fails to recognize, much less acknowledge, the existence of other, albeit more subtle forms of resistance that might actually lead to social change (p. 310). There are however examples of the re-conceptualization of resistance to include those who use academic achievement as a means of countering negative portrayals, exceeding society’s limited expectations, and defying the process of their own subordination. Whether it was described as accommodation without assimilation (Gibson, 1988), accommodation without assimilation (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994) conformist resistance (Fordham, 1996), resistance within accommodation (Gillborn, 1997), positive resistance (Valenzuela, 1999), or resilient resistance (Yosso, 2002) the act of persisting and succeeding in education can be seen as a strategic response to racism and a means of resisting disempowerment, marginalization, and subordination within society (see also Flores-Gonzalez, 1999). In fact, as Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) contend, according to Giroux’s (1983) conception of resistance as requiring both a critique of social oppression and a motivating interest in social justice, oppositional behaviours and anti-achievement attitudes are merely self-defeating social critique and not full-fledged resistance. Conversely, those who work towards social justice, yet offer no critique of the systems of oppression similarly fall short (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, those who employ whatever strategies necessary to acquire educational credentials and skills, not simply for their own individual empowerment, but

instead for the liberation of their communities and their peoples, are engaged in what has been called “transformational resistance” (Brayboy, 2005). Such resistance is “political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320) and that perhaps education is a means to this end.

Indeed, in the contemporary war for survival educational credentials and skills have become weapons, according to Brayboy (2005), as Aboriginal people are learning they must “fight fire with fire” if they want to improve the situation of their people (p. 194). Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) described covert forms of transformational resistance as “internal resistance” wherein the student is consciously engaged in both a critique of oppression and a struggle for social justice, yet on the surface the appearance of conformity to the dominant cultural norms is maintained. Moreover, as compared to the openly visible “conspicuous” external transformational resistance that “overtly operates outside the traditional system” in order to effect social change (such as participation in walkouts and demonstrations), internal transformational resistance is “subtle or even silent” and therefore might easily go unnoticed. Because internal resistance is defined by the appearance of conformity to societal expectations, and is therefore visibly indistinguishable from actual conformity (assimilation), what differentiates internal resistance is the awareness and motivation of the student. Specifically, students must demonstrate an awareness and critique of social oppression and be motivated by a desire to change the system and not only by a desire for personal success and social advancement (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Therefore, understanding the awareness and motivation of the Aboriginal women in this study will

be crucial to the conceptualization of academic achievement as a form of internal transformational resistance.

For the purposes of analysis, the definition of social justice that I am using refers to social-democratic conceptions. Rather than relying upon liberal notions of fairness, individual freedom, and the removal of barriers, or market notions of free competition, social-democratic understandings of social justice focus on social relationships and the importance of meeting the needs of people within communities (see Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

### *Conclusion*

The conceptual framework brought to the study of any phenomenon is critical. Pre-existing assumptions, concepts, and theories provide a framework within which we seek to understand the nature of that which we have set out to study. Within the context of an anti-racist feminist framework, Mohanty (1988) had criticized the use of concepts such as reproduction, the sexual division of labour, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, etc., “without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts” and the underlying assumptions about the “universal applicability” of such concepts (p. 75). Having claimed that our understanding of the workings of oppression is increased by looking to the historical specificities of actual women’s lives, rather than by searching for universals in the subordination of women in society generally, Mohanty was careful to explain that she was not arguing against generalization per se, but rather she was arguing for “careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities” (2000, p. 349). Based on this understanding, for the purposes of my study of Aboriginal women in the academy, many of whom describe experiences of both racism and sexism as they

struggle to obtain educational credentials, analysis must begin with a consideration of the historically specific effects of multiple sources of disempowerment in the realities of everyday life for such women. By maintaining a focus on the specific, the concepts of the sexual division of labour, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, etc., become extremely useful in my analysis of how Aboriginal women are differentially positioned with regard to accessing the benefits of our society generally and post-secondary education specifically. I must, therefore, look at how the daily lives of Aboriginal women, their responsibilities to their families, their communities, and indeed to their nations, become entangled with their academic pursuits and their struggles to survive in what has often been described as the ‘hostile environment’ of mainstream educational institutions. Indeed, Razack points out,

That women and minorities are bodies that do not belong in the hallowed halls of academe is underlined repeatedly through racial and sexual harassment in universities and the powerful backlash against the hiring and promotion of Aboriginal and minority women. (2000, p. 47)

Yet, against all odds, despite racism, sexism, and the enduring legacy of what can only be understood as genocidal practices in the residential school system, contemporary Aboriginal women are succeeding in their academic pursuits. Academic achievement can be interpreted as a form of resistance for Aboriginal women: resisting the dominant image of Aboriginal women as “worthless” and inferior, resisting disempowerment, subjugation, and marginalization in society and, perhaps most importantly, resisting the paralysis that often accompanies an awareness of the process of one’s own subordination in society. It is, then, in their everyday experiences and relationships that I not only hope to find insight into the workings of marginalization and oppression, but also insight into the possibilities for change. The liberating potential of coming to an understanding of the



complexity of interlocking systems of oppression in a racist and sexist society is eloquently articulated in Razack's words:

When the tracing of multiple hegemonic systems leaves us with a heavy sense of futility, understanding that there is accommodation and opposition perhaps enables us to see a ray of hope. For it is in working out (but not becoming resigned to) the multiple roles we have that we can better calculate when a specific political response is likely to be effective or not. Questions of strategy are better answered when we begin to unpack multiple systems. (2000, p. 52)

Through an exploration of many facets of the lives of these specific Aboriginal women, who are struggling in academic institutions that were not designed to encourage the success of minorities or women (as Razack pointed out), we can better understand the factors that encourage, and those that discourage, success in such contexts.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

Although one could not hope to cover the full complexity of the research in the scope of this review, the following overview of research trends in the field of Aboriginal education provides a substantial context for this study. In their 2003 work, Schissel and Wotherspoon found two predominant themes in the literature on Aboriginal education. Traditionally much research focused on the persistence of educational disparity between the Aboriginal and non-aboriginal populations, producing a large body of research exploring and documenting low rates of educational attainment and high drop-out rates. As the negative impacts of forced assimilation and integration through education could no longer be ignored, and Aboriginal communities demanded educational equity and a voice in the education of their own children (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972), a second theme subsequently emerged focusing on the description of the resulting programs and initiatives implemented in an effort to increase rates of academic success for Aboriginal students. Studies of the factors influencing Aboriginal student success were limited, at least in comparison to the historical plethora of research on Aboriginal failure. However, within these studies, the factors identified as influencing Aboriginal student success include: personal factors, academic preparation, family support, socio-economic status, home environment, culture, Native language fluency, financial aid, social support networks, faculty relations, campus environment, non-linear approaches to schooling, and gender differences. Each is discussed in turn.

*Research on Aboriginal Educational Failure*

While there are unquestionably significant challenges facing students from ethnic minority groups in general as they struggle to obtain academic qualifications, Aboriginal peoples, in particular, have faced major barriers to achievement at the post-secondary level (Astin, Tsui, & Aralos, 1996; Benjamin et al., 1993; Malatest, 2004; Pavel, Swisher, & Ward, 1994; Richards, 2006; White, 2009). Apparently, “despite evidence of academic ability” Aboriginal peoples are less likely to graduate from post-secondary programs or attend graduate school and, not surprisingly therefore, consistently attain lower levels of education overall even in comparison to other ethnic minority populations (A. Jackson et al., 2003, p. 548). The limited level of academic achievement found among Aboriginal populations, as compared to the larger non-aboriginal population, has been well established and there can be little doubt that this is cause for great concern (Ambler, 2006; Lin, LaCounte, & Eder, 1998; Minthorn-Biggs, 2005; Malatest, 2004; Preston, 2008; Reyhner, 1992; Richards, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2008).

Although no longer acceptable, colonial attitudes and the blatant racist constructions of Aboriginal people as inferior and/or incompetent are reflected in a long history of research focusing on the characteristics of those Aboriginal students who fail, and their families, communities, languages, or cultures as the source of persistent academic failure (Reyhner, 1992). Whether they were called disadvantage theory, cultural deprivation theory, or cultural deficit theory, suggestions that Aboriginal peoples were to blame for their own failure were found to be largely “undemonstrated” and ultimately dismissed (Valentine, 1971, p. 138). Subsequently, cultural discontinuity theories argued that the differences between the culture of the school and the home culture of the student,

particularly in the area of communication, leads to conflict and misunderstanding and eventual failure and/or drop-out (Frideres, 1987; Jacob & Jordan, 1987; Huffman, 1995; Kwagley & Bernhardt, 1999; Ledlow, 1992; Miller & Thomas, 1972; Philips, 1983; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1989; Wilson, 1992). Unfortunately, as the National Indian Brotherhood explained as a result of such theories, “it has been the Indian student who was asked to integrate; to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life” in order to suit the structures of the non-Aboriginal educational institutions (1973, p. 25). Or worse yet, based on assumptions of the Aboriginal students’ “inability” to “understand” or “practice” the behaviours necessary for school success (Valentine, 1971, p. 141), an alternative solution has been lowered expectations and the watering down of curriculum for such students.

Furthermore, as Saunders and Hill (2007) have argued, even the body of seemingly positive literature which focuses on the Native learning style (Backes, 1993; John, 1972; Johnny, 2002; Pewewardy, 2002; Plank, 1994; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989) can reinforce the propensity for victim blaming as the student and his or her culturally defined learning style become responsible for educational failure, once again simultaneously disguising systemic inequity. Unfortunately, the uncritical identification of characteristics common to Aboriginal students who have failed has clearly not led to the kind of substantive changes in education that are necessary if we are to close the gap between Aboriginal students and the rest of the Canadian population.

As Aboriginal academics such as Battiste (1995, 2002), Hampton (1995), Graveline (1998), Kirkness and Bernhardt (1991), and Cajete (1994) offered alternative perspectives, the research paradigm began to shift. Suggestions that it was not the

Aboriginal students that were the failures, but the education systems that had consistently failed the students, gained increased acceptance. Hampton's (1995) foundational work explains how education for Aboriginal peoples has historically meant the education of Aboriginal students by non-aboriginal peoples, in non-aboriginal schools, with non-aboriginal methods, instilling non-aboriginal values, and most importantly that such an education has destroyed the hope and damaged the self-esteem of generations of Aboriginal peoples. Battiste (1998) challenges Eurocentric assumptions, arguing that education systems and curricula are tools of colonial power, designed to eliminate Aboriginal knowledges, languages, and cultures. Battiste (1998) discusses the damage done by such educational efforts and the resulting need to decolonize and transform education by embracing Aboriginal knowledge and consciousness. These works marked a turning point as researchers began to look beyond the Aboriginal student for explanations of failure.

Bowker (1992) described how Aboriginal students at-risk share many characteristics in common with non-aboriginal drop-outs including: distinct minority ethnicity, one-parent homes, low parental education, low sibling education, repeated school failure, family dysfunction and abuse in the home, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, and discrimination or racism. In a study of the connection between socio-economic status and the drop-out of status Indians, Hull (1990) found the educational attainment of First Nations students was sensitive to parental SES, more so than was found for non-aboriginal students. In a study of non-aboriginal populations, Radwanski (1987) had suggested the connection between low SES and low educational attainment was an effect of lowered expectations and the streaming of students with low SES into

basic levels while students with higher SES were supported to achieve in advanced levels and enter post-secondary. Wilson (1992) confirmed the connection between SES, teacher expectations, and low Aboriginal achievement, having found Aboriginal students were being overwhelmingly streamed into basic level courses.

In the hopes of improving success rates, many studies have opened new doors, focusing on the complex environment in which Aboriginal students exist in order to identify external barriers to achievement including: lingering effects of residential schooling, learning disabilities, and absenteeism (Bougie, 2009); family responsibilities, and finances (A. Jackson & Smith, 2001); historic, social, financial, and cultural conflict, and isolation (Malatest, 2004); finances, and issues associated with being first generation to attend post-secondary (Malatest and Associates & Stonechild, 2008); poor academic preparation and finances (Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation, 2005); poor academic preparation, finances, childcare, housing, and communication issues (Reyes, 2000); racism, finances, language issues, and alcohol problems (Reyhner & Dodd, 1995); and racism (Steward, Giminez & Jackson, 1995). Under the broad category of financial barriers, it is important to note that Malatest (2004), Malatest and Associates & Stonechild (2008), and the Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation (2005) also specifically identified the increased costs of living for ‘non-traditional students’ (i.e. those students who return to school later in life with dependent children) as a significant and often unrecognized barrier to the pursuit of higher education.

#### *Research on Aboriginal Specific Programs*

As mentioned previously the second predominant theme in Aboriginal education literature, focused on the description of a wide variety of relatively new programs and

initiatives that have been implemented in an effort to increase rates of Aboriginal student access and success. As traditional Indigenous cultures have been shown to be critical for educational attainment and not a barrier to success (Deyhle, 1989; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000), education for Aboriginal peoples in Canada has evolved substantively over the last few decades moving away from policies of assimilation towards the establishment of programs and institutions designed to foster the academic success of Aboriginal students by supporting the maintenance of healthy cultural identities (see Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997). Such programs are a far cry from the not so distant past where education was used as a tool for the eradication of Aboriginal cultures, lifestyles, and ultimately Aboriginal peoples. The overwhelming condemnation of the practices employed by residential schools and an awareness of the resulting physical, psychological, and spiritual damage has contributed to the recognition of the need for Aboriginal people to take control of the education of their own children. Although the process is not without challenges, the empowerment of the Aboriginal community has led to interesting and significant advances in education.

The importance of Aboriginal culture as a central component of successful programs is articulated in the following examples of programs designed to be reflective of, and responsive to, local Aboriginal communities. Through their critical examination of a multitude of post-secondary programs created specifically to meet the needs of Aboriginal students, Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen (2000) identify three main approaches to design based on their relationship to mainstream educational institutions: 1) add-on, 2) partnership, or 3) Aboriginal controlled. With the add-on approach

Aboriginal programs or courses are offered within a majority culture educational setting, thus meeting demands for Aboriginal inclusion without fundamentally altering the system. Although this method is “better than nothing” and it is the easiest to implement, as it requires the least amount of effort and resources, it is also the least effective in increasing Aboriginal student success rates (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000, p. 171). Further, H. Harris (2002) articulates the difficulty of housing Native studies programs and courses in non-native institutions claiming there is a fundamental contradiction involved in trying to use experiential, holistic Aboriginal learning techniques in mainstream institutions that only recognize the legitimacy of (non-aboriginal) conventional teaching methods.

According to Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen (2000) the partnership approach is based on the principles of equality, mutual-aid, and cooperation between the Aboriginal community and the non-aboriginal educational institution. The foundation of this approach is a belief in the benefits of “grassroots community development: helping people to help themselves by asking what they need, listening and offering the tools to meet these needs” (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000, p. 171). This approach requires a willingness in the community to work with the mainstream institution as well as the commitment of the institution to relinquish control and support genuine collaboration in the process of development and implementation. Partnerships offer distinct advantages as they allow the Aboriginal community to develop a curriculum and program structure that meets their own needs, while still benefiting from the experience, resources, and accreditation of the larger mainstream institution. The nature and extent of the partnership varies based on the needs of the community. The partnership may exist throughout the



life of the program, or it may be strategically employed as a means of community capacity building deliberately setting out to extinguish the partnership aspect as the community host incrementally assumes control (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000).

Komppf and Hodson (2000) describe the process of developing an Aboriginal Adult Education Degree program housed in Brock University based on the fundamental principle of partnership between the institution and the local Aboriginal community. The partners believed that even a mainstream university based program can be made to address Aboriginal cultures, needs, and goals so long as the Aboriginal communities are included in all aspects of program conception, design, and delivery. In order to build community capacity, a model was developed wherein the university had the majority of control at the outset of the program with autonomy being transferred incrementally until the Aboriginal partners were ready to assume control and operate as a community based program. Similarly, B. Harris (2006) describes the benefits of an off-campus community based and community controlled First Nations Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of British Columbia. In fact, B. Harris (2006) argues, the provision of culturally appropriate education, through the inclusion of the wisdom of the Elders and a respect for Aboriginal epistemology and ways of being, is critical for the success of Aboriginal students thereby meeting community needs, developing capacity, and potentially transforming the larger academic institution as well.

While there are a number of institutions that have proven their commitment to Aboriginal control of Aboriginal programs as they empower the Aboriginal community in decision-making processes, such programs are always to some extent governed by the policies and regulations of the larger institution and are therefore limited. Complete self-

determination in education is nonetheless ultimately the goal of most Aboriginal communities and the third and final approach necessitates the creation of First Nations controlled programs (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). Ranging from fully fledged college type programs such as those offered by the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, through smaller locally focused affiliates of larger mainstream institutions offering preparatory programs in Aboriginal communities, to community learning centers delivering a variety of accredited and non-accredited programs, these programs are deliberately designed to operate separately from the mainstream. Despite notable successes achieved, a lack of consistent long-term funding has been a major barrier for Aboriginal controlled programs (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; see also Bell, Anderson, Forton, Ottman, Rose, Simard, and Spencer, 2004). While complete Aboriginal autonomy is the goal for such institutions, due to the reliance upon government funding and, therefore, a necessary adherence to government stipulations, control is often only partial (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen). Indicating their support of the principle of local Aboriginal control of Aboriginal schools, Paquette and Fallon (2010) describe the continued difficulties faced by such schools as they struggle, often in isolation with limited resources and insufficient funding.

Goulet and McLeod (2002) describe an Aboriginal teacher education program housed in the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, wherein students experience what is termed “culturally authentic education”. Using a holistic model, through interaction with the elders and the land in a cultural camp setting, students share and learn from each other. Aboriginal culture provides the foundation for learning not only as content in the teachings of the elders, but also through the pace and context of the

learning out on the land which is in keeping with an Aboriginal worldview. Instead of finding discontinuity between the Aboriginal culture of the home and the mainstream culture of the school, the reconnection to the past through the stories of the elders provides these students with an affirmation of cultural continuity. Swanson (2003) provides an example of the smaller community operated programs describing the Literacy and Basic Skills Program for Adult Learners operated by the Moose Cree Education Authority. Claiming that motivation is critical for achieving success, Swanson (2003) argues further that cultural awareness, culturally sensitive teaching processes, a sense of community, and a cooperative relationship between teacher and learner were the key factors for motivating Aboriginal students in this program.

Using a case study approach, Bell et al. (2004) examined ten Aboriginal community schools to identify common elements of their success. All of the schools displayed highly effective and consistent leadership and governance structures, they possessed high expectations for their students and a strong focus on achievement and long term success, secure and welcoming environments were created for students and their families, Aboriginal culture was respected and effectively integrated to make learning relevant, staff were provided quality opportunities for professional development, and all schools provided a wide range of programs and supports for student learning. These cases provided evidence of the importance of Aboriginal pedagogy. Despite numerous barriers facing both the schools and the students, the commitment to provide culturally based learning in a supportive environment that was responsive to local needs and circumstances created student success.

The examination of numerous programs, whether add-on, partnerships or Aboriginal controlled, on-campus or community based, leads to the conclusion that the integration of Aboriginal culture into such programs is critical for the success of Aboriginal students in academia (Agbo, 2001; Antone, 2003; Benham, 2002; Cahill & Collard, 2003; Curwen Doige, 2001, 2003; Harris, B., 2006; Jones, 2003; Lee, 2007a; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Swanson, 2003). There is also much agreement that the simple inclusion of Aboriginal content and knowledge is not enough to transform the education system and increase rates of Aboriginal student success. Curwen Doige (2001) argued that appropriate curriculum and teachers informed in multicultural education are not sufficient, and in order to improve the success of Aboriginal students, “Aboriginal people must be valued as an integral, important part of their own education” (p. 127). As Hampton (1995) and Battiste (2000) have argued both the content and the process of education must reflect Aboriginal traditions and the holistic Aboriginal worldview and they must be valued at least as much as, if not more than, mainstream culture, knowledge and pedagogy in the classroom. Indeed, the Aboriginal people themselves must be valued (Curwen Doige, 2001). For example, although their work refers to the Aboriginal people of Australia, Cahill and Collard (2003) claimed that changing the culture of the schools to reflect the culture of the (Aboriginal) students and creating an educational environment where Aboriginal dialects are valued, while simultaneously explicitly teaching the standard [mainstream] dialect, significantly contributed to Aboriginal student success. However, given years of adherence to mainstream pedagogy and curriculum the process of integrating Aboriginal ways into the classrooms and programs is not an easy one. In fact, several authors identify the need for

extensive training to insure that teachers have the requisite knowledge and skills to be able to work effectively with Aboriginal curriculum and pedagogical methods (Agbo, 2001; Cahill & Collard, 2003; Curwen Doige, 2001).

### *Factors Influencing Aboriginal Educational Success*

Improving rates of Aboriginal educational success is a multifaceted and exceedingly complex issue. There is no one single critical factor that determines whether an Aboriginal student succeeds in his or her educational endeavours, or conversely why another fails in the same situation. A number of researchers have noted, relative to the body of research on Aboriginal student failure there is a comparative lack of work focusing on academically successful Aboriginal students (Benjamin et al., 1993; Reyhner, 2001; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995; Rindone, 1988) and the majority of the studies that do exist typically pertain to American Indians. In fact, according to Bougie's (2009) analysis, there is very little research addressing either the issue of school achievement or school drop-out specifically related to Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Furthermore, a review of the literature indicates that even within this limited body of research there exists significant disagreement among researchers concerning the factors that influence educational attainment among Aboriginal peoples. Although the studies include a wide range of Tribes, nations, or bands, covering disparate geographic regions across the continent, analysis reveals a number of themes in the research. The following sections examine a variety of factors identified in the research as influencing the academic success of Aboriginal students in higher education including personal characteristics, academic preparation, family support, socioeconomic status, home environment, culture, Native

language fluency, financial aid, social support networks, support of faculty, campus environment, a non-linear approach, and gender.

### *Personal Factors*

A number of researchers have identified internal characteristics as being significantly related to academic success for Aboriginal students. In their study of the 125 college students from the Navajo nation, Falk and Aitken (1984) found that personal motivation, the ability to persist through periods of challenge, was positively related to the retention of students in college. Rather than pursuing individualistic goals, according to Malatest and Associates and Stonechild (2008), many Aboriginal students are personally motivated by a desire to improve the lives of their families and to give back to their communities. Seeing themselves as potential role models for their children, siblings, or other members of the community was also reported as a motivating factor.

Under the larger category of self-beliefs, in their study of 83 American Indian undergraduates, Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius (2001) found that higher self-esteem and greater self-efficacy positively correlated with academic success. Students who had more positive perceptions of their self-worth (self esteem) were more likely to persist in college. Also, students who believed in their own ability to complete necessary tasks (self-efficacy) had fewer self-doubts about completing their degree and were also more likely to graduate. In their study of 15 successful Aboriginal college students, A. Jackson et al. (2003) found that those who developed independence and assertiveness, either prior to or during the initial terms of college, reported feeling more comfortable asking for help and speaking in social situations and were therefore overall more likely to persist academically. Although it is not post-secondary specific, in a study of over 500 Navajo

high school students, McInerney and Gayton Swisher (1995) found that motivation, academic achievement, and retention were positively impacted by the students' sense of self generally, and their sense of competence (confidence in their abilities academically), sense of purpose (connection of academics to future success), and task motivation (striving for excellence) specifically. Furthermore, it was also noted that group leadership (students who try to be leaders in a group) and social concern (students who care about helping others) were also positively related to academic achievement. Contrary to the researcher's expectations, the conflict between the school's values of competitiveness, individuality, and extrinsic rewards and the Navajo youth's values of non-competitiveness, affiliation, and cooperation did not have a negative relation to school performance.

Referring to Ogbu's concept of the alternation mode of classroom learning, McInerney and Gayton Swisher (1995), explain that the successful students have learned to function in two cultures, transitioning between the home and the school, adopting certain behaviours strategically without perceiving it as a sign of assimilation. Further, McInerney and Gayton Swisher (1995) continue, the Navajo students who failed academically were those who felt the need to maintain values that are in opposition to the school ethos in order to preserve and protect an identity which is threatened by such cultural transitions. In other words, so long as the Aboriginal student felt secure in his or her own cultural foundation, they were able to strategically adopt mainstream behaviours in the classroom context in order to achieve academic success, without having to sacrifice attachment to their own cultural beliefs. In this case a stronger attachment to traditional culture may lead to greater academic success.

### *Academic Preparation*

It may seem an obvious assumption that those students who are better prepared academically will be more likely to succeed in school and those who are less strong academically will struggle and eventually drop-out: however there is considerable disagreement in the research as to whether this pattern holds true for Aboriginal populations. In a study of 86 students who made the transition from Tribal College to larger universities, Lee (2007b) determined that Aboriginal student persistence was dependent upon academic readiness, in addition to financial security and personal, cultural, and social supports. As the result of an extensive literature review combined with stakeholder interviews (including educators, advisors, and those in government positions), Malatest (2004) concluded that poor academic preparation at the elementary and secondary levels leads to weak academic skills, which ultimately contributes to high rates of post-secondary drop-out for Aboriginal students. This was consistent with the much earlier work of Falk and Aitken (1984) who found that both the students themselves and the educators felt that Aboriginal students were not sufficiently prepared in several areas including, study skills, math skills, budgeting skills, and career information and goals. Thus they recommend the provision of courses or workshops either prior to college or during the initial terms. Similarly, the Aboriginal students in Reyes (2000) study reported that developmental courses teaching basic academic skills were very much needed.

Conversely, in a study of the factors affecting the retention of Aboriginal students, Reyhner and Dodd (1995) found that few of the reported barriers to achievement were academic. Indeed, according to the work of Benjamin et al (1993),



unlike the 'white' students in the study, for the Aboriginal population, previous academic performance was not found to be predictive of success at the post-secondary level. The Aboriginal students who obtained good grades in high school graduated at the top of their class and did well on entrance exams were just as likely to struggle with college academics as those who had done poorly in these areas. Further, those who had done less well in the aforementioned areas were just as likely to succeed as those with strong academic scores. These findings seem to indicate that current notions of persistence and failure, which predict that academically stronger students will succeed while weaker students fail, appear to have little validity in the Aboriginal context (Benjamin et al., 1993). Huffman (1986) and J. Davis (1992) similarly found in their respective studies that grade point averages were not directly related to college achievement for Aboriginal students. Furthermore, the research of Cole and Denzine (2002) found no significant difference between the academic engagement of Aboriginal and non-aboriginal college students and both groups reported high levels of satisfaction with their college experience. However, as Cole and Denzine themselves point out, this may simply indicate that those who were struggling and were less satisfied had already withdrawn, or that this particular institution was doing a particularly good job of supporting Aboriginal students. As there is no clear agreement on the relationship between academic preparation, or lack thereof, and the rates of Aboriginal student success, a myriad of other factors that can potentially influence academic achievement must be taken into account.

#### *Family Support*

Whether it is a study of post-secondary students from the Navajo Nation (Falk & Aitken, 1984; A. Jackson & Smith, 2001; Rindone, 1988; Willeto, 1999), the Crow,

Northern Cheyenne, and Blackfeet Nations (J. Davis, 1992), Alaskan Natives (Reyes, 2000) a sampling of students from numerous nations across the U.S. (A. Jackson et al., 2003; Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries & Baysden, 2000; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995), or Aboriginal women specifically (Bowker, 1992), all of these studies indicate the active support and encouragement of family members is consistently found to be a significant factor in the academic success of Aboriginal students. Conversely, Coladarci (1983) had found the lack of support from family to be a salient factor in the decision to drop-out. While A. Jackson and Smith (2001) found support from the father to be especially influential on Aboriginal student success rates, Willetto (1999) and Bowker (1992) specify the importance of the role of the matriarchal influence. Claiming there is no one single characteristic that identifies Aboriginal women who are more likely to stay in school, Bowker (1992, 1993) did, however, indicate that the success of these women in higher education is connected to the presence during their adolescent years of a caring adult to act as support, advocate, and/or role model. In most cases the women referred to a mother, grandmother, or aunt, but the caring adult could be the father, another relative, or even a teacher. J. Davis (1992) specifically articulates the importance of family involvement in the school system explaining that having even one member of the extended family working in the school system as a teacher, teacher-aide or as a counsellor provided a role model to many in the community. Rindone (1988) goes so far as to claim that the encouragement of parents and other family members was the key factor in academic success as they set high expectations and motivated Navajo students to achieve.

*Socioeconomic Status*

Clearly the support of the family has a significant impact on the success of Aboriginal students; however the nature of that support is not as straightforward as one might expect. According to much research in the larger non-aboriginal population a low socioeconomic and educational background in one's family is commonly correlated with low academic attainment (J. Davis, 1992). Not surprisingly, therefore, as Willetto (1999) found, the adolescent Navajo who obtained better grades was more likely to have parents of higher status as defined by level of education and family income. As a direct result of pervasive poverty in the Aboriginal community, A. Jackson and Smith (2001) noted that low levels of family income often led to difficulties starting or continuing in school for Aboriginal students. Not only were many students unable to turn to parents for financial assistance, in fact, due to financial crisis many were expected to help support their families of origin. Clearly this causes increased strain on the already limited financial resources and study schedules of Aboriginal students. Yet, both Rindone (1988) and J. Davis (1992) found that the majority of successful Aboriginal students came from homes with low incomes and parents with little education. This observation comes as little surprise given the low levels of academic attainment and the correspondingly low levels of employment for Aboriginal peoples in general. As a result of historical oppression the majority of Aboriginal peoples, successful or otherwise, come from poor homes and parents with little education. Bowker (1993) found that it is not the presence or absence of poverty per se that influenced academic achievement, but rather how the family unit deals with the stress of poverty (whether by turning to drugs and alcohol or relying on spirituality and other more positive coping mechanisms) that determines academic

success or failure. Such findings must at the very least call into question the commonly held belief that the low income and low education level of parents are a determining factor in the perpetuation of low educational aspirations and attainment for Aboriginal students. Apparently, as J. Davis contends, “white middle class standards” are an inappropriate basis upon which to make judgements regarding Aboriginal students generally and their academic potential specifically (1992, p. 28).

However, the results of Falk and Aitken’s (1984) work indicate there is in fact a relationship between parent’s educational background and attitudes and the years of school completed by the student. Similarly, A. Jackson and Smith (2001) found Aboriginal students who had a first or second degree relative who had graduated from college or had a successful career were more self-confident and had less ambiguity about schooling. Conversely, they also found those students who had no such successful relative were less sure about their own educational or occupational plans (A. Jackson & Smith, 2001). According to analysis of the Aboriginal Peoples survey (Turcotte & Zhao, 2004), at least for Aboriginal peoples living off-reserve, the higher the parental levels of education the less likely it was that their children would have to repeat a grade, thereby clearly indicating a connection between level of parental education and academic performance.

### *Home Environment*

While parental income and education may not be strong predictors, the impact of the home environment remains a potentially significant factor. Bowker (1992) found many of the 991 academically successful women in her study indicated they came from positive home environments, defined as homes where rules were established with parents

were good role models (no alcoholism, they valued education, some were college graduates themselves) and who were actively involved in the lives of their children. Similarly, Turcotte and Zhao (2004) found, for Aboriginal children residing off-reserve, those who were read to more often were less likely to repeat a grade, thereby indicating the positive influence of parental involvement. Clearly, while most Aboriginal families may not have much to offer in the way of financial assistance, their support comes in a less tangible form, which is nevertheless critical to the academic performance of Aboriginal students.

### *Culture*

The relationship between a traditional Aboriginal cultural identification and academic success (or failure) has been the subject of much debate and research. Coggins, Williams, and Radin (1997) claimed that for many years the cultures of the Aboriginal peoples were thought to be “obstructing the educational process.” It was for this very reason that Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities and placed into residential schools in order to isolate them from such supposedly negative influences. It is hypothesized that when the culture of the student is fundamentally different from that of the teacher, the classroom, and the overall education system, the resulting conflicts, alienation, and confusion may lead to poor academic outcomes. Contrary to this hypothesis, in her study of 451 Navajo youth, Willeto (1999) found that a traditional cultural orientation had no detrimental effect on academic performance. Platero, Brandt, Witherspoon, and Wong (1986), Rindone (1988), Deyhle (1989), J. Davis (1992), A. Jackson and Smith (2001), and Brade et al. (2003) similarly found a lack of connection between commitment to traditional culture and poor academic

outcome. Furthermore, while a number of other studies have indicated the importance of a strong traditional cultural orientation as a factor supporting academic success (Benjamin et al., 1993; Coggins et al., 1997; Huffman, 2001; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Lin, 1990; Macias, 1989; McInerney & Gayton Swisher, 1995; Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996; Montgomery et al., 2000), many differ in their explanations of how a traditional culture supports the education process.

In a study of Aboriginal peoples who were near, or had recently achieved college graduation, Montgomery et al. (2000) found the results indicated the importance of “integrating traditional Indian ways and family values” into all aspects of educational life including ways of learning, identity development, and social support systems (p. 387). A. Jackson et al. (2003) discovered many students relied on traditional cultural spiritual resources to assist them through times of difficulty and feelings of conflict. According to the work of Huffman et al. (1986) culturally traditional Sioux students had a better chance of academic achievement than non-traditional students as the culture provides a strong sense of personal self-identity and confidence. In a further exploration of this phenomenon, in a study of 69 American Indian college students, Huffman (2001) explained how students who adhere to traditional culture can succeed academically without compromising their cultural integrity. Huffman (2001) identified two categories, labelling as ‘estranged’ those culturally traditional students who experienced alienation while in college and who consequently had poor academic outcomes, whereas ‘transculturated’ students also adhered to the traditional culture, but were able to overcome alienation in order to achieve academic success. Huffman (2001) suggested that a stronger Aboriginal identity provides the confidence necessary to allow entrance

into, and engagement with, a majority culture educational milieu without fear of losing or compromising one's ethnic identity. In this context, security in one's Aboriginal identity leads to better academic performance, whereas a weak traditional cultural orientation and fear of assimilation lead to a poor academic outcome (Huffman, 2001). Indeed, Benjamin et al (1993) found the ability to adopt new traits, while still maintaining their traditional culture was a characteristic of those who persisted to graduation from college. McInerney and Gayton Swisher (1995) argued that those with a stronger cultural foundation were able to strategically adopt mainstream academic behaviours without feeling a threat to their cultural identity. Brayboy (2004) discovered that a process of deliberately making oneself invisible in the academic institution was being employed as a strategy that allowed Aboriginal students to maintain their traditional culture while still succeeding in mainstream educational systems.

While it seems that cultural orientation does have a significant impact on the academic performance of Aboriginal students there are interesting gender differences. According to Willetto's (1999) study of Navajo youth, students who identified with a culturally traditional Navajo mother had better grades and were strongly committed to their education. Willetto (1999) offers a number of explanations for this finding, claiming the positive educational influence of the mother is strongly tied to the matriarchal nature of the Navajo peoples. The fact that Navajo women are less adverse to change (as compared to Navajo men) may also lead them to be more open to education. Furthermore, as there is a connection between income and education - Navajo women have historically been the primary provider for the family - Navajo mothers may be more likely to seek the financial benefits of education for their children. In their work with

Ojibway students, Coggins et al. (1997) also found that a strong traditional cultural identification of the Ojibway mothers had a strongly positive influence on children's academic achievement, while the Ojibway father's identification with traditional culture had neither a negative nor positive impact on academic performance.

### *Native Language Fluency*

The connection between academic achievement and Aboriginal language fluency has been a very contentious issue for most of the history of education for Aboriginal peoples. As English (or French in Quebec) is the language of mainstream school systems, Aboriginal language fluency has long been seen as detrimental to educational success (Willeto, 1999). The misguided belief that Aboriginal language fluency was connected to poor academic performance in mainstream classrooms led to great efforts on the part of teachers to eliminate Aboriginal language use altogether. Sadly, the promulgation of this conviction motivated a great many well-intentioned Aboriginal parents to deny their children access to their own heritage by speaking to them only in English lest they be disadvantaged. Indeed, historically research has indicated a correlation between bilingualism and poor academic performance (McLaughlin, B., 1977) and a correlation between high school drop-out and Aboriginal language retention in the family (Platero et al., 1986). In addition, Rindone (1988) found that academically successful Navajo students reported communicating best in English, thereby indicating a lack of adherence to Aboriginal language use. On the other hand, Willeto (1999) found no significant relationship between Aboriginal language use and academic success. Unfortunately, mainstream education seems to have had a very clear negative impact on Aboriginal language preservation. According to Turcotte and Zhao's (2004) analysis, the higher the



level of education of the parent, the less likely they are to have children who can speak their Native language. Only 17% of children whose parents have post-secondary education were functional in their Native language as compared to 44% of those whose parents did not complete elementary school. Acknowledging the importance of preserving Aboriginal languages, Paquette and Fallon (2010) described the continued difficulties facing in-school language instruction programs as a lack of resources, a lack of funds, and a lack of individuals who were both fluent in the language and simultaneously able to teach in the schools thwarted such efforts.

### *Financial Aid*

Despite the perception that all Aboriginal students have access to free post-secondary education as a treaty right, a 2005 survey of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation indicates that a lack of financial resources was believed to be the most significant factor hindering First Nations student success. Given the pervasive poverty in most Aboriginal communities and the resulting inability of many Aboriginal parents to provide for the basic necessities for their offspring, much less the exorbitant costs of a post-secondary education, it is not surprising that access to sufficient financial assistance was identified as a significant determinant of success for Aboriginal students (Helin & Snow, 2010; A. Jackson & Smith, 2001; Lee 2007b; Malatest, 2004; Malatest and Associates & Stonechild, 2008; Canadian Millenium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Montgomery et al., 2000; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995; Reyes, 2000). Despite financial constraints, 39% of First Nations parents in Canada indicate savings have been set aside for their child's post-secondary education. However in comparison to the non-aboriginal population, of whom over half are saving money for education, this statistic further

emphasizes the disparity of educational opportunity for Aboriginal peoples (Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005). Having found that financial concerns were the most common reason for leaving school, Falk and Aitken (1984) discovered that the majority of students reported insufficient funding for transportation, clothing, medical expenses, and childcare. While most First Nations in Canada and the United States provide some form of financial assistance to their students, as Montgomery et al. (2000) clarify, such funding is often limited, inconsistent, and subject to political whim (p. 396, see also Helin & Snow, 2010). Furthermore, in their study of the factors affecting use of financial assistance by First Nations students in post-secondary, Malatest and Associates & Stonechild (2008) found many First Nations students had a very limited awareness of alternative funding options or understanding of the application processes, due to the assumption that band funding will be available and sufficient to cover full post-secondary costs. Unfortunately, as this study further indicated, not all First Nations students are eligible for band funding. Increased demand and insufficient resources have resulted in lengthy waiting lists for funding in some communities and application processes often disadvantage off-reserve applicants. Thus the researchers recommended actively working to increase awareness of available funding options among Aboriginal students as a means of increasing success (Malatest and Associates & Stonechild, 2008).

The research of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (2000) found that most Tribal College graduates were older than typical college students and had increased responsibilities: 74% of graduates were between the ages of 25 and 49 with a median age of 34, 68% of graduates were women and 69% of graduates had at least one dependent child (p. 5). The stress of limited financial resources is often exacerbated for

such 'non-traditional' students as they struggle to balance the conflicting demands of study and family responsibilities. Clearly, as Reyes (2000) found, for many Aboriginal students the challenges of finding affordable childcare and housing only add to the already difficult task of financing post-secondary education. Tate and Schwartz (1993) suggest the provision of campus daycare, more evening and weekend classes, and teaching and research positions that pay a wage above the poverty line might alleviate some of this burden. Clearly the amount, and type, of financial supports need to be re-examined in order to encourage increased success for Aboriginal students who do not fit the typical student profile. Given persistent inequity, Paquette and Fallon (2010) argue that financial assistance is imperative suggesting that regardless of the outcome of Treaty negotiations the Government of Canada should provide funding sufficient to support all First Nations students who are accepted into post-secondary programs, at least until such time as Aboriginal peoples reach post-secondary attainment levels comparable to the rest of Canadian society.

### *Social Support Networks*

While the support and encouragement of family members is particularly influential in determining the success of Aboriginal students, the extreme distances many students must travel to attend school often necessitates relocation away from family support networks. Many studies indicate that in these instances the support of other social networks becomes significant. A. Jackson et al. (2003) found many students identified the positive effects of structured social supports such as Native American clubs or associations, even though they may have initially been reluctant to become involved. Often, in situations where no such structured groups exist, it was found that Aboriginal

students receive and provide “indirect support” for each other as a means of coping (Montgomery et al., 2000, p. 397). Further, the work of Gloria and Kurpius (2001) indicated the benefits of mentoring relationships, as they found social support was the strongest factor in an Aboriginal students decision to persist in education. Based on their finding that family member’s post-secondary experiences (or lack thereof) influence Aboriginal students’ attitudes towards their own chances of educational achievement, A. Jackson and Smith (2001) similarly argue for a focus on actively cultivating culturally appropriate mentors to improve Aboriginal student retention, especially for those students with no such appropriate role models in their family structure. Montgomery et al., (2000) highlight the benefits of mentoring, not only as a way for students to acquire the knowledge that would support their own academic progress, but also as a way for the students to give back to their communities as they assist others on the same path. These studies echo the earlier findings of Reyhner and Dodd’s (1995) work wherein Aboriginal students indicated they would go to special Aboriginal support services rather than faculty for assistance with academic difficulties, and Tate and Schwartz (1993), who suggested the creation of Aboriginal student support groups would increase the sense of community and help decrease the feelings of isolation which are common for Aboriginal students in majority culture educational institutions.

### *Supportive Faculty*

While most indicated that their families were of primary importance, the students in Reyhner and Dodd’s (1995) study also believed that the presence of caring and concerned faculty was a significant factor contributing to their academic success. Indeed, having found evidence of equal levels of family support for both Aboriginal students who

graduated and those who failed, Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) argued that positive contact with faculty/staff subsequently emerged as a critical factor related to Aboriginal student success. Furthering this argument, Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001) subsequently found that while all the Aboriginal students in their study reported that they had support from family and friends, it was not found to be significantly correlated to their rate of academic persistence. The role of faculty or staff mentoring was found instead to have the strongest relationship to academic persistence (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001). Similarly, A. Jackson and Smith (2001) and A. Jackson et al. (2003), confirmed the earlier findings of Bowker (1992, 1993), Hornett (1989), and Tate and Schwartz (1993), citing positive relations with faculty members as positively relating to Aboriginal student persistence, while Lee (2007b) found that help from even one supportive faculty member made for a more positive experience for Aboriginal students. The perception of care from faculty provides students with an important personal connection as well as someone to turn to when they have questions (A. Jackson et al., 2003). Indeed, while Bowker (1993) had found that uncaring insensitive (and often racist) teachers were a significant factor in drop-out decisions, it was also noted that many Aboriginal women indicated the presence of a caring, sensitive teacher who acted as an advocate and intervened on behalf of the student helped them stay in school. Similarly, having acknowledged the importance of supportive faculty, Tate and Schwarz (1993) further argued that numerous time constraints and job expectations may be limiting the ability of faculty to provide the necessary support as many students perceived a lack of supportive faculty as a barrier to their success.

It has long been argued that having more Aboriginal teachers would improve Aboriginal educational attainment levels, as they would provide stability and be more apt to understand and utilize culturally appropriate learning environments and methods as well as being able to relate to the experiences of the Aboriginal students, having been in the same position themselves (see Grant, 1995). Indeed, in their 1992 study, J. Davis found at least half of their sample population (of successful Aboriginal students) had educators as role models, and suggesting the need for more Native teachers and counsellors, not only to provide a culturally sensitive and appropriate education for the students, but also to set an example for the younger generation. Surprisingly however, in their secondary analysis of the responses of 636 respondents to the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, Brade et al. (2003) found that having Aboriginal teachers was actually related to decreased educational achievement. It is important to note that those students who have lived on the reserve would be much more likely to have had Aboriginal teachers and unfortunately, simultaneously more likely to have attended poorly funded schools and have been subjected to a myriad of problems associated with reserve conditions including poverty, alcohol and substance addiction, abuse, ill health, substandard nutrition, and inadequate housing. Without contextualization and extensive study it is difficult to determine the nature of the influence Aboriginal teachers have on the success rates of Aboriginal students.

### *Campus Environment*

The connection between relationships with faculty and the perception of the institutional environment as either negative or positive has long been established. For example, in their comparison of the effect of school environment on academic

achievement and graduation expectations of both Aboriginal and ‘White’ students, Lin et al. (1988) found a full 40% of Aboriginal students indicated hostility had been directed towards them “by their professors in particular” as compared to only 15% of White students (p. 6). Surprisingly, however, the attitude of Aboriginal students towards college education remained more positive than that of the non-aboriginal students. Through multi-variate regression analysis, Lin et al. (1988) provide evidence that perceptions of ‘hostility’ and the feelings of ‘isolation’ contributed significantly to the poor academic performance of the Aboriginal student population:

To attribute the problem of poor academic performance to ‘poor motivational factor’ or ‘difficult situation’ is like blaming the victim of rape for being a woman. While it might be true that American Indian students confront a ‘difficult situation’ on a predominantly white campus, the question to ask, then, is ‘who created the difficult situation?’ It is obvious from our study that Indian students did not create the ‘difficult situation’ on campus – for they are the victims of being isolated and explicitly or implicitly targeted for hostility. (Lin et al., 1988, p. 6)

As a result, Lin et al. conclude, the problem of low academic achievement for Aboriginal students “must be rooted in the contextual situation” of an alienating college campus.

Calhoun (2003) explained, the ‘hostile environments’ faced by Aboriginal students in the academy, which were created by ethnocentric “one-size-fits-all” mentalities, clearly disadvantage culturally different students (p. 142). Citing the work of Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) who argued that discrimination is the “biggest problem” faced by Aboriginal students in post-secondary, Malatest (2004) described how Aboriginal students perceive the university to be an “impersonal and hostile environment in which [Aboriginal] culture, traditions, and values are not recognized” (p. 13). Indeed, “because the academy does not meet their needs” the reality for many Aboriginal students is, according to J. Mihesuah (2004), a desperate desire to return to their home

communities “because of unwelcoming university environments” (p. 191). This argument is supported by Brayboy’s (2004) study, which indicated that Aboriginal students consciously endeavoured to make themselves as ‘invisible’ as possible in order to preserve their cultural integrity and minimize persecution in Ivy League environments. Unfortunately, according to Brayboy (2004), such strategies ultimately served to further the marginalization of Aboriginal students on campus.

Conversely, Lee (2007b) found that Aboriginal students felt welcome and supported and were, therefore, more successful at the universities that acknowledged the specific needs of their Aboriginal students providing support systems, programs, and networks for the students. A. Jackson Smith and Hill (2003) found that some previous positive exposure to the college environment eased the transition into post-secondary for Aboriginal students. Whether it was through outreach structured experiences or through a parent or relative who was attending college themselves, this exposure provided Aboriginal students with a sense of familiarity that increased their level of comfort in the university environment. In their analysis of the Aboriginal Peoples’ Survey data, Brade et al. (2003) found that students who liked what they were taught about Aboriginal peoples in elementary school had higher academic attainment levels. Feeling that one’s people are being portrayed with respect and dignity would be empowering, or at least not alienating, thereby promoting retention and success. Indeed, emphasizing the possibilities of, and the apparent need for, culturally sensitive counselling, Huffman (2001) had previously indicated that culturally traditional Aboriginal students can achieve academically and still retain their cultural integrity if the institutions create a situation in which Aboriginal students “perceive the freedom to express any ethnic identity they chose” (p. 34). This



contention is supported by, Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001) who found the Aboriginal students' level of comfort in the university environment was a strong predictor of persistence, specifically Aboriginal students who had a more positive view of the university environment and found a closer match between their own culture and the university culture were more likely to succeed. A focus on, and improvements in, the campus environment ought to be key components in any attempt to increase the academic performance of Aboriginal students. In order to create a supportive environment, in addition to sensitive non-aboriginal faculty and staff, Falk and Aitken (1984) had previously suggested that overt institutional commitment beginning with top level administration was critical, including culturally specific programs and organizations for Aboriginal students, along with the recruitment of Aboriginal faculty, staff, and administration to provide both culturally sensitive support and culturally appropriate role models.

#### *Non-Linear Approaches*

Although Platero et al. (1986) focus on student drop-out among the Navajo nation, it is worth noting as it introduces the need for a redefinition of Aboriginal educational failure and by corollary of Aboriginal student success. The researchers noted that most drop-outs had, in fact, not given up on schooling; apparently 46% fully expected to return at a later date and 45% indicated they might return, while only 8.8 % discounted the utility of returning to school or obtaining an education at all (Platero et al., 1986; as cited in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992). Indeed, in her study of college graduates from the Crow, Northern Cheyenne and Blackfeet Nations, J. Davis (1992) discovered that often the academically successful students had "stopped out" (i.e. they withdrew from

college for a period of time) and/or changed colleges prior to completion. Machamer (1999) also found that of the 62% of Aboriginal students who withdrew or took leave of absence, 82.9% indicated their desire to return if they were provided financial aid (89.4%), transportation (43.2%), childcare (32.4%), and family housing (32.4%). Clearly, the withdrawal from education, in this context, is merely a temporary situation, a 'stop out,' (as it is currently being called) instead of a complete drop-out.

A. Jackson et al. (2003) similarly found none of the 'successful' Aboriginal students in their study reported a linear path to academic success. In fact, many reported attending several different institutions and taking breaks from their studies. Contrary to what they expected, Brade, et al. (2003) similarly found that an increase in the number of high schools attended was associated with an increase in educational attainment for Aboriginal students. Although, it may be contradicting popular opinions on the subject, such findings may indicate that when the numerous barriers are taken into consideration and the linear definition of educational success is abandoned, Aboriginal people are actually more persistent than non-aboriginals in education. Despite increased barriers to success and frequent periods of absence, Aboriginal students continue to return to school and pursue their studies until they achieve their goals.

Interestingly, none of these students indicated any shame or embarrassment regarding their path. A. Jackson et al. (2003) connect this finding to a fundamentally different cultural orientation:

They seemed to have less of a sense that graduating in a timely manner (as defined by the dominant culture) was somehow better than taking longer to graduate. Likewise, the participants seemed comfortable with their decisions to leave college for a time to help with family difficulties or address other personal needs. Our sense is that the nonlinear path and the relative comfort with such paths experienced by our students are reflections of fundamental cultural diversity

– in this case a value of cyclic rather than linear progression.... Many Native American cultures are less competitive than the dominant culture. They may also value the present more than the future. (p. 558)

Clearly, for such Aboriginal students the definition of academic success must be re-evaluated to reflect the cultural values of the Aboriginal peoples. Given this understanding, the fact that Aboriginal students typically take longer to graduate than their peers can be seen as a reflection of adherence to cultural values rather than a sign of a lack of ability or determination.

### *Gender Issues*

While the research reviewed thus far has provided an interesting overview of the difficulties faced and coping strategies employed by Aboriginal students in general, research specifically dealing with Aboriginal women in the education system is extremely limited. Furthermore, as I have found much of the research fails to even consider the potential of gender specific differences in the experiences of Aboriginal students.

According to Willetto (1999) gender had a significant effect on the academic achievement of the 451 Navajo youth studied, with females consistently outperforming their male counterparts on all three measurements of academic performance (grades, school commitment, and college aspirations). Although Willetto (1999) also noted that this gender effect is also found among other racial groups and Anglo society, she questions whether the gender effect is stronger for Navajo girls than Anglo girls due to the matriarchal nature of Navajo society. While she provides no conclusive answer to this question, Willetto (1999) theorizes that as Navajo society is matriarchal and the women have historically been the primary economic providers for their families, and since education is connected to employment and earning power, the treatment of girls in

Navajo society is similar to the treatment of boys in Anglo society. Furthermore, in Navajo society (due to the matriarchal orientation) Navajo women feel males are not dependable for economic support. Education for girls is, therefore, valued for its role in the future economic stability of the family. Willetto (1999) also notes that Navajo women are less adverse to change than Navajo men, which may influence their acceptance of education as a new means of survival in modern society.

In her study of successful Aboriginal students in Alaska, Reyes (2000) reported gender differences in the responses. While both males and females reported similar experiences of discrimination, both in and out of the university setting, the men responded with greater “shock, emotion and anger” citing specific examples and details, whereas the women reported their own experiences in generalized terms and in a calm “matter of fact” manner (Reyes, 2000, p. 158). Unfortunately, Reyes does not offer much in the way of interpretation or analysis of the gender differences; they are simply noted.

In a two year study of 991 Aboriginal women from seven northern plains tribal groups, five reservations, and three states, Bowker (1992) set out to identify the factors that contribute to educational success or the lack thereof. Many of the women interviewed described experiences of racism, particularly those involving teachers as a contributing factor to the decision to drop-out of school. Unfortunately, the experiences of the women varied so greatly that analysis did not reveal a specific characteristic that identified the women who dropped out, nor was there a single characteristic that identified those women who had achieved success. However, Bowker (1992) did claim there was considerable evidence that the success of women in schools is connected to the presence during the adolescent years of a caring adult in general: a mother or

grandmother in particular, a community member, or a caring and non-judgemental teacher. Other factors common in the lives of successful Aboriginal women were stable home environments, defined as those with rules and restrictions with parents who were involved in their children's lives as well as being good role models (i.e. no alcoholism, they value education, and may have been college graduates themselves). This research affirms the influence of mentors and the role of family support. In a further exploration of the data, in addition to a caring adult and a stable home environment, Bowker (1993) adds a strong sense of spirituality and the ability of one's family to deal with the numerous stressors that abound in the lives of Aboriginal people to the list of factors that contribute to the academic success of the Aboriginal women. Apparently, it is not the presence or absence of poverty that is significant, but rather, it is how one copes with poverty that shapes a negative or positive academic outcome for children. Even in the face of abject poverty, children are able to overcome their circumstances and realize their potential when raised in families where parents provide love, affection, encouragement, instilling a sense of self-worth (rather than turning to drugs, alcohol, and abuse when under stress). Although Bowker (1992) set out to study the experiences of Aboriginal women specifically, she too seems to have failed to provide significant analysis of gender-based issues.

Although she did not set out to identify specific factors that contributed to, or detracted from educational success (indeed success itself was not a primary consideration of the research), in her qualitative study of the university experiences of 8 Aboriginal women, Martin (2001) nevertheless provided excellent insights into the experiences of cultural conflict felt by Aboriginal women in the academy. The experience of cultural

conflict and an ability to cope effectively with the effects of such conflict, apparently, have the potential to be extremely influential factors in an Aboriginal woman's ability to persist in her educational endeavours.

Although the research of L. Jackson (1998) is not Aboriginal specific, it is worth noting as it provides a potential insight into the experiences of students who are similarly marginalized on the basis of gender as well as race. In her study of the college experiences of 135 African American women enrolled in four different colleges, L. Jackson found the race and gender composition of the college influenced the available options for African American women, who claimed to spend inordinate amounts of time and energy fighting racial stereotypes, proving their academic qualifications, and struggling to maintain connection to their community, while simultaneously striving for success in mainstream society. Responsibility for the demoralizing experiences of these students is placed squarely in the hands of the institutions as L. Jackson concludes we must recognize the complexity of issues faced by those students whose educational experiences are affected by both racism and sexism. As previously mentioned, although this study is not Aboriginal specific it does provide significant insight into the complexity of living with oppression based on both gender and racial identification.

As gender specific studies are rare in this field, the work of Macias (1989) is worth mentioning even if it now out of date. Macias (1989) interviewed 11 Aboriginal women enrolled in a graduate program in order to identify 'effective learning strategies'. The results of this study indicate reliance upon writing and verbalization as study strategies and a preference for essay tests over multiple choice or true-false questions. Although her study provided interesting insights, the gendered sample occurred by

accident and not design (as there were simply no men enrolled in the program chosen for study), and the findings lack any analysis of gender issues.

While this review of the literature identifies numerous factors that contribute both negatively and positively to academic success, the studies are largely lacking the kind of critical perspective that would allow for an understanding of how all of these issues fit into the larger problems of overall societal inequality. Indeed, according to Ledlow's (1992) assessment, much of the research "has yet to look beyond the classroom and the home" to see the influences of the larger political and economic environment (p. 6).

#### *Conclusion*

I conclude that while there have been a multitude of studies focused on the reasons for Aboriginal student failure and comparatively few that examine the potential factors that contribute to educational success, the question of why some Aboriginal students fail to graduate or conversely why others persist despite barriers, setbacks, and challenges is exceedingly complex. However, J. Davis (1992) did find evidence of fundamental differences between the factors contributing to the success of Aboriginal versus non-aboriginal students with regard to socioeconomic status, parental education levels, and previous academic performance. Rather than assuming that educational strategies found to be effective in the larger population can be applied to all situations and all students regardless of context, as indicated by this literature review, research must focus on understanding the experiences and identifying the needs of Aboriginal students specifically in order to improve the rates of academic success. This study contributes in a small but significant way to filling the noted gaps in the literature. Rather than focusing

on failure, by sharing successes and exploring the factors that influence academic achievement, this contributes a much needed alternative to racist stereotypes.

Furthermore, and most importantly, by offering insight into both the difficulties faced by these Aboriginal women studying in mainstream educational institutions as well as their strategies for academic and cultural survival, this study identifies potential solutions to an already well documented problem and, thus, offers hope for future generations of students.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

#### *Introduction*

*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about change. (Lorde, 1979, p. 98)*

This chapter outlines the process undertaken in the development of a culturally appropriate research design that, being congruent with Aboriginal community traditions and informed by Indigenous epistemologies, would give voice to the Aboriginal women who graciously agreed to share their stories so that we might all learn from their experiences. The research design has grown out of my need, as an Anishnawbekwe (a woman of the Ojibway/Odawa nation), to remain connected, to respect my own cultural traditions, values, and beliefs while simultaneously producing a work that will be deemed credible in a mainstream post-secondary institution. In an academic space that had little tolerance for research that diverted from mainstream positivistic concepts of research, the decision to consciously acknowledge, much less actually attempt to incorporate, culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate ways of conducting research was both critical and exceedingly difficult. The process of development began with an analysis of the ways in which previous research methods have disempowered Aboriginal peoples and silenced the voices of the very people they endeavoured to understand. I then introduce the Indigenous and feminist principles that informed the subsequent choice of a research methodology for the qualitative study of the experiences of Aboriginal women in post-secondary: a recognition of the partiality of all knowledge and, therefore, the value of multiple perspectives and situated knowledges, the necessity of including and

empowering those who are participating in the research, the benefits of an insider/Aboriginal researcher, and a commitment to make a positive difference for those who are being researched. In order to avoid the shortcomings of previous exploitative research methods, this study is based on the premise that we must give centrality to the stories of the Aboriginal women whose experiences we seek to understand. Therefore, in recognition of the importance of allowing the women themselves to give direction to the research, rather than pursuing a predetermined line of inquiry, general topics of discussion were introduced and the women were given the opportunity to share the knowledge they had gained from their years of experience learning not only to cope with, but actually thrive and succeed in a racist, sexist, and unquestionably hostile environment. In order to be accountable to an Aboriginal cultural tradition the research methodology consisted of a qualitative study employing Traditional Sharing Circles wherein women shared their stories, in addition to personal interviews, for the collection and analysis of data. The use of Sharing Circles invites the collaborative generation of ideas and knowledge through dialogue.

#### *The Inherent Problems in Previous Approaches*

Many Indigenous nations have long been unsatisfied with the process and results of research being conducted on our peoples, and recognizing the need to protect Indigenous knowledge many have been calling for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal research (Alfred, 2004; Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; D. Mihesuah, 1998b, 2005; L. T. Smith, 2002). Aboriginal control does not necessarily suggest that non-aboriginal people cannot, or should not, conduct research, but rather that Aboriginal peoples and communities should become genuine partners in the research, and not be

relegated to a perpetual subject position. However, this demand for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives ignores the power of the dominant discourse within the academy. Kirby and McKenna (1989) explained, in their work on conducting research with marginalized populations, we must understand research has often been “a tool of domination which has helped perpetuate and maintain current power relations of inequality” (p. 17). Thus, simply mastering and subsequently employing the intellectual tools of the dominant culture will never allow for the development of the kind of emancipatory research that is necessary for the empowerment of Aboriginal peoples, as such tools were designed for an altogether different purpose. We must, therefore, continue the arduous process of developing our own tools, a process that began with the foundational work of Hampton (1995). Indeed, as Irwin, a Maori researcher points out, “Real power lies with those who design the tools – it always has” (quoted in L. T. Smith, 2002, p. 38). Not surprisingly therefore, successful efforts to introduce Aboriginal perspectives into academic institutions where, as hooks (1994) claims, knowledge has been traditionally “shared in ways that reinscribed colonialism and domination,” (p. 30) have given rise to a particularly disturbing paradox. Despite advances in several fields that have allowed for the recognition of previously silenced voices (such as women, and sexual, racial, or ethnic minorities), in order for the work to be recognized as ‘legitimate’ academic discourse, one must still adhere to the dictates of the institutional model for the production of knowledge. However, as Shortt (1995) pointed out, the methods that are generally accepted within academic circles “were developed to serve the needs of a culture and society that has neither treated us [Aboriginal people] well nor been

sympathetic to our needs” (p. vii) and such methods are therefore unlikely to allow for the development of the kind of empowering research that is necessary.

Indeed, in the words of H. Cardinal (1969), historically “torrents of words have been spoken and written about Indians since the arrival of the white man” on our shores and “endless columns of statistics have been compiled” (p. 2), yet, as Haig-Brown argued that “little of the writing has involved the actual experiences as described by the Native People” (1988, p. 142). To further explicate, in her study of the residential school experience Haig-Brown asserted:

Researchers have consulted archival material which is predominantly European in approach; letters and diaries written by Europeans about Native people, registers and other reports compiled by Europeans, and reports filed by European church and government officials about Native people. When they finally did begin to work directly with Native people’s experiences, researchers tended to distill the experiences into tables of figures surrounded by speculative statements. (1988, p. 142)

Although much has changed since Haig-Brown made these assertions in 1988, and there is now an ever- growing body of Aboriginal works being produced , generating a balance of perspectives will take time given the historical advantage of non-aboriginal depictions. The failure to recognize the voices of the Aboriginal people when conducting research on their specific experience is offensive, yet not surprising. It reflects the continued influence of the historical belief that Aboriginal people are not only innately less intelligent, and therefore incapable of articulating their thoughts or managing their own affairs, but also that they are inherently inferior and therefore irrelevant to the process of knowledge construction. Furthermore, as Kirby and McKenna (1989) argued, often those experts who are deemed qualified to conduct research “have been well trained in patterns of thinking which not only conflict with their understanding” of the experiences of

oppressed groups, such as Aboriginal peoples, but in fact serve to “explain and justify” the status quo (p. 17). Such research practices have created a genuine conundrum wherein those who are qualified to research cannot understand that which they seek to explain, and those who understand by virtue of their lived experience are often deemed unqualified to conduct, or even contribute to, the necessary research. The following words nicely describe the effects of such social ‘scientific’ rationalizations. Powell, an Aboriginal scholar herself, speaks to the challenges facing Aboriginals in the academy:

When scholars convince themselves that they cannot study Indians, (i.e. others) from the basis of Indian experience and existence, that they must make their efforts “scientific” and thus distance their work from Indian reality, they displace the very voices – those of Indian peoples – that they claim to want to hear. (quoted in Justice, 2004, p. 107)

In this manner, research serves to further alienate the very people it claims to serve.

Moreover, Aboriginal peoples are not alone in our condemnation of traditional positivist research methods, as Kirby and McKenna (1989) found, “people from various oppressed groups” have argued that such “research has not been objective and that it does not represent their experience” (p. 16).

Apparently, as L. T. Smith (2002) had emphatically argued, contrary to popular belief research is not “an innocent” nor a “distant academic exercise” (p. 5). Throughout colonial history research has consistently been a means of disempowering Indigenous populations and, it is therefore not surprising that in her work with the Maori peoples, L. T. Smith found most Indigenous communities harbour a “deep distrust” of researchers and the “whole philosophy of research and the different sets of beliefs which underlie the research process” (p. 173). Thus, as Scheurich and Young (1997) explain, the problem remains that current research practices,

...arrive out of the social history and culture of the dominant race, that these epistemologies logically reflect and reinforce that social history and that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures), and that this has negative results for people of colour in general. (p. 13)

Clearly then, in the words of feminist scholar Hill-Collins (1995), we “cannot use the same techniques to study the knowledge of the dominated” as we would use to study the “knowledge of the powerful” (p. 341). Therefore, demanding that Aboriginal peoples participate in, or even take control of the production of academic research, without examining the techniques employed therein is not likely to significantly alter the balance of intellectual power in our society. Similarly, Semali and Kincheloe (1999) have argued, not only does the necessary transformation of social science involve the affirmation of various Indigenous perspectives “in the process reversing the disaffirmations of the traditional Western social scientific project” (p. 19), it must simultaneously involve the transformation of research methodologies by, and for, Aboriginal people. Through her decolonizing methodologies, L. T. Smith (2002) is careful to point out that the search for a new Aboriginal research model does not imply the “total rejection of all theory or Western Knowledge,” but rather a centering of the concerns, experiences, world views, and knowledges of Aboriginal peoples so that we may come to understand “research from our own perspectives” and begin to use it “for our own purposes” (p. 39).

As early as 1981, Said argued that all knowledge that is about human society “historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgement and interpretation” (p. 154-56). However, Said clarified stating this does not mean that “facts and data are nonexistent,” but rather that facts and data “get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation” (1981, p. 154-56). Citing the early work of Hirsch, authors Kirk and Miller affirm Said’s argument and claimed there is in fact “no such thing as ‘raw

data” to be found prior to interpretation, as the very act of perceiving requires some level of interpretation (1986, p. 50). Elaborating, Kirk and Miller further contend “human beings do not simply perceive, then interpret,” instead they go through “a process called cognition” wherein they use existing theories, which are “not altogether culture free,” to determine what it is they are seeing (1986, p. 50). Ciaffa’s words explain:

It is claimed that social scientists must “interpret” phenomena, which can only be accomplished by recourse to their own hermeneutic horizons, or that they must engage in “intentional explanation” thereby attributing “subjective states” to the persons and cultures being investigated. In either case, the cultural beliefs and values of scientists are said to condition social scientific analysis, rendering the hallowed distinction between the facts and values at the very least problematic. (1998, p. 20)

Thus, it is the researchers own explicit and implicit resources of cultural knowledge that provide the framework for understanding, or misunderstanding. As Savan posited in 1988, social scientists are not simply “discovering external facts” about the world around us, but rather they are “manufacturing knowledge” through their interpretations (p. 20) thereby affirming Kirk and Miller’s (1986) suggestion that claims of being “neutral observers” are mere pretense.

The suggestion that our perception of reality, is always only a perception, existing in relation to, but never completely encompassing reality is not new. In fact, as early as 1929 Kant explained:

Nothing can be called factual or real beyond what human understanding defines... Whatever man perceives – in other words, whatever harmony or design- depends on the categories of his understanding... we cannot say anything about reality in itself. We can only speak meaningfully about that to which our minds give meaning; and the order we impose is contingent on the categories of our minds. (as quoted in Greene, 1973, p. 33)

Given the longstanding arguments against the possibility of neutrality, if we accept the belief that researchers “often produce knowledge that is imprinted with their own ideas

and values” then, as has Savan (1988) continues, we must always analyze the “history” of the information presented, asking “who did the work, why, and for whom?” (1988, p. 24).

After years of functioning as passive subjects of research, as Hampton (1995) argued, it is important that Aboriginal peoples continue to contribute in increasingly meaningful ways to the generation of knowledge according to our own traditions, for our own purposes, and for our own people. This study overall, and the use herein of Traditional Sharing Circles for data collection and analysis, represent small yet important steps in the necessary process of reclaiming ownership of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge production.

#### *A Direction for Research*

There is an increasing acceptance of the importance of acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher and the potential impact of such subjectivity on the research process. Feminist scholars have argued that acknowledging the subjective position of the researcher, i.e., critical self-reflexivity, is both necessary and beneficial in social research (and not a source of contamination or bias). As all knowledge is biased, and always has been, Lather (1986) explained how feminist scholarship that, and unapologetically make these inherent “biases part of its argument” has entered into academic circles as “a new contender for legitimacy” (p. 259), thereby disrupting the previous monopoly of positivism and paving the way for an acceptance of the legitimacy and value of Aboriginal research on Aboriginal issues.

Having explored the arguments against the possibility of researcher objectivity, I agree with Ciaffa’s (1998) contention that all knowledge, is not only “influenced” by, but



indeed it is in actuality “constituted by and bound to the historical and social conditions” from which it emerged (p. 21). Thus, according to Ropers-Huilman (1998) we are led to “question” the plausibility of any individual inquirer, regardless of their supposed purity of mind, possessing the capacity to objectively “explain or describe ‘reality’” as they will always be limited by the horizons of their own perspective (p. 96). Movements in feminist social science have recognized that all social knowledge is necessarily partial as it is “incomplete as well as culture-bound” and, therefore, it is suggested that a truly revolutionary social science should “aim for cultural diversity among its participants so that through our diverse approaches we would likely light different facets of the realities we attempt to understand” (Bleier, quoted in Harding, 1991, p. 300). Contrary to many popular criticisms of feminist research, such arguments do not suggest that the perspectives of women, minorities, or indeed any other marginalized population, are inherently closer to the truth, but rather, they are reflections of different aspects of the truth and through the inclusion of multiple perspectives we may add new pieces to the eternal puzzle that is our social reality. Thus, we see that the exclusion of Aboriginal perspectives has resulted in distorted depictions and consequently the deliberate re-introduction of Aboriginal viewpoints might improve our understanding of a shared reality.

Indeed, as early as 1979, Rich argued ““there is no ‘the truth,’” nor even “a truth” because truth is not “a thing” existing independently somewhere awaiting discovery, it is “an increasing complexity” (1979, p. 187). Similarly, Lather explained,

The desire is not to substitute an alternative and more secure foundation... but to produce an awareness of the complexity, historical contingency and fragility of the practices that we invent to discover the truth about ourselves. (1991a, p. 7)

As a result, Lather explained, we find ourselves shifting from the previously unquestioned traditional positivistic view of knowledge as “disinterested,” value neutral, or objective, and moving towards the conceptualization of knowledge as “constructed, contested, incessantly perspectival and polyphonic” (1991b). This conception of knowledge as perspectival is furthered by Stewart’s (1998) work wherein he argued that each individual has a “limited purchase” on a shared reality and therefore truth is merely “what is right to believe, provisionally and critically” based on our “best means of understanding” the reality at hand (p. 14). For perceptually limited beings, as we undoubtedly are, understanding may be increased through what Stewart terms “intersubjective” communication (1998, p. 14). Accordingly, in the intersection between multiple variant perspectives it is argued that we shall be able to overcome our limited purchase on reality, since what is “intersubjectively observable” expands the horizons of what is ordinarily observable (Stewart, 1998, p. 15). Insofar as each subjective perspective has the potential to contribute to increased understanding of the reality of the world in which we live, we must recognize the importance of alternative points of view, whether they be Aboriginal or non-aboriginal. However, it is important to reiterate the fact that historically the non-aboriginal point of view has taken precedence, thereby creating and maintaining an imbalance which must now be corrected by the interjection of Aboriginal perspectives and the sustained pursuit of Aboriginal research by Aboriginal people.

Apparently, as Lincoln and Cannella (2002) have asserted, the “pursuit of objectivity” as a necessary condition of social scientific research has been “largely discredited” as it is “impossible to attain because objectivity itself is non-existent” (p. 6).

Given the apparent “impossibility of scientific objectivity” in social research, and the suggestion that increased efforts to “remove ideological bias” may seem ultimately “futile” (Koertge, 1998, p. 4), attempts to identify, acknowledge, and account for bias remain necessary, yet insufficient, aspects of the research process. Having abandoned claims to objectivity as the primary criteria for the evaluation of social scientific research we must now determine new grounds upon which to assert research validity. Advances in feminist methodological debates have elucidated the difficulty of applying dominant western methods to the study of non-dominant populations and feminist arguments for the validity and inclusion of subjective knowledge have opened the doors for other marginalized and oppressed peoples to demand that their own rights be similarly acknowledged.

However, as Harding (1991) has indicated, while we must avoid the false “view from nowhere” of conventional western methods, we cannot simultaneously unquestioningly exalt the views of marginalized peoples as inherently more truthful (p. 311). As with any form of qualitative research and especially those forms that rely on the personal accounts of individuals, one must recognize the fallibility of human beings (regardless of race). Indeed Aboriginal peoples, either as subjects, informants, or researchers are not necessarily free of bias or prejudice, nor is it realistic to think they should be. Although such understandings demand a rejection of the claim that only ‘Natives’ can research ‘Natives’, they do not necessitate a rejection of ‘Native’ perspectives. Rather as Rienharz (1985) argued, “since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, we should feel free to substitute explicit interests for implicit ones” (quoted in Lather, 1986, p. 257) in the design of our research methods. Furthermore,

similar to mainstream conceptions of social validity in research, Indigenous researchers have argued for a focus on the outcomes of the research, rather than just the process, as a measure of quality. This must also be taken into consideration during the development of the research method, as the approach must explicitly “set out to make a positive difference for the researched” since “historically, Indigenous peoples have not seen the positive benefits of research” (L. T. Smith, 2002 , p. 191). The belief that the process as well as the outcome of the research must be empowering for the Aboriginal women who agreed to participate influenced the choice of data collection methods. The use of Sharing Circles provided a culturally appropriate knowledge sharing model and worked to minimize exploitative relationships, as all members of the circle are in theory equal. The equality of members in the circle, however, ultimately cannot overcome the disproportionate power of the research as the initiator of both the project and the circles. Moreover, the researcher ultimately maintains the power to transform the collections of seemingly disparate bits of text into a coherent account of what was shared. It was hoped that providing the women who shared their stories with opportunities to contribute to the subsequent generation of themes would allow for a more collaborative process.

#### *Data Collection: Defining Indigenous Methods*

Clearly, as Aboriginal researchers, we must abandon the quest for positivistic objectivity and work towards the explicit inclusion of the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized and the silenced. As the Aboriginal peoples have been traditionally excluded from knowledge construction and subsequent decision-making processes, it is important that Aboriginal voices be heard and respected. Unlike previous social scientific methodologies that have tended to dismiss the “values and beliefs, practices and customs”

of Aboriginal nations as at best exotica, or at worst barriers to the research process (L.T. Smith, 2002, p. 15), for the purposes of this study, the development of appropriate Indigenous methodologies must acknowledge and incorporate these fundamental aspects of our culture. Indeed, citing the work of Martin (2003), S. Wilson claims Aboriginal researchers need to “articulate their own research paradigms, their own approaches to research, and their own data collection methods, in order to honour an Indigenous paradigm” (2003, p. 7).

After centuries of anthropological fixation on the so-called primitive peoples and, more recently, social science’s concern with the Indian problem, Aboriginal peoples, according to S. Wilson’s (2003) work on Indigenous research paradigms, currently feel themselves to be “among the most researched group of people on earth” (p. 5 ). Yet, contemporary conditions for Aboriginal people, both in Canada and around the world, would seem to indicate that these many years have done little to actually improve the lives of those being studied. Unfortunately, as a direct result of their historical experience of research, and as the ever-present subjects of research that was often of questionable benefit and on occasion actually detrimental (L.T. Smith, 2002; A. Smith, 2005; S. Wilson, 2003), Aboriginal peoples have over time developed an uneasy relationship with research and researchers. Although she is speaking of the Maori people specifically, the following words from L. T. Smith (2002) nicely illustrate the difficulty experienced by Indigenous people globally as they attempt to balance their recognized need for research, as it is often a prerequisite for government program funding, and their determination to protect their people and their knowledges from further exploitation and abuse:

Research in itself is a powerful intervention, even if carried out at a distance, which has traditionally benefited the researcher, and the knowledge base of the

dominant group in society. When undertaking research, either across cultures or within a minority culture, it is critical that researchers recognize the power dynamic which is embedded in the relationship with their subjects. Researchers are in receipt of privileged information. They may interpret it within an overt theoretical framework, but also in terms of a covert ideological framework. They have the power to distort, to make conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance. (p. 176)

Clearly, as Menzies (2001) explained, when working ‘with, for, or among’ Aboriginal communities the researcher is presented with unique challenges and considerations (2001). In her collaborative work with the Indigenous peoples of Australia and Canada, Weiss (2000) suggested that often those with power and privilege “automatically” presume that a “less powerful group can be understood, analyzed and explained using the tools, parameters, [and] constructs ” of the dominant group (p. 34). As a result there exists a significant potential for misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and a subsequent misrepresentation of the behaviours and beliefs of those who happen to be from a different cultural group than that of the researcher. Indeed, based on the understanding that diverse cultural groups may have equally diverse worldviews, Weiss argued that confusions can arise when these “different ways of looking at things” are not recognized (2000, p. 34). In order to prevent such confusions, misunderstandings, and potentially wrongful conclusions, when working with Aboriginal peoples we must acknowledge a multiplicity of Aboriginal ‘ways of looking at things,’ i.e., Aboriginal worldviews, cultural beliefs, values, and traditions. Indeed, as Archibald, Bowman, Pepper, and Urion (1995) argued, all “research is a cultural, human activity” and must therefore “proceed from the culture” (p. 11).

Unfortunately, given the pervasive influence of centuries of Western cultural dominance, as Urion, Norton, and Porter (1995) had found, one of the primary difficulties

hindering the process of developing Indigenous research methods is that they continue to be “defined in comparison with western or European models for the acquisition of knowledge” (p. 56). In his description of the evolution of Indigenous research, S. Wilson (2003) explains how in response to the demand for Aboriginal people to take control over the research process initially many of the Indigenous scholars who set out to work with Indigenous peoples were still having to situate themselves in a western framework in order for their work to be considered rigorous and be legitimated by the larger academic community. This is exceptionally problematic, as such dominant ideologies and worldviews are fundamentally different from, and arguably anti-thetical to, Aboriginal worldviews and are, therefore, not appropriate frameworks for the exploration of Indigenous knowledge. Indeed, as Menzies (2001) argued in her analysis of the challenges of conducting research with, for, and among Indigenous peoples, “western social science cannot simply be applied by Indigenous scholars without question” (p. 4).

If research is to be truly insightful and benefit our peoples, as Alfred (2004) a leading Aboriginal scholar declared, Aboriginal academics must stop “defining our purpose and methods by Western academic standards” and instead learn to be “accountable to our cultural heritage and to our people” in order to fulfill our responsibility to fight against the overall oppression of Aboriginal people (p. 95). Similarly, citing the work of Weber-Pillwax, (1999), Steinhauer (2002) claimed that, albeit a time consuming and conceptually difficult task, the development of a culturally appropriate Indigenous research methodology has the potential to ensure that research conducted for, among, or better yet, actually with Aboriginal peoples, will improve their

lives instead of being, as it has so often been in the past, “a source of depletion or denigration” (p. 2). This position affirmed the work of Benjamin et al. (1993), who demonstrated the inability of quantitative statistics to predict American Indian persistence in education specifically and suggested therefore that a more culturally sensitive approach might help future researchers identify the factors that lead to academic success for Aboriginal peoples.

Clearly there is extensive criticism of the use of Western research methods (alternatively referred to as Eurocentric, White, mainstream, or scientific methods) for the study of non-western peoples (see L. T. Smith, 2002). Conversely, numerous scholars have expounded upon the urgent need for culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate Aboriginal research methodology as well as the potential benefits thereof (see Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Menzies, 2001; L. T. Smith, 2002; Steinhauer, 2002; Weber-Pillwax, 1999; S. Wilson, 2003, 2007). However, given that the very concept of Indigenous research is relatively new to the larger social scientific world (compared to the extensive history of mainstream approaches, see L.T. Smith, 2002) we encounter difficulty in the process of developing such culturally appropriate methodologies. Most existing guidelines, textbooks, and articles on research design were, according to Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002), written “by and for a Euro-Western audience” and they articulate “how to conduct research based on Euro-Western beliefs and ideologies” (p. 96). In comparison to centuries of documented mainstream approaches, the body of documented work on Aboriginal specific research processes has been limited.

As the time that this study was developed, after extensive searching for “one good definition of Indigenous research methodology,” I agreed with Steinhauer’s (2002)



conclusion that perhaps we cannot “find a specific answer” to this question (p. 1).

Defining methodology as the collection of actual methods used to investigate a particular subject, according to the relevant literature at the time of research development, I was faced with a number of answers to the question of defining Indigenous methodologies, all of which ought to be taken into consideration in the research design process: the need for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal research (Crazy Bull, 2004), the need to involve Aboriginal communities as participants not merely as subjects (Agbo, 2001; Bishop, Berryman, Taikiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Crazy Bull, 2004; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Swisher, 1998), the importance of cultural sensitivity (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000), the importance of spirituality (Crazy Bull, 2004), the benefits of having an insider/Aboriginal researcher (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; D. Mihesuah, 1998b; Smith, L. T., 2002; Swisher, 1998), the importance of writing for the Aboriginal community and making the results accessible (Cleary & Peacock, 1997), the importance of reciprocity and ‘giving back’ to the community (Hermes, 1997; Wilson, S., 2007), research should address community issues (Crazy Bull, 2004) and perhaps most importantly Indigenous research must “emanate from, honour and illuminate [Aboriginal] world views and perspectives” (Wilson, 2003, p. 7). In order to define a culturally sensitive research model, as an insider/Aboriginal researcher, it was imperative each of these themes were taken into consideration during the development of each aspect of the following methodology. Most importantly, in my decision to use of Sharing Circle methods, I deliberately choose data collection procedures that would allow for the generation of knowledge in a culturally appropriate and collaborative forum.

Although the following words do not actually offer a definition, they succinctly articulate one of the most fundamental principles of an Aboriginal methodology and provide the foundational premise of this study:

We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers. (Alcoff, 1991-92, cited in Weiss, 2000, p. 31)

To avoid the profound shortcomings of mainstream research, an appropriate methodology for the study of academically successful Aboriginal women in post-secondary institutions must give centrality to the stories of the very women whose life experiences I had hoped to understand. Rather than pursuing a line of inquiry based on "predetermined and, inevitably mistaken conclusions about problems and solutions," (Cardinal, 1969, p. 93) it was imperative that I recognize the importance of allowing the women themselves to give direction to the research so that outcomes would be relevant to their communities. By allowing the themes to develop and emerge out of dialogue, I provided the women who chose to participate an opportunity to give voice to their concerns, articulate their perspectives, and share the knowledge they have gained from years of experience in a variety of education systems.

### *Traditional Sharing Circles*

As previously stated the development of a collaborative research methodology that could be sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal communities must be based on the cultural traditions of Aboriginal peoples. While I acknowledge the profound heterogeneity of both historical and contemporary Aboriginal communities, which complicated the process, there are areas of commonality that provide the necessary

foundation for the development of appropriate research methods. D. Mihesuah (2005) reiterated a well known fact that traditionally most Aboriginal peoples did not transmit knowledge in written forms, relying instead upon the continued strength of an oral culture (p. 74). Thus, as Haig-Brown (1988) found in her work with Aboriginal residential school survivors, “storytelling has been the most important means of passing along history and traditions” (p. 142). In traditional oral cultures stories “were a way of preserving and passing on knowledge and spiritual beliefs,” indeed as described by Weiss (2000), they “showed the people, both directly and indirectly how they should live their lives” and they “played a role in everyday social interaction as well as on ceremonial occasions” (p. 44). Clearly, for Aboriginal peoples storytelling can be an “important dialogical tool for passing along truths” (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 142) and is therefore an integral aspect of the research design. However, according to Aboriginal traditions, the telling of stories does not happen in a random nor haphazard fashion. There are implicit guidelines especially when the storytelling takes place in ceremonial or group settings.

In order to structure the process of generating knowledge through story, I will draw upon one of the core principles of Aboriginal epistemology as symbolized in the sacred circle:

In ancestral times, the Sacred Circle was central to the teachings of the Elders. The circle is a form that arises in nature and is imprinted upon our culture as well as our individual cells. Part of the energy of the circle has to do with the physical structure: a circle has no head and no tail, no beginning and no end. Everyone is equal in a circle. (Cahill & Halpern, 1992, as cited in Graveline, 1998, p. 130)

Several Aboriginal researchers including Hains (2001), Bazylak (2002), and Martin (2001) have employed “Talking Circles” as their primary data collection method. However, as Bazylak (2002) argued, perhaps ‘sharing circle’ is preferable as it better

“captures the essence of both talking and listening,” and is therefore, a “more accurate description” of the kind of interaction utilized in this study (p. 135). Bazylak (2002) explains the term Talking Circle is ultimately misleading, especially for those not familiar with such a process, as it does not accurately express the significance of time spent listening to others. The Sharing Circle tradition provides an appropriate basis for Aboriginal specific data collection as it has already been used for innumerable centuries by traditional Aboriginal peoples. Hart (1996) explains the Sharing Circle is primarily a “method for facilitating discussion”:

Participants are seated in a circle facing towards the center. There should be no gaps as all are seated side by side. Once the process begins, the circle should not be broken by individuals leaving during the process. There is usually a facilitator who leads the sharing circle. This individual outlines the process to the group. Upon completing this task, the facilitator has the individual on the immediate left begin the discussion. The format allows individuals to focus on a predetermined topic, or be free to share their thoughts on any topic they wish. (Hart, 1996, p. 67)

By using a Sharing Circle and inviting participants to share the story of their own experiences in education, I avoided the usual direct questioning of participants, as such behaviour is inappropriate in the context of both my own Anishnawbek culture and the Sharing Circle processes. However, as noted, I did suggest broad topics that I had hoped to understand and invited participants to contribute their own concerns. As is traditional, when opening the circle I introduced myself, identifying my family, community, and nation. The topics included: (1) experiences with faculty, campus environments, and institutional social support opportunities or programs; (2) any perceived conflicts, concerns, or difficulties (cultural, familial, financial, etc.); (3) any advice or suggestions for improving the university experiences of Aboriginal women specifically and

Aboriginal people generally; (4) both positive and negative discussions of the overall university experience; and (5) issues of race and gender in the university environment.

It was made clear at the outset that each person was able to speak for as long as they wished or not at all if they felt disinclined to do so. The speaker was given a sacred object to hold, in this case we used a spirit stone which they held until they were finished speaking whereupon it was placed in the center of the table for another to take up. In this manner everyone including the researcher/facilitator had an equal opportunity to speak and be heard. No one was able to dominate the discussion, nor were they allowed to interrupt, cut off, or otherwise disrespect fellow participants. Thus, I avoided the usual unidirectional flow of information, and the potentially exploitative relationships, that tend to characterize the typical interview process. As the researcher, in order to avoid altering the direction of discussion, I limited my own participation to the sharing of similar experiences in my own life once others had already contributed.

At the outset, given such a process and the disproportionate amount of time spent listening, I had concerns that the size of the circle would have a negative impact on the length of discussion time allowable for each participant. Too large a circle can lead to individual participants feeling rushed, as they are aware of those waiting silently, or conversely feelings of annoyance and/or boredom among those waiting if the speaker takes too long (Hart, 1996). Thus I had decided that circles would be limited to a maximum of five participants, including the researcher, in order to facilitate the flow of discussion and allow everyone a sufficient chance to express themselves in the allotted time. My fears turned out to be unfounded as it was difficult to find four women who were all available to participate at the same time. The intention was for circles to be

approximately two or three hours in length with subsequent sharing circles for follow-up if the participants felt they were warranted.

While their benefits were clear, there were particular contexts where Sharing Circles were just not possible. There were on occasion insufficient participant numbers at a given site at a particular time. Due to scholastic, family, and work commitments some participants were only available during very restricted timeframes, which made coordination of circles impossible. In addition, as part of the institutional ethical review process I was required to offer individual personal interviews for any of the participants who expressed discomfort with the Sharing Circle process and specifically requested a private interview. The inclusion of the option for personal interview in the letter of information undermined participation in Sharing Circles as a number of participants opted for the convenience and privacy of personal interviews. However, it was important to maintain the integrity of the culturally appropriate Aboriginal methodology. Conventional qualitative interviews were found to be problematic for a number of reasons: (1) as previously mentioned, in the Anishnawbek tradition direct questioning of another person is considered extremely rude and is therefore to be strictly avoided; (2) the standard, researcher lead, unidirectional question and answer interview process, creates an inequitable if not outright exploitative relationship; and (3) the typical use of predetermined interview schedules reinforces the privileging of the researchers' preconceptions. Thus, in order to remain true to the principles of respecting Aboriginal traditions in the research design, I intentionally avoided the standard unidirectional question and answer interview schedule choosing instead to provide the women with control over the process of sharing their own stories and knowledge.

As a means of avoiding the aforementioned unidirectional flow of information and the inequitable relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee that characterize typical qualitative interview methods, I employed the concept of interview as conversation (see Burgess, 1984). Much like the traditional process of building consensus, as Eisner (1991) explained, “as in a good conversation, one listens to the other, and how, and when and what one says depends upon what the other has to say” (quoted in Bishop, Berryman, Taikiwai, & Richardson, 2003, p. 214). Although the general topics had already been identified, as they were the same as those used in the Sharing Circle processes, the direction of the discussion was determined by the participants. At the outset of the interview as we reviewed the letter of information and the necessary consent forms I discussed with each participant what I hoped to gain from this research, i.e., my purpose, and I subsequently verbally informed them of the topic areas I hoped to cover. I also provided reminders of those topics when asked to do so by the participants and as a result the participants were free to share what they felt was significant to their experience in their own way.

### *Researcher Role*

Given the understanding that the kind of emancipatory research desired must give voice to the Aboriginal women whose lives are being studied I found myself faced with the extremely difficult task of defining an appropriate role as researcher in this project. As mentioned previously, but worth emphasizing again, the role of the researcher in the Aboriginal community has historically been exploitative. The stories, beliefs, values, and knowledges of the Aboriginal peoples have been recorded, interpreted, and retold by non-aboriginal researchers (primarily ethnographers) for centuries resulting in, what L. T.

Smith described as a “foundation of ideologically laden data” (2002, p. 170). In their discussion of research practice among the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, Bishop et al. (2003) found that historically most research has consisted of the accounts of outsiders who have “gathered the stories of ‘others’” and subsequently “made sense of them in terms of perceived patterns and commonalities” (p. 213). The stories “taken” from Indigenous peoples were “reconstituted” and “retold” in a “language and culture determined by the researcher” (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 213). The notion that a researcher, either Aboriginal or non-aboriginal can simply listen to and record stories of “other people’s experience” is unacceptable as it ignores the fact that “researchers are constantly reflecting and seeking explanations” and indeed theorizing as they listen (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 213). This understanding affirms the much earlier arguments of Glaser and Strauss (1970) who had suggested that researchers cannot claim to “remain a passive receiver of impressions” since he/she is always “drawn into actively finding data” (p. 289). Moreover, as Brewer (2000) claimed, the “social world” is in fact “an interpreted world” which is always “under construction and reconstruction” by both the people being studied as well as those conducting the research (p. 49). Hanrahan (2000) explained how, contrary to the claims of positivistic scientific approaches, such analysis is not conducted from the point of view of a fictitious “autonomous subject” (p. 25). Rather, Hanrahan continued, it is always “situated through the identity or ideology” of a particular subject, the researcher specifically, who must therefore always establish and clarify the position of critique (2000, p. 25). However, Bishop et al. (2003) claim that simply identifying the position of critique is not sufficient:

Simply telling our own stories as subjective voices is not adequate... We as researchers need to acknowledge our participatory connectedness with the other



research participants. We need to promote a means of knowing that denies distance and separation and promotes commitment and engagement. (p. 213)

Clearly, as Weiss (2000) argued, just as the “observer must be a part of the observation” the researcher therefore must also be an integral part of the research (p. 37). We must self-consciously acknowledge the ‘self’ of the researcher. Indeed, as Oakley (1981) contends, generating knowledge about the lives and experiences of others is “best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship” (p. 41, quoted in Bishop et al., 2003, p. 216).

The importance of creating a non-hierarchical relationship and the significance of my own subjective positioning as a fellow Aboriginal woman in the academy became increasingly apparent as I began the data collection process. The women had responded to (and presumably read the content of) an email invitation to participate in the study which clearly indicated my Anishnawbe background in addition to the typical academic background information, and yet often at the outset of the interviews or Sharing Circles the tables were turned and the interviewer became the interviewee as I was subjected to a number of questions regarding my First Nation, my clan, my family, my grandparents, and my parents. While the revelation of such personal details would seem to go against traditional western conceptions of appropriate researcher conduct (by potentially contaminating the data) the disclosure of such information was often felt, especially by the older women, to be a necessary precursor to any discussion of identified topics as they judged my connection and commitment to the larger Aboriginal community.

It was only after answering numerous such questions, and often once we had established knowledge of a mutual friend or family member and by extension confirmed

my relationship to, or involvement with a larger Aboriginal community, that many of the women felt comfortable enough to begin to share their stories. Traditionally, it is through our relationships that Aboriginal people determine and define who we are (and not western conceptions of individuation). As one of the participants, explained “sometimes . I like to know who I am talking to, that’s why I asked so many questions.” She went on to further explain that “Sharing Circles are only good for people who are really trustworthy” and such questions were a means of determining if I was indeed such a trustworthy person. The nature of my responses to their queries, and my positioning in relation to my family and community provided a basis for their judgments of both my authenticity and trustworthiness. The demonstration of a willingness to divulge intimate details about my personal life, my feelings, my experiences, and especially my ancestry was often required before the women would open up and share their own stories. Helena clarified the importance of the interactional nature of knowledge development as she pointed out that “you gotta recognize it is a two-way street, if you want the student to do something you gotta give something back...that’s how it works, if you give you might get. It works for everything.” My ‘participatory connectedness’ with the research, my engagement with the process, was not an optional element of design. It was an integral part of the process of gaining access to the stories of others. My willingness to share my own story became a sign that I was willing to give of myself for this project, just as I was expecting the women to give of themselves. Using the words of Oakley (1981), according to Bishop et al., (2003) personal involvement is the “ condition under which people come to know each other” (p. 231), and is therefore critical for gaining both access and knowledge in research contexts. By abandoning the traditional roles of interviewer and

interviewee, and moving towards a dialogic process, we all contributed to the generation of insight and knowledge.

Therefore, like Brettell (1997), I made a commitment to “include myself explicitly,” not only as the researcher, but also as a fellow participant in the Sharing Circles as I expressed my own stories and experiences in order to maintain “the collaborative and interactional nature” (p. 225) of this work. While some researchers, the more traditional anthropologists to be precise, may view this “presentation of self” within the research as surreptitious autobiography, or as “publicizing unnecessary closet guilt,” (Haig Brown, 1995, p. 27) others such as Kirby and McKenna (1989) claim that researchers we must include our own experience and understanding” (1989, p. 7; see also Haig-Brown, 1995). Indeed, since the findings of much qualitative research rely upon the researcher’s interpretation of the data, personal identification provides the necessary social and cultural context for the analysis offered. As Ross explains, in an effort to make sense of the world around us we “constantly interpret the words and acts of others,” albeit subconsciously, in “conformity with the way which our culture has taught us is the ‘proper’ way” (1992, p. 4). I must therefore acknowledge the cultural frame of reference I employed as it unquestionably had a marked influence on what was heard (as opposed to what might have been meant), the interpretations offered, and the resulting conclusions.

Thus, the following background provides the frame of reference for my study of the experience of female Aboriginal students in post-secondary studies. Most importantly, I am an Aboriginal woman of the Anishnawbek Nation, and a married mother of three children, struggling through graduate studies while balancing the needs of

my family, my community, and nation. As the child of an Ojibway/Odawa mother and a non-native father, as a result of my mother's loss of Indian status upon marriage and her subsequent legal challenge which went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, I did not have legal Indian status until 1985. Nevertheless, due to my mother's employment as a teacher, my siblings and I were raised and attended school both on-reserve and off-reserve, in various rural communities in both northern and southern Ontario. Despite having a white father, and in my case fair skin, in my younger years the local non-aboriginal people were well aware that we were still "Indians" to be looked down upon with benevolent pity at best. It was not until much later in life when I enrolled in high school in a distant city, where no one knew my family or where we had come from, that I realized the benefits of being able to hide my Aboriginal identity.

While we were likely considered poor by non-aboriginal standards, in comparison to many First Nation families we were privileged; the farm, my mother's meagre teaching salary, and my father's sporadic seasonal employment in construction provided what was needed as we never went hungry. Although my mother had to stretch every penny we were raised in warm and stable environment with loving parents who taught us to be proud of who we were, instilling a sense of self-worth and a belief in our own potential.

I was privileged to have been influenced by a tradition of educational achievement in my mother's family. As the women in my family were all well educated and my mother, grandmother, and several aunts were teachers in our First Nation. Collectively these women provided the cultural teachings, personal supports, academic skills, and role models that would facilitate my success in school. Unlike my grandmother, and great-grandmother, who endured residential schooling and remained

convinced that education was the path to equality and a better life, my grandfather, who never attended school, could not read or write, and relied upon hard work to establish himself as an extremely successful business man, firmly believed he *was* equal to any white man.

Within mainstream post-secondary institutions, steeped in the patriarchal Eurocentric traditions of the elite, I now find myself constantly being positioned and repositioned, resisting and negotiating my own construction as the 'Other. In spaces neither designed for nor truly comfortable embracing those who are not white and not male, I have found myself often overwhelmed by the prevalence of ignorance, the ever-present demands that I prove myself, and the feelings that I 'did not belong' in the academy. Although I recognize the profound heterogeneity of both historical and contemporary Aboriginal populations, the larger mainstream society often does not, and consequently, many Aboriginal women often share the experiences of racism and sexism in mainstream institutions and a common feeling of marginalization in society at large.

#### *Participant Selection*

As I have argued, it was crucial that the importance of allowing the women themselves to give direction to the research be recognized, rather than continuing along a line of inquiry based on the researchers "predetermined" or possibly "mistaken conclusions" about the nature of the problem (Cardinal, H., 1969, p. 93). Therefore, it was my specific intention that the Aboriginal women function as genuine participants in, and not merely subjects of, this research process. This is a vital distinction as the experiences of the women and their understandings determined the nature of discussions and the direction of inquiry. For these specific philosophical and cultural reasons, despite

academic propensities towards certain terminologies in academic discourse, the role of 'the subject' is not found in this study.

The Aboriginal women chosen for this study were determined by the following basic criteria: (1) they had already completed at least one degree, or were enrolled in and near the completion of their final year of study; (2) they self-identified as Aboriginal women; and (3) they were all willing to share personal information, experiences, and feelings. Participants were contacted through a variety of university Native Student Associations, Aboriginal Student Centers, or Native Women's Groups. In order to maximize the variety of female Aboriginal student experiences, I set out to recruit at least four participants from each of the 6 unidentified universities. The 6 universities chosen include both large and small campuses, in northern and southern locations, with varying levels of Aboriginal programs and services and varying Aboriginal student population sizes. With six sites and four women per site I had hoped to recruit a minimum of 24 participants. Planning four Sharing Circles per site I initially anticipated conducting approximately 24 Sharing Circles. In total 31 women were included in the study, 32 including myself as researcher, and of these women, after reading the necessary letters of information and consent forms, 24 requested personal interviews while only six agreed to participate in the Sharing Circles. As most of the women were already at the graduate level many had attended more than one of the identified university sites (along with several universities and colleges not chosen for this study) which added a deeper dimension to the data as the women were able to compare their experiences in different settings.

### *Data Analysis*

Due to the overwhelming request for personal interviews, only two Sharing Circles took place along with 24 personal interviews, resulting in approximately 29 hours of taped narratives. In an effort to remain true to my original intent of conducting research in a culturally appropriate and collaborative manner I gave very careful consideration to the process of data analysis. According to Eisner (1991), the conventional process of “formulating themes” requires the researcher to “distil the material they have put together” and “inductively generate thematic categories” (p. 189-90, quoted in Bishop et al., 2003, p. 219). However, as Bishop et al. (2003) contend, any approach that relies solely upon the researcher for the “categorization of themes” and construction of meaning conveniently ignores the “impositional tendencies inherent” in the analysis process (p. 219). Without an opportunity for participants to provide input into the generation of thematic categories this research could not be considered culturally appropriate.

In order to facilitate this endeavour, the Sharing Circles and all personal interview sessions were recorded, and subsequently transcribed. Rather than relying on computer software for the technological generation of themes from the raw data, which would work against my efforts to remain respectful of Aboriginal cultures, in order to maintain the necessary personal contact with the data I chose a hands-on approach. I listened to, and transcribed, all the audio recordings. In order to give the reader a true sense of the way in which these words were originally spoken, whenever possible I did not correct the use of the English language, nor did I edit out seemingly repetitious or incoherent words.

While themes emerged in the Circles, as the women listened to one another and built upon their shared thoughts, the overwhelming requests for personal interviews undermined the intention of genuine collaboration in the process of identifying themes. In order to honour the Aboriginal research process, rather than immediately dissecting the interview transcripts into a myriad of fragmented and de-contextualized pieces, participants were given the opportunity to review and reflect on their transcripts and comment on what they perceived as important themes and/or concepts. I subsequently began my own analysis by reading all the data from beginning to end in its entirety to gain a more holistic perspective. I often went back and listened to the original audio recordings in order to reconnect with the voices and the intonations of the women's words and to clarify meanings within the transcribed pages. Following the initial reading of all the women's stories, I went back again and only then did I begin the in-depth process of highlighting the salient points in each woman's story. Using the methods advocated by Kirby and McKenna (1989) and the themes generated collaboratively in the Circles, I examined the transcripts, in order to identify clusters and common themes in the stories the women told. Participants were offered the opportunity to review and comment on the initial summary of the data and themes. These comments were taken into account as meanings were clarified and themes adjusted as necessary.

Furthermore, as the preservation of voice is of the utmost importance in this research, I endeavoured to present the comments of the women in as much of their entirety as possible, avoiding the division of comments into exceedingly small, disconnected, bits of meaning. Adhering still to Aboriginal principles of maintaining holistic perspectives, the comments of the women, my own experience and analysis and



relevant literature are combined into a blended presentation. While the data and analysis will be presented in sections according to the particular themes identified, each segment will contribute to the overall story being told.

### *Participant Review*

According to Kirby and McKenna's (1989) conceptualization of 'researching from the margins' of society, truly collaborative research requires "an authentic dialogue between all participants" wherein all "are respected as equally knowing subjects" (p. 129). Therefore, in recognition of the importance of their input into the research process, the opportunity for participant review must be an integral part of the research. In the words of Opie (1989),

In order to minimize appropriation through misrepresentation and stereotype, to expand the researcher's appreciation of the situation as a result of discussion and reworking the text with the participants, and to realign the balance of power in the research relationship, a practice has developed, which crosses disciplinary boundaries, of giving a draft of the report to participants and asking them to comment on its validity. (quoted in Bishop et al., 2003, p. 220)

Thus, in order to ensure that the meanings derived from the data gathering and analysis processes are accurate representations of the participants' views and experiences, once the transcripts were complete, and prior to my own analysis, participants were offered the opportunity to review and provide comments on their own transcripts. These comments were taken into account, along with the themes from the Circle, informing my own reading of the transcripts. My initial summaries of the data and emergent themes were provided to participants for review and comment. Every effort was made to contact and encourage participants and approximately one third of the women responded to requests and contributed their comments.

*Introduction to the Participants*

In order to protect the identity of the Aboriginal women who agreed to participate in this study, at their request I cannot offer the reader much in the way of individual description. Confidentiality is crucial, and since there are so few Aboriginal students at the graduate level in Ontario universities it was feared that individual or even general descriptions would make the students easily identifiable. As a compromise I offer the following general information. The women who agreed to participate ranged in age from 23 to approximately 60 . Participants were predominantly First Nations citizens (status, non-status, and the so called Bill C-31 women who had been removed and subsequently reinstated to First Nations band membership), with only two identifying as Métis, and no Inuit. While almost all of the women were living in urban settings for schooling and/or work, at least two mentioned they chose instead to commute from the reserve to the university for classes. While 7 defined themselves as urban having never lived on a reserve (including the 2 Métis), most of the women mentioned living both on-reserve and off-reserve at various points in their lives. As a result of this mobility and varying levels of schooling on reserves, these women had attended a variety of educational institutions including residential schools and First Nation community schools (except for the 7 identified as urban), provincial schools in rural communities and urban centers, and alternative school programs.

Although 4 mentioned the experience of living in poverty, and 23 indicated a lack of adequate financial support for post-secondary was a barrier while 17 indicated a lack of available funds for childcare, and one indicated she had a middle class upbringing, the socio-economic status of the women was not a specific topic of discussion. Since the

information was therefore available only if the individual woman mentioned it there exists no basis on which to judge the SES of those who did not discuss it. Similarly, although some mentioned the education levels of parents, particularly if they had witnessed the return to school, and others indicated they were the first member of the family to graduate, many did not indicate the parental education level at all. With only two noted exceptions, the women all described being raised in supportive home environments by loving parent/s and/or grandparents who instilled a strong cultural foundation, a sense of self-worth, and hope for the future. Approximately half of the women (17 of the 31) indicated they were either single mothers at some point either prior to or during their schooling (12) or were themselves raised by single mothers (5) and that their motivation to pursue postsecondary education was indeed influenced by that experience. What all did share however, was a pride in their Aboriginal heritage as they struggled and ultimately succeeded in mainstream academic institutions.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, the decision to use qualitative research and employ Traditional Sharing Circles, as a means of accessing the stories of academically successful Aboriginal women was based on the understanding that the research methodology must be congruent with, and sensitive to, Aboriginal cultural traditions. In contrast to mainstream research approaches that have historically exploited Aboriginal peoples and appropriated Indigenous knowledges, and were therefore deemed inappropriate, the use of traditional knowledge sharing formats increases the comfort level of the participants and facilitates the kind of genuine dialogue believed to be the foundation for developing new insights and deeper understandings. Moreover, as the Sharing Circle entails both

speaking of one's own experience while listening to, and learning from, the experiences of others in the circle, the benefits of the interactional nature of the circle and the resulting dialogic foundation of knowledge production are clear.

Although arguments surrounding the need for researcher objectivity have typically been used to exclude those who were marked by their race, ethnicity, or gender from the process of knowledge production due to their supposed bias, as I have argued herein, feminist, Indigenous, and critical scholars have thrown into question the very possibility of objectivity in social research and argued for the validity of experiential (subjective) knowledges. Therefore, rather than directing the research by pursuing a predetermined line of inquiry, the Sharing Circle method employed in this study of Aboriginal women in post-secondary was founded upon a belief that the themes to be explored and the direction of the research should emerge from the stories of the women whose experiences I wish to understand, and whose knowledge I hope to share.

However, my efforts to utilize an Aboriginal method in a mainstream institution were undermined by the ethical review process. Indeed as a requirement for obtaining the necessary ethical clearance to conduct research on 'human subjects' I had to agree to offer personal interviews in my letter of information for those who might not be comfortable sharing in a circle. Even though participants had originally been committed to a traditional Sharing Circle process, when given the opportunity many opted for the easier, less time consuming, and more private personal interview thereby altering the entire dynamic of the method and limiting genuine collaboration.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Findings and Analysis: Conceptualizing Academic Achievement as Resistance

*Introduction*

*There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than in the olden days... But they will emerge with their hands held forward, not to receive welfare, but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours.” Chief Dan George (Chief Dan George & Hirschall, 1974, p. 91)*

Most resistance research has focused on oppositional student behaviours as a form of personally liberating, although ultimately self-defeating, resistance that in the end helps to reproduce the existing social order (Willis, 1977, Ogbu, 1987a, 1987b, 1991, Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Such research consequently failed to recognize or acknowledge, the existence of other more subtle forms of resistance and the possibility of social change. Recent re-conceptualizations of resistance allow for the identification and inclusion of academic achievement as a means of resisting society’s limited expectations and the process of subordination. As previously discussed in the theoretical framework, drawing on critical race theory Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) described the more covert forms of resistance as internal transformational resistance wherein the student is consciously engaged in both a critique of oppression and a struggle for social justice, yet on the surface the appearance of conformity to dominant cultural norms is maintained. In order for their academic achievement to be understood as internal resistance students must demonstrate not only the awareness and critique of social oppression, but also the desire and motivation to change the system (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This chapter opens with a description of self-valuation as a sign of internal resistance for Aboriginal women who, as a group, have been subjected to denigrating stereotypes and

negative constructions of Aboriginality and womanhood. The subsequent examination of the critical awareness and social justice motivation of the Aboriginal women in this study provides the starting point for the conceptualization of academic achievement as a form of internal transformational resistance.

*Self-valuation as Internal Transformational Resistance*

In her foundational work on Black feminist thought Hill-Collins (2009) declared that even within the contexts of a racist and sexist society “no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self” and, therefore, others may only ever assist “in this journey toward personal empowerment” (p. 130). In a society that has for centuries now promoted the belief that Aboriginal people are by nature inferior to Whites, and women inferior to men, the advancement of Aboriginal women is critically dependent upon the development of an ability to challenge such beliefs and resist the process of their own subordination. Anderson (2000) explains that Aboriginal women have “been subjected not only to racist notions of the savage, but to the sexist notion of a debased womanhood. To be Native was uncivilized; to be female was inferior; but to be a combination of the two was particularly base” (p. 139). Survival for Aboriginal women in an inherently and profoundly racist and sexist society has therefore meant “learning to resist stereotypes, imposed roles and negative definitions of their being, as well as learning to cope with the poor treatment from others” that results from such conceptions (Anderson, 2000, p. 115).

Convincing oppressed peoples of their own limited capacities and/or worth and, therefore, their corresponding lack of options for advancement in society has been an integral part of ensuring that their subordinate position in society will be seen as

legitimate, or at least unavoidable and therefore accepted, thereby perpetuating inequality. Rice and Snyder (2008) explain that longstanding “myths about Aboriginal racial inferiority have laid the foundation for negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people that are used to justify domination” (p. 54) and “alleviate any sense of guilt or responsibility for Aboriginal oppression” (p. 53). One such myth is that of the ‘incompetent Indian’ which implies Aboriginal peoples are incapable of managing their own affairs and therefore require government intervention and control (Rice & Snyder, 2008). As a result of the deliberate devaluation of Aboriginal cultures and nations, as Laenui (2007) argued, those who have experienced colonization often suffer from concepts of inferiority as they come to believe such myths (which is in fact the desired outcome, at least from the perspective of the colonial society).

Furthermore, Indigenous beliefs in the fundamental equality of all people and consequently the more egalitarian social structures found in many Aboriginal societies, as well as the empowered Aboriginal women therein, were seen as a threat to the patriarchal order of the colonizers, and as the “bearers of a counter-imperial order,” the subjugation of Aboriginal women and the destruction of their power and authority in the community was “critical to the success of the economic, cultural and political colonization” of the new world (A. Smith, 2005, p. 15). The very existence of women who were subject to the authority of neither fathers nor husbands had the potential to throw into question the supposed natural order of patriarchal hierarchies. Clearly, as A. Smith maintained, the subsequent and continued “demonization of Native women can be seen as a strategy of white men to maintain control over white women” (p. 21) and reinforce patriarchy, as well as simultaneously destroying the social structures of Aboriginal nations. Given this

history of colonization, according to Anderson (2000) “Aboriginal women have had to become practised at resistance” (p. 115) in order to survive in a system that functions to subjugate and oppress both Aboriginal peoples and women generally, and therefore, Aboriginal women particularly.

Clearly, in the context of a racist and sexist society, an Aboriginal woman’s awareness of her own strength, capability, and potential not only contradicts the derogatory definitions of Aboriginality and womanhood maintained by the dominant society it is, therefore, a powerful tool in the struggle for equality. Indeed, many of the women in this study evidenced both high self-esteem and a high estimation of their own capabilities, which is in itself an achievement in a society that has for centuries denigrated Aboriginal women. Comments such as “I consider myself a really smart person, I think that I am pretty capable of so much more,” and “I know I’m an intelligent person and that I have the determination and the drive to complete something,” or “I am also kind of stubborn, I just keep at it, and at it, until I get it” illustrated the kind of positive self-esteem, determination, and strong work ethic that contributed to the educational success of the women in this study. For example, as one of the women explained,

I worked really hard. Nothing had ever just come to me like other people. Maybe they don’t realize that they have a gift, but for me I always worked really hard to get the things that I’ve been able to achieve, and that was by just persevering and consistency. (Cathy)

Indeed, many of the women described a feeling that they just always knew what they wanted (to be a teacher, or doctor, or go to university) and a determination to achieve their goals, despite the knowledge of the challenges they would face and the discouragement of those who deemed such achievements unattainable.



I have always dreamed of being a doctor... You know, that was always my dream. I'm stubborn in that way. I wanted the degree, where some people sometimes don't always think maybe they deserve it. (Rosemary)

It is unfortunately not surprising, as Rosemary suggested, that after generations of disempowerment, self-valuation becomes increasingly rare as many Aboriginal people have come to believe in their own inadequacy.

### *Evidence of Critical Consciousness*

#### *Awareness of Racism in the Schools*

*Residential Schools.* The school system has played an important role in this process of convincing Aboriginal peoples of their inferiority and, by extension, in the process of ensuring their subordination in society. Several of the older women recalled an era when nuns ran the schools and abuse was rampant as they tried to convince the children of their own worthlessness. For example:

The nuns were teaching at the time too. I didn't have a good experience in grade 4, it was very harsh. We had a lot of very harsh discipline to the point of abuse in that classroom, a lot of verbal and physical abuse. The teacher was very... it was difficult. We went through a lot, us students. It's only recently that some students are sharing what we had experienced. But we couldn't tell anyone because if we told our parents they would give us the strap too because they would say we must have not behaved. If one student got punished the whole class got punished. That was really difficult. Sometimes the teacher went wild. We were just kids at her mercy. So anyway we survived somehow... A lot of the teachers would really abuse the students so verbally, saying "you will never amount to anything. You are nothing". (Sierra)

Tragically, such abuse was common throughout the day school and residential school systems as priests and nuns attempted to beat the Indian out of the students to facilitate the process of 'civilization' and assimilation (Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The "essentially violent nature" of the residential school system

was implicit in the mandate of such institutions to “Kill the Indian” in the child so that they might be re-socialized into the colonial culture (Milloy, 1999, p. 42).

As children were traumatized, and many left with severe emotional, physical, and spiritual scars, the experiences in residential schools reflected the widespread belief that Aboriginal people were inferior. As Jane explains, it was in the context of these experiences that she began to see the blatant effects of white privilege and developed her initial understandings of the ways racism functions to provide opportunity for some, while simultaneously denying it to others. After much healing and reflecting, such awareness has the potential to lead to a necessary critique of social oppression. For instance,

I remember it was a very traumatic experience for me... I have a lot of those bad dreams, the whole time I was at residential school... It was all, it's just so institutionalized and I remember my number was 64, you know...so everything I owned was number 64. I remember [that was] the first time that I knew that I was really different... When I went to Fort Albany residential school, there were the nuns and priests, they were all non-natives and most of them were French. I remember when we used to go down to the Rectory room... where they would eat... The girls and boys were segregated. We had our own eating place, and I remember a dentist had come into the community. He had 3 children, and one of them was a girl, and she came to eat with us... Every meal, she had her own table, and her food was different from us. I mean our food was awful... I remember the food was just terrible..... soup, and a dry piece of bread... and she used to get nice hot meals, like steak and gravy... She was really blonde too with blue eyes...and then I kinda thought well that's why... when you're a little kid you just think about that... and then when you get older you just think more and more...  
(Jane)

The practice of giving students “food not fit to eat,” and subsequently severely beating those who refused to consume such meals, was sadly incredibly common for Aboriginal children as they were starved and beaten into submission under the auspices of civilization through education (Milloy, 1999, p. 150). Recalling her experience of being taken from her parents and enrolled in such a school, Jane explains:

I always have this re-occurring dream for many, many years afterwards. I think it was only until I was about 30 years old that those dreams ended, I mean they started fading away. I was pressing my face against the window...against the train window, trying to see as far as I can, to see my mom and dad waving on the platform of the train... and tears streaming down my face. (Jane)

The establishment of the residential school system was, according to Milloy's extensive historical research, "an act of profound cruelty rooted in non-aboriginal pride and intolerance and in the certitude and insularity of purported cultural superiority" the legacy of which continues to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day (1999, p. 302). Many residential school survivors are only now dealing with the legacy of such abuse and beginning the process of healing (Brant Castellano et al., 2008).

*Provincial Schools.* After the residential schools were closed (some as recently as the 1990's) and the church was forced to release its stranglehold on education, most Aboriginal children were sent to provincial or community schools. Although the overt physical and verbal abuse had for the most part come to an end, racism remained an insidious yet integral aspect of education for Aboriginal children. Apparently many educators were still promoting a belief in the inferiority of uncivilized brown skinned people and the natural superiority of those born with white skin.

I've always had this one other friend who was Native too, so the two of us used to get picked on by the teachers a lot... in Catholic school you have to take religion classes. So I remember the teacher talking about the concept of hell. You know she showed an image of what hell was and there was people dancing and parting and stuff... She showed the image of these people partying and they were all brown skinned people, like reddish brown skinned people and me and my friend looked at those things. We were like "ohh." We were just little kids too, but then she talked about heaven. It was all these White people with blonde hair and blue eyes... but you know you were always treated differently. So I will always remember that. I think that always impacted my sense of childhood education... I was always treated differently. (Rosemary)

Clearly for women like Rosemary, Jane, and Sierra the experience of differential treatment, and the perception of the numerous ways in which non-white peoples are denigrated (and in this case demonized) while white-skinned races are unjustifiably exalted, resulted in the development of an awareness of racism at a young age.

The persistence of the kind of “non-aboriginal pride and intolerance” and “purported cultural superiority” described by Milloy (1999, p. 302), continue to constrain the opportunities available for Aboriginal students. As a result of the assumed limited intellect of Aboriginal students, many are not only actively discouraged, but in fact actively blocked from enrolling in the kind of courses that would enable them to go on to post-secondary education.

My daughter who is incredibly skilled struggled through high school... She would tell me that the things she was interested in like history, and art, and literature, she was never encouraged to study. She would go to the guidance counsellor and they would say “oh no that course is too difficult for you.” She was never encouraged to enrol in courses where she would be challenged intellectually. She would be kept back and told you have to do this course or that course... if she had listened to her teachers in high school she would be nowhere. (Janet)

Several of the women described similar stories of how they had to stand up to school counsellors who pushed Aboriginal students into general level classes and vocational programs telling them that university was not a realistic goal for ‘Indian kids’.

As Aboriginal students progress through the school system they cannot help but become increasingly aware of the ways in which the school system generally and racist teachers particularly participate in the reproduction of Aboriginal educational failure.

As I got older and was more aware of how things were, then I noticed things that didn’t necessarily happen to me, but I saw what happened to other people. Like comments and lies... I actually overheard two teachers talking about not wanting to work with ‘those Indian kids’ and things like that ... I don’t know if they didn’t realize that I was Native or what. (Lisa)

Lisa explained that her fair skin and less stereotypically Aboriginal features offered her a privileged position, and increased insight into the workings of prejudice and discrimination as she witnessed the racism going on all around her without being stigmatized herself. Although it may not have been official school board policy, as Aboriginal children were forced to stand on the school buses while the non-aboriginal children had seats, or Aboriginal children were relegated to the back rows of the classrooms while the others sat up in front, the actual practices of the educational process functioned as a continual reminder that Aboriginal students (and indeed all Aboriginal peoples) are still believed to be inferior and unworthy of even the second class education they were provided.

*Ameliorative Measures.* Sadly, even when First Nations were able to negotiate agreements to implement supportive measures for the children that were enrolled in mainstream schools, such efforts can result in backlash as the measures themselves became another source of conflict when non-aboriginals resent what they perceived to be ‘special’ or preferential treatment for the so-called “Indian” students.

That’s one thing I remember, our reserve had a tuition agreement with the board so that we could have a hot meal daily, which was wonderful. There was lots of food! But I always felt inwardly so inadequate for having us eating this, because of how the teachers would look at you. Because of how the other non-native kids would see us eating there. Like, “it must be nice” they’d say, “it must be nice to be an Indian.” Stuff like that. Just little comments like that, just eroded you constantly. (Cathy)

As privilege has been historically (and is believed to be rightly) afforded to Whites, any measures designed to advance the social position of oppressed minority groups are predictably seen as a threat to the existing social structure. While in reality, “White privilege confers benefits in almost all sectors of society,” (Henry & Tator, 2009b, p. 23)

a societal belief in the mythology of meritocracy, and the corresponding emphasis on “individual rights and equality of opportunity,” (p. 32) necessitate a rejection and repudiation of ameliorative measures.

While combating racism requires “substantive interventions” in order to effect social change (Henry & Tator, 2009b, p. 33), previous experience has taught women like Janet that such efforts are likely to be strongly resisted within educational institutions.

I think that the hardest thing in the world is to get through high school. Every young person, my own children, their friends, they talk about the racism in high school and then you combine that with the other types of barriers, whether it is not having the actual skills, the reading, writing, and arithmetic, or the psychological [problems] for children who might have grown up in bad situations, they have witnessed violence or may have fasd. There are multiple barriers to begin with and then when you go to an environment where you have so much racism and favouritism by the teachers. I think that is something that could be fixed but it is never really addressed because the school system in my experience, they will never admit to the racism in the system. They would cut their own throats before admitting to the racism or that teachers are racist. But talking to my children’s friends, the more pressure that is put on them to disperse, the tighter they hang, and the more racism they experience the tighter the group gets. (Janet)

Although those who are the victims are obviously well aware of the ways in which their lives are constrained by racism, because racism is “produced and reproduced systemically” (p. 63) and has become, according to Kobayashi’s (2009), a “normative aspect of Canadian ways of doing things,” (p. 61) many of those who enjoy positions of privilege are not directly aware of their own complicity in the process of excluding and marginalizing others. They are, therefore, also unlikely to see any need to address the issue of racism, as it is indeed not an issue for them. The vehement denial of the very existence of racism in the school system is, as Janet found, a formidable barrier to any attempts to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students. For Aboriginal students the pervasive racism within the school system is unquestionably an issue in need

of immediate and substantial redress if they are to benefit from formal education processes. Moreover, according to Janet's experience, the attempts of the education system to denigrate Aboriginal culture and destroy the connection to community have apparently had the unintended consequence of actually increasing the students' commitment to their collective tribal identity and for many reinforcing their desire to resist integrating into the school community.

*The Legacy of Educational Racism.* Although resistance was common, unfortunately as Rice and Snyder (2008) illustrated, the legacy of educational abuse for Aboriginal peoples has left lasting scars in Aboriginal communities as they "must deal not only with anger towards their colonizers/adversaries but also with internalized colonization/self-hatred" and the resulting "ongoing abuse in the communities" (p. 49). Consequently, many of the survivors have had to engage in a healing process. Having spent a large part of her life believing in her own lack of worth after surviving the soul crushing experiences of residential school, childhood abuse, and the resulting battles with addictions and alcoholism, Helena indicated that she obviously did not "always" possess a positive self-image. Helena further explained how over time and only after much struggle reconnecting with her culture helped her to heal and develop the strength and self esteem necessary to succeed.

So I say to you I didn't have no advantage I didn't have no nothing. I just have a lot of love and respect. I have forgiven my mother and my stepfather. I had to learn to forgive and I learned the Seven Grandfather Teachings: love, respect, humility, bravery, truth, and wisdom. I learned how to live by these teachings. Learning these teachings and living by them honestly and not fooling myself... That's who I am today. I live my culture today and I am proud that I have found it. (Helena)

I don't look at myself as a failure anymore. Like I did before. I've got so much self-esteem and self-worth, that I can just, it's just flowing out of me I talk to

other people and I say, “well you need some of this,” you know? ... oh yeah, if you’ve got that belief in your head there, well I can’t do this, I can’t do that... you know... ohhh, that erased from my mind a long, long time ago, cause I used to be like that eh? Oh I can’t do that, can’t do this, you know? And then, now it’s can... now I can, I can do it! (Helena)

Reflecting on how far she had come from a place of negativity, abuse, and victimization to a position of strength and self-worth, Helena explained that only after reconnecting with her cultural traditions and going through a healing process, was she finally able to break free of the oppressors’ influence and once again believe in her own value as a human being.

*Awareness of Gender Discrimination in the Ivory Tower*

*Denigration of the Female.* In a society and institution where White male privilege is protected, reinforced, and reproduced (Henry & Tator, 2009b), it is to be expected that one’s visibility as female is decidedly not an asset. As a result, much like the minority students who feel they must ‘act white’ in order to survive the educational process, as Fordham (1993) contends, in the academy women “are compelled to ‘pass’ as the male dominant ‘Other’” if they hope to achieve success (p. 3). Citing the work of Pagano, Fordham explains how women are obliged to “hide their femaleness” in order to be accepted as legitimate by their male peers (1994, p. 4). In order to “be taken seriously” women must “transform their identity in such a way that the resulting persona makes the female appear not to be female” (Fordham, 1994, p. 4) and, consequently, those who are not able to achieve such a transformation are predictably not considered to possess legitimate authority. For instance,

Sometimes being an Aboriginal woman, I am trying to think how to phrase this... it’s hard often times to be taken seriously. I don’t know why it is still, the thing is even just being a woman, you don’t even have to be an Aboriginal woman, but just being a woman... it’s hard to get to be taken seriously. Sometimes you don’t



get as high as marks as other people. You know it's sometimes hard to get the scholarships and the bursaries and I don't know why that always is. (Rosemary)

Being taken seriously then requires a disaffiliation of oneself from the female gender, by consciously "discarding or at least minimizing" a female identity (Fordham, 1993, p. 4).

The challenge of being a woman in the academy, but not appearing as such, is exacerbated by the chauvinism inherent in specific fields, namely those fields of study that until quite recently, tended to be exclusively male.

My situation is a little bit different because I am in engineering so I am one of only five girls anyway... I think that has affected me more than anything else. I came here and it was a really big struggle... it was just being a girl in engineering. Whether I was any other race or religion would be easier than being a girl. People don't think you are as good. Like yesterday I was out and a lot of the labourers are very blue collar and macho and I am a girly girl, like I wear earrings and it is really hard because they don't take me seriously. I have to prove myself even more. Even academically the profs treat me different because I am a girl. They are very condescending and the industry is so male dominated. So I think that is the most challenging. I want to be an inspector. But who is going to want some 25 year old girl to come in and tell you what to do? They are probably just some high school grad who has been working in construction for 25 years. I don't care if they hate me... (Elize)

Clearly, having the audacity, as a woman, to enter a field of work thought to be the exclusive domain of men, or worse yet, for a woman to hold a position of power and authority over men, in such a field, as a result of her skills and education, is unacceptable. Moreover, remaining "girly" or feminine and refusing the expectation that one must at least emulate masculinity, is apparently reprehensible. Interestingly, in such male dominated fields, it seems gender matters much more than race or religion as grounds for exclusion and marginalization. Obviously, in this context, being male (or at least 'passing' as masculine) is a prerequisite for respect, regardless of qualification or technical skill.

As a result of this denigration of femininity in the academy and a consequence of not 'being taken seriously' many women and many women of colour particularly feel continually obliged to prove themselves, i.e. to demonstrate the legitimacy of their very presence in the 'Ivory Tower' (L. Jackson, 1998; James, 2009; see also Hill-Collins, 2009). Exposing a deep seated and still commonly held faith in the superiority of (White) men, James described how universities have evolved "on the basis of assumptions that heterosexual, white men from the economically and socially privileged classes were naturally endowed for university education" (2009, p. 136) and thus their dominance within the institution is simply presumed to be legitimate. However, with no such presumed natural endowment for intellectual activity, as Cora found, many apparently believe that, as an Aboriginal woman, it was inconceivable that she could be sufficiently intelligent to compete and, hence, it is assumed that she must have been 'allowed in' the university as part of some type of affirmative action policy.

I think even now in school it is weird because I have a lot of experience and I apply for things, but I feel like people think I am too smart for a Native woman. They look at my resume in disbelief and they say how do you do that? I feel like they try to disempower me. They look for ways to diminish the significance of my work by saying all sorts of things. (Cora)

Evidently, low expectations (which are the manifestation of gender and racial prejudice) result in arrogant expressions of disbelief literally in the face of such a successful young Aboriginal woman. Having been continually underestimated, Aboriginal women such as Cora begin to feel demoralized, not to mention exhausted from repeatedly having to prove themselves in the academy. Time wasted 'proving oneself' is time not spent on more worthwhile pursuits.

*Vilification of Pregnant Women and Mothers.* As the ultimate expression of femininity, pregnancy significantly complicates the maintenance of the non-female persona deemed necessary for achievement in the academy. Although not a mother herself, Rosemary describes the situation faced by pregnant women in the academy:

They shame you... it's 'oh [sigh] she had a baby'. You know? It's like you did something totally bad, you committed this ultimate crime and you betrayed all people... you know, as a woman you can't, you can't do anything... You somehow become, I don't know, less than [your peers], if you have a child when you're in academia. It's like you can't do it, everyone shuns away from you, or pulls away from you... (Rosemary)

Having been accepted into the academy, for many women pregnancy is not perceived as cause for celebration, but instead it is seen as betrayal; pregnancy is a betrayal of your commitment to your academics and a betrayal of the institution that funded your study. For Aboriginal women, it is further perceived as a betrayal of the band that funded you and, in fact, your entire race, whom you represent and whose emancipation you should be advancing.

Furthermore, although it may create a greater financial burden, having a family does not have the same negative impact on career plans for men because it is assumed their wives will bear the burden of childrearing. To the contrary, it seems in fact that some men are specifically preferred because they have a family:

They're all like "oh well we'll invite him [into the program] because they have a family and it looks good" but then if you [as a woman] start having children in the program they say "oh lordy, you don't be doin' that." (Rosemary)

Because he is perceived as more stable and he is free to devote his energies to work performance, while his wife takes care of him, their children and their home, being married has proven to be an asset to a man's career<sup>2</sup> (citing Waite & Gallagher, 2000, Kingston, 2004, p. 248).

While men are apparently rewarded for their family status, within the male-dominated culture of the university institution, where self-consciously minimizing a female identity facilitates acceptance and achievement, being a mother obviously disrupts the performance of masculinity and, hence, jeopardizes success. Lisa explains:

Especially in academia, when people know you have a kid, it does change how people see you and your employability and things like that. Because they can't ask you in your interview, but when you go to the dinner they find out if you have kids... In the academy you look around and see it is one of the professions where women tend not to have children at all, or even get married at all. (Lisa)

Given the acutely perceived prohibition against femininity in the academy, the ultimate signifiers of womanliness, pregnancy and motherhood are perceived to be incompatible with achievement. Moreover, the incompatibility of work and family is particularly acute for women with higher levels of education. According to Becker (1991), the motivation/pressure to not have family increases with education as the more educated a woman is, the more she is able to earn and consequently the greater the potential financial loss. Interestingly, Payne (1980) suggests that in the context of a patriarchal institution pregnancy is perhaps in itself a form of resistance (albeit likely self-defeating), as it is the ultimate affirmation of the female self.

Within the contexts of academic institutions that expect and reward masculinity and the larger patriarchal society that is dependent upon unpaid female labour in the home and where women bear the burden of care for children (see Doucet, 2006, for discussion of whether men can mother), Aboriginal women are taught that they must choose between either career success or family as the acquisition of one precludes the attainment of the other. For instance:

Well I don't have children. I had to make a choice. I had to choose. I had to choose. I absolutely had to choose and that sucks you know. That really sucks. But oh well... I had to choose because I just felt that I couldn't do both. (Louise)

Well that's the thing, they make all these assumptions and they make these demands of you. You know, to get rid of the kid, but you know you don't want to do that. I have a lot of friends that are also Aboriginal women who have given up careers because the careers themselves are inflexible. These careers are often in university and they can't handle it. They say "you know what, I can do contract work and I don't have to deal with this." (Rosemary)

As previously argued, such choices, or perhaps more accurately such sacrifices, are not demanded of men who are not only free, but in fact actively encouraged, to pursue both. Clearly, these women were all too aware of the ways in which the social construction of gender and appropriate gender roles function to limit opportunity for some while opening doors for others.

*Awareness of the Intersection of Race and Gender in the Structure of Opportunity*

Although the dominant ideology in this purported land of opportunity suggests that how far one reaches in life is a direct result of individual effort, Aboriginal women are well aware of the fallacy of such mythology. The experiences of their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties have taught successive generations of Aboriginal women that individual agency is not the sole, or even the primary determinant of socio-economic mobility, as the intersection of both race and gender discrimination function to provide opportunity for a privileged few, while denying it to others.

*Financial Disadvantage in the Academy.* The intersection of race and gender plays a large role in determining access to funding and financial aid, or the lack thereof, and directly impacts the ability of Aboriginal women to obtain an education. In addition to racist practices in the institution that blatantly discriminate against First Nation students generally and the family circumstances that disadvantage Aboriginal women

with children specifically, centuries of colonial oppression have created such widespread and pervasive poverty in our communities that those most likely to benefit from educational credentials, i.e., Aboriginal women, are the least likely to be able to afford to obtain them. Moreover, many of these women came from families that were already struggling themselves and were, therefore, unable to offer financial support. Indeed, the lack of funds was the most commonly mentioned barrier for these Aboriginal women and better access to financial aid was the most common recommendation for improvement.

It is important to note at the outset that, contrary to popular mythology, not all Aboriginal people have access to ‘free’ government money for their education. Despite the existence of federal government assistance - so called ‘band funding’ for First Nations students - most of these women indicated that a lack of sufficient financial resources was a significant barrier to their academic achievement. Even for full status First Nations women, band funding for post-secondary is not guaranteed. According to the work of Helin and Snow (2010), due to a lack of transparency and accountability in how funding is allocated and awarded in the First Nations, many people are being denied the financial assistance to which they are entitled. According to Milligan and Bougie’s (2009) analysis of the duly registered and therefore entitled First Nations women, only 58% received band funding for their education. The cost of daycare<sup>3</sup>, larger accommodations and increased grocery bills created even greater challenges for those women who were raising children while attending university. For almost all of the women in this study the persistent lack of funds, and the resulting worry and stress, detracted from academic performance. Indeed, as Cheyenne explained “you are always in survival mode. You can’t focus on school.”

While there are a number of scholarships and awards available and many specifically for Aboriginal people, apparently being a mother can be a disadvantage in the applications process. In comparison to those students without children, the increased domestic burdens faced by Aboriginal women with families made such women less able to compete for scholarships and awards, if only on the basis of time available to effectively complete applications.

I've seen what the Aboriginal women who have come through different programs go through, be it undergrad programs, masters programs, or PhD programs. It is the money it takes to raise children. It's expensive and you know, often times the funding levels aren't there to support that, so you're pulled in all directions and your scraping by academically. If you don't have the marks, you can't get the scholarships... Sometimes you don't get as high as marks as other people, so you know it's sometimes hard to get the scholarships and the bursaries. I don't know why that always is, it can be really difficult and sometimes they don't take into consideration that Aboriginal women sometimes have children and families and you know the time commitment, they don't adapt to those things (Rosemary)

As well, Aboriginal women who already have to balance study time with family responsibilities, and perhaps part-time work, are at a disadvantage when applying for awards and bursaries based on merit (academic performance).

Regrettably, the struggle to make ends meet on limited band funding can be exacerbated by what can only be described as overtly racist policies in some institutions. One woman explained that Aboriginal students who received band funding were not allowed to apply for jobs on campus. There were no such policies excluding students with wealthy parents, or grandparents who provide them with funds to attend school, as there would be no way of ascertaining such provisions. Apparently, First Nations students were easy to target, as any who received a sponsorship letter from their band were automatically no longer able to apply to work on campus. Similarly, practices

determining how teaching assistant (TA) positions were assigned were in many cases also felt to be unfair.

There's an elitism, an hierarchal structure in how people get TA's. Depending on the university, sometimes you have to be there for so many years, or you have to have certain marks... So you get these people... they're not good people, they don't always need it. Some of them driving convertibles and Daddy and Mommy are paying and they have an expense account and they're getting TA's, so they're making practically 30,000 dollars... and then there's the people that are struggling and that's what I see in departments across the board, because that's what happens. (Rosemary)

Such practices only serve to further disadvantage an already marginalized Aboriginal population by denying these students an opportunity others take for granted – the right to be able to work your way through school. In these situations, Aboriginal students become trapped, as they cannot make ends meet on limited band funding, but they are denied the usual opportunities to supplement that income through part time employment on campus. Similarly, other universities apparently were known to consciously provide less graduate student funding to Aboriginal students, presuming that they would obtain band funding. Clearly, such discriminatory practices lessen the chances that an Aboriginal woman will be able to survive in the academy, much less succeed.

*Financial Disadvantages in the Work World.* Many of the Aboriginal women in this study indicated an awareness of how both race and gender constrained their opportunities, not only for education, but also for basic survival, in a fundamentally racist and sexist society. When discussing their motivation to pursue post-secondary education many agreed that for Aboriginal women - without post-secondary credentials - the jobs available were sometimes dangerous, often demeaning, and almost always minimum wage. Diane describes how, without a good education, the few options available to Aboriginal women include:



Waitressing, dish washing, anything in that sort of a service provision, that type of thing if your an Aboriginal woman. Probably chamber maiding. I guess it would depend you know, on a person's personality too I think, how far along they go in those areas. But, it's pretty limited, child care for other people, housekeeping, that kind of thing. Not too much opportunity outside of that without more than grade 12... yeah it's pretty limited. (Diane)

Moreover, as Cheyenne explains, with childcare costs eating up a significant portion of an already insufficient wage, making ends meet without an education becomes almost impossible and returning to school becomes therefore an attractive option.

A big motivator was working at minimum wage jobs. But knowing you had so much more to offer...I left home at 18 years old and I came here ... You work and do different things and you do odd jobs, but you always think there has got to be something better out there because you don't enjoy your work. Come Monday you are always waiting for the weekend. So, you are working for minimum wage and trying to pay a baby sitter and everything else. I knew I wanted to go back to school. (Cheyenne)

Conversely, although they are similarly constrained by pervasive racism, the fundamentally patriarchal nature of mainstream society affords Aboriginal men an employment advantage (at least in comparison to Aboriginal women). Several women indicated that in their experience, without post-secondary education, men still seem to have greater opportunity to earn a reasonable salary by working in trucking, construction, mining, lumber camps, or other male-dominated fields.

In addition, as Elize explained, men also appeared to have access to alternate means of entering into employment, relying not mainly on credentials, but instead using networks of friends and other male family members who are already in the work force.

Men have other options like construction, or their buddies and friends will get them a job at this company or that plant. Girls can't really do that. I mean we could do that if we want but there is only one girl that works at the plant... But men have options like that. You don't see a lot of women doing that... My mom she was the only one who went to university in her family. Her brothers didn't go, they ran her dad's lumberjack company and they started driving trucks because they could [start] right away. My dad, he left highschool because he could work in

his Uncle's autobody shop right away, and those options are presented to men earlier than women. They are not going to be like hey girly come work here.... It is very stereotypical but lots of times it is true. You can't expect women to get a job at the plant because it is harder for them to do it in the first place. Like my boyfriend in 6 foot 4 and 250 pounds he could get any job he wants. He just walks in and they hire him because he is big and strong. (Elize)

Although in theory, as Elize claims, women could use their female connections to access employment, it is not, however, practical in reality. Centuries of confining women to the home means they have not had the opportunity to establish the kind of 'old boys networks' that men can rely on.

In addition to an awareness of the increased access accorded to men in certain fields, others noted how income disparity is exacerbated by a devaluation of women's work. Apparently, even when working at the same kind of job, the higher value of men's labour is reflected in the rate of pay. Claiming that the "male type of job is higher paid"

Diane explains:

If you're going to be cooking in a restaurant like a typical Kelseys, or Zellers, or any kind of restaurant, you do mass cooking because there are always people coming, but you wouldn't get paid the same, not as much as a camp cook in maybe a gold mining situation. A lot of women will be sceptical and probably fearful to be going to those places because what's the safety for them in there, the safety factor, the safety issues...those kinds of things to consider. I think where women want [to work] you have to consider other things. They're motivated to get an education so that they can work in a safe environment, in an environment where there are boundaries and rules and accountabilities and that kind of thing. (Diane)

Articulating safety concerns in a shocking, yet likely completely valid observation, Vera pointed out that without an education "for women to make large amounts of money comparable to working in the oil fields, or iron working, the sex trade is the only option". Sadly, the disproportionate number of Aboriginal women working the streets of the major urban centers of our nation would seem to support the truth in this claim (Sethi, 2007).

Voyageur (2008) suggested that the fact that it is easier for Aboriginal men to earn a decent living without higher education in combination with the high proportion of female-lead, single-parent families means that increasingly Aboriginal women are finding they must be better educated in order to provide for their families. As Aschenfelter and Rouse (2000) have confirmed, income differences based on race and gender lessen with increases in education (see also Howe, 2004). With higher levels of education, women not only earn more individually, they begin to catch up with men and similarly Aboriginals begin to catch up with non-aboriginals. Shockingly, as D. Wilson and MacDonald (2010) recently demonstrated, with a Bachelor's degree Aboriginal women have, in fact, higher median incomes than non-aboriginal women who possess the same level of education. They are furthermore, in fact the only segment of the Aboriginal population to exceed the earnings of their educationally equivalent non-aboriginal counterparts. In addition, there is apparently greater gender equality in income among the Aboriginal population as the income gap between Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women is smaller than the gap between non-aboriginal men and women. However, with anything less than a Bachelor's degree, Aboriginal peoples as a group continue to earn much less than non-aboriginals with equivalent education (D. Wilson & MacDonald, 2010).

Without a degree, it is easy for these Aboriginal women to feel that one is in fact without options at all, as the following words plainly indicate:

When I first applied in the university, it's only because I didn't have any options and the jobs were drying up for anyone that didn't have a degree. If you don't have a BA degree, I noticed your resume would be thrown out. So I decided that I should try to go back to university. (Diane)

Although they are well aware of the lack of opportunity, they are not discouraged by such knowledge. In fact, as their academic performance would indicate, these Aboriginal

women are driven to work harder by the knowledge that their lives are constrained by both race and gender.

For Aboriginal women, coming to an awareness of the ways in which they are devalued, denigrated, and subordinated because of their race and subsequently “learning to resist stereotypes, imposed roles and negative definitions of their being” (Anderson, 2000, p. 115) are integral to the process of self-definition and personal empowerment. According to Hill-Collins (2009), the importance of self-definition, the denial of negative definitions and the refusal of imposed subservient roles, lies not in refuting “the technical accuracy” of negative stereotypes (p. 125). Rather than simplistically replacing the old negative images with more positive ones, empowerment comes from recognizing “the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself” and understanding how such stereotypes function to “dehumanize and control” particular groups in society (p. 125). Thus the rejection of damaging stereotypes and the construction of a positive identity is not “the goal but rather the point of departure” in the larger process of self-definition and the “journey toward an understanding of how our lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (p. 125).

Hill-Collins (2009) further explains that although independent self-definition and critical awareness do not directly impact the oppressive conditions of daily life for individual women (in fact they may worsen such conditions as the awareness of injustice can foster bitterness and anger not to mention an unwillingness to accept ‘ones place’ in society), they are empowering insofar as a changed consciousness inspires people to work for social change and a “critical mass of individuals with a changed consciousness” can

in fact foster “collective empowerment” (p. 129). Moreover, the colonization of a peoples is never complete, no matter how protracted the effort (as evidenced by the occasional need for violence to maintain hierarchies). Even oppressed people are, therefore, rarely totally powerless in the face of domination. Consequently, becoming “personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one’s ability to act, is essential” as a first step in resisting intersecting oppressions and as a prerequisite for engaging in internal transformational resistance (Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 129).

#### *Evidence of a Social Justice Motivation*

The question of what motivated these women to work hard and persist in post-secondary education, despite the numerous barriers they faced and the sacrifices that were required, is central to my conceptualization of academic achievement as internal transformational resistance. The motivation to enrol and persist in university level studies appears to be intimately connected to a desire to change not only their own personal circumstances, but also an awareness of the desperate need to change the circumstances of Aboriginal communities in general.

#### *Education as a Weapon in the Struggle for Social Change*

Centuries of exploitation and oppression, combined with persistent educational disparity and the resulting comparatively lower incomes for Aboriginal people generally and Aboriginal women specifically, have lead to appallingly bleak circumstances for many Aboriginal communities. Describing the situation on her home reserve Jane explains:

You know when you’re living on a reserve and you see all the poverty that’s around you, and people having... some people having alcohol problems. I

remember living on the reserve, on weekends it was very common to see drunks walking around on weekends and I mean they were all over the place! All day, the whole weekend, starting Friday night to Sunday night. Sometimes there was a group of them, you know, going from one house to another or whatever. I remember thinking “I won’t be able to live, I can’t, I won’t be able to live like this!” You know? I gotta do something to get out of this misery, or to get out of this, very poor, poverty, dismal, sad, you know? It’s sad to see this all around you. (Jane)

Apparently, the experience of poverty and alcoholism in her community instilled a desire to “get out of the misery” and obtain a better life. However, Jane explained that she didn’t leave her community until much later “because I knew there was a better future for our children and I knew that. I felt like I had a task to do for my community.” Evidently, Jane’s sense of responsibility and her belief that she had a role to play in creating a better future for all Aboriginal people was stronger than her desire to personally escape from misery and poverty.

In addition to pursuing post-secondary education in order to better the lives of their own children and families in particular, many Aboriginal women in the study described a strong sense of commitment to bettering the lives of Aboriginal children and Aboriginal people in general. Many of these women explained how they had been raised to believe they had a responsibility to give back to their own community and an obligation to “help our people”.

I’ve always been I guess, you know, passionate about helping women and children too, so that is probably a big part of it. I’m just thinking now, that this is probably sounding really self absorbed (laughter) but that’s a big part of it. Just helping Aboriginal people [because] I mean, we’re so oppressed and so many Aboriginal women don’t even, I don’t even think they realize that they are oppressed, or how oppressed they are, you know. Even just helping to educate them and seeing them make changes in their lives is really rewarding and, that is I think a big part of the motivation too. (Margaret)

Hampton (1995) explained that a commitment to provide service to community is in fact one of the 12 standards that differentiates an empowering redefined Indian education from what is offered to our people in mainstream systems.

*Traditional Community Responsibility*

Given our traditional cultures it is not surprising that many of these women feel the need to help our people. Arising out of our role as the givers of life, the role of Aboriginal women is specifically to care for and nurture that life once it is brought into the world and, by extension, to care for and nurture our nations (Anderson, 2000). Using the teachings of the Dakota nation, Anderson (2000) explained that according to our traditions Aboriginal women not only literally “birth the people” they are also given a “lifetime responsibility to nurture the people”:

It’s not just women’s responsibility to the children – we have a responsibility to all of the people. We have to. We are the life givers. We are the life force of the nation. Our responsibility is to everyone; male and female, young or old, because we are that place from which life emanates. And there is nothing greater than that. (Ivy Chaste, quoted in Anderson, 2000, p. 169)

Bringing forth and nurturing a new life is understood to be the basis of the creation of our nation and a future for our peoples. Thus, unlike western ideologies that denied women decision-making power in the family and positioned them in a role equivalent to a family servant, traditionally Aboriginal women had responsibility for the life they created and, by extension, for the whole family and the entire community. With that responsibility came authority and the “right to make decisions on behalf of the children, the community and the nation” (Anderson, 2000, p. 171).

As expected, many of these women indicated that adherence to traditional values instilled a strong sense of responsibility not only for their own families, but also for the

future of their communities, and indeed all Aboriginal people collectively. As part of the longstanding battle for the emancipation of our peoples, many Aboriginal women were taught that their role was to obtain an education and use the ‘tools’ of the dominant society to help their people. As a result, many expressed a belief that through their post-secondary studies they would eventually be able to help those back on the reserves, or those living in the streets of the urban centers, to have a better life.

The message that we were given growing up was that you had to go to school. They would say we need our own doctors. We need our own nurses. We need our own teachers. That is how we were raised. I don’t recall them saying you need to get an education so you can make lots of money and buy a big house, it was more in the context of giving back to the community. That was my grandfather’s philosophy. I have heard that from other people as well. Like from Basil Johnson, he often talks about my grandfather and how he too was told to “do something for your people”. That is what I remember too, that’s how he raised us. Do something for your people. So that is why education was important. (Janet)

Since the first introduction of western education by the missionaries, through the years of assimilation and integration, Aboriginal parents, grandparents, and leaders have recognized the potential of education to be a tool for the betterment of our people (see Brayboy, 2005). Although this potential has yet to be realized, despite years of educational abuse at the hands of both church and state, many Aboriginal people still see education as the means to a better future for all our peoples. Within a traditional Aboriginal value system working for the benefit of the collective is the primary motivation and means of obtaining status in the community. Therefore, education is not valued as a means of personally climbing the social ladder, as it is seen to be in many westernized cultures (Collins, 1979), but rather it is perceived as a means of bringing our entire community ahead.



For Aboriginal women the collective values that are central to our traditional culture can come into conflict with the elitist tendencies of the academy.

When I think about our PhD lecture, a certain person was saying, you know, when you get to be a PhD you kiss your family goodbye. I don't know if you remember that? I was just sitting there thinking "boy, it takes some people a lifetime to learn why we're really given life." It's not to be esoteric and get to a certain level for everybody else to aspire to. It's about relationships and everybody moving forward together. So, I just think about that, I always think of it whenever I get kind of down because I have all these mountains of tapes to transcribe and I've got deadlines to meet. I think, you know, why am I doing this? Am I doing this to get this degree? No, because it's not going to make any difference, I'm still going to be me. I'm still going to know these people, I'm still going to be here to help my people, my family and make this work. I think that's important and that is why I chose to do the PhD, because once I got my masters and I was in school, I thought, you know what, I'm in the classroom, I'm doing what I can, but that's just not enough. Some more questions need to be asked and I need to ask more people about those questions. So, that's why I'm here. Everything has a meaning. (Cathy)

Thus, obtaining a degree is not about individual accomplishment or even personal empowerment, but rather it is obtained for a much more pragmatic and community oriented purpose. Degrees and credentials can be tools to help our people and they are especially useful in a mainstream society that places great value on such things (Brayboy, 2005).

#### *Traditional Reciprocity*

The idea of giving back, of reciprocity, is absolutely fundamental to traditional Aboriginal beliefs. One of the women in the study explained how universities should embrace this idea of reciprocity within the institution so as better motivate Aboriginal students.

If you want the student to do something you gotta give something back. That is the way I believe and I always try to do that. If I get something some help I always try to give something back. I got a cheque the other day for 5000.00 dollars, a Native student bursary. Now I gotta give something back. I gotta go to bingo now and give some to charity (laughter)... well I got presents for Christmas

for the kids drum group I facilitate. There is a pow wow place out there and they have skins, so I went out there and I bought them all a piece and oh did they ever love that. I used my own money and that is what I believe. If you help and you do things it always comes back to you. (Helena)

The principle of reciprocity is central to the Aboriginal tradition and adherence to this belief is what ensured the survival of maximum numbers of Aboriginal people in hunting and gathering societies. Unlike western societies which encouraged personal frugality and the amassing of resources as the means of family survival during times of shortage (and as a symbol of social status), traditional hunting and gathering Aboriginal societies actively discouraged the amassing of resources. Status in the community was gained not in the possession of resources but instead in the giving away of such resources. This redistribution of wealth functioned very effectively as a means of ensuring the survival of the entire community. As many people have referred to education as ‘the new buffalo’, implying that it is the resource that will sustain our people, it is therefore to be expected that Aboriginal students would feel compelled to use their education for the benefit of their people.

The principle of reciprocity is in fact so fundamental that not only are the credentials to be used for the benefit of the community once obtained, but also the process of getting those credentials is perceived in a similar fashion. Thus, unlike westernized notions of objective research, Indigenous research is specifically defined by its subjectivity, by the engagement with, and contribution to, the Aboriginal community.

It is Indigenous research. [This university] has always been big on pushing Indigenous research. The whole difference in Indigenous research is that with Indigenous research you have given back to the community. That is kind of like the qualifier between mainstream research and Indigenous research... It is all about giving back to the community. (Elaine)

Clearly, the fact that Aboriginal women are seen as having responsibility for not only the well-being of their own children and families, but also for the larger community and nation, significantly increases what is at stake when these women decide to pursue post-secondary studies. The educational pursuits and academic achievements of these women are unquestionably motivated by a desire for social justice, i.e. a desire to participate in the empowerment and eventual emancipation of our nations.

### *Transformational Role Modelling*

For many of the women in this study, the sense of responsibility to family and community is not only about pragmatic concerns such as using the knowledge, skills and income provided through education to work for the emancipation of our people. By proving that a post-secondary degree is attainable for Aboriginal people, despite centuries of apparent evidence to the contrary, these women were also consciously challenging dominant ideology, negative stereotypes, and the racist assumption that Aboriginal people are inherently incapable of academic achievement.

Part of getting an education would be to open my mind and open up the possibilities for me, so that I can show my son that the possibilities are endless, endless but near. At least you can dream, you could place them in your mind that it is possible. (Diane)

By refusing to accept the dominant image of Aboriginality and consciously choosing educational achievement, despite an awareness of the numerous barriers they face, such transformational role models are instrumental in redefining the limits of possibility.

The importance placed on being a role model is connected directly to the fostering of dreams and the setting of goals – expanding the horizons of what we deem possible, but specifically in relation to where we are currently and where we have come from historically.

I just wanted to give you a picture of who I am and where I come from and why it is really important for our young people to stay in school. I mean I went back after years, after raising my children, but all the way along I would do some upgrading here and there and it all helped to get where I am today. But the thing is to help the youth not to drop-out but to stay in there and to finish their highschool and college or whatever and go on to university because they can do it. If I can do it with all the problems I have had, they can do it. I look at that and I say I did it. I am graduating in June. But also I am so proud of myself for doing it. I am not proving anything to anybody. I just am who I am today and that is enough. So I say to you I didn't have no advantage. I didn't have no nothing. I just have a lot of love and respect. (Helena)

Helena explains that it is critical that we demonstrate to the younger generations that, despite historical oppression, persistent systemic racism and the resulting hardships faced by the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people, higher education is attainable. In this manner, Helena believes that her own refusal to accept victimization and subordination will open the minds of other Aboriginal students to the possibility of resistance. As Hill-Collins (2009) had explained, the purpose of racism is “to destroy not just actions that resist, but the very ideas that might stimulate such resistance” (p. 221). Helena’s academic achievement against all odds is obviously motivated by the pursuit of social justice insofar as she is attempting to inspire others to similarly throw off the shackles of oppression and is, therefore, unquestionably a profound act of resistance.

While, Helena is proud to be a role model for the young Aboriginal people who have witnessed her academic achievement and those who come to her for guidance and support, Rosemary explained how this role can also become a burden. As she feels that she is expected to be a representative of her people, Rosemary described increased pressure (motivation) to succeed in her studies as she is acutely aware of the increased ramifications of failure when so many consider her to be an example.

I certainly think of that, like, do I want to drop out? What example do I show to those young women, you know, the undergrad students that would look at me and

say well “she dropped out.” You know? It’s an easy out, you just do it. Things get rough, you just do it, rather than maybe try to fight or change something that maybe pissed you off or you can’t do. You fight and you tell people what you need... While you’re a good person and you represent your community too, you have to, you have to put on a couple different masks or hats along the way in order to get through the system, to change the system for those who are coming behind you. That’s certainly what I think about. Not only did I have role models who now have their PhDs... but I’m a role model for those who look – those who see me as a TA. They see that I can do this and do it in a good way. Certainly, you know, I think we need more and more Aboriginal women out there that are strong and visible. (Rosemary)

Thus, as Rosemary indicated, the awareness of one’s role as a representative of the entire Aboriginal community and her resulting visibility as a racialized role model, can be simultaneously motivating and oppressive, as personal behaviours and actions are perceived to impact, and reflect on, other Aboriginal peoples. Consequently, there is enormous pressure not only to achieve, but also to do it “in a good way” which specifically refers to the maintenance of cultural integrity. Rosemary also pointed to the transformational power of her very presence in the academy as she hoped that her struggles, persistence, and ultimate success would eventually help to ‘change the system’ for those who come after.

The concept of enduring oppressive situations in order to better the chances of future generations is for many racially oppressed women, according to Hill-Collins (2009), a strategy for the pursuit of social justice. Just as African American women described their efforts to not only ensure the survival of their children, but also to instil the kind of values that would encourage the rejection of a subordinate place in society (Hill-Collins, 2009), Diane explained that struggling to earn a degree was as much about providing her son with broadened horizons and increased opportunities, as it was about the ability to provide material goods such as food, shelter, and clothing.

There is a big difference between children being raised on welfare and children being raised by parents with jobs. Their self esteem, their motivation, their outlook on life, their positive energy, you know I see the difference because I live in a very depressed socioeconomic area. It's very obvious to me, and it's not just Native children, Native and non-native, I can see the difference. I want my son to be able to see that. We don't have to have a lot of money. We don't have to have lot of material things, but I want him to have the option of whether he wants those things or not... I want him to have a choice. I don't want him to be a poverty thinker, thinking that we can't afford that, or we can't do that, or it's not possible. I don't want his mind and reality shaped that way. I want him able to think wow I can do this, I can go there. (Diane)

As these words indicate, providing future generations with a 'better life' is not necessarily about financial wherewithal. For many Aboriginal communities, where despair has settled in after generations of persistent crushing poverty, the educational achievement of women like Diane is perceived as a means of concretely demonstrating that a better life is indeed possible for Aboriginal peoples, even in the face of much historical evidence to the contrary. In this manner Diane pursues the larger goal of social justice for Aboriginal people through her efforts as a mother to ensure that her children will not simply accept their own subordination as inevitable. Although she cannot guarantee that they will automatically have a better life than previous generations, as Hill-Collins (2009) argued, a "changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their lives" (p. 129) and is therefore important to the overall struggle against oppression.

### *Conclusion*

The stories of these Aboriginal women demonstrate an awareness of the challenges they must face and the barriers they must overcome in order to succeed in the context of mainstream institutions specifically, and the dominant racist, sexist, post-colonial society generally. However, instead of being discouraged by persistent

experiences of discrimination in the academy or paralyzed by the knowledge of structural inequity in society, these particular women described an increased commitment to academic achievement. The pursuit of educational credentials from mainstream post-secondary institutions was perceived not only as a means of providing a better life for their families, their communities, and their people, but also as means of initiating necessary social change. As they displayed external compliance, critical consciousness, and a social justice motivation, the educational achievement of these Aboriginal women can be interpreted as internal transformational resistance. Survival in the academy has become therefore part of the larger fight for the survival of our nations and our people.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Findings and Analysis: Strategies for Transformational Resistance in the Academy

*Introduction*

In the context of a racist, sexist, and (allegedly) post-colonial society, positive self-definition and self-valuation may be necessary, but they are by no means sufficient to ensure success for Aboriginal women within institutions that reflect and, in fact, function to reproduce the dominant social order. Even though their ability to take action to bring about social change maybe severely limited (by a lack of power and/or resources and a position of vulnerability), many Aboriginal women, armed with a changed consciousness, have become increasingly aware of the ways in which they are personally and collectively marginalized and have thereby become simultaneously better able to determine ways of resisting such oppression, which is in itself a means of working toward social change albeit in a less visible way.

This chapter outlines the multiple strategies of resistance employed by these Aboriginal women as they struggled to survive and succeed in a hostile academic environment. Indeed it has been long argued that, as one of the primary institutions responsible for the reproduction of the existing unequal, racist, and sexist social order, the academy is in fact complicit in the maintenance of White privilege and patriarchal power and is therefore also complicit in the oppression of Aboriginal women. As a result, the survival strategies described herein include (albeit extremely rare) instances of outright confrontation and subversion, as well as the commonly employed avoidance strategies which include 'passing' as non-aboriginal, becoming strategically invisible and/or



purposefully silent, learning to ‘play the game’ according to the rules of the oppressor, and how to pick the battles worth fighting when avoidance was not possible.

*External Transformational Resistance*

*Confrontation*

In a rare example of external transformational resistance, when a non-aboriginal counsellor discouraged Cathy from pursuing her dreams and attempted instead to push her into a vocation (and social class) deemed more appropriate for someone of her race and gender, she not only resisted the efforts to ‘keep her in her place’ but in fact used the resulting anger as a motivation to achieve well beyond such limited expectations in order to prove everyone wrong:

My counsellor played an instrumental role in my life, the non-native counsellor, by saying “you can’t really go to a university. You want to be a teacher? You don’t really have those kinds of marks. So how about we look at something else. Let’s look at the vocations, look at maybe hairstyling, or the food service industry?” I went home and I was so angry. I remember this so clear. I was so angry. I was like “I had enough of this! People telling me to do well in school. People telling me to just live your life. Why don’t people just let me do what I want to do?” So that really got my gears going and I said “well that’s it, if I have to go to advanced to get into university then bring it on!” And it was hard... almost impossible. They weren’t going to let me do it... So I told my counsellor, I said “I want into advanced and if you’re going to give me a hard time about it, I’ll bring my dad in here.” But that worked. They were really surprised... and I could tell that they really admired me for stepping forward like that. I don’t think that they had seen many Native, many Aboriginal women step forward like that, to have so much determination. But it was hard... (Cathy)

In an interesting example of the intersection of race and gender in the structuring of opportunity in society, it is important to note that as an Aboriginal woman Cathy had to employ the patriarchal authority of her father in order to be granted access to the education she deserved. However, after years of being streamed into general-level courses as the result of the lower expectations held for Aboriginal students, by the time

she became aware of how the system was surreptitiously operating to deny her access to higher education, Cathy found it was extremely difficult and indeed “almost impossible” to cross over into the university stream. Clearly, Cathy had not been encouraged by her teachers, nor was she expected to achieve a post-secondary education and, consequently, was not provided the same skills and knowledge that others had obtained. Unfortunately, this meant working twice as hard to have the opportunity to even enrol in university much less achieve success therein. Regrettably, for many Aboriginal students, by the time they realize that a university education is slipping out of their reach as a result of such streaming, it is often too late.

### *Subversion*

Unlike Cathy who openly challenged racist assumptions, practices, and the processes of exclusion, most of the women preferred a less confrontational approach. Although she describes a similar experience of being denied access to the academy, instead of directly confronting institutional powers, Sylvia chose an alternate route and was thereby able to subvert the process of her own marginalization.

I actually didn't get into the university of my choice and for whatever motivated me, I decided that was important to my own ego so I signed up for summer school... I tried again and I still didn't get into the university of my choice. So I ended up putting in my own resume and subjects that I thought were strong and bringing some of those pieces of work that I had done in English and art for example and I went to [the university] myself. Which is amazing when I think back on it, because I would've been eighteen and I knew already with my [non-native] peers that I was lagging behind them. I still decided to go and give up that summer and market myself, which I didn't realize at the time that was what I was doing... I always wish I had kept the rejection letters, because I got rejected twice from [that university] and I still went and took classes there and ultimately graduated from there. (Sylvia)

In a situation where many would have given up and simply accepted the institutional appraisal of their abilities, Sylvia refused to accept her exclusion and persisted despite

numerous rejections. She was ultimately able to obtain an opportunity to prove her academic ability by circumventing the usual application process and beating the system. Unfortunately such a positive outcome is not common. Typically, as Brade et al. (2003) maintain, when Aboriginal students realize they must “work twice as hard to obtain the achievement levels of their white counterparts,” and that “society is actively preventing them from reaching these goals,” many simply give up and disengage from education (p. 237). Clearly, although the presence of high self-esteem and a positive self image does not lessen the barriers that many Aboriginal students still face in the struggle to gain access to and respect in the academy, it can enhance a personal ability to deal with and overcome the inevitable setbacks.

### *Internal Transformational Resistance*

#### *‘Passing’ as a Strategy of Resistance*

The university “has long been, and remains, a zone of white privilege” (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 60) and, as Monture (2009) contends, as experienced in the university, “Whiteness” implies “maleness” and all the power that patriarchy provides (p. 78). It is therefore not surprising, as Kobayashi (2009) maintained, that women of colour have been effectively excluded from the academy. However, for those few who do gain access (which serves to bolster the claim that such institutions are not exclusive), according to Monture (2009) once accepted into the academy, there exists an expectation that academics of colour “will all be functionally ‘White’ and have all become so because of our years of education” in a system that rewards acceptance of, or at least deference to, the dominant (White patriarchal) culture (p. 77). In addition, as Fordham (1993) posits, women are compelled to disguise their “femaleness” in order to gain acceptance in the

male centric environment of academic institutions. In the context of such a system that rewards those who display the appropriate (White patriarchal) culture and marginalizes and often denigrates those who do not, resisting the dominant narrative in order to preserve one's sense of self-worth becomes an important, albeit difficult, strategy in the overall struggle for survival in the academy as an Aboriginal person generally and as an Aboriginal woman particularly. Monture (2009) further describes how, as Aboriginal people, "if we are not learning to reflect and resist - knowing that resistance is only one possible choice of action - then the structures and practices at the university will consume us" (p. 77). Indeed, she continues, for those who are 'othered' by the White patriarchal culture, values, and practices of the university, a significant amount of time and energy is exhausted just trying to remain in the institution much less actually succeed therein. Although racism is "produced and reproduced systemically," according to Kobayashi (2009), it is experienced at the level of the individual in interaction with other individuals (p. 63). Moreover, Kobayashi continues, "our histories cannot be whitened nor can they be set aside" (p. 66) as they are a fundamental part of our identities and therefore, as Monture (2009) argued, "every act of an othered person in an institution like a university is an act of power (conscious or not)" as they are "giving power up or taking it" depending upon their degree of resistance to, or compliance with, institutional expectations and the dominant narrative of society at large (2009, p. 77).

Even though the Aboriginal women in this study evidenced an awareness of the numerous barriers facing Aboriginal people generally and Aboriginal women specifically and the myriad of ways in which they are constrained, excluded, and 'othered' on a continual basis in the academy, previous experience had taught many that, particularly

when in a position of relative disadvantage, direct confrontation poses considerable risk and is often unproductive and subversion is not always possible. Indeed, having worked hard to gain access to the academy, the coping strategies employed by the women in this study represent a critical awareness of the process of their own marginalization in such institutions as part of the larger process of systemic discrimination in society generally and a resulting conscious choice to offer sufficient compliance to succeed academically, while still resisting the underlying racist and sexist ideology enough to maintain a sense of personal and cultural integrity. Despite progressive developments that have recognized and outlawed the more overt forms of discrimination that existed in the past and the resulting claims that therefore “colour makes no difference” in contemporary society, “marginalized groups remain marginalized” and the colour of one’s skin is still a marker for exclusion and discrimination for those who are non-white (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 66). Consequently, according to Brayboy (2004), for Aboriginal students in predominantly White universities, consciously working “to make themselves less visible to the dominant population,” and thereby avoiding racial conflict, is unquestionably an important strategy for survival (2004, p. 127).

Indeed, for those who are less stereotypically Aboriginal in their physical appearance, ‘passing’ as white has proven to be an effective means of avoiding direct conflict and discrimination. For instance, according to Sheila, acting “as White as you can” was a survival strategy intentionally taught to her by her parents and grandparents who had themselves long ago realized that hiding one’s Aboriginality as much as possible made life easier in a racist mainstream environment.

When my [paternal] grandfather was raising his children, he always tried to enforce the area of um, trying to be as White as you can in order to have a better

survival rate in life... my mom didn't go to residential school. She grew up on a trap line, spoke Ojibway forever... a very, you know, traditional lady... My mom would try to speak to us in Ojibway, try to teach us the language, and my dad would say, even though my dad spoke [our language], he said "no, the kids aren't going to learn, cause it's not going to be any use to them when they grow up and become adults..." and so we never learned. (Sheila)

In a society where people of colour generally and Aboriginal people specifically have been denigrated, exploited, subjugated, and oppressed, simply because they were non-white and therefore believed to be inferior at best, or subhuman at worst, hiding one's tribal heritage is primarily a method of self protection but it is also a means of gaining access to opportunities that would otherwise be denied. Arguing that appearance influences how Indigenous women are treated, D. Mihesuah (2003) suggested that indeed, women who were of mixed White and Native heritage (and therefore less stereotypically Native in physical appearance) had numerous opportunities that were not available to most "full blood" Native women or those of mixed African and Native ancestry (p. xvii). Although trying to be as White as possible may be consciously and strategically employed and is apparently a functional adaptation for short-term survival in a hostile environment, such strategies exact significant long-term costs and the achievement of success may not be worth the resulting loss of cultural identity. Sadly, because their grandparents and parents quite rightly believed that minimizing any and all signifiers of Aboriginality facilitated success in (a fundamentally racist) mainstream society, Sheila and her siblings had been denied the opportunity to claim an important aspect of their cultural identity, specifically the ability to speak and understand their own language.

*Strategic Invisibility and Deliberate Silence as a Resistance Strategy*

Rather than actively attempting to portray a White identity, others passively yet strategically avoided identification as an Aboriginal person when in hostile environments. For instance, Cathy explained that although she had experienced a great deal of racism when she was younger, particularly in the schools, when she left her home territory and entered a university where no one knew her background, she often avoided identifying her racial heritage as a means of self protection.

I've been able to escape a lot of that because I'm whiter... You know, there have been many classes where they're talking about land claims and the whole class was just against it, saying "look at this, look what they're doing now!" There was no way I was going to put my hand up and say "I'm Aboriginal" and "yes, we do have a right"... Why would I do something like that, and be totally in the minority? (Cathy)

As Cathy's words attest, when Aboriginal issues came up in lectures or seminars, it was rarely in a positive context and to self-identify would only have drawn negative attention and would therefore have been unquestionably foolhardy. Under these circumstances, although the decision to remain silent and allow racist myths and misinformation to continue unchallenged was decidedly disempowering, the alternative of self-identifying in order to offer a more accurate perspective and thereby opening oneself to persecution was potentially even more damaging and therefore not worth the risk. Indeed, according to Brayboy's (2004) work on Native American students, in such situations Aboriginal students must attempt to choose "the lesser of two evils" (p. 144). By "retreating into the silence and invisibility that are more comfortable" Native students remain relatively protected, while speaking out and "challenging inaccurate representations and sharing information about what 'real' Indians are" requires the individual Native student to become "more visible" and simultaneously more vulnerable

(Brayboy, 2004, p. 144). Similarly, in Fordham's (1993) work on academically successful Black girls who choose not to "announce or celebrate their presence by speaking or in some way making themselves visible" (p. 18), it was argued that the intentional maintenance of such "invisibility" and "deliberate silence" were prerequisites for academic success for those who are stigmatized by their racial identity (p. 17).

Even though remaining silent offers, as Brayboy (2004) argued, a sense of comfort in an environment often described as hostile, such comfort comes at the expense of voice. However, Cathy explained that she was able to express herself and avoid being completely silenced by sharing her perspective with her professor through her writing assignments and thereby strategically making herself visible and finding voice in a safer context.

I would write about it and then the teacher would bring something up... bring the topic out a bit more into the class room, in our discussion and he would start breaking it down. Then I could start contributing, but the process to that takes time... But I was in situations where you know, there was a lot of racism, I was fortunate... I feel bad for other students. (Cathy)

Depending on the professor's ability to be open-minded and willingness to introduce the alternative perspectives from his or her position of power and authority, Cathy explained that she was subsequently able to judge whether her perspective would be accepted and join classroom dialogues if and when she determined a safe space had been established. Recognizing that she was indeed fortunate to be able to avoid persecution, Cathy clearly struggled with feelings of guilt for her lack of action in the face of racism and sympathy for those who were not as fortunate, those who could not hide the markers of racial difference.



Similarly, Cora acknowledged that she was very careful about maintaining a middle-class image in order to fit in with her classmates and draw attention away from considerations of race. She explained “I was consciously strategic about what I would divulge to people, I had a middle class façade. I think a lot of these women do that same thing. It is all a façade.” Likewise, claiming she had never actively denied her Aboriginal heritage, Lisa admitted that since others were unsure of her racial background, or had simply presumed she was White; she felt that she too was willing to benefit from racial anonymity.

I never really hid it, but because my dad is White and his family lived in [small northern city] basically since the beginning and everybody knew him and not everybody knew my mom was Aboriginal, or from a reserve, so I could certainly pass for either... I didn't hide it but at the same time I didn't broadcast it either.  
(Lisa)

While she felt that self-identifying as Aboriginal often served no purpose other than marking herself for abuse, Lisa found herself struggling to maintain a protective cloak of silence when offensive racist attitudes inevitably arose in class.

[this professor] was trying to say in a very confrontational and not very effective way that we are human, but he was trying to say that basically we are no better than everybody else, nothing special, because [our connection to the land] has been mythologized... and maybe in some cases it has been used for reasons that really weren't true, but at the core I disagreed with him and the conversation developed... and I am squirming thinking I don't like this and to make matters worse my friend is in the class with me and he is looking at me and I am looking at him. It is making it worse because he knows exactly what I am thinking and I can't just hide. So basically I went into the graduate office and I said I want out... this prof who seemed okay and then he pulls this on [me], in the class it would be me versus them the whole term. I just couldn't do it... I went to talk to him afterwards and he said 'well I was trying to be controversial' and I said 'well you were.' Then he says 'but now I have lost a voice,' but I said 'it is not my responsibility to re-educate these people' ... that's his job. (Lisa)

As she was unable to just sit back and listen to the negative things being taught about Aboriginal peoples, Lisa decided instead to remove herself from the environment. By

dropping the course Lisa thereby avoided having to take a stand and decide between either participating in the denigration of her own people in order to preserve her protective invisibility as an Aboriginal person, or opening herself up for persecution by introducing a more accurate but unquestionably less popular perspective and arguing against what was being taught about Aboriginal peoples.

However, Lisa's experience illustrates one of the significant drawbacks of the strategic employment of invisibility as a means of surviving in racist institutions. For women of colour the "most efficient way" to succeed in the academy is to "perform all assigned tasks while remaining silent" which unfortunately also results in the loss of voice (Fordham, 1993, p. 23). The voice lost is one that could have corrected erroneous assumptions, dispelled myths, and introduced a more accurate portrayal of Indigenous cultures, but only at great personal cost. As Rita pointed out, sometimes "the Prof will say something about a First Nations group and the people sitting behind you just start bashing First Nations people, but they don't even know it's you. That is really tough sometimes to hear." Clearly, although the choice to remain invisible is eventually rewarded, it also entails significant personal costs as one is often subjected to bigotry and must endure prejudice and hatred in silence.

#### *'Playing the Game' as Resistance Strategy*

For those Aboriginal women who were unable to 'pass' for white and could not therefore become physically invisible, or for those who were unwilling to do so, alternative strategies for survival in the academy were employed. According to Kobayashi (2009), given the overall 'culture of Whiteness' fostered in universities, the inclusion of people of colour is predicated upon their willingness and ability to conform

to the dominant culture. Although they can never actually be white and will therefore never be truly accepted and never experience the privileging that whiteness affords in our society, to get ahead “one can act white, follow the white rules, and people will go out of their way to be accepting according to their rules; to challenge whiteness, however, is to embark upon a perilous journey (p. 67). Consequently, as Fordham (1988) found, having acknowledged the “critical importance of race” as “one of the most formidable obstacles” to vertical mobility, adopting what she termed a ‘raceless persona,’ was deemed by the students in her study a functional strategy for achieving success. Specifically, “disaffiliating themselves” and “adopting personae that indicate a lack of identification with, or a strong relationship to” their racial community, in essence assimilating, was seen as a means of avoiding racial stigma and increasing their own chances of success not only within inherently racist institutions, but also in society at large (Fordham, 1988, p. 58). Therefore, until Aboriginal nations can establish our own educational institutions and operate them in a way that is appropriate according to our cultural beliefs, as Aboriginal peoples, we have little choice but to learn how ‘to play the game’ and follow the rules of the dominant society as reflected in academic institutions if we want to succeed. Yvonne explained,

I don't like the idea of having to play the game, although I mean I do it. I have played along, here and there... well I'm not as stubborn as some of my peers I guess, or strong willed as some of my peers, because I know [Aboriginal] people that have been adamant, you know, that their way is the right way....well yeah it is the right way for us, but this whole academic structure of having formal education, public school, secondary, private school, college, university and scholarships and bursaries, this is not our idea, this is not our world, this is their world you know.... They get to make the rules, you know? If we want to play in their world we have to follow the rules, you know? And that's the way I look at it, I look at it very holistically... I guess I don't feel as betrayed as I would if I was completely lying to myself. You know, I just try to be honest with myself... to a

level where I can still look at myself in the mirror every day and say “I think I’m doing the right thing”. (Yvonne)

Unfortunately, for Aboriginal women, many of whom are keenly aware of the ways in which they are marginalized within the larger society generally and in the academy specifically, the object of ‘the game’ being played is the legitimation and reproduction of the status quo, i.e., the existing inequities and White privilege.

Consequently, it appears that learning to ‘play the game’ in an institution where racism operates to “maintain a racial ruling elite” (James, 2009, p. 134) is to be complicit in the oppression and marginalization of those who are non-white. Conversely, choosing instead “to challenge whiteness” and not ‘play the game,’ and thereby refusing to participate in the reproduction of structures that ensure White privilege by actively exposing and opposing racial oppression, is as argued by Kobayashi, “to embark upon a perilous journey” which ultimately threatens an already tenuous acceptance in the institution (2009, p. 67, see also Fenelon, 2003). In fact, according to Luther et al. (2001) universities typically only admit those who are “most likely to fit within and help reproduce its established [White patriarchal] culture and traditions” (p. 25), thereby avoiding any potential disruption to the existing order. Therefore, as Lorde (1984) confirmed, for those whose lives are constrained by the experience of oppression, becoming “familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor” and self-consciously “adopting them for some illusion of protection,” (p. 114) is an effective means of camouflaging counter-hegemonic thought and transformational resistance. We can see how, for Aboriginal women like Yvonne, pragmatism governs behaviours and decision making processes. Yvonne quite rightly recognizes that within mainstream educational institutions compliance with the dominant culture fosters educational success

and she is therefore strategically operating according to ‘their rules’ in order to achieve her own goals. However, much like women of colour who hide their critical consciousness and the resulting acts of resistance “behind the mask of behavioural conformity” (Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 106), Yvonne’s compliance is in fact deliberate and superficial - a means to an end - and in no way indicates that she has actually adopted mainstream values or ideology.

In order to understand how this can possibly be considered ultimately empowering, as compliance with the dominant culture necessitates a rejection of Aboriginal cultural traditions and worldviews, we can turn to the work of Hill-Collins (2009) who explained that as a result of their economic vulnerability (i.e. because they desperately needed their jobs to support their families) many women of colour would “superficially adhere to the prevailing rules and thus appear to be endorsing them,” while simultaneously engaging in other forms of resistance (p. 220). By consciously acting as though they had accepted their place in society and appearing to conform to the roles deemed appropriate for women of colour, such women were able to mask their independent consciousness and subversive counter-hegemonic activity. As it is one of the primary vehicles for personal advancement in our society and an important tool in the overall struggle for equality and social justice, apparently for Aboriginal women who need academic credentials in order to help their people and support their families, the personal disempowerment associated with having to ‘play by their rules’ for the short-term is a price willingly paid for access to higher education.

In an environment where White privilege has become naturalized and racism is “deeply entrenched” (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 61), although it has been argued that a retreat

into protective silence “only compounds our oppression,” the choice to speak out against such oppression is “also fraught with danger” (Monture, 2009, p. 80, citing Montoya, 2002). Clearly the potential for backlash must be carefully considered. According to Henry and Tator (2009b), students of colour who attempt to introduce issues of race and/or racism in their university courses are often met with “denial or backlash” and are “very aware of context” indicating there are “situations where they do not feel comfortable raising concerns about racism (p. 48). In fact, as Cora explained, for those who initially have the courage to try to challenge the dominant ideology are quickly taught that such efforts are not rewarded.

I did this seminar on White privilege and the first comment was from someone who said “I don’t think racism exists [here]”. That was the first comment after a whole seminar about White privilege and someone else was really pissed about it. It was just a really bad experience all around. I would come home and just cry myself to sleep.

Unfortunately the denial of the existence of racism or social inequality is not limited to students. Kobayashi (2009) argued that as a direct result of pervasive and profound racism in the university, there is “resistance on the part of those in power to recognizing that problems of racism exist” and a profound “lack of institutional procedures to combat systemic racism” (p. 61), which leaves students who do speak out against racism unsupported and with little hope of redress.

Moreover, as Henry and Tator (2009b) contend, rather than functioning to protect the more vulnerable members of society, the principles of “tolerance, equality, and freedom of expression” have become instead “the ideological framework and discourse through which racialized beliefs and exclusions are enabled, reinforced, and defended” and perpetrators of racism are protected (p. 32). Demonstrating the depth of her critical

awareness of the functioning of racism in society and the processes through which racism and racist beliefs are perpetuated, Janet suggests that although the tenure system and the principles of academic freedom are important for the encouragement of open and free thinking, without sufficient accountability, they can simultaneously be misused to protect and encourage racists who would otherwise have been terminated:

I have always said I support universities because it really is the last area in modern society where you do have that opportunity to really reflect and to think. So they are an important place and they ought to have an important place in our world as Indigenous people. But the other side of that is if you have a faculty member who is tenured and the guy... I mean the person, is out to lunch, if he is a closet racist, or a leftist wannabe radical, it can be very detrimental. I don't know, I suppose you can never get away from that possibility because a university environment is supposed to be open and free thinking. But I think that there needs to be a level of accountability. You will find most of the racists in this society sort of find a home in that environment... I think they should do away with tenure, I think with tenure they lose their motivation to be responsible, let alone accountable. (Janet)

Although there is no way of determining the validity of such comments, at least not within the confines of this study, it is important to acknowledge the need for responsibility and accountability within the academy. The right to academic freedom is indeed critical for the protection of those who produce counter-hegemonic thought, including the many Aboriginal voices that have been previously excluded and silenced, however it cannot be used to excuse ignorance and/or the propagation of racist opinions and behaviours.

*'Picking Your Battles' as Resistance Strategy*

In an environment where those who support White privilege are rewarded, while those who insist on exposing it are often labelled troublemakers and persecuted, learning how to ignore even the most blatant racism becomes a strategy for survival for those who are non-white. For instance, when an overtly racist attack directed specifically at

Aboriginal people occurred in her university, Lisa explained that if the institutional response was to turn to the rhetoric of free speech to excuse, if not the actual offensive and clearly racist behaviour, then at least the lack of appropriate institutional response, any actions on the part of individual Aboriginal students were bound to be a waste of time.

When that article first came out, the [people at the] First Nations center here were all like ‘we are going to have to do something!’ I think that’s important but I have already been through those meetings and I have done that and I wish you the best and I hope that goes well but... if the President of the university respects the free speech of the newspaper and well the person was not apologetic for their comments, then I don’t want to take hours and hours out of my week to talk to somebody that doesn’t want to listen. (Lisa)

Clearly, as Kobayashi (2009) argued, even as universities are purportedly committed to “overcoming systemic discrimination and in the case of this particular university, openly encouraging Aboriginal students to enrol, those who “make up the university community continue to act in ways that marginalize and, therefore, discriminate” (p. 69). Whether it is the classmate who spews racist venom in the school newspaper, or the professor who makes racist jokes during seminars, the lack of institutional response indicates an acceptance and ultimately an affirmation of, not only the individual acts of racism, but also the underlying racist beliefs they expose. Moreover, by failing to deal with racism in a proactive manner, or worse yet denying it even exists, the institution effectively places the burden of overcoming systemic discrimination on the shoulders of its victims.

The amount of time and energy spent in the (seemingly futile) fight against ignorance, prejudice, and bigotry must be carefully weighed against any potential benefits. Therefore, for Aboriginal women, many of whom are already struggling with an overwhelming workload (academically and domestically), past experiences have taught



them that in such an environment deciding to ignore individual acts of racism and focus instead on academic obligations is a very realistic, if not necessarily palatable choice.

I don't need to be a spokesman for all Native people because I knew that early on, that people expected that out of me... There were a couple of younger Native students in there, articulate, well-spoken, intelligent and angry young women. I understand that, but I thought "you go girl. I have been there and done that." I know now that you can't change your world in one fell swoop. (Diane)

Compared to the angry young women who actively challenged racist ideologies and were vocal in their critique of societal inequity, Diane explained that while she was just as angry, she had over the years learned to "channel it differently." By learning as much as possible in her courses, Diane hoped to eventually be able to use her knowledge to challenge the structures that currently oppress her people.

Rather than allowing racism to become an excuse for failure, or a distraction from study, others like Andrea had found through experience that often the best approach was to "just get over it and move past" the everyday instances of racism if one wanted to succeed. In fact, as Elize pointed out, the everyday instances of racism have been so common that she has come to believe that "it is just part of my life, it doesn't really bother me at all... It goes in one ear and out the other." In an interesting inversion of the concept of racial tolerance, Helena explains how she has had to learn to become tolerant of racists in order to maintain her own sense of wellbeing:

There are a lot of things that people do that used to irritate me. I think why do they talk like that? Why are they so racist? Now today I have a tolerance for other people. I just allow people to be who they are and that has made me so happy. I have had run-ins with people and then I realize who they are and that they have problems also. So I say okay I gotta let this go. I feel okay now. (Helena)

Sadly, developing the ability to ignore or at least tolerate those who espouse racist beliefs is apparently an important skill for those who struggle to survive in mainstream academic

institutions. Margaret similarly explained that bigotry was indeed just part of the normative fabric of life in the academy and that over time she had learned to accept it.

... you hear so much of it that you're just quiet. Most of the time anyway... it doesn't affect me as much as it used to, you know, but it probably should... I guess just kind of, you know, I wish it could be different. Maybe one day it will be... I guess in a way I've just kind of accepted that you know, that people are like that and I just have to be glad I'm not, you know?... (Margaret)

Although Margaret remains hopeful that someday things will be different, “systemic racism is a normative aspect of Canadian ways of doing things” and remains “deeply entrenched within university culture” (Kobayshi, 2009, p. 61). As a result, until such time as we are able, or more importantly willing, to identify and actually deal with systemic racism as it is manifested in academic institutions specifically and in society generally, many Aboriginal people will continue (quite rightly) to view racism as an inevitable aspect of life in a supposedly post-colonial society. In fact, as Nora and Cabrera (1996) argued, perhaps minorities on mainstream campuses have become so “accustomed to discriminatory acts” that they have become “hardened” and therefore less negatively affected by their perceptions of racism.

Certainly, as Janet claimed, it is such an integral aspect of life in the academy that she believes prospective Aboriginal students should be explicitly taught upon arrival to expect racism and how to deal with it when it inevitably occurs.

My advice for anybody going into that environment, any future students, is you have to insulate yourself... I think that insulation is important because if you start to internalize the racism that nobody admits to, then going to school becomes a horrible experience and going to class becomes more and more difficult. So I think they should have pre-courses for students so we can say this is what is going to happen to you when you get there and just don't pay attention to it. Don't internalize it. (Janet)

Janet explained that students must learn how to consciously insulate themselves in order to avoid internalizing the dominant ideology and be able to preserve the necessary sense of self-worth and positive tribal identity in an environment fraught with racist policies, peoples, and curricula. Since “one little negative can do more than so many positives,” Cheyenne agreed that even when surrounded by bigotry and prejudice in the university, she would advise other Aboriginal students to “always feel proud and feel good about yourself. Don’t let anyone put you down. Don’t let negative things get to you.” As the denigration of Aboriginal people (in order to justify their subjugation and exploitation) has been an integral aspect of systemic racism in North America for centuries, it is indeed important that Aboriginal students learn how to insulate themselves as a means of coping with pervasive racism.

#### *Empowerment Through Internal Resistance*

As evidenced by the well-documented high drop-out rates, many Aboriginal peoples have blatantly rejected the mainstream education system, perceiving it to be alienating and ultimately disempowering for tribal peoples<sup>4</sup> (Deyhle, 1989), while others, like the women in this study have employed strategies of quiet internal resistance by offering the appearance of conformity and compliance in order to access the power afforded by a university education. Choosing to ignore racism and thereby allowing it to flourish unhindered, or consciously deciding to “to play the game” and appearing to follow the rules by adhering to the values of the dominant society may seem like capitulation to the overarching system of oppression. Indeed, as Murray (1987) claims, the strength of such systems is drawn from “the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness”

in the face of long standing oppression (p. 106, quoted in Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 109). However, it is important to note that for these women, an acceptance of the privileging of mainstream (Euro-Christian) culture and the inevitable ignorance, bigotry, and discrimination in contemporary society, does not imply an acceptance of the dominant construction and/or conception of Aboriginality and the underlying racist values and colonial ideology, or acquiescence to oppression. Instead, the conscious decision to ignore individual instances of racism indicates a strategic choice to remain focused on a larger purpose, i.e., the collective empowerment of Aboriginal peoples and the role of higher education in that empowerment. In an environment where racism is in fact systemic, under oppressive circumstances these Aboriginal women have learned how to pick their battles. The conscious choice to endure short-term disempowerment and marginalization and ignore, or tolerate, everyday instances of racism facilitates personal academic success and, by extension, long-term community empowerment and hopefully social change.

### *Conclusion*

In an environment where people face discrimination and persecution on the basis of both race and gender, as these women have found, often the safest and most effective choice is to minimize any and all markers of difference and maintain the appearance of conformity whenever possible. Instances of overt resistance such as confrontation or subversion was rare, and as most of the women explained that over time they had learned to avoid persecution by 'passing' as non-aboriginal, by becoming strategically invisible and purposefully silent, by consciously 'playing the game' according to the rules of the dominant society, and by picking their battles even in the face of ignorance, intolerance

and racism. Having accepted racism and discrimination as an inevitable and integral aspect of life in a mainstream educational institution, these women explained that choosing to endure short-term persecution and disempowerment was a price they willingly paid for a chance to access an education and hopefully make a long-term difference for their families, communities, and nations.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Findings and Analysis: The Source of Transformational Resistance

#### *Introduction*

The awareness and critique of oppression and the attendant desire for social justice, that differentiates internal transformational resistance from either self-defeating resistance, or self-abnegating compliance, are neither inherently present among oppressed peoples, nor automatically developed through the experience of oppression. This chapter begins with an examination of the role of the Aboriginal family generally and the influence of mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives (other mothers) particularly in supporting and encouraging resistance. It is in these familial relationships that the necessary sense of self-worth was nurtured, pride in a tribal identity was developed, and a belief in the value of education was instilled. Whether it was through explicit teachings, or implicit in their actions, parents, grandparents, and often extended kin were instrumental in the development of the kind of critical consciousness necessary for the understanding of societal inequity and a belief in the possibility of social change. This section is followed by a discussion of the importance of supportive woman-centered networks for the maintenance of resistance and the sense of connection to Aboriginal community.

#### *The Role of the Family: Planting the Seeds of Resistance*

Many of the women described how the development of a counter-hegemonic consciousness generally and a belief in the importance of education as a tool for individual, family, and community empowerment specifically, began in early childhood and was continually reinforced throughout their upbringing. Unlike the kinship groups of

the involuntary minorities described by Ogbu (1987a, 1987b) who have disengaged from, and discourage peer group members from participation in, assimilative and discriminatory educational processes, the families of these Aboriginal women remain convinced of the value of education as a means to a better life. Consequently, they were often described as encouraging and actively supporting academic achievement, despite an awareness of, and for many the direct experience of, the ways in which schooling has been used as a weapon in the process of subjugating Aboriginal people and annihilating Aboriginal culture and tradition. For instance, having been cared for by her grandparents after the death of her father and the hospitalization of her mother for tuberculosis, Janet described the long-term impacts of how she and her siblings were raised in the 1940's.

[when we lived with my grandparents ]... all of that time we heard frequently about the value of education. So when we moved in with my mother when I was maybe eight years old, that was already totally ingrained. We also knew right from the time when we were little that we would go to university or college. They were setting career goals for us from the time we were little. My oldest brother was encouraged to go into the RCMP... my sister was supposed to be a teacher and I was supposed to be a nurse. ... so that is what they did. That was the environment we were raised in. (Janet)

In such an environment, from the time they were small children, Janet and her siblings were taught not only the value of an education, but also, contrary to prevailing racist beliefs, that higher education was actually obtainable for Aboriginal students. This is an important distinction, since understanding the value of education is only an effective motivator if it is simultaneously seen as a concretely achievable goal and not a hopeless dream.

I think when we mentioned earlier about trying to recruit Aboriginal kids into the colleges or universities, it really does start with setting... I don't think it is about setting a goal, it is working with kids so that they believe that is possible. Not only so they believe it is possible, we felt that it was expected. There was just no question. When it came time for high school you took the five year program for

the university bound because there was just no question. We were all going, we understood that... (Janet).

Remarkably, this expectation, however potentially unrealistic given the disheartening rate of Aboriginal failure, was never questioned by the women themselves. Many claimed they always knew they were going to obtain post-secondary educations. For example, Vera claimed, it was never a question of “if I was gonna go or not, I was always going,” but rather “it was just a matter of when” she would enrol.

Indeed, many of the women claimed that success in education and graduation from college or university was “just expected” as they were growing up whether it was in the 1940’s or like Rosemary and Elize, in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

My sisters, you know they’ve gone before me, I come from a family where the women too are very academic, one of them has a degree in youth studies, a degree in education and a joint degree in history-english. The other sister, she has university degrees in geography and business and banking I think from a college and my brother had a nursing degree. My mother took college courses to be a secretary and my dad went to university for environmental stuff. So there has always been that sense of education as empowerment. That’s not always the case with some of my other family, my aunts and uncles and the children. A lot of them have dropped out of university and haven’t always made it. (Rosemary)

My Dad never had high school, but my mom did, but my step dad and my mom are who I have been living with most of my life. It is not common for a lot of Aboriginal people to have it just be expected of you to go to university. I think that is what it was like for me... (Elize)

Interestingly, both Elize and Rosemary felt that such high expectations were in fact uncommon among many other Aboriginal families. Given the longstanding history of low rates of academic attainment for Aboriginal people, and the failure of education to deliver on the promise of equality, not to mention the horrors that many Aboriginal people have suffered in the past in the name of education, it is not surprising that success in education is not expected in all families. Rita Trudeau, a residential school survivor,



explained that when she was a child in the early 1900's it was easier for parents to believe in the promise of education as the path to a better future describing how her own mother had begged to be sent to the residential school with her friends (personal interview).

Declaring that "school was very important" in her family, the long-term influence of parental expectations was articulated by Cheyenne who explained that even an unplanned teenage pregnancy did not lessen the expectation that she would get a good education.

I went to school here and there but then I went into an upgrading thing at the regular public school because I was pregnant at 16... so that finished my school for a while after I had Melissa. So I went back and I got my grade 11 and we were always told all our life that you had to graduate, you had to graduate... The motivation was just instilled in you from when you are a kid. You know you have to go back and you know you have to finish. (Cheyenne)

Apparently, whether they had post-secondary credentials themselves or not, the high expectations of parents and grandparents seem to be a significant factor in the desire of Aboriginal women to persist and achieve in higher education. In contrast to the many Aboriginal people who, after generations of oppression and abuse, have given up any hope for the future (as evidenced by the extremely high rates of addictions and suicide), these women maintained the dream of a better life and a belief in the role of educational credentials in achieving that life. As Jane insisted, as a result of her early socialization "it was just engrained that we were going to be something, going to do something with our lives." Thus parents who helped to build dreams and set educational goals simultaneously fostered a belief that such goals were actually achievable even for Aboriginal students, despite much historical evidence to the contrary.

In addition to instilling a positive attitude and belief in the value of education, coming from a strong and supportive extended family network also builds the positive

identity and sense of self-esteem necessary to believe that personal success (in any form) is even possible much less actually deserved. Furthermore, family support also provides the strength necessary to maintain a positive self-definition and withstand the numerous challenges to such self-definitions that many will face when attempting to achieve post-secondary credentials in mainstream (historically and predominantly racist and sexist) academic environments. Indeed, Hill-Collins (2009) argues that the creation of a strong identity “capable of withstanding the assaults of White supremacist rhetoric and practice” is critical for survival in a racist society (p. 239). Referring to the significance of her own childhood socialization, Cleage (1993) contends that “information, analysis and positive group identity” are potent weapons for oppressed peoples as they confront institutionalized racism (cited in Hill-Collins p. 239). For instance, during our conversations Janet explained how the socialization provided by her grandparents provided her with the tools she would need to survive outside her own community. Insisting that they take pride in their Aboriginal heritage, these grandparents consciously worked to instill a positive cultural identity and facilitate the development and maintenance of high self esteem in order to counteract the debilitating effects of the continuing prejudice, discrimination, and blatant racism that many Aboriginal people face in their daily lives.

I mean these old people were so smart in the ways of life... they knew that we were leaving them at some point, that my mother would come to collect us. They were very clear in telling us to be proud of who we are: “You are an Indian, be proud” because they knew we would end up in the city. It was a very overt message rather than implied. They were very clear about that. (Janet)

Indeed, Janet’s subsequent experiences of racism upon moving to an urban area with her mother and new stepfather confirmed her grandparents’ belief in the importance of

consciously cultivating a positive cultural identity. She and her siblings had to face many people who would try to degrade, humiliate and exclude them simply because they were Aboriginal, or perhaps more accurately because they were Aboriginal in a country still heavily influenced by the profoundly racist ideologies that were used to justify the displacement, subjugation, and continued oppression of the Indigenous nations. In the face of overt racism, the teachings from her grandparents were, to use the words of Anderson (2000) “essential components in the foundation of her resistance to the dismantling and negation of her identity” (p. 122). Janet had been provided with the strength to withstand the onslaught of bigotry that she would face in her life generally and in the school system specifically. Indeed, as Kay (1983) argued, such strength is a significant factor as the Aboriginal student with a “strong cultural identity” and a “sense of Native history” is more likely to persist in school and enjoy greater academic success (p. 30). Unlike Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) description of how involuntary minorities have developed their “sense of collective identity or sense of peoplehood in opposition to the social identity of white Americans” and therefore resist participation in anything they perceive as belonging to the White identity including, unfortunately, the education system (p. 181), Janet’s racial identity was developed through a positive association with tribal history and culture and is therefore not defined by opposition to White society. M. Sanders (1997) described this process of promoting a “healthy racial identity as well as an awareness of and constructive responses to racism” without encouraging hatred of other racial groups as “positive race socialization” (p. 91).

In addition to such overt encouragement of pride in a tribal identity, in a manner more in accordance with our traditions, Janet’s grandparents also lead by example,

showing their grandchildren that Aboriginal people could be important and worthy of dignity and respect. For instance:

Because my grandfather was the Chief in our community I always had the sense that they were somebody. The Indian agent would still be coming around at that time, so this guy in a suit would come driving up in a car and come visit him. My grandfather had this desk where he kept papers and this was before the time when they had band offices so all the business of the reserve was conducted from this little desk in the corner of my grandparent's house. (Janet)

Although his actual decision-making power was likely minimal, at least in comparison to the Indian agent, having witnessed the respect conferred by a White man upon her grandfather, Janet learned to resist the belief that Indians are by nature inferior, as she had personally seen otherwise. Such early experiences helped to create the expectation that she too was worthy of respect which would be essential to counteract the demoralizing effects of the racism and oppression which she inevitably encountered as she moved through life. Clearly, such expectations, i.e., of the right to basic human dignity, respect, and ultimately equality, are not only empowering for our young people who learn to demand a recognition of these rights, but they are simultaneously potentially disruptive to a societal structure built upon not only the subjugation of Aboriginal nations, but also upon a belief in the legitimacy of such subjugation (and by corollary the overall social order).

*The Role of Mothers: Nurturing Resistance and Counter-Hegemonic Thinking*

Speaking of the Mohawk Nation specifically, Elaine explains how according to our teachings the traditional role of Aboriginal women as nurturers has always been very closely connected to supporting the learning of future generations.

The Aboriginal women are the teachers, they are the mothers, they are the nurturers, they are the teachers. So education plays a major role for the women. I think that is the basis of Aboriginal education. It would probably be the same in

any Aboriginal nation, whether it was Ojibway or Cree. The first teachers are always the women. We have the babies for the first five years. (Elaine)

Indeed, Anderson (2000) who is of mixed Cree and Métis heritage, similarly described the traditional teaching role of women as they were responsible for passing on the culture as they raised the children. Obviously then, as it is the traditional role of the women to initiate, oversee, and support the learning and cultural development of the children, the maternal role is therefore critical to the development of positive attitudes towards education.

As women are more likely to be the primary caregivers, and for this reason, spend more time in the home especially during the preschool years, they clearly have a tremendous role to play in the development of the disposition of the child towards the educational process. Many of the women described how, often as a result of their own experiences of discrimination and marginalization, their mothers not only encouraged educational attainment, but actively facilitated academic performance and achievement to ensure their children would have a chance at advancing in society. Defined by their role as mothers, Hill-Collins (2009) describes how “struggling to give their children the skills and training” and access to increased opportunities is, for those who are constrained on account of both race and gender, not only an effective means of working towards social justice, it is also likely one of the few opportunities such women may have to effect social change.

Indeed, several women recalled in detail the great lengths to which their mothers had gone in order to ensure the future educational success for their children, often, after enduring long hours of work at their place of employment in addition to the time spent in the home engaged in domestic labour. For example:

My mom was always supportive. I remember when I was young I was crying and freaking out because I couldn't spell Wednesday... So my mom said "okay well we will just have to practice every week." I remember her helping me all the time with everything. I remember her reading to me and making activities for me to do, like crafts, or baking, or I remember her making me a math book. We did printing and we did flashcards, addition flashcards or multiplication flashcards. When I was learning how to read I remember her helping me with my reading and helping me sound things out. That kind of stuff. She was always being helpful and reminding me to do it by the deadline. So my mom was always very helpful, all the time, always, forever. All through elementary school she helped me with my projects and now even, she is helpful in whatever way she can be. (Cora)

In fact, as Cora explained, the role of our mothers as teachers extends beyond the preschool years, as they attempt to pick up where the school system has failed, filling in the gaps and providing the additional instruction necessary to ensure their children will not be disadvantaged by a racist school system.

As has already been well established, Aboriginal children are, for a variety of reasons, not well served by the mainstream education system, (as the continuing and well documented educational gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals would attest) and therefore the role of mothers providing additional instruction, tutoring, and support in the home becomes all the more important. Cathy explains that although her father was always encouraging, believing very strongly in the liberating potential of education and helping in whatever way that he could, it was her mother who actually sat down and helped her with lessons and homework.

My mom would sit down and she would say "C'mon, let's do this" and she would be so frustrated with me. I remember doing long division...yeah, that was hard! We sat there with the paper for about maybe 2 hours and she showed me all these ways how to do long division. She'd say "ok, I'm going to put a sample question down and I want you to show me." I just looked at it and I thought "I have no idea." After two hours of teaching all she said was "bed." It was my bed time, that's all she said. When I got up, she had done all my homework. She did it all! (Cathy)

Clearly, Cathy's mother believed so strongly in the importance of education generally and the need for compliance with institutional expectations specifically, that she was willing to do the work herself to ensure that her child would have increased opportunities. However, the ability of mothers to provide such parental support obviously relies upon, not only having the available time and energy, but to a certain degree also the level of education and requisite knowledge base and to be able to understand and explain the schoolwork, especially as children progress to increasingly higher levels of education.

Undoubtedly, women whose mothers had post-secondary credentials themselves had a distinct advantage at least in terms of academic support and were potentially able to benefit from mentoring right through their years of university. As Vera explains, "I lived at home in my first year with my mum who would read everything I wrote. That was a big help. She had an eye for university writing and university organizing." In addition to such formal academic support, the experiences of mothers who had survived and succeeded in post-secondary also provided more subtle non-academic benefits. As Vera further clarified, she left the reserve at the age of six and was subsequently raised in the university environment while her mother attended classes and as a result did not feel the same sense of alienation and discomfort that many others had described as a barrier when entering university.

Well I was a city kid. I never had a problem fitting in. I saw racism in there but I don't know if maybe I was different. I am sure some people didn't like Indians, but I am sure they didn't think of me as that. Well, I will tell you that the university had Native student services, which was really great if you knew how to access it. My mum was the director there so I knew what they offered and how to get and how to access it. But if I didn't know I am sure it would have been more difficult. They had a wide range of tutorial services and just the comfort of being there with other students. (Vera)

Unlike many of the other women who described the university as “overwhelming” and a place where they “did not fit in,” as a result of the years spent on campus with her mother, Vera felt familiar with a university environment. Vera also had prior knowledge of the supports that were available for Aboriginal students and how to access such services, both of which clearly facilitated her ease of adjustment and eventual academic success.

In addition to obtaining both the formal and informal knowledge necessary to support the education of their children, Aboriginal mothers attending post-secondary also act as, what Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) have called transformational role models. They act in this capacity by actively demonstrating for their children not only the value and benefits of higher education, but also the value, capability, and strength of Aboriginal women. Indeed, many of the women who indicated that their mothers specifically were an important source of support during their schooling had mothers with post-secondary education themselves. Mothers who were themselves engaged in covert resistance by continuing to perform their domestic role while simultaneously engaging in activities that would ultimately free them from such a subordinate position, instilled counter-hegemonic values and beliefs in their daughters. Indeed, watching their own mother return to school, balancing class attendance and assignment completion with the demands of their regular domestic workload, influenced Jane’s conception of what it means to be a woman in contemporary society.

My mom, was a stay at home mom, but after my youngest brother completed grade 6, my mom started getting on the bus with us and she went to upgrading. She went from grade 2 to grade 12 basically and those years, I think it was a few years that she got on the bus with us, it was sort of a change of life for us because we had to get used to not having dinner when we got home. You know, sometimes my mom would put something in the oven and it would cook all day,



she would think of those kinds of things. But sometimes we would get home and have no dinner and have to wait. You know how it is when you get home from school, you're just so hungry, you just want to eat. So there were changes there. But I think, I mean you don't really think about it then, but when you have experienced that, when you see your mom get on a bus and go back to school and work her way up to become a language teacher in the school system... I think that really has a big impact, I think that really, really did have a big impact on me... Being my Mum and a role model, raising eight kids and she still did the traditional role of housekeeping and my Dad didn't do too much in that area. So, I wonder how did my Mum survive all those years? You know, she had a hard life. (Jane)

Jane's description of her mother's situation illustrates a common experience faced by many Aboriginal women. In addition to the challenges of being an Aboriginal person in a mainstream environment, facing racism and intolerance (as discussed extensively in the section on racism), many Aboriginal women are also apparently struggling with the constraints of being a woman in a predominantly patriarchal society. Watching her mother successfully balance the needs of her education with the responsibility of caring for a family of eight, rising from a grade two level through graduation from post-secondary, demonstrated to Jane that such things were in fact achievable, albeit not always easily and certainly not without sacrifice. Being raised in this environment had, in her own words, "a big impact" on her life, instilling a sense of confidence in her own ability to overcome the challenges she would inevitably face.

The influence of our mothers as transformational role models was also illustrated by Cheyenne when commenting on her relationship with her own children.

Well I will tell you a little story. I had my diploma and I never hung it up for about 3 or 4 years. My son he is 20 now and my daughter is 24 and the night I hung it up was about 6 months ago. They didn't even know and they both just stopped and they said "I want one of those. Why didn't you ever hang this up?" My son came up and said "Oh I didn't realize how much you had done, I want one." But this year my daughter is going to school and when I said "what made you want to go to school?" She said it was seeing the diploma on the wall. (Cheyenne)

Apparently, seeing the academic credentials of their mother had demonstrated for these children that such achievements were possible and subsequently inspired in them a desire to similarly pursue post-secondary education. Furthermore, Cheyenne also explained that due to her ongoing scholastic efforts, she was able to provide her children with increased early learning opportunities. Consequently, her children were able to develop advanced skills, especially in the area of computer literacy, which she believed would provide them an advantage in their future schooling.

Although Sylvia was not able to benefit from such transformational role models herself, as neither of her parents had post-secondary education, she had observed first hand and commented on, the benefits that children obtain from such role models and specifically from being raised by a student mother in a university environment.

Think of the modeling that you have provide ... I have a lot of great women friends... what I found was that they would bring their daughters or their sons around and I watched that and thought of how much they were learning. I never learned that. My mother didn't go, I mean both my parents didn't go to university... I think the effect that you probably have on your own daughter. It will be so normal for her to be sitting in these places of higher learning... She knows it and it is like a playground I am sure. (Sylvia)

Although, as noted, due to her parent's low level of education, Sylvia was not able to benefit from the academic mentoring provided by the mothers with higher education, however, in an interesting reversal of roles, Sylvia herself subsequently became the role model inspiring her mother to enrol in university.

Interestingly, in addition to being a transformational role model, as she had the courage to leave an abusive marriage, raise four children and successfully complete a college diploma, Andrea's mother also encouraged the educational success of her daughter in more pragmatic ways. Indeed, the everyday support of her mother during

Andrea's education was so critical that she believed it would not have been possible to complete her studies had her mother not been there to provide assistance. Andrea's mother, Sherri, left her own home and community and moved to the city in order to be better able to provide assistance, childcare, and domestic support, in addition to sharing her own meagre financial resources in order to make ends meet:

Well if my mother wasn't there, like she gets welfare and she pays half the rent, and whatever is left I tell her to keep it and I pay for everything else, all the bills and the groceries and everything... I came up here and my mom came with me to help me go to school. My mom watches Malachi for me, I really need someone because sometimes my clinical starts really early and I have to leave at 6 am. I can't get him up at 5:30. It's so much easier to just get up and go... I am just really happy she stayed with me. (Andrea)

Obviously, as the lack of sufficient finances and lack of affordable quality childcare were cited by most of the women as significant barriers to academic persistence and achievement, pooling resources with her mother allowed Andrea to be able to afford post-secondary. Furthermore, the existence of additional female help in the home alleviated some of the domestic burden that was also cited as a challenge thereby allowing Andrea the uninterrupted time to focus on her studies rather than worrying about daycare drop-offs, cooking meals, and doing laundry or other domestic chores. In essence, by having her mother as the primary caregiver for her children, Andrea was afforded the privileges typically enjoyed by men with full time stay at home wives. Previous to her mother agreeing to come and live with her on campus, Andrea had separated from her family leaving them back in the community so she could attend school, a decision which resulted in a failed marriage, the prescription of anti-depressants, and eventually necessitated withdrawal from classes. With her mother's assistance Andrea was able to leave her

husband and bring the children with her when she re-enrolled and, subsequently, successfully completed her program.

Whether it was providing nurturing during preschool development, helping with schoolwork during the early years, acting as a transformational role model, or providing emotional, financial and/or childcare support, or perhaps as is more often the case a combination of many of these roles, the influence of mothers as facilitators of educational achievement is clear. Although she is speaking specifically about the experiences of African American women, Hill-Collins' (2009) articulation of the profound influence of the relationship between mothers and their daughters offers critical insight into the significance of mothering as a potential act of resistance:

Motherhood as an institution occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place. On the one hand, a mother can foster her children's oppression if she teaches them to believe in their own inferiority. On the other hand, the relationship between mothers and children can serve as a private sphere in which cultures of resistance and everyday forms of resistance are learned. (p. 57)

Collins further explains, for centuries "mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival" as women of colour in a sexist and racist society (2009, p. 112). In the context of a society that has historically and continually denigrated and subjugated people of colour generally and women of colour specifically, when children were taught to "trust their own self-definitions and value themselves" they were provided a "powerful tool for resisting oppression" (Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 57). For the women in this study, in addition to teaching the basic skills necessary for survival in the classroom, mothers who lead by example, instilling in their daughters a sense of the strength, capability and value of Aboriginal women, were simultaneously providing the means to resist oppression.

*Role of “Other Mothers”: Supporting Resistance and Oppositional Knowledges*

In addition to critical importance of their mothers, many of the women also benefitted from the presence of many other strong Aboriginal women in their family networks. Much like the African-American communities described by Hill-Collins (2009), as tribal peoples, so too did our ancestors also recognize that “vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible” (p. 192). Citing the work of Troester (1984), Hill-Collins explains how “Othermothers,” i.e., the women who assist the biological mothers by “sharing mothering responsibilities” are central to the institution of motherhood among African and African American peoples (2009, p. 192). Similarly, unlike patriarchal nuclear families, in traditional Aboriginal societies women were supported by networks of their own kin and specifically by networks of female kin, especially within the matriarchal, matrilineal, or even matrilineal nations. Although there was considerable variation of tasks depending on the particular nation, traditionally other women, such as grandmothers, aunts, and siblings cared for small children while the mothers planted crops, gathered wild foods, butchered and processed meat and hides and tended to the other numerous daily tasks required to provide sustenance for the family (Anderson, 2000; Berkin, 1996; Brown 1990; Hansen, 1977). In her analysis of historical accounts, Berkin (1996) noted specifically how Aboriginal women worked together, completing their tasks co-operatively so that they might enjoy both the physical and social support of the other women. In this manner social harmony was also encouraged as the bonds between women were strengthened. In fact, since it has been argued that the majority of the daily calories consumed were provided by the collective work of the women in many Aboriginal nations, especially in

the more agrarian societies, such women were therefore not solely dependent upon husbands for support (unlike women living in nuclear family structures), but rather they relied upon other women in extended kinship networks, particularly during the prolonged absences of the men who were engaged in hunting or warfare (Berkin, 1996; Hansen, 1977). In fact, among the Cherokee, Choctaw, Hurons, and Iroquois, for example, because the women worked the land and produced the food, they had the right to control the distribution of these resources and therefore, much to the amazement of European observers, had the ability to “hinder or prevent war parties” simply by “holding back the supplies” (Anderson, 2000, p. 60). Despite a concerted effort on the part of the patriarchal colonial society generally and the Christian Church specifically to destroy such kinship networks and replace them with supposedly more seemly nuclear family models, as a result of protracted resistance the extended family bonds remain strong in many Aboriginal communities, especially those between the women and are evidently still relied upon heavily for support.

The collective skills found within woman-centered networks of ‘othermothers’ remain vital resources for Aboriginal women. Cathy described how as she advanced through secondary school and her own mother was no longer able to offer the kind of instructional assistance that she needed to complete her school work she turned to her aunties, and cousins for additional help.

I could see how it started making her feel bad and inadequate and that was the last thing I wanted on my mom. And when I seen that my needs were not able to be met by my immediate family, I didn’t want to put any hardship on my family. I went outside of the family and I looked to extended family for help. I knew they had older cousins, they could help me. I said “Mom, I’m going to go over to my aunt’s, going over there for a while”. I never told her why. She knew why and that was ok. (Cathy)

In this instance, when her mother was no longer able to keep up with her lessons, we see the importance of the women in the extended family network as a source of additional support. They were able to step in and provide that which her mother could not.

Similarly, Sheila explained that after she left home to pursue her education and could therefore no longer turn to her mother for emotional and spiritual support, she was able to rely upon her aunts and cousins.

I think I was lucky too because I had a good support system... I moved away from Red Lake, but I have a lot of family in Thunder Bay too. So if I was ever homesick or whatever, I could call my aunt, or go see my cousin... We still talk all the time, she's more like a sister than a cousin. If it wasn't for her or my aunt, I don't think I could have made it here in Thunder Bay. I probably would have went back home. (Sheila)

In this instance the presence of family and female kin specifically were determining factors in her ability to cope with the pressures of school and relocation from a remote Aboriginal community to a notably racist and sexist urban setting.

While several of the women decided not to relocate to the university and remained in their home community in order to preserve the essential connections with family, those not lucky enough to live within commuting distance found other ways to access the necessary support networks and maintain a connection to traditional culture. For example:

Being Aboriginal women... mothers, sisters, the close connections to these people... calling your mother up, or some of them would call their granny up or their aunties and that's a big thing you know... aunties [are] that important in Aboriginal life. From my experience those are the people I'd rely on, because I lost my mother and grandmother, so my aunts and my sisters are my connection, the thing that makes me sane. So I'll call them up and they reassure you and put you back on the path of why you came here... calling up your family reassures you and sets you back on the course. (Rosemary)

Evidently, the relationships within this circle of supportive Aboriginal women and the ability to “rely on” one another during times of need are, as Rosemary points out, critical for the maintenance of mental health and the necessary motivation. While she claims it is the support of ‘family’ that is key, those she identifies as members of this family network, namely mothers, sisters, aunties, and grannies are all female kin, clearly indicating the gendered basis of her family supports.

According to Anderson’s (2000) analysis, the “guidance that women receive from their mothers, aunts and grandmothers, shapes the way they learn to understand themselves and their positions in the world” (p. 123). Having had to learn how to resist subjugation and how to survive under the weight of oppression, generations of Aboriginal women have developed what Hill-Collins (2009) calls ‘oppositional knowledges’. Much like many African American women, who have faced similar subjugation, drawing upon their lived experiences and their traditional cultures (wherein women were accorded respect and authority), Aboriginal women maintained a definition of womanhood premised upon strength and capability that was distinctly different from the negative images and subservient female role offered by mainstream society. Indeed, according to the definition of womanhood cultivated by Western society the so-called “true woman is self-contained within her nuclear family, with specific and separate roles for men and women and with an economic dependence on men, in such a way that motherhood is one’s true occupation” (Snorton, 1996, p. 57). In contrast, for Aboriginal women the role of wife and mother did not traditionally preclude working outside the home and was certainly not defined by dependency. In fact very much the opposite held true.



In traditional communities, given that the men were often away from the community for long periods, women were not only encouraged, but expected to be independent and self-reliant. Women were therefore neither prevented, nor discouraged from learning tasks that were traditionally seen to be men's work and, moreover, engaging in such work was not seen to take away from one's femininity (Anderson, 2000; Berkin, 1996; Brown 1990, Landes, 1974). Furthermore, the provision of foodstuffs and resources for the family often relied heavily upon the tasks traditionally performed by women, thereby negating any possibility of women being seen as 'dependent' upon their husbands and creating instead relationships characterized by "interdependence" (Anderson, 2000). For centuries therefore, strength, independence, and self-reliance have defined Aboriginal womanhood, the legacy of which continues to influence our women today.

Indeed, describing the strength and determination exhibited by her grandmother, Lisa explained how she was far from the image of the helpless vulnerable femininity proscribed by western ideology:

My grandmother, she ran the post office on our reserve in her home. It was sort of a room off the house. They didn't have running water and there were five kids. She had to boil the water, run the house, cook dinner for her husband and run the post office and I don't think she thought of it as hard. I never heard her say wow that was hard. But even today she hates laundry... but I have never heard her complain about it, I think there were women on the reserve who were her friends and relatives who were much worse off. (Lisa)

Since time immemorial Aboriginal women have had to work hard with whatever means they had at their disposal to ensure the survival of their families and communities.

Furthermore, following the colonization of our lands and the resulting destruction of our traditional way of life, along with the imposition of numerous racist policies and

practices, Aboriginal men as a group have been denied the ability to provide adequately for their families, resulting in increased burdens on Aboriginal women:

Women have more responsibility and they view education as necessary to maintain those responsibilities, than in the last generations. We don't have the same solid family foundations that we maybe did before. Do you know what I mean? We are more apt to see single parent families in the community than you did when I was growing up. So those responsibilities generally fall to women, so women have to [get an education] out of necessity. They go to college because if you are going to compete in the job market, which we have to, then it is a necessity. (Janet)

Indeed, despite concerted effort on the part of the church to teach Aboriginal women their rightful place as dutiful housewives and full time mothers (see D. Mihesuah, 1998a), the circumstances of daily life in Aboriginal communities have taught our women otherwise. Each successive generation of women has been taught to expect to have to work and often, like Lisa's grandmother, to have to work hard with scarce resources and limited opportunities.

Contradicting the ideological construction of the ideal wife and mother as subservient and obedient (which the colonizers have tried unsuccessfully for centuries to impart on the Aboriginal peoples), Janet explains how she was explicitly taught by her grandmother, a counter-hegemonic conception of her role as a woman:

I am old school and I was raised in an old fashioned role. I don't think that those role differentiations in a traditional [Aboriginal] household meant that one was subservient to the other, you just did different things and in fact, in my family women were the bosses. Women are the bosses. We also tend to socialize together, it is my sisters families that gather together, it's my aunts that we hang out with. (Janet)

In many Aboriginal families, it is during this time spent socializing with the women in our families, our mothers, aunties, and grandmothers that we, as Aboriginal women, learn about our place as equals in the family structure and, by extension, our rightful place in

the community and the larger society. Clearly, in the context of a patriarchal society, such teachings would be deemed ‘oppositional knowledge’ and the transmission of such wisdom a counter-hegemonic act.

Moreover it is within this circle of women that the younger members learn of their own power as women and the attendant responsibilities. According to tradition, water represents the female element. In addition to acknowledging water’s unique ability to mould to the shape of the vessel in which it is placed, indicating exceptional adaptability, we are taught to recognize its strength:

The other thing to remember about the water is that it is the strongest force on earth... even the wind can’t do what the water can do, in terms of determining the process of life. And we know that water comes first before life itself... That is our role in terms of tradition; we have the capacity as women to take those shapes, but also to make those shapes. We recognize that we don’t have the kind of power where you bang your fist on the table, but that we have the power of the water – that sort of everyday going against something that ultimately changes the shape of the thing. (Maracle, as quoted by Anderson, 2000, p. 184-85)

Women learn that as the givers of life and the carriers of the water that nourishes and ultimately brings forth new life, the woman has a quiet but unyielding and substantial power that can bring about significant change over time. Such teachings, passed on by mothers, grandmothers, and aunties are absolutely fundamental for the empowerment of young Aboriginal women who must learn how to resist oppression and fight for their very survival, not to mention basic human dignity, in a society that has for centuries taught its members to believe that women are inferior to, and should rightly therefore be subordinate to, men and that people of colour generally and Aboriginal people specifically are similarly inferior to and rightfully subjugated by Whites. These teachings remind our women of the source and nature of their feminine power and affirm the belief in their own ability, as women, to effect change in society.

Indeed, a “system of oppression” as Murray contends, “draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness” (1987, p. 106, quoted in Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 109). Consequently, therefore, women who are provided by their female networks with access to oppositional knowledge, who are given a sense of their own power to effect change and taught the fallacy of the dominant ideologies generally and the dominant (derogatory) conceptions of Aboriginality and womanhood specifically, as well as the possibility of resisting these conceptions, weaken, or at least subvert such systems of oppression.

As Hill-Collins (2009) explains, “people who are oppressed usually know it” and in fact, the very conditions created by the intersection of racism and sexism in society that produce oppression simultaneously “foster activism” among the oppressed (p. 11). Unlike so many young Aboriginal people who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and becoming overwhelmed feel paralyzed by the seemingly intractable nature of poverty and social inequality (as current suicide rates will attest), Janet was taught by her grandmother that our people are not powerless and we need not accept our situation as inevitable. For instance:

When they learned that INAC was threatening to close the school down they would meet with other women from other homemakers clubs along the North Shore and raise the money to send the Chief to Ottawa to object to the closure. My grandmother... she really believed that schools should stay within the community and that they were needed to educate our own people within our own culture. I have actually come across newspaper clippings where she was quoted as saying that. So they really struggled to hold on to those institutions. (Janet)

Although it might appear, at least on the surface, that these ‘homemakers’ had accepted their (inferior) position as support mechanism for male authority and the attendant

suppression of their own voices, acquiescing to patriarchal authority by sending the Chief to Ottawa to speak on their behalf, such analysis would be simplistic. Deeper analysis reveals how these women were engaged in internal transformation resistance, in that they consciously maintained the outward appearance of compliance while simultaneously engaging in social critique and working towards social justice. Regardless of the fact that they were innocuously called homemakers clubs, supposedly focusing on teaching women how to be better housewives, Janet explained that her grandmother and the other club members were in actuality “activists” and “organizers” who struggled with the larger issues of their communities and worked tirelessly for the advancement of their people. In contrast to the power and respect accorded Aboriginal women within many communities traditionally, as a result of colonization and the subsequent imposition of the Indian Act, these women recognized how they were hindered by the constraints of an overtly patriarchal mainstream society. Government representatives dismissed any and all female leadership, as was to be expected given their firm positioning with an overtly patriarchal establishment, acknowledging almost exclusively only the male representatives of Aboriginal communities. By raising the funds to send the Chief to Ottawa to speak on their behalf, these women were able to influence the content of political discussion, to ensure that their concerns were heard and ultimately that the needs of their children were met. The women maintained the outward appearance of having accepted their proper (subservient) place in the family and in society, by seeming to busy themselves with inconsequential homemaking concerns, all the while secretly fighting for the advancement of their people. Hill-Collins (2009) explains how the very presence of groups designed to foster empowerment for marginalized women (of colour) and enhance

their ability to work for social justice, are “threatening to those who feel excluded” as they are “free of surveillance” (p. 121). By strategically appearing to occupy themselves with innocuous feminine issues such groups attract little attention and are allowed to carry out their counter-hegemonic projects in relative safety.

In addition to underscoring the importance of education, witnessing the courage of her grandmother as she took a stand against the government instilled in Janet and undoubtedly many other young women in the community, a sense of the power of all Aboriginal women and, by extension, a belief in her own strength and capability. As Anderson (2000) explained, such “strong, independent female role models provide Native girls with the sense that they can overcome whatever obstacles they will inevitably encounter” (p. 118). It is this belief in one’s own ability, like the water, to adapt to and eventually overcome, any obstacle encountered, that inspires resilience and persistence in the face of adversity and such characteristics are unquestionably related to success in the academy.

Evidently having strong transformational role models within the family can have a significant impact on the lives of young women. Indeed, describing the influence of her aunt, Jane confirmed the significance that positive role models had as she was growing up.

I think a lot of women, it depends on how you were raised and the role models you have in your family. Like my aunt she was a teacher as well and my aunt had a strong influence, my mum’s sister. She was a teacher as well, she really believed in the language, language maintenance and reviving and keeping the language. She worked a lot in the language area for the Ministry of Education. She taught in the schools up north. She was a nun, my aunt, she was a nun right until the day she died. She really believed... But even though my aunt was a nun, I still loved her. Yeah, because she was very strong in her cultural values as well. She was able to maintain those, but she didn’t just practice the religious parts, you know. She believed in, I mean she liked to be in the bush and do things in the bush and

go canoeing and stuff like that. She was always close to nature and so she was a role model as well. So I think it [academic success] just came from having strong role models in my background. I feel fortunate. (Jane)

It is important to note that not only was her aunt a positive role model in the academic field, by maintaining her connection to the land she was also a role model in traditional fields as well. This aunt thereby demonstrated that assimilation is neither a necessary, nor inevitable outcome of education, but rather that it is possible to strategically obtain academic credentials and simultaneously maintain one's connection to traditional ways.

Over time, the success of Aboriginal women in certain families is reinforced creating multi-generational impacts. As each subsequent generation benefits from the accrued oppositional knowledge of those that have gone before they become increasingly capable of surmounting any barriers. For instance, Vera explained how she was merely the latest addition to a dynasty of strong women who had, each in turn, learned from their mothers and grandmothers how to persevere and succeed in society generally and in education specifically (as this group included teachers, principals, and PhDs).

The women in our family have always succeeded and have in most cases been the ones to stand out. I would say in my immediate family that has always been the case. My mum drove it, homework was always important in grade school and high school was very important because that determined if you were going to university. So I guess it was a succession. From an early age the motivation started. I looked at my aunties, or grandma, or my mum who actually was in university in my formative years. (Vera)

In such families, academic achievement for women was expected and consequently encouraged and supported.

The importance of transformational role models for young Aboriginal women was illustrated by Cora's explanation that "if I had no role models I would have no example. I would have no direction I guess. I wouldn't be able to feel direction if I didn't have role

models.” While many of the women benefited from relationships with female role models that exhibited the strength and capability of Aboriginal women and were therefore empowering in a general sense, as Rosemary explained, the historically low levels of academic achievement for Aboriginal people means that positive Aboriginal role models in the academic field are relatively rare.

There’s still not enough, out there. It’s hard sometimes to find role models for academic achievement. I have a number of them that I have met along the way, some Anishnawbekwe, some Cree... some you know, of different nations... if they can make it though, it’s certainly helps and inspires me. (Rosemary)

Being aware of the lack of Aboriginal role models in the academy, Rosemary was also very cognizant of her own role as graduate student in either encouraging academic success, or perpetuating failure through the example that she is setting for others. She explained how when an Aboriginal student drops out (for any reason) it can “shake the confidence” of the other Aboriginal students who begin to wonder if they will share a similar fate in the academy. So long as they maintain their commitment to social critique and their motivation to work towards social justice and not be co-opted into mainstream agendas, as Aboriginal women move through their academic careers, they become transformational role models themselves, inspiring the next generation of young women to believe they too can overcome any obstacle in their path.

*Women Centered Networks: Maintenance of Resistance and Sense of Community*

For many of the women who had learned from, and come to rely upon, woman centered networks consisting of their mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and other kin in their home communities, the decision to relocate in order to pursue post-secondary education and the resulting loss of support networks was identified as a source of difficulty. While it is precisely these networks that made these women strong,



independent, confident, and motivated to change society, the pursuit of the necessary academic credentials simultaneously takes these women away from their support networks at a time when they are critical for the maintenance of transformational resistance. Lisa explains how the support of these female kinship networks had been such an integral and natural part of her upbringing in her home community that she in fact did not even notice their presence until she felt their absence.

Especially as a Native woman, it is difficult going from my mother and my grandmother and all my aunts to God only knows where. There wasn't a community of women in the same way [at the university]. Now I found they started a drum group when I was in third year, which I joined, which was great, but those first three years were pretty lonely when you don't have somebody to share your same experiences and your sense of humour. I miss the sense of humour. I just remember being at home making scone and thinking wow I haven't had this since Christmas... I missed that, I missed being surrounded by Aboriginal women specifically. In the same sort of way, like the community generally, but also being able to talk to an Aboriginal woman and just go thru similar experiences. I don't know. It is just sort of a tie. It's difficult. You don't realize you have it until you leave ... (Lisa)

In fact, in her work on mothering in the academy, Thomas (2000) explained how for many women of colour the loss of such supportive networks are "a trade-off caused by upward mobility" as they relocated for education and/or employment (p. 58).

In the wake of such loss, according to Anderson (2000), women must find alternative "ways to maintain or replace that sense of community" and cultural connection in order to survive life in a hostile environment (p. 123). While some discussed the importance of maintaining a connection to community through frequent returns home, others, who lived at a greater distances eventually had to find new support networks.

I didn't really lack for a social life it just wasn't as meaningful as what I was used to. I think I called home a lot more than I do now, like two or three times a week and now it is more like once a week. That was something. I also went home a lot

more, I don't know if you would call that a coping strategy or a cop out. I was home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter,.. basically anytime I had more than two days off. I was very fortunate as my parents were able to provide me with bus money so I could get home, that is something that not everybody has and I know that I was fortunate for that. It was a sixteen hour bus ride from [campus], but I was fortunate that I was able to do it if I wanted to... As I got more comfortable and as I sort of got into the community [at university] that sort of petered out. I still go home often, but not as often and I don't feel as sad when I can't go. (Lisa)

It is important to note that prior to her engaging with the university Aboriginal community, as Lisa pointed out, she was not without social networks and activities, however, they were not sufficiently meaningful. As Lisa found alternative sources of support and found a sense of community among the other Aboriginal people at university she found herself better able to cope with feelings of isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Perhaps, as Anderson (2000) argued, "ties to community are as significant as ties to family" in terms of maintaining a positive tribal identity the strength necessary to resist the numerous assaults on that identity that occur as Aboriginal people generally and Aboriginal women specifically struggle to survive in mainstream society (p. 123). Continuing, Anderson (2000) explains how, therefore, the sense of cultural connection provided by urban Aboriginal communities sustains many Aboriginal women until they can return to their own home communities.

Unlike Lisa who acknowledged that she was very lucky to have parents with enough financial resources to pay for her bus fare, Rosemary explained that she had not been home to the reserve in almost two years because it was simply not economically "feasible." Without the opportunity to return home, Rosemary was forced to seek alternatives and found the necessary cultural supports in the community of Aboriginal women at her university.

I find connections through the [female] Elders in my program, I'm lucky that I have that. So if I need cultural guidance or just some of those older women to talk to kind of like an auntie or a granny, cause I don't always get home, then I lean on them, I'll go talk to them and then the other Aboriginal women, just other girls to talk to. You know? Yeah, so that's my support network and that's how I get through. (Rosemary)

Thus the university Elders and the other Aboriginal women in her program provided the sense of connection to tribal culture that was critical for her survival in a mainstream institution.

In addition to providing cultural guidance and a sense of belonging to a community, Rosemary also explained how it seemed that the other Aboriginal women were more likely to offer assistance. Evidently, unlike non-aboriginals and Aboriginal men, Aboriginal women did not share the competitive individualistic orientation of the dominant culture and were therefore willing to share their knowledge and their resources.

My fellow Aboriginal women have been more supportive, saying "listen, I didn't know how to do it, but now that I'm getting it, let me show you how to do it." But some of the non-aboriginal students and even some Aboriginal men don't. They hoard it and they don't want us to see that stuff because we are competition. I'm not used to that. I don't want to take anything away from them. I'm just trying to support myself. I see that with other women. They're just trying to support themselves and their families and it's maybe a different mindset of how you go about things. But I was taught to share, you give and you give and you get back. It's a sense of reciprocity. I'm just, sometimes I'm just floored. You know if I did good, I'd share my knowledge of what I did right. So, it's very frustrating at times. (Rosemary)

According to Rosemary, given the limited number of scholarships and funding opportunities, for those who have embraced a competitive ethic, assisting fellow students is seen as a self-defeating act. However, these women were operating from a more traditional community orientation and Indigenous ethic of collective responsibility, rather than the Western conception of individual advancement through competition, means that they felt they had a responsibility to assist one another.

Since time immemorial Aboriginal people have relied on the assistance of one another in order to survive, functioning quite effectively on the basis of reciprocity and cooperation and, as a result, see other community members as allies in production rather than as competition for resources. While the adherence to a traditional Indigenous collective social orientation is an important factor in the willingness of these Aboriginal women to help one another, it is apparently not the only factor as Rosemary herself pointed out that the Aboriginal men in her program don't seem as willing to offer assistance in the same way as the women. Continuing this point, Claudia claims that the propensity to help others is also connected to gender socialization since, as she observed:

... the guys who do really well they don't help anybody else, but the women do. I am so supportive, in any of my jobs or even in school I will share anything, I will give you anything, I do not hoard it just for my organization or just for myself. It is not something that I have ever done. I don't think it's just my personality. I think it is just the way I was raised as a woman. (Claudia)

Thus it is apparently not just being Aboriginal, but being an Aboriginal woman, that underlies the observed willingness to assist others.

Anderson's (2000) work on Aboriginal womanhood confirms that traditionally, as the creators of life, women were given the responsibility to "nurture life once it has been produced" (p. 169). Moreover, the connection of birthing individual Aboriginal children with birthing "the people" meant that women were similarly given "responsibility to nurture the people" (p. 169). As mothers, women (whether they had borne children or not) were therefore responsible for the whole community and their role was to "teach, nurture, and heal all people," not just their own children and family (p. 171). Whether it was sharing experiences and providing a listening ear, helping one another with questions about assignments and course work, or getting together for potluck at the end of the

month when food and money were in short supply, such behaviours can be seen as a contemporary example of this tradition. These Aboriginal women are consciously working for the collective advancement of their people by nurturing and assisting one another in the academy, sharing their resources and knowledge so that they might all succeed. Moreover, if as I have argued, the pursuit of academic achievement can be read as transformational resistance, then the social justice motivation would necessitate a collective vision of success and a co-operative orientation towards other Aboriginal students. Indeed, if the goal of educational achievement is the betterment of life for all Aboriginal people and not just the pursuit of individual accomplishment, competitive behaviours are counterproductive to the pursuit of social justice.

### *Conclusion*

Aboriginal peoples are not inherently committed to the pursuit of social justice (although traditional social structures may encourage a belief in the value and possibility of equality, such a debate is beyond the scope of this discussion) and moreover the experience of oppression does not necessarily lead to critical consciousness or transformational resistance. Indeed, as the stories of these Aboriginal women illustrate, the ability and desire to deny denigrating stereotypes, defy societal expectations, and resist subordination must be nurtured. By instilling a positive tribal identity, a strong cultural foundation, and an empowering sense of self Aboriginal families generally, but mothers, grandmothers, and other female kin specifically, were found to encourage counter-hegemonic thinking and consequently transformational resistance. Additionally, once in the academy, women-centered networks become critical for the provision of a

sense of connection to Aboriginal community and the maintenance of the commitment to resistance.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Findings and Analysis: Institutional Influences

#### *Introduction*

As one of the primary societal institutions responsible for the transmission and maintenance of the dominant culture and the attendant racist and sexist social structure, both the education system and, by extension, the educators therein play a crucial role in either perpetuating the marginalization of Aboriginal people in general and Aboriginal women in particular, or in a break with tradition, fostering their empowerment and the pursuit of social justice. The first two sections of this chapter explore the complex ways in which both non-aboriginal and Aboriginal faculty, teachers, and other institutional staff can influence the educational experience of Aboriginal women in either positive or negative ways depending on the nature of their relationship with the student. These sections are followed by an explanation of the need for a demonstrated institutional commitment to actively support Aboriginal students, faculty, staff, and programs if they are to succeed. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the importance of Aboriginal specific 'safe spaces' that function as a haven in an otherwise hostile institutional environment.

#### *The Complex Role of Faculty, Teachers, and Staff*

As the first and, for many, the only point of contact with the educational system, teachers and faculty can have a significant impact on academic achievement, either positive or negative depending on the nature of their relationship with the students. Given the significant amount of time spent in educational institutions, many students spend at least as many of their waking hours in the care of teachers as they do their own

parents, making the role of an educator considerably more complicated than simply transmitting curriculum. They are simultaneously responsible for the care and socialization of the children. In her foundational work on the role of faculty in the retention of American Indian college students, Hornett (1989) argued that given the significance of their contact with the students, teachers are perhaps in the best position to directly affect the motivation of Aboriginal students. The level of cultural awareness and sensitivity displayed by faculty was suggested, in fact, to be a key factor contributing to the desire of Aboriginal students to remain in school (Hornett, 1989). Furthermore, according to D. Sanders (1987), Aboriginal students were found to be more responsive and the levels of participation in activities and discussions in the classroom increased when they had an Aboriginal teacher specifically. However, as Brade et al. (2003) indicated, the comparatively low numbers of qualified Aboriginal teachers in the education system generally means that not all Aboriginal students will have the opportunity to learn in an Aboriginal led environment. Conversely, as Colodarci (1983) found, in his oft-cited study of reasons for academic drop-out among Native Americans, a lack of positive relationship with teachers can be similarly, albeit negatively, influential. The perception that teachers did not care and/or did not provide enough assistance (which in turn gave the perception of being uncaring) was found to be a significant factor influencing the decision to drop out of school for the Native Americans students interviewed (Colodarci, 1983). Unfortunately, as Kirkness (1986) subsequently indicated, an overwhelming majority of Aboriginal students (91-95% of those studied) felt that White teachers did not like Aboriginal people, much less exhibit any caring behaviours towards Aboriginal students.



Such findings have supported arguments for increased recruitment of Aboriginal instructors at all educational levels in an effort to improve the academic achievement rates of Aboriginal students (see also Mackay & Myles, 1995). It is presumed that since the development and maintenance of a strong cultural identity is connected to academic achievement for Aboriginal people (see Dehyle, 1989, Huffman et al. 1986; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Starnes, 2006) and that a positive identification with others who share the same heritage and belief system is important for the creation of a strong cultural identity, therefore, the exposure of Aboriginal children to racially matched positive role models in the classroom should be connected to increased academic achievement (Brade et al. 2003). Brade et al. (2003) explained that according to the literature, following parents and other close family members, teachers can be one of the earliest role models in a child's life and are, as a result, thought to be particularly influential. However, their research indicated that having racially matched teachers was, contrary to expectations, negatively related to academic achievement for the Aboriginal students in their particular sample (Brade et al.). Clearly, as Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010) contend, the "overemphasis on race and or gender as a basis for understanding a teacher's influence is limited in understanding the intertwining set of social, cultural and economic relations that operate to affect both implementation of curriculum and student engagement with schooling" (p 49). What is required then is a more complex understanding of the nature of the relationships with teachers and faculty described by the Aboriginal women in this study as having had a positive impact on their academic success.

For almost half of the women in this study, positive relationships with teachers, faculty, and other staff in the institution were felt to support academic achievement and, moreover, positive relationships with Aboriginal faculty were felt to be particularly important, but not necessarily as role models. Betty explained that spending time among the other Aboriginal people who worked in the Aboriginal teacher program provided her with a sense of attachment to the academy through her sense of connection to the Aboriginal community within the institution:

I was working at [the Aboriginal teacher program] and after about a week of classes I had to cut back to about half time and then I said “you know what I just can’t even do that” and I told them “maybe you should just find somebody else.” But [the Director] said to me, “you don’t really want to lose us altogether do you?” I said “no I don’t but you know.” So she said “here is what we can do, we are gonna cut it down, and you can just do this and that, and just zip in and out.” You know what? I am so thankful for that. I think I would have gone nuts with no attachment. I would just be way out there. I just look forward to the day I go in. I like seeing them and there is that attachment... It makes me feel a little better and more connected and she had the foresight to see that. I just was so thankful.  
(Betty)

Having been through similar experiences during her own Masters and PhD studies, the Director of the program was able to identify and satisfy a need that Betty was not yet aware of herself, the need for connection to a community.

The ability to foster a sense of connection to the academic community is, as Tinto (1998) found, directly connected to the likelihood of overall academic success. Citing Rendon (1994), Tinto explains that the more students see themselves as “integrated into the institution and as valued members of it (i.e., validated) the more likely it is that they will persist” (1998, p. 168). However, cautioning against the simplistic reliance upon race and gender affiliation as the source of connection, citing McCarthy’s 1990 work, Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010) argue that “racial difference or affiliation must only be

seen as ‘one of a variety of starting points’ for building certain sorts of identifications and solidarities with minority students in schools” (p. 54).

*The Complicated Influence of Aboriginal Staff and Faculty*

Increased numbers of Aboriginal people working within the academy may give the outward appearance of inclusivity. However, without significant commitment on the part of the institution to address inequities and genuinely empower Aboriginal faculty and staff, the hierarchies of power and privilege in the dominant society will continue to be reflected and reinforced within the academy. In an example of how anti-racist concepts can be turned into mere rhetoric and conveniently used against those whose interests they were meant to serve, Janet described how efforts on the part of Aboriginal staff to provide Aboriginal specific activities that might better address the needs of Aboriginal students, were summarily rejected. University administration argued that “separating out Aboriginal students” might be “ghettoizing” and, therefore, might ultimately be detrimental. Describing her experiences within this particular university as confining, Janet explains that without the necessary institutional backing she was often left to find her own resources for Aboriginal student supports:

After a while the only way I could function in that institution was just to fly below the radar. Even with the particular title of the position, I was the Director but if I wanted to organize something like a welcome day I had to find my own resources and go ahead and do things. It was just a very confining experience. (Janet)

In fact, having been made well aware of the opinions held within the institution Janet had little choice but to ‘fly below the radar’, hoping that her subversive efforts would go unnoticed by those in authority. As a direct result of the continual disempowerment and the frustration of not being able to get proper institutional support and resourcing, Janet

found herself torn between her commitment to the students and her hatred of the institution:

When I worked for this university, there were days when I would go to work and be happy because I liked the students and I like the environment, then there were days when I just hated it. I dreaded going through that door. (Janet)

Clearly, one must begin to question the ability of Aboriginal staff to encourage the retention of Aboriginal students when they too are suppressing a deep desire to flee the institution in search of more supportive and welcoming environments. Indeed, citing the work of St. Denis, Bouvier and Battiste (1998) who found that the need for Aboriginal teachers to feel connected and supported in their respective educational institutions paralleled that of Aboriginal students in the classroom, Bazylak (2002) contends that the necessary empowerment of Aboriginal students cannot occur if Aboriginal teachers are themselves marginalized.

It might be argued then, that without a commitment to provide the necessary supports, the hiring of Aboriginal staff could be, in fact, detrimental to Aboriginal student retention, as the resulting feelings of resentment towards the academic institution are often difficult to hide. However, without someone in the academy to rely on for support, many Aboriginal students find themselves struggling in isolation to deal with the challenges of life in a mainstream institution. Having Aboriginal people working within the institution becomes particularly important during times of crisis when students require an ally; when they need someone from the same background, someone who has shared the same experiences of marginalization and who can therefore relate to and assist with dealing with incidents of racism. After a classmate made racist remarks regarding Aboriginal people in one of her classes, Lisa explained how she had to seek out the help

of an Aboriginal student counsellor at a nearby university since such support services were not offered at her own institution:

I talked to the education counsellor at [another university] because there wasn't one here. I knew there was one at [the other university] from a friend of mine. Lynn said "if I have to go in with you I will, but if you want to talk to the prof first and then we will see where that goes"... If this needed to be taken up to the chair or something like that she offered to go with me, to help me out, or if I needed to talk to a friend I was always welcome... I took that class in my third year, but had that happened in my first year I don't know if I could have spoke up... it was okay after that. There were obviously ideas that I didn't agree with but nothing at the level they were at that first day. (Lisa)

Luckily, through the Aboriginal student social network, Lisa was able to find such culturally appropriate assistance when it was needed most. The Aboriginal student counsellor was able to provide not only a sympathetic ear and a safe space in which to share her experience, but also offered to act as an advocate and provided concrete guidance on appropriate processes for dealing with such incidents. However, this experience made her all the more aware of the lack of appropriate supports for Aboriginal students offered by her own institution:

I had to talk to Lynn at [a neighbouring university] because we didn't have a Native counsellor. I think they have an equality officer but it was more of a gender position, sort of more of an inclusivity kind of thing. Actually I was sort of surprised because [my university] is quite a diverse place, maybe not a lot of Aboriginal students but they have a lot of other people who are from different places, who are minorities. So that was a big barrier because I realized that if anything happened that I couldn't handle on my own, who would I go to? It's not Lynn's responsibility to cover what happens at [my university], although she was always supportive and never ever said that or even implied but I knew that it was not her problem. (Lisa)

Evidently, as Henry and Tator (2009a) argued, despite swelling minority student populations, institutions remain bound to a model that "no longer accurately reflects the needs and demands of a racially and culturally pluralistic university and society" (p. 7). Lisa's observation that her university had an equality officer, but that this position was

not mandated or equipped to deal with any form of discrimination other than gender, indicates the kind of discrimination that is deemed relevant and worth addressing in the institution and, by extension, how much impact the white mainstream feminist movement has had within society as compared to antiracist advocates. In her foundational work on the intersection of race and gender discrimination, A. Davis (1983) explains that in the context of a profoundly racist society, the maintenance of power (and wealth) in the hands of the White population has provided White women with increased access to political arenas and consequently more power to influence political agendas to their own benefit.

Despite many arguments for the value of increasing diversity in academic institutions and the creation of many Native Studies departments and Aboriginal specific programs, the overall balance of power within the institutions remains undisrupted (James, 2009). Indeed, the lack of Aboriginal faculty, even in Native Studies departments, is evident. Chantal explained that although she had been lucky to have had many Aboriginal professors throughout her education, which she felt had a positive impact on her educational career, many of her classmates and students had not been so fortunate:

When I began my PhD there were other Native students there and you know what they all said and this is why I feel so fortunate because we have Native profs here, not even one of them had ever had a Native prof. None of them!... being a Native instructor now, I had feedback from students who came from Sault Ste Marie and they had gone to college there. They were actually in Native courses there. They walked into my section, my class and they told me this later, they said “you wouldn’t believe how good we felt when we seen a Native prof standing at the front of the room”. They said “we took Native courses up there in the Sault but they were taught by non-native people.” (Chantal)

Clearly, as her students declared, the presence of Aboriginal professors can be empowering for Aboriginal students, just as conversely the experience of seeing non-Aboriginals maintain their stranglehold on positions of power within the university, can be disempowering. While it is doubtful that any institution of higher learning would ever have the audacity to employ a man to teach women's studies classes, it seems that no such concern exists for Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. While the oft-mentioned lack of 'qualified' Aboriginal candidates to teach courses is often relied upon to excuse such practices, what these arguments conveniently avoid is any discussion of the criteria used to determine qualification, not to mention the history of oppression and educational abuse that created the credential disparity in the first place (see James, 2009).

The inclusion of Aboriginal curriculum and the creation of Native Studies programs were intended to engage Aboriginal students and hopefully improve achievement levels; however, without a conscious consideration of the context in which such curriculum is delivered, the desired outcomes cannot be realized. When mainstream power relations are reproduced within Native Studies departments, Aboriginal students who "naively" expected that such programs would be different, find themselves sorely disappointed when they realize Aboriginal people continue to be marginalized:

I came here, very naïve. I came here thinking that [it] would be radically different. Like they claim to be the oldest Native studies program in Canada and it is the only place to get a PhD in Native Studies. All this different things that are supposedly so good and Native centered and I came here and I felt no different. I was just as marginalized as I was at [Big City University]. I feel like here it is really bad, like I feel that here it is definitely worse. Here the people who aren't Native teach Native studies and I was totally unprepared for that. My first two experiences were with White men, the first time I came here. In my first week I went to two classes and there were these White men and I felt disempowered and marginalized. (Cora)

This is not to suggest that Aboriginal people are inherently more qualified to teach Native Studies courses simply by virtue of their racial heritage, as such assertions would be absurd. However, the obvious reproduction of the dominant social structure within Native Studies programs cannot lead to the kind of empowerment that Aboriginal students are seeking. Such programs become instead, as Cora found, simply a means to “facilitate White peoples’ access to Indigenous knowledge.”

While increasing the numbers of Aboriginal faculty and staff is obviously a positive first step in the necessary process of challenging and hopefully transforming the prevailing power relations within the academy, presuming that Aboriginal faculty are automatically more qualified to empower Aboriginal students by virtue of their race, is simplistic and flawed. Although it has been argued that matching the racial identity of the teacher with that of the student leads to increased academic success as such teachers have the cultural competency necessary to engage and empower their students (S. King, 1993), as Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010) contend, such strategies risk essentializing and homogenizing educators of colour and wrongly presume that racial background is sufficient basis for pedagogical connection. Multiple generations of Aboriginal people have been denied the opportunity to maintain a connection to their traditional cultures and identities, as they were stolen from their families and forced into residential schools, or adopted out into non-aboriginal families and are therefore not necessarily in possession of the appropriate cultural competencies. In fact, as assimilation has been the goal and mandate of education as provided to Aboriginal peoples for the largest part of North American history and success has heretofore been dependent upon acceptance of and adherence to dominant epistemologies and value systems, it can safely be assumed that



more likely than not, those who possess the credentials necessary for teaching will by definition be those who are more assimilated. Moreover, simply being Aboriginal, even if traditional, does not necessarily equate with being a good teacher, nor does it necessarily lead to a critical understanding of oppression and issues of power.

The tendency of academic institutions to admit only those members of minority populations who are not critically aware and therefore not particularly threatening to the established social order, allows for the appearance of inclusivity without jeopardizing the status quo (see James, 2009). As Hill-Collins (2009) explains, the maintenance of White male privilege does not require the actual management of the institution solely by White men, in fact White women and people of colour may be recruited to maintain the system so long as they accept their subordination and reinforce the prevailing ideology.

Accepting and rewarding a small number of “safe” outsiders, are a means of “keeping the outsiders out and at the same time having them acknowledge the legitimacy of this procedure” and, by extension, their own exclusion (Hill-Collins, p, 272). For example, Cora observed how,

They have this habit of rewarding people who don't have as strongly developed critical thinking skills. They are always finding people who have very little kinds of experience and putting them in positions of power. Which is fine because I feel they deserve access to positions of power, I am happy for them... I feel like there are these people who are pitied and I think people get hired so that those people hiring get to feel they are sharing power, they get to feel benevolent. So it gets twisted in some ways. It's really strategic for them, for the White people, to have people who won't challenge them in positions of power. (Cora)

Permitting a few non-threatening Aboriginals to obtain positions of authority is an effective means of addressing demands for increased representation, obfuscating the exclusion of the majority of Aboriginal people and averting any genuine challenge to existing authority (see Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 272-273). Clearly such practices hinder, if

not outright prevent the exposure of Aboriginal students to the kind of oppositional knowledge that would lead to empowerment. In fact, as Cora further explained, even the traditional elders seem to have been chosen for their willingness to support the maintenance of the status quo:

It is their job I guess. I just didn't feel supported. I don't feel supported by the school elder... I just find her cold, but then also her lack of confrontation, they get mega rewards for not confronting the faculty or for giving them guidance but in really superficial ways. The school elder is supposed to be providing guidance to [faculty and administration] and they are not. They are not giving the right kind of guidance. They just say everything is okay as long as we are respectful. So then I feel unsupported. (Cora)

Although a 'don't rock the boat' approach may be personally functional as it facilitates continued employment within the institution (see James 2009), by choosing to avoid confronting those who exercise power within the institution and encouraging the students to be similarly accommodating, this particular Elder is not only supporting the status quo through her inaction, she is simultaneously alienating the very students she was meant to support.

Unfortunately, as a result of domination in society generally and in the academy specifically, some Aboriginal people have developed unhealthy practices in an effort to regain some measure of esteem. Access to traditional knowledge has long been one of the extremely few areas where Aboriginal peoples possessed privilege and consequently has been used as a weapon in the larger struggle for social power:

I also find it difficult because I find that through colonization, cultural knowledge has become the domain where our power dynamics are fought out. So you find people who are traditional knowers and profs who have cultural knowledge and they are doing things they really shouldn't be doing. They are being arrogant and mean and nasty and they are using their cultural knowledge as power. But they shouldn't be doing that but they are doing that because that is where power dynamics are being played out. I really struggle with all that, and that is particular

to my department where there are a lot of Indigenous people, a lot of Indigenous profs, but then a lot of White people as well. (Louise)

In the context of such power dynamics, Aboriginal professors are using their cultural knowledge to improve their own position, but doing little to empower their Aboriginal students.

The reliance on racial affiliation as a source of pedagogical connection is also flawed because it presumes a stable essential identity for both the teacher and the student. This homogenizing tendency, based on the racist belief that people of colour, or Aboriginals are 'all the same', denies the concrete reality of multiple intersecting aspects of identity and the presence of hybrid identities having affiliations with more than one race or ethnic group. Particularly among the First Nations peoples, there can be great variation not only between, but also within nations, which significantly troubles the supposed automatic affiliation of Aboriginal teachers with all Aboriginal students. In an example of internalized oppression, Louise describes how identity politics lead to differential treatment depending on the degree to which the individual conforms to stereotypical images of authentic Aboriginality:

I find in my department... identity politics are really played out. I really find that... If you don't look Native you are perceived as non-native even more and so those identity politics are played out. I think it is in terms of how you look, like your brown hair and brown eyes. The more you look Native the more some professors favour you. There is a lot of interesting dynamics. Native professors I find are favouring more Native looking students. So it is that internalized oppression right. It is offensive. It is bad because it is not about appearance it is about a value system and a philosophy. (Louise)

Just like their non-aboriginal counterparts, Aboriginal professors are not beyond reproach simply because of their racial identity. As a result of centuries of oppression, many Aboriginal people have begun to lash out at their own people in order to regain some

small measure of power. Such lateral violence is a common response to continued oppression. In a society where marginalized peoples have historically had little ability to fight back against their oppressors, anger and frustration are often redirected at one's own people (Langton, 2008). Interestingly, in Native studies programs, where resources are scarce and cultural 'authenticity' provides power and legitimacy, those who are more stereotypically Aboriginal in appearance are favoured, while those who are lighter skinned often become marginalized. We are obviously still struggling with the legacy of the colonial construction of Indigenous peoples in opposition to 'Whites' and, unfortunately, efforts to reassert the value of tribal identities often have the unintended effect of excluding and marginalizing those who do not fit the stereotypes and are therefore deemed inauthentic. Such internal oppression can be devastating. Aboriginal people can become trapped in the borderlands, having been rejected by their own people for being 'too white' and simultaneously never acceptable to the non-aboriginal society as they remain Aboriginal.

The unproblematic presumption that the presence of Aboriginal teachers will automatically improve the educational achievement of Aboriginal students is flawed. Conversely, the assumption that all non-aboriginal teachers are injurious to their Aboriginal students is equally and similarly flawed. While the presence of Aboriginal people working in the academy was felt to have a positive impact on the achievement levels of Aboriginal students, many of the women in this study also found that non-aboriginal instructors and staff could also be supportive if they were able to develop a caring relationship with their students:

In grade 7 we had this teacher and she really had an impact on me, because she talked to me quite a bit. She was in home economics and she would ask "what is

going on at home” because I wouldn’t get my home work done. It was just her approach I guess. You have to wonder you know. Even now I would like to get in contact with her. But she would talk to me. No one was at home really so I never had time to do homework. We had to make dinner and help out. But she was always there for me. She had a nice family and I used to day dream about that, thinking when I get out of here I want to have a nice family like that. (Sierra)

In contrast to the uncaring teachers who were deemed to have contributed to the failure and drop-out of their Native American students in Colodarci’s (1983) study, even though she was non-aboriginal the care and concern demonstrated by Sierra’s teacher had an obvious and lasting impact. Furthermore, the fact that this teacher was not of the same race apparently did not prevent her from being seen as a role model.

Even when the majority of one’s experiences in the academy are negative, as Cora found, having a positive relationship with at least one member of the institution can help make the entire experience more bearable:

... this woman who is the academic programs coordinator, she is really helpful. She is a non-native woman, but she is helpful. Like the first time I came to Trent, when I was 18 she came to the bus station and picked me up and drove me around on a tour and introduced me to everyone and she was really nice. When I wanted to get back into school I called her. I was always asking her what the next steps were and she always told me and I was always calling and double checking. So in that kind of way she was helpful. She wrote me reference letters this year and she tells me about different things like how to get the work study positions if you applied for OSAP and got turned down. She was very helpful. She was the one helpful person out of the entire staff and faculty, they are so unhelpful. (Cora)

The efforts of this particular non-aboriginal teacher, who endeavoured to explain and assist with various processes within the institution, made a significant difference in Cora’s experience in university. According to Monture (2009), many of the “conventions and practices” in the academy “are not written and are therefore not accessible” to those without relationship to an insider who is both able and willing to act as a guide (p. 80). Moreover, Monture contends that the “lack of a guide to lend assistance in clearing the

maze of unnecessary obstacles” is, in fact, a “covert strategy that operates to deny success” to those labelled as outsiders, i.e., those who are not white or male (2009, p. 81). Indeed, the historical absence of people of colour generally and Aboriginal people specifically from post-secondary institutions means that many of those who are currently pursuing post-secondary degrees are, like Cora, the first generation to do so and are consequently unable to turn to family, or even other community members for the necessary guidance and/or assistance. Clearly, without a positive mentoring relationship within the university, such students would be at a significant disadvantage when negotiating the ‘maze’ of academic processes and behaviours.

In addition to possessing the requisite knowledge of academic processes by virtue of their privileged position, faculty who have also developed an awareness of the history of Aboriginal peoples and are willing to deal patiently with the legacy of that history as it is manifested in the classroom, are better equipped to understand and therefore meet the needs of Aboriginal students, regardless of their own racial identity. For instance,

...they saw the potential of me but I didn't. My self-esteem was still very low. But then I tried and I worked to develop that. But they saw in me things that I didn't. That was one of the reasons for their strict discipline with me. I realize now that is one of the reasons why I am here today is because they were strict with me and I pushed them. Oh did I ever. I talked to this one teacher and I said how dare you do this, who in the world do you think you are... anyway she talked to me, she let me blow off steam and then she sat down to talk to me and then I realized I was the one venting and blowing off steam. She was very self-disciplined. I thought holy cow here I am blowing off steam and talking like a little child. I praise her today for pushing me and I told her that. I saw her the other day and I said I am graduating and she said I knew you could do it. (Helena)

Unlike many teachers throughout the history of education for Aboriginal peoples who have held lower expectations for their Aboriginal students (based primarily upon racist beliefs), this particular teacher believed Helena was capable of reaching her goals even

when Helena herself did not believe it was possible. According to Hornett (1989), unlike non-aboriginal students who tend to have better supports, for students like Helena who, due to family breakdown and dysfunction, do not have significant family support, a caring and culturally sensitive faculty member can be the difference between success or failure (see also Bowker, 1992). Unfortunately, after generations of oppression and racism, many Aboriginal people are, like Helena, plagued by low self-esteem and self-destructive behaviours. Consequently the teacher who is able to identify and support the true potential of Aboriginal students is the one who will be able to make a difference.

*The Need for Demonstrated Institutional Commitment to Support Aboriginals*

While affiliation with the Aboriginal faculty, staff, and community within the institution does provide an extremely important point of access to the academic community for many Aboriginal students, in order for Aboriginal students to feel they are truly valued members of the larger academic community, they need to see that Aboriginal people and Aboriginal specific programs are not only tolerated, or even accepted, but genuinely valued within the larger institutional community. Betty explained how the support of other non-aboriginal faculty, particularly those in leadership positions, was a critical component of her feeling 'at home' in the faculty.

The Dean and Associate Dean make it clear that they are just ordinary people. You meet them in the hall and they just stop and talk to you. Oh I loved that I felt so at home, people were friendly and of course we had [the Aboriginal teacher program]. I was not a student then, but I was there and all the faculty knew of us and I thought it was really great. We opened this new lab where you can do computers and video from all over the world and they had this contest to find a name. We put in a Mohawk word "Agwego" it means like "all of us are together" or "all of us matter together" and the Dean was away in another country and she sent an email saying she really liked that name... I remember the day that the Dean came to the Aboriginal council and she said okay I want to move that we are to get an Aboriginal Masters program here and this is what I am going to do.

Anyway she was really supportive from the start.... And the Associate Dean is just so down to earth. (Betty)

By embracing and exemplifying, the belief that “all of us matter together” the non-aboriginal faculty were able to create an environment where Aboriginal faculty, staff, and by extension Aboriginal students, felt welcomed and respected.

Coming from similar cultural backgrounds (while still recognizing the heterogeneity both within and between Aboriginal Nations) and having shared similar experiences (of being marginalized within society generally and mainstream educational institutions specifically), Aboriginal people are, according to Janet, in the best position to identify the needs of Aboriginal students and to provide advice on how to support those needs within the academy in ways that are culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive. However, as her experience attests, simplistically recruiting Aboriginal staff, whether as faculty, counsellors, or support staff is bound to be ineffectual if those hired are not provided the necessary support and resources that would truly empower them to make a difference for the Aboriginal students in the institution:

I think universities or colleges need to listen to what their Indigenous staff are telling them in terms of how to support students... in one particular institution there was only a handful of us that were Native staff. We tried to advocate for acknowledging that we as Native people require different types of supports and that we as Native staff are in the best position to set these things up. That was never really acknowledged there.... since we were such a small number it was just not a very supportive environment. They were more than happy to take the tuition. They are more than happy to brag that 10 to 15 % of the student population was Native but when it came to having a really honest discussion about support, it was all lip service... I was the Director but if I wanted to organize something like a welcome day [for Native students] I had to find my own resources and go ahead and do things... they really have to pay attention... most colleges and universities now have an advisory council. It really depends where you are, some of them are really active and are listened to by the institution and some are just lipservice. They are there because they have to be there for the institution to get the money. They really need to change, they really need to empower those advisory councils. (Janet)



As Janet explained, Aboriginal councils can be initiate positive changes when they are empowered and respected by the larger institution, and conversely without a genuine commitment on the part of the institution to work in a relationship of partnership and respect such advisory councils will not be effective.

In this manner, institutions can give the appearance of adhering to a belief in the value of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education as a necessary precursor to substantive educational improvement, without actually giving up control. According to Henry and Tator (2009b) such situations are the result of ‘democratic racism’ wherein societal and institutional commitments to “democratic principles such as equality, fairness and justice *conflict* with, but also *coexist* with, negative feelings about racialized groups and discrimination against them” (p. 33). Unfortunately, for those who are struggling to improve the situation of oppressed populations, one of the consequences of this conflict between liberal democratic ideals and lingering racist ideologies is often a “lack of support for policies and practices that might improve the relatively low status of racialized communities” (Henry & Tator, 2009b, p. 33).

#### *The Importance of Aboriginal Specific Spaces*

For Aboriginal women, as is the case for all human beings, it is important to have a sense of belonging. This feeling is clearly difficult to obtain in a mainstream institutional environment where many Aboriginals feel they are not only marginalized, but also often outright persecuted, as they become the target of racist attacks and sexist assumptions. It is therefore not surprising that many felt they simply did not ‘fit in’ much less belong in the academy. Given such a context, as Anderson (2000) argued, leaving one’s home community to pursue an education can therefore result in feelings of

alienation and isolation for Aboriginal women since they often do not ‘fit in’ with the dominant society and are simultaneously geographically disconnected from their own people.

Cathy explained that being able to spend time ‘back home’ reconnecting with family is critical for the survival of Aboriginal students who may experience feelings of shame, frustration, anger or disempowerment as a result of repeated exposure to ignorance, intolerance, and racial prejudice in the university environment:

It was really hard and I think if I had to go away further than one hour’s distance, I wouldn’t have made it, because, even though I was in residence up there I went home twice a week. Just for supper, just an hour. That was great. Then it was just that I needed to go home and gather strength from my family, for me to see that yes they’re still there and for them to see me, yes she’s still there, she’s alive, we can see her, she’s doing well. I went home to get my strength and then I’d come back to school, to stick it out and to hear some really dumb stuff in sociology class about Native people, you know, you’d get so mad about that. (Cathy)

Coping with the demands of academic requirements and the stress of living in what many have described as an alienating environment was easier if strong ties to family and community were maintained. For those Aboriginal students like Cathy who come from supportive environments, time spent at home can reinforce a sense of self-worth and reaffirm the belief that being Aboriginal is something to be proud of, which as Cathy explained, strengthened her determination to withstand the onslaught of racist conceptions about Aboriginal people that she was often subjected to over the course of her education. Unfortunately, not all Aboriginal students are lucky enough to have such support and nurturing in their home environment.

For Aboriginal students who feel marginalized by the “really dumb stuff” propounded in mainstream curriculum, time spent at home with family offers a reprieve, an opportunity to feel safe and respected. As Hill-Collins (2000) explains, within the

context of a racist society, having a 'home' to return to is critical as such spaces provide security and "serve as sanctuaries for group members". The very concept of home means that members are "surrounded by individuals who seemingly share similar objectives" and therefore homes represent "idealized, privatized spaces where members can feel at ease" (p. 161). In the home environment there is no need to defend Aboriginal peoples to those who criticize and judge. Conversely, for those who cope with being an Aboriginal in mainstream society by "passing" or downplaying any outward signifiers of Aboriginality, there is no need to deny ones heritage or identity by actively maintaining such facades and no need for the inner shame that results from such behaviours.

For those students who are unable to return to a positive family home, or even as a means of sustaining oneself until the next opportunity to return to one's home community, alternative safer spaces, or homes must be found, where one can find 'sanctuary' and feel at ease and affirmed among those who share similar experiences. Many women described the importance of Aboriginal specific programs, centers, lounges, or even a specific class for the creation of the necessary safe spaces within otherwise hostile alienating institutional environments. Aboriginal programs, that are specifically designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal students, utilize traditional Aboriginal pedagogies and privilege Indigenous knowledges, are critical for the empowerment of our students:

Here is it very supportive. Being here in numbers, you know I feel like I am one of the clan. That is important. For me I kind of get power out of it and get strength from it. It's being with people who share similar things and who I can just relate to and they can relate to me, I don't have to explain myself. When I am out in the world you are always explaining yourself, always explaining a different way of being. (Shauna)

In contrast to the experience of so many Aboriginal women who found themselves feeling isolated and marginalized as the only Aboriginal person in mainstream programs, in this Aboriginal specific program Shaunna was able to find a sense of belonging and garner strength from the presence of other Aboriginal people. In this way, Aboriginal peoples have been able to carve out a small space of safety- a place where they “fit in”- even in the midst of a larger (potentially alienating) mainstream institution. In such settings, among those who share not only similar experiences but also a common cultural background, as Shaunna claims, there is no need to explain or justify your way of being. The ability to simply be oneself and do so with pride, frees one’s energies to focus on learning, instead of continually fighting ignorance and oppression by re-educating classmates (and faculty), deconstructing racist mythologies and exposing denigrating stereotypes.

However, not all Aboriginal students are enrolled in Aboriginal specific programs and as Rosemary has observed, unfortunately, due to the persistence of racism both in academic institutions and in society at large, “if you’re not working in a Native studies program, or an Indigenous studies program, you’re going to have a harder time out there.” As a matter of fact, without the supportive and welcoming environment they had previously found in Aboriginal specific programs, several women described the great difficulty they experienced when transitioning from the Aboriginal specific entry program into the first year of the regular program:

I did the first year in Native Nurses Entry Program... I was an A student for that year. So then I went into the HBSCN and that is when the headache started. The first year was not too bad. They had a small group, there was only 10, in the Native nurses entry programme. They have set classes. It’s a smaller group but they really orient you well. But when you go into your first year on your own. You are on your own. I am the person who does not ask a lot of questions. I

stayed by myself. I tried to figure things out on my own and that was hard.  
(Cheyenne)

I went through the Native Nurses Entry Program. I was very successful... I went into the first year of nursing and ... I found I didn't have the same support as I did in the Native Nurses Entry Program because you're in with the mainstream kids ... and educational support and stuff like that, it just wasn't there as much as in the Native nursing program. So it's like, you go from all this support and tutoring and all this stuff like that. They try to show you where you can go to within your institution to get that and then when you go into your mainstream, it just kind of falls apart. It was like yeah, see you later! Thanks for being with us. ... So I did the nursing thing for two years and then I switched over to Political Science and Indigenous Learning. (Sheila)

Both Sheila and Cheyenne described feeling suddenly very alone and unsupported when transitioning from the Aboriginal specific program to the mainstream nursing program.

For Aboriginal women, who are struggling to survive in mainstream programs on campuses that were often described as overwhelming, the presence of an Aboriginal focused space was felt to be important as a site of refuge:

You can come here so it is very comforting. I found in first year in between classes if you don't know a lot of people you can come here. In my program I gotta loosen up sometimes. You can get away for a little bit. So I come here and do some reading or check my email or whatever. There are always people up here.  
(Brenda)

Many of the women similarly described this 'sense of comfort' they obtained from being among other Aboriginal people in Aboriginal specific spaces as a significant factor in their continued well-being. As a matter of fact the sense of comfort provided by Aboriginal-specific spaces was so important that several of the women indicated that even though computer access was available at other locations on campus they preferred to check emails and conduct research in the Native Student Center simply because the environment felt safe and familiar.

For those Aboriginal students who are struggling to 'fit in', there can be a reluctance to ask for help, out of fear that such actions would only confirm the beliefs of those who accuse Aboriginal students generally and Aboriginal women in particular of gaining 'special access' through alleged affirmative-action policies and thereby usurping positions that would otherwise be occupied by more deserving non-aboriginal students and simultaneously lowering academic standards. For these students, Aboriginal-specific spaces on campus provide the security to request assistance without fear of exposing oneself as being in need of such help. Many of the women indicated their preference to access assistance at the Native center even when these same services (such as writing assistance, help with assignments, program planning, computer skills training, or obtaining information on how to access funding, housing, or childcare) were available in other more accessible venues across campus simply because they felt more comfortable. Having developed a sense of security in such Aboriginal-specific spaces and a relationship with the staff, several of the students indicated that they would in fact prefer if more services were offered in the Native center and suggested that creating 'one stop shopping' for Aboriginal students who need anything from study tips, to housing and childcare would be extremely beneficial.

In addition to the practical assistance and academic guidance described above, Aboriginal-specific spaces were also found to be important for the spiritual grounding of many students who indicated that they had found the ability to smudge and speak with an Elder was critical for the maintenance of their emotional well being while in the university:

There was an incident last year when I was in a First Nations studies class and the lecture was about residential schools and I came out of that class very emotional

and upset so I came right over here and [two Elders] were here. It was a miracle. I came in crying and they closed the door and I was able to get a smudging and have a nice talk. It completely turned around the way I felt. Something like that is invaluable. You know you just can't put a price on something like that. (Lucy Ida)

Especially during times of crisis, the presence of such an environment, i.e., a space where Aboriginal students can feel safe to reconnect with their spirituality is, as Lucy Ida claims, "invaluable" for Aboriginal students. The ability to access traditional Aboriginal culture within an otherwise mainstream environment was indeed an important aspect of Aboriginal-specific spaces. For example,

If they had a room or a place over here and have the pictures up there, or medicines like sweet grass, cedar, sage, and a smudge bowl. If somebody isn't feeling that good... not all of them smudge, but there are quite a few of them that do and there are some that are just learning... If you had people there that, others could go to, go into that room where they are sitting around on a couch and they have to help them, to talk to them about it. You know? So they wouldn't be lost... Yeah, it is important. Very important, you know? You can't just leave your culture behind! That's you! That's who you are. (Helena)

That's one of the reasons why they should have their own place here is to understand that your culture is important. Just like those people down the hall... they are keeping their stuff... Why can't we? Why do the youth come down here and they feel that they can't keep their culture, that they have to blend in with this [culture]... That's part of what's happening with the youth, they're not keeping their stuff with them... Now they feel like they have to learn this or to learn that. It's good to learn, but you have to know where your limits are, your boundaries, as you as a person. You know? You can't give yourself away. (Helena)

For Aboriginal people who have for centuries now experienced education as incompatible with the preservation of traditional culture, being able to maintain a strong connection to cultural practices within academic institutions is a relatively new, but extremely empowering experience.

Interestingly, for those students who were not able to access traditional knowledge or cultural teachings within their own family structures (due to separation or dysfunction), exposure in the academy provided an all-important point of access. After

years of struggling with the legacy of childhood abuse, including ongoing battles with alcoholism, addictions, depression, and abusive relationships, Helena found a positive Aboriginal identity and a sense of self-worth when she was introduced to her own Aboriginal culture through a university life skills program for Aboriginal people in Toronto:

At that time, 1992, I believe, they started a life skills course there. The professors were from [the university]... So we started going to this life skills course in 1992. It was quite interesting. It was good. That was where I started learning about the culture, because I never really thought of my culture or my identity or anything like that. It is sad but it is true, you know. At that time they took us up to Curve Lake and they took us to the Petroglyphs and showed us the writing on the stones. I was so amazed. I just felt so.... I don't know, spiritually I guess, I had a spiritual awakening at that time I guess. I just felt the chills all over me and I thought holy geez our ancestors were here. It really just hit home to me, who I am and who I was as a person, as Anishnawbekwe. (Helena)

Although Rosemary cautions of the danger of learning Aboriginal culture exclusively within the academy, for those who have had no previous exposure to a positive Aboriginal identity and are without family support, the access provided through the institution was an important first step in the process of developing a sense of self-worth. For women like Helena, the Aboriginal 'safe space' found within the academic institution offered refuge from a life of addictions and self-hatred. Anderson's (2000) work confirms that for many women who are not able to find strength, or a positive identity in their own family or community due to dysfunction and/or abuse, urban Aboriginal communities offer the support that had been missing from their lives.

Agreeing with Brenda's emphatic assertion that "it would be awesome if we had a bunch of us that lived in our own building," the importance of Aboriginal specific spaces was also confirmed by Adeline who indicated that an Aboriginal student residence would help minimize culture shock, especially for those students who come from the more



remote First Nations. Many of those interviewed felt that it was important that Aboriginal peoples have a 'home' within the institution, but moreover that this home should be comfortable, culturally sensitive and that it ought to be structured by a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of our students. Specifically, it was argued that spaces designed only to address the academic needs of our women was insufficient. Such approaches do not recognize a multitude of other emotional, physical, and spiritual needs that must be satisfied before students can truly feel at home in institutional settings:

There should be a nice room here where everybody can get together or anything else. They even have a room down the hall there for gays and lesbians... I think they are having a lot of fun in there all the time. They can joke and laugh. ... We got a nice little room too but there is no couch, only computers. It is all about work in there...(Helena)

We are just not a piece of meat that is going to come to school, you know we have feelings, we hate, we cry, we go to the washroom, we eat, you know. We need to satisfy those needs. If we start satisfying our needs then we get results. So if the university wants results they have to satisfy those needs. (Helena)

Having seen the benefits of the supportive and welcoming spaces established by other marginalized groups, Helena felt the desire for a 'home' for Aboriginal people on campus was not satisfied by spaces that feel academic and institutional.

Furthering the argument for providing a home for Aboriginal people within institutional environments, Helena also noted that if we are truly operating from an Indigenous world view and trying to create a culturally appropriate space, then we must also recognize that Aboriginal people and Aboriginal women in particular, operate within collective social units (not the individualist model of western society) and, therefore, we ought to provide space that can accommodate Aboriginal families. This is essential for the creation and maintenance of an Aboriginal community on campus, which as we have argued, is essential for the well-being and success of Aboriginal students:

We need that here [a First Nations house] If you bring your kids in here [Native student services] people don't appreciate that. This is not a place for kids. But if we had a house like that with the understanding that children are allowed there, family can come, the single moms. That would be so much better for women to stay in school. (Helena)

In fact, a number of Aboriginal women indicated that they did not participate in many events on campus because they were not family friendly and they could not find, or perhaps afford, a babysitter, or simply that after a day of classes (and daycares) they felt guilty and selfish for spending additional time away. Unfortunately these women are missing an important opportunity to become involved and, as Tinto (1998) noted, social integration is an important factor contributing to student persistence. Therefore, the creation of spaces that welcomed Aboriginal students and their families would allow women with children the opportunity to benefit more from social networking opportunities and lessen feelings of isolation and loneliness thereby potentially increasing levels of involvement and persistence.

The creation of a physical Aboriginal specific space, i.e. a lounge, center, house, or residence, within the university setting is clearly important, however, not sufficient, no matter how comfortable. Such a space must be connected to an overall institutional commitment to embracing and supporting Indigenous knowledge and tradition, as well as Aboriginal faculty, staff and students, lest Aboriginal specific programs become either colonized or marginalized within the larger institution (as is often the case). As more academic institutions are beginning to accept the legitimacy of and need for Aboriginal knowledge and are therefore creating Indigenous Studies programs and Native Studies courses, one would expect that the feelings of alienation would be lessened. Seeing their own history and knowledge validated in the academy, along with the creation of

Aboriginal specific spaces, ought to increase the sense of acceptance for Aboriginal students. Interestingly, several students described how such Aboriginal focused initiatives often only create pockets of acceptance and, apparently, do little to change the overall hostile environment of the larger institution: in essence they create pseudo reserves within the academy. Reserves are simultaneously protective and oppressive, reinforcing the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the larger society:

I can't really say that I feel like I fit in but I can say that there are some places at the university where I feel more welcome than others. I do feel more welcome up the hill [where the Native social work program is housed] simply because we do have our own secretaries and our own faculty. When we see our identity reflected in the faces of the people who work there and who are a part of the institution it makes a lot of difference. You know down here the only place where we are reflected is in the Native programs and Native student services. As long as I have been here there has never been a Native student working down at Timmy's or at the bookstore or in the library. It is like we are here, but we are here on a little reserve, little islands. (Yvonne)

The reproduction of such relations in the creation of isolated Native Studies programs, while a worthy and important first step, is nevertheless an incomplete solution to the challenge of making the university environment less hostile towards Aboriginal students. So long as Native studies programs remain segregated and Aboriginal faculty and staff continue to be pigeon-holed in Native studies classes and departments, the students will continue to feel that they do not truly belong in the institution, or at least that they do not belong outside the boundaries of the appropriate Native spaces.

According to Hill-Collins (2009), as a strategy, racially specific safe spaces “rely on exclusionary practices” in order to allow those who are marginalized the opportunity to address their own issues of concern free of fear or criticism. Further, she explains, “such spaces become less ‘safe’” if opened up to non-members (2009, p. 121). For example, as a number of Aboriginal women in her program had expressed, Louise found

that Western ideology and White privilege had slipped into the Native Studies program alongside the non-aboriginal students:

... in my department I have a lot of difficulty because we have non-native students who think they know what is best for Native people. They think that their good intentions are good enough. I think that's fine but they assume that when you say they don't get it, or when you correct them in what they are saying, they think it is a competition between students not coming from a location of Indigeneity. So that is really difficult, watching non-native students come in and their default way of thinking is western. It is not Indigenous. They may have a more Indigenous world view than other people, but their default way of thinking is still very western. So they are saying a lot of things that are really offensive and they don't even realize it. So I struggle with that a lot. (Louise)

Creating a 'safe space' for Aboriginal students is also about ensuring that Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are centered, practiced and respected, lest these spaces become just another tourist attraction, or ethnic treat, for the non-aboriginal student population.

Unfortunately, attempts to protect Aboriginal-specific spaces have come under criticism. According to Hill-Collins(2009) demands that no one be treated differently on the basis of their race effectively "reproduces social inequalities by treating people of colour the same" as everyone else (p. 121) and ignoring the legacy of historical oppression, and marginalization. In such a context the demand for the creation and protection of 'safe spaces' for oppressed peoples is labelled "separatist," "essentialist" and "anti-democratic" and therefore suspect (Hill-Collins, 2009, p. 121). As Cora found,

People get upset and say "why is pre-session just for Native students" when they know why it's just for Native students. So why would they ask something like that? [they say] "oh there are poor White students too." And there are, but they are ignoring the historical specificity. They are taking things out of context. (Cora)

Hill-Collins (2009) suggested, the reason that "safe spaces are so threatening to those who feel excluded and so routinely castigated" by their very presence, is that such spaces

are deliberately “free of surveillance by more powerful groups” (p. 121-22). As a result, Cora laments the fact that, in order to adhere to principles of inclusivity, there is no real Aboriginal safe space even within the Native Studies Programs, as the entire program, all classes and even ceremonies are open to non-aboriginal students:

They never do anything that is just for Native people, nothing ever. The only thing that was ever open was the remedial pre-session and that is all. Nothing is ever for Native people, there is no Native center space, or no courses that are open just for Native people. You know ceremonies are open to non-native people. It is just really ridiculous. Like teachings are open, everything is open. So it is like nothing is specific, you know. They kind of include themselves in places that they are not welcome. (Cora)

Unfortunately, these words illustrate some of the many difficulties facing those who attempt to create Indigenous spaces and conduct ceremonies within mainstream institutions.

Students, such as Cora who had actually transferred from a large urban university to attend this particular Native Studies program expecting that things would be dramatically different, often find themselves sorely disappointed when Aboriginal students are still in the minority, and still performing less well in comparison to their non-aboriginal classmates, and power imbalances remain.

Like last night I went to sleep crying at the thought of someone who wasn't Native winning Native studies awards... They find really bizarre ways of rewarding White students for really little involvement. They are just really bad and really conservative. I think it is just a really bad time for Native studies because I don't think the program was always that way. It wasn't always that way... When I have the energy to I think I am going to confront these people. They shouldn't get to be so comfortable in Native Studies. It is just really weird that there is nothing about power. Native Studies doesn't do race, class, or gender. That is not what Native studies is. They find all these other Indigenous world views and pedagogies I guess, but it really ends up becoming an excuse for people to have easy access, to facilitate White peoples access to Indigenous knowledge. (Cora)

Although the tendency for non-aboriginal students to out-perform Aboriginal students, even in Native Studies classes is, as Cora's feelings illustrate, offensive to some, given the long history of educational disparity it is not surprising that Native Studies awards are being won by non-aboriginals. Indeed, even though she attends a different program in a different university, Yvonne observed the same tendencies explaining in a matter of fact manner that non-aboriginals invented the game and they are therefore better players.

I can see that happening because even now we are less than 50% of the class. So I say if that is happening then it was meant to be and if we have all these other people who are learning our Native ways so what if they are getting the 90's and the 95's. Well good for them, they are not going to turn around and be Native people, nobody is going to give them a status card for doing the program. I don't see any reason why we can't share that knowledge in a good way. This is the game that they invented you know, I don't have to be up there [high marks] to feel successful. I will do good to come forward with the knowledge and the skills and the tools that I have to keep pursuing. (Yvonne)

While Yvonne acknowledges that non-aboriginal students are obtaining higher marks, she feels this does not detract from her own personal success as she also points out that they will never become Aboriginal.

As Native Studies programs become established, and Indigenous knowledges are consciously privileged, protected, and promoted, the decolonization of previously accepted history can be empowering for Aboriginal students. However, as Cora explained, after centuries of privileging the colonial perspective, embracing Aboriginal perspectives and revealing thereby a closer approximation of the truth of our mutual history can be threatening to some, making those who have benefitted from the subjugation of Indigenous peoples quite rightly "uncomfortable":

...for instance there was an external reviewer, because [we are] having so many problems and having so much hostility, they hired an external reviewer and she was there and she was a Native woman. I was the only one who was there and I had planned to be there and I got up early as I had serious concerns to talk to her

about. Then there was a white PhD candidate who was talking to another White student and she sent him into the review, she said there's free lunch in there. So he went in and he said things like "I don't take Native studies because Native studies makes me feel uncomfortable because I have to talk about racism". That's what he said. Then the reviewer sat there and gave both of our opinions equal weight. Like it was equally as bad that both of us felt alienated from Native studies. It was so bad, but then by the end of the year I was like to hell with it. To hell with Native studies. To hell with the faculty. I don't give a shit. So it was a bad experience. (Cora)

Apparently, the privileging of Aboriginal perspectives is not easily accomplished and not without upsetting a certain number of those who have been taught to ignore the historical treatment and contemporary situation of Aboriginal peoples. As Cora's words attest, without a conscious privileging of Aboriginal experiences and a deliberate fostering of Aboriginal students' ability to participate, non-aboriginal students may continue "to have the experience structured around them and their access and their comfort." In so doing, Native studies can become even more alienating for those who arrived expecting to feel empowered but find instead a replication of mainstream power relations.

The best means of ensuring that Aboriginal students are supported and Aboriginal learning is centered, is to actively involve the Aboriginal community in decision-making processes. Many universities and colleges now have Aboriginal councils, or advisory committees, who are actively and effectively working to inform policies and programs. However, as Janet explained, some are just tokenistic and never really empowered to initiate change within the institution. Claiming that her university was "really big on recruitment" but "less likely to look at how to keep students" once they were enrolled, Janet found that those in power were unwilling to acknowledge that Aboriginal students required different kinds of supports from those that were typically offered. For instance,

...their welcome week committee would have tons of money to put on events. We said we would like to do something parallel to welcome week [specifically for

Native students] but the resistance within the institution was very strong. Their feeling was that if we separated out the Native students that we would be ghettoizing them somehow. I think it was really a mask for their reluctance to acknowledge the difference, or to acknowledge, I don't know, but it has something to do with power and control. The students there were never really supported to the extent and capacity that they should have been, within that particular university... Our Aboriginal student population tended to be older women with children. None of the activities that were organized for welcome week reflected that reality. So they would set up workshops for student success that never reflected the reality that our population was women with children at home. They might have been single parent families. The way that they managed their time and resources was fundamentally different from the non-native students and that was never acknowledged. (Janet)

Not only does it not ghettoize our people, acknowledging the unique needs of Aboriginal people and designing spaces, programs, and activities specifically for Aboriginal students and not the majority of the population could be revolutionary.

This is not to suggest that such programs become exclusionary, barring non-aboriginal people from Native programs, courses and/or events, (indeed, it is hoped that such inclusion might ultimately help eliminate the pervasive ignorance about Aboriginal peoples and our histories) in order to create a safer spaces for Aboriginal students, but rather that the needs and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples should remain the focus. This will ensure that Aboriginal-specific spaces will remain empowering for Aboriginal students. It is similarly important that the existence of Aboriginal-specific spaces does not preclude, or hinder the integration of Aboriginal students into the rest of the university should the desire exist:

You know down here the only place where we are reflected is in the Native programs and services... it is like we are here but we are here on a little reserve, little islands. This whole reserve mentality has been taken from one area and put in this place, you know what I mean. It would be nicer to see that we are all over, that we are acceptable all over, not just in our own little departments. (Yvonne)



Unfortunately, far too often, much like the creation of reserves supposedly to ‘protect’ Aboriginal peoples, the creation of a space, either intellectual or physical, where Aboriginal students can feel they ‘belong’ can become oppressive should those in power start believing that, indeed, Aboriginal people belong in such spaces to the exclusion of all other areas in the academy. For instance, Lisa felt that she, like many other Aboriginal academics, was being pigeon-holed, as research focused on Aboriginal issues was not considered relevant outside of Native Studies:

I’ve heard people say, well actually an Aboriginal historian told me, that you will never be a Canadian historian [if your research addresses Aboriginal issues] you’ll never be hired for a Canadian position and I thought well I don’t know how fair that is, if I am going to do my PhD in a way that will deal with things Canadian wide so what makes it be excluded from doing Canadian history down the road... it is something that I have thought about for down the road, if the university doesn’t have a Native studies course will I even bother applying or maybe would I even be considered. So that is something that unfortunately plays into what you research. (Lisa)

In addition to feeling they have a home within the academy, Aboriginal students need to see that Aboriginal peoples and Indigenous knowledges, are nevertheless welcomed and valued as an integral aspect of the university. The tendency to view Aboriginal issues as separate from, and not integral to, the Canadian narrative, results in a similar tendency to confine Aboriginal academics to Aboriginal programs.

Unfortunately, as part of the larger tendency to marginalize Aboriginal people in society, without broad institutional commitment, some institutions (particularly those who do not have a Native Studies department) similarly marginalize Aboriginal services, spaces, and faculty. A number of women indicated that they could have benefited much more from Native Student Services had they only known of its existence earlier in their academic careers. Although some of the women were lucky enough to have been told

how to find the Native Student Center by a friend, or guidance counsellor, several others complained that, due to an obscure location and a lack of appropriate advertising or signage, the center was in effect invisible and they had been unaware that any such services were available at their university until their second or third year long after they were most needed.

For many Aboriginal women in this study, having somewhere they could feel safe and valued, in essence a home within the institution, was an important source of support. However, as Hill-Collins (2009) explains “safe spaces were never meant to be a way of life,” but rather a transitional necessity as people of colour work towards acceptance, inclusion and social justice (p. 121). Creating Aboriginal specific spaces need not imply separatist politics, or segregation, much less ghettoization, but rather, simply the need for at least one small area within the larger community where Aboriginal people do not feel marginalized. The overall purpose of such a space is ultimately to provide Aboriginal students a safe haven in which they can let down their guard, access supportive culturally appropriate social networks and thereby garner the strength necessary to cope with life in the academy.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion then, as I have argued, although the support of Aboriginal teachers was felt to contribute to the academic success of the Aboriginal women in this study, the interplay of power relations within the academic environment specifically and in society generally are extremely complex and significantly complicate the ability and/or willingness of such teachers to offer the kind of support necessary for the empowerment of Aboriginal students. As I have argued, the overall institutional environment and the

degree to which the Aboriginal teachers are accepted and empowered influence the effectiveness of the individual Aboriginal teacher. Furthermore, culturally sensitive and critically aware teachers, regardless of race, who actively established caring relationships were also described as important for success. Apparently, we can neither unilaterally claim that Aboriginal teachers support Aboriginal student success nor conversely can we say that non-aboriginal teachers are detrimental, but rather that it is the nature of the relationship with the teacher, regardless of racial affiliation, that influences academic engagement and success. Furthermore, this analysis indicates that efforts to recruit Aboriginal students and faculty and create Aboriginal programs are not sufficient. Indeed an institutional commitment to provide on-going support is necessary to ensure that they not only survive, but in fact flourish and thrive within the academy. Finally, the stories of the women indicate the importance of Aboriginal peoples having a 'home' within the institution - at least one small area within the larger institutional environment where Aboriginal people do not feel marginalized. Aboriginal specific spaces need not imply segregation or exclusionary practices, much less ghettoization, but rather they simply indicate the need for a safe haven in which Aboriginal students can access culturally appropriate supports and garner the strength necessary to cope with life in the academy.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Discussion: Personal Cost of Resistance*

#### *Introduction*

As success in academic institutions has traditionally been dependent upon assimilation and the separation of self from any and all traces of tribal identity, I expected to find that the academic achievement of these women had come at the expense of cultural integrity. However, as discussed in chapter seven, the women in this study had found ways of maintaining their connection and commitment to their tribal communities at the same time as participating fully in a mainstream education system. While these women were apparently able to be simultaneously a ‘good Indian’ and a good student, most described difficulty achieving a similar balance between gender role performance and academic obligations. This chapter examines the personal costs of engaging in transformative resistance. The following sections explain how, for the women in this study, attending school full time was found to be in direct conflict with having a family and the performance of their role as mother and wife (at least as defined in patriarchal society).

#### *Being a ‘Good Indian’ and a Good Student*

Due to the privileging of dominant values and perspectives, in addition to a long history of using education systems as vehicles for assimilation, the maintenance of a tribal cultural identity has been perceived by many to be in direct conflict with the pursuit of academic success (see Durie, 1998; Ryan, 1998; Shutiva, 1991; St. Germaine, 1995). In a study of the Aboriginal people of New Zealand, Durie (1998) found that due to the schools’ demand for cultural surrender and the suppression of the Aboriginal language

and identity, rather than embracing schooling as a source of growth and opportunity, there was increasing cultural conflict and resistance in the schools. Although assimilation and/or integration through education have been officially abandoned and significant advances have been made particularly for community based schools (Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995), mainstream post-secondary institutions still promote, reinforce, and reproduce dominant ideologies, while silencing and marginalizing racialized peoples (Henry & Tator, 2009a). It is therefore not surprising that, as Brayboy (2005) argued, many Aboriginal students continue to find it “difficult to be true to the cultural norms of their communities” while succeeding in mainstream educational institutions (p. 196). However, as Brayboy (2005) further indicated, some Aboriginal students have found ways to maintain the necessary balance and were therefore able to maintain the ties to family, community, and culture that would allow them to be both a “good Indian” and a “good student” simultaneously (p. 203).

For the Aboriginal women in this study, it seems that self-consciously engaging in what Gibson identified as accommodation without assimilation (1988) was central to their ability to succeed academically without abandoning their cultural identity. Although it appears that the formal education system has, since its inception, demanded a repudiation of the Aboriginal culture and the adoption of White lifestyles, beliefs, and values, the Aboriginal women in this study found actual assimilation to be unnecessary as the mere pretence of assimilation was sufficient to facilitate success in the academy. By becoming deliberately silent and strategically invisible in the academy, or hiding behind a protective façade of compliance to the expectations of the mainstream institutional culture, these women were able to access the benefits of a formal education and the

resulting skills and credentials, while simultaneously maintaining their connection to culture and community and thereby resisting assimilation.

*The Conflict Between Career and Family*

While the larger Aboriginal community unquestionably benefits from the educational achievement of these Aboriginal women, according to Brayboy (2005), those who “engage in transformational resistance often incur serious personal costs” and negative consequences (p.193). Although these women found ways to be simultaneously a ‘good Indian’ and a good student, most described the difficulty of achieving a similar balance between gender role performance and academic expectations. Indeed, many found it nearly impossible to be both a good student and simultaneously a “good wife” and “mother” in the context of a patriarchal institution and society:

They don't take into consideration that Aboriginal women sometimes have children and families and you know the time commitment, they don't adapt to those things. I guess they consider either you come and you do the work and you do it like everyone else, or you get out... They're not flexible for women who have children. (Rosemary)

The challenge of trying to raise a family while carrying a full course load was apparently, at least in the eyes of the women who were struggling, not something that the university recognized. Clearly, as Rosemary indicated, in such a context women who desire educational credentials must conform to the demands of the institution to do the work like everyone else.

Although we have as a society, at least on the surface, acknowledged the equality of men and women, as Henry and Tator (2009a) explain, “the university institution was created and controlled largely by White males of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity who reflected their European origins and experience,” (p.5) the legacy of which remains to this day.

Simply put, universities were initially designed by (White) men, for men and, hence, are predictably found to have difficulty accommodating the needs of women in general, much less Aboriginal women. The difficulties are not connected to some kind of innate biological essence, but rather are the result of societal assumptions regarding the 'proper' role of women both in society and in the family. Women in mainstream society who attempt to break out of the traditional role of wife and mother, or worse yet attempt to have both career and family (as men have been able to do for centuries) face significant challenges.

As a result of the influence of colonization, Aboriginal women currently face the same difficulties. Despite current assertions that Aboriginal peoples were originally more egalitarian than western peoples, with men's and women's tasks having equal value (A. Smith, 2005; Anderson, 2000), specific tasks and activities were still divided along gender lines, with responsibility for children and the home falling squarely in the domain of Aboriginal women<sup>5</sup> (see Anderson, 2000; Brown, 1990). Moreover, as the presence of egalitarianism and empowered Aboriginal women was deemed a threat to the maintenance of patriarchal order among the settler society, the traditional gender balance of Aboriginal societies was deliberately targeted during colonization (A. Smith, 2005), which over time has led to an erosion of the traditional power of our women. As A. Smith explains, the domestic training in the art of washing, sewing, ironing, and flower arranging that was forced on Aboriginal girls through the residential school system, was part of a larger effort to "inculcate patriarchal norms into Native communities so that women would lose their place in Native communities" (p. 37). Although there was great resistance on the part of Aboriginal women to such training in subservience and the

efforts to subjugate Aboriginal women were never completely successful, they were not without effect.

In her analysis of the experiences of First Nation women chiefs, Voyageur (2008) describes how even those Aboriginal women who are occupying the top position of power in their communities were impacted by patriarchal beliefs about the proper (subservient) role of women<sup>6</sup>. Studies have demonstrated that, as a result of the patriarchal belief that a woman's place is in the home and the longstanding gendered division of labour that defines child rearing and housekeeping as women's work, women continue to perform the majority of the domestic workload, even if they also hold a full time job (Kingston, 2004, Luxton, 1980)<sup>7</sup>. While the research cited by Luxton (1980) was based on a non-aboriginal population, apparently, according to Voyageur's aforementioned observations, the trends hold true in Aboriginal families as well.

The burden of the 'double day' has a tremendous (negative) impact on the amount of time and energy any woman (regardless of race) has available to devote to either her career or her domestic duties. In order to present the appearance of being a proper wife and mother and maintain harmony in the family relationship, the women described how they often sacrificed their own sleep and personal care time, placing themselves under considerable stress, in order to make sure that the husband did not feel burdened with women's work and children did not feel neglected:

I remember when I went into nursing it was like saying goodbye to my kids in fall and saying hello in the spring. I felt like a bad mom. But I remember getting up at 5 am and making sure their lunches were ready so the only thing my husband had to do was get them to school. He was very supportive but my husband didn't like to see change. They say husbands' are a bit of barrier but they get used to it... it is also guilt on our part. If you make one wrong lunch, there it is... I remember used to have to cook the meals and then freeze them... you have to do at least 3 hours of homework a night or you won't be able to make it. Anything less and your marks will suffer and



you will be under too much pressure. You have to discipline yourself. I would have everything ready for 9 and then do the last 2 hours for studying. We had to be on the floor by 7 in the morning. (Cheyenne)

They're expecting miracle from you and you can't do that because you still have dirty laundry like everybody else. You still have to cook like everybody else. You might have a husband like everybody else. You might be ordinary in a sense, but then you have more than a double standard to be this super person, super woman and it's really hard to do. You don't want to give up on yourself because you know who you are, but you don't want to give up on your family, so you carry – I carry a huge and heavy burden with me. I can't give up on my kids and my family. I can't let my extended family down. I sure can't give up myself. I can't give up on all those other people who I hope to help through my research. (Cathy)

I think also a lot of expectations too I mean to be this you know, working mom and still a perfect wife, I mean, no way, my house a disaster most of the time (laugh) but I feel bad about it though, like I wish I could just get organized, but it just never happens... I used to feel really guilty about it but now I'm just like, you know, that's just the way it is. (Margaret)

These words illustrate the fundamental challenge of engaging in internal transformational resistance. Although maintaining the appearance of conformity to appropriate gender roles obscures the larger implications of education pursuits, namely that educational achievement is typically a means of escaping the confines of traditional gender roles, the effort required to maintain the image of the perfect wife and mother while attending school is exhausting. However, as Cathy pointed out, there is too much at stake to even consider failure.

#### *Good Students and Bad Mothers*

Many of the women described intense feelings of inadequacy and guilt over being a 'bad mother'. They questioned whether or not they were doing the right thing by choosing to pursue an education while their children were still in the home. This is not surprising, given the public propensity to point to the working mother as a threat to her children's wellbeing (Kingston, 2004). Diane explains:

I don't think I made many made sacrifices. The only thing I think I sacrificed was the quality time with my son. There were times when I had a class that went to 6 o'clock and he would be home for an hour and a half alone and I just felt bad. I didn't like it. He was fine with it. I had a cell phone just for that, so he could call me if he needed to. It was me who mostly felt uncomfortable with it... There were times that I had to leave him on a Saturday or a Sunday, all day... But being a single parent I didn't want to impose on anyone, or feel like I was unloading him. (Diane)

As a single mother it is not surprising that Diane feels guilty for the time spent away from her son. Without someone to share in the nurturing of her child, as a single mother, Diane is both practically and ideologically solely responsible for his care and safety and therefore feels tremendous guilt for the time her son spends in the care of others. Indeed, in contemporary society modern women are taught that the biological mother is the 'natural' and, consequently, the best caregiver for her children. All other caregivers and all other forms of care are not only inferior but potentially damaging for children (Kingston, 2004).

Guilt is a multifaceted emotion and just spending more time with the children is not necessarily sufficient to relieve a mother's guilt. Unlike traditional Aboriginal women who benefited from the 'extensive mothering' provided for their children by other women in the community, according to O'Reilly (2004), in this current era mothers are taught by so-called experts to believe in the need for and the psychological benefits of 'intensive mothering' and specifically that a child's optimum development is dependent not just on time spent together with the mother, but on quality time spent together. O'Reilly further explains this quality time is to be filled constant stimulation, opportunities for learning, and play, all of which require intensive effort and significant financial resources on the part of mothers, and the lack of such enriched quality time is (supposedly) liable to lead to disadvantaged if not outright damaged children.

In such an environment, Aboriginal women who are already balancing the demands of their own academic work and domestic chores, now feel the additional burden of having to provide a multitude of extracurricular learning opportunities for their children, lest they fall behind the development of other children.

Sometimes your internal self feels like you're letting your family down, you're letting your kids down, you're denying yourself ... It's hard to prioritize things when everything is almost of equal importance... for me it's not as easy as people saying "well decide not to do this or decide not to do that" because if you don't do this now then down the road, when you should have done this, you're not going to benefit from it. Like I think about my kids, people just say "well don't take them to soccer or baseball then, just don't do this and just stay at home and save money." Well this is going to help them! If I don't encourage them now they – what about their self esteem? What about their opportunity? ... you can't just set one thing down because you gotta look into the future too and see what kind of harvest will come from these seeds planted here. If you don't plant any seeds here, because you think you're too busy, you're not going to have anything... I think about my kids too. Should they know more by now? Should they, could they, be better kids? Could they do this, or that better if I weren't so involved with my free time to do work on the computer, to read. Guilt I think is a big thing that I struggle with as an individual. What have I done? But looking into the future, this is the now and it's a short time. I have to overcome that sense of guilt, that sense that I should have been a mother but I chose to do this instead. I see what I am able to offer them down the road and that will make up for this time now. If it weren't for the ability to foresee how the future may look and what needs to be done now for then I would have given up a long time ago. (Cathy)

However, in a society that demands such intensive effort on the part of women, as mothers are taught that they must be at all times attuned to the ever increasing needs of their offspring, women who have chosen (often out of necessity) to return to school and/or obtain employment begin to question if they are indeed actually doing what is best for their children.

In a patriarchal society, O'Reilly (2004) explains, good mothers are portrayed as completely self-sacrificing as they "put the needs of their children before their own, are available to their children whenever needed, and if the mother works outside the home,

her children rather than her career are at the center of her life” (p. 4). Surrounded daily by such depictions and immersed in such ideologies, it is not surprising that many of the Aboriginal women in this study described intense feelings of guilt and internal conflict. According to O’Reilly, such definitions have a distinct ideological function as they serve to “constrain, regulate, and dominate women and their mothering” (p. 5). In much the same way that malnourished prepubescent girls depicted as women in magazines fuel the consumption of beauty products (as women invariably and predictably feel inadequate next to such unattainable ideals), in comparison to the unrealistic and unattainable ideal of the ever selfless devoted mother, real women are bound to fall short and become therefore self-critical. O’Reilly further claims that the ideal mother myth is not inconsequential as it “gives rise to self doubt or, more specifically, guilt that immobilizes women and robs them of their confidence as both workers and mothers” (p. 10). Therefore, the act of continuing in education and pursuing activities outside of their role as eternal caregiver, is in itself clearly an act of resistance to the dominant ideology and the construction of womanhood held therein.

Despite their critique of the dominant social order and their desire to effect social change, these women are, however, clearly not immune to the dominant ideology as they often describe feeling conflicted. Many believe that children belong with the mother and want to spend more time with their children but simultaneously refuse to give up on their educational dreams and accept a subordinate position as full time housewife:

I really disagree with daycare. I disagree with daycare and with Junior Kindergarten, even though I sent my kids to daycare when they were 18 months, as soon as they were eligible. But I really disagree with it. Because of the nurturing I think they lost, but for those of us who have to work, I thank God for daycare! You know? (Cathy)

Sometimes I feel guilty and I should be at home more, you know, because I miss my kids when I'm at work... but, I mean I made that decision [to work] before they were here. I mean I feel guilty because I'm excited to get home and see them, but I know if I was at home all the time I wouldn't be happy either... But I guess I hope that for both of [my children] they can see that... that both their mom and dad work hard for them and enjoy what we do... I think sometimes, am I being a good mom? But I think I am a good mom. (Margaret)

Clearly, in her definition of a 'good mom' Margaret goes beyond the traditional ideology of sacrificial mothering. For Margaret being a good mom is also about being a role model for her children, showing them that both women and men can work (and often times have to work) outside the home and that women have options should they so choose.

Unfortunately, the results of such choices are not easy to predict and are often only visible in hindsight as Jane found. Given the enormous workload of her academic pursuits and to avoid disrupting their lives with a move, when she began her studies Jane chose to leave her two daughters at home with her husband and her family to care for them. Although it made sense at the time, especially given the lack of supports in the academy for women attending school while raising children, looking back it is a choice she sorely regrets as the time she missed with her children can never be regained:

I carried a lot of guilt being away from my daughters when I was in Toronto ... I think if I had to re-do it again, I would bring my daughters with me... even though it would have been a big change for them... Because, you could never, never make up for those years. Like sometimes they'll be talking about things that happened in school or they'll reflect back and I wasn't there. So I find that gap missing.... and sometimes I wonder I ask myself "why in the world did I do that? Why did I do that?" My daughter, my oldest daughter had a discussion with me once too. She was angry with me for a long, long time for doing that. She didn't understand, but now she has a better understanding and she says "Mum I'm so glad you made that change in our lives" ... I remember many times when I was in Toronto, I just wanted to pack up and leave. (Jane)

The effects of the pervasive ideology of sacrificial motherhood are felt not only by the women, who chose to break out of the traditional female definition of wife and mother,

but also by their children who inevitably felt that they were being abandoned or short-changed. Anger directed at the mother from her children was not uncommon, as she was from their perspective acting selfishly, since children do not always possess the maturity to understand the larger reasons why the family has to make changes and sacrifices when the mother returns to school:

I didn't want to continue on in school and feel the same way that I did in North Bay. I think it is because Malachi was younger too and he was getting stressed out. I think he was feeling that I was just up here [at school] having fun and having my free time and stuff like that while he was at home with Calvin.  
(Andrea)

From a child's perspective, time spent at work or school is obviously time spent neglecting motherly duties:

My mom she took classes when we were little and did all that stuff and then went back to work. My dad had a heart attack and she had two kids so she had too. She was coming home from work, driving to Sudbury for a night course which was two hours away, then driving back and then getting up to get off to work in the morning. To be honest when I was little I thought why are you leaving me to go to class? Why are you doing this? Why aren't you spending time with me? (Lisa)

As this woman described her childhood feelings of abandonment and neglect, not to mention the resulting temper tantrums that ensued when her mother chose to work and attend school, she also described the subsequent feelings of shame and embarrassment as she grew old enough to appreciate the value and necessity of her mother's actions and the significant sacrifices her mother had made.

### *Successful Women and Disgruntled Husbands*

Negative reactions are unfortunately not limited to children, as the educational advancement of these Aboriginal women was quite accurately seen by many husbands as conflicting with their appropriate role in the family unit and was therefore opposed. The primacy of the husband's role as breadwinner and the wife's supporting role as

homemaker is very firmly entrenched in mainstream society, so firmly in fact that variations from this script can cause significant marital discord. Subsequent family breakdown is then, as expected, blamed on the wife and her ambition. In the struggle for gender equality in education and employment, it is clear that women have more to gain and men in fact have much to lose. In much the same way that the emancipation of African slaves was accurately seen as a threat to the exploitative economy of the southern states, a highly successful career wife is perceived quite legitimately as a threat to her husband<sup>8</sup>. In very practical terms the loss of unpaid female labour in the home is a significant hindrance for a man's earning potential. But the threat of the working wife goes beyond such pragmatic concerns, as it erodes the traditional role of the husband as primary breadwinner and head of the household. As masculinity has traditionally been tightly associated with a man's skills as hunter and provider, the presence of a wife who earns more than her husband can be emasculating, as he faces social stigma and a sense of irrelevance having had his role and his authority usurped (Kingston, 2004).

The maintenance of marital relationships became extremely difficult for many of the women once they entered school. It is therefore not surprising that, as many of the women explained, educational pursuits and academic achievement, elicited a wide range of negative responses from their male partners. Cheyenne described her hesitancy to even bring up the subject of her desire to return to school as she was well aware that her husband wanted her to spend more time at home. Jane explained how she applied to university despite her husband's threats to end the marriage should she persist in her pursuit of education. Predictably, they divorced before she completed her program. Other husbandly responses covered a wide range; from the passive aggressive efforts of men

who neglected the children and/or engaged in self-destructive behaviours such as excessive drinking, and suicidal actions while the wife was away at school (hoping she would feel compelled to return home), to deliberate sabotage such as the burning of assignments (in the hope that she would fail and have to withdraw), or worse yet, actually beating their wives in an effort to regain power and control. One husband even refused to attend his wife's graduation in a symbolic refusal to accept her achievement and potential independence.

In an effort to preserve their marriages (or rather to preserve the balance of power in their marriages) through such destructive behaviours, these men attempt to dissuade their wives from continuing their schooling. Much to their dismay such behaviours often had the opposite effect, as several women decided to leave their husbands instead of their studies.

I found that it was easier to be a single parent. I didn't have to worry anymore. I didn't have to care anymore about what was going on. I could just go on as long as I knew my kids were okay. It was so much easier, less stress. Before when I was [away at school] it was almost like he did stuff on purpose just to screw me up. Every time my exams came around... he would go do something just to screw me up. I wouldn't be able to study because I would just be so worried, just calling home all the time wondering what's happening. Then my mom was calling me because she would have to go running around late at night to get the kids, to go looking for them. He was just giving me a really hard time. I expected him to support me but I felt like I wasn't being supported. I didn't care about the money situation, I could go on with just getting a single person's amount of funding, but I really relied on him to be supportive emotionally. That was really important to me but no, no he couldn't do it... I came home to get my kids out of the house so I could move back to Sudbury and have my own place and get everything set up for them. There was no way I could keep up with all that. I started in September again. I would have been in third year right now, but I had to take a year off and figure out how to get the kids out and get my own place. Just to get away from him I guess. (Andrea)

It wasn't a very bad break up of the family, but I think my husband at the time was threatened. He thought that if she goes for her masters well, that's going to be a change in our lives. And it was true, it did make a big change in our lives. I



think he was really struggling with that and I remember being a school teacher at the time when I had aspirations to do my masters, I kept asking him, “do you think you could get job in Thunder Bay so I can do my masters?” or “Do you think you could go closer to a bigger centre? Where there’s a university where I can study?” ... He was dead set that he was not going to leave the north. So I had to deal with that and I struggled with that. It was 5 years before I actually left, from the time I was thinking about it, I mean, it was always in the back of my mind right from the early days. But when I started to really think, when, you know how you are in one area for so long and one job for so long, you’re just kinda ready for a change... So it started earlier and then I just had this itch that I had to study more. When I brought that to my husband he was not in favor of it and he threatened me that he would, that it would be the end of our marriage. I went ahead, I went ahead and did it... Our marriage didn’t end right away. Like, it stayed on a string for a long, long time after that but eventually you know. (Jane)

The threats and destructive behaviours on the part of husbands appears to reflect a deep seated fear of, and the resulting attempt to avoid, the changes that will be brought about by their wives’ education.

One of the women suggested that it was not only the loss of unpaid domestic labour, or even giving up financial dominance that men feared the most (although these things were apparently greatly concerning), but rather it was the subsequent changes in the attitude and demeanor of the women that were perceived as the greatest threat:

One of the things and I think that is what men hate the most about women getting education, is the confidence it gives and the skills and the knowledge. I am very serious. When my students used to come in... at the beginning you could tell that they were panicking. They had that deer in the headlights look. They wouldn’t say boo. If we were doing our job properly at the end of the semester you could see that confidence and by the end of the first year they were questioning things. I loved to see them develop. By graduation, the difference between that person who first came in and who they became, I just felt so proud of that. The men don’t like that confidence. (Claudia)

Confidence and critical awareness in women are clearly a significant threat to male dominance and authority in the relationship. Indeed, as Hill-Collins (2009) argued, highly educated women of colour who compete with men are “deemed to be too assertive” and therefore less feminine and less desirable as marital partners (p. 89).

In order to understand the source of such fears we must understand the social construction of marriage as an institution. As a result of the proliferation of Judeo-Christian values, as Kingston (2004) explains, since God supposedly created the first wife Eve as the helpmate for Adam, man's supremacy and women's subservient role as support mechanism has been presumed natural, unavoidable and indeed divinely ordained. Marriages were to be based on relations of reciprocity as men were responsible for providing for the family, while women were to be housekeeper and mother (which in reality turned out to be equivalent to one step above slavery for a large number of women throughout most of Western history). The role of provider confers power in the typical marriage relationship and the female caregiver is therefore dependent upon her husband's skill and/or whim for the provision of the necessities of life.

In the absence of such dependency, when women begin to earn their own money or worse yet, when a woman's occupation begins to eclipse her husband's, as Cathy explained, some men begin to question the nature of their role in the relationship:

I look at him and his role as a man. I see he must have felt very threatened by somebody who he was married to having more earning power, who had more on the go, who was responsible for more and I think in many occasions, just to keep the family going, who delegated more to him. If you want this [a nice home] then you're going to have to help and this is how you help. I think that it was really hard for him to accept that was the kind of family we have and it's working so let's go at it. I think he felt there wasn't something in it for him, he felt powerless in our marriage, as it was. You know? I'm not sure if that was behind our separation. He just decided one day "I want to have a life, I need to do things for me, I am 45 years old, I still haven't done a, b, or c and just somehow I am going to do that right now to feel fulfilled". So he was out there trying to do these things and I'm sure he's not feeling that instant fulfillment. But, it makes me wonder, why did these kind of things need to happen in families? I'm saying all families in general but specifically too for Native families. (Cathy)

Interestingly, Cathy was able to see from her husband's perspective and appreciate his reasons for leaving the marriage. Having similarly endured the inferior position in the

relationship, it is easy enough for women to understand, although not necessarily accept, their husbands' lack of desire to participate in the process of their own subordination.

As they too are well aware of the role of education in the creation of opportunities for advancement and social mobility for Aboriginal women, Aboriginal men quite accurately perceive that they may be left behind, as their wives move up in society. The result, predictably, is a sense of fear and insecurity for a husband.

He was insecure, because he told me that he was afraid that I would meet somebody. That's what he told me. I think that's why he did what he did [drinking] when I was away at school. I think he just felt insecure because I am going to school and I am going to get a better job and then I am going to leave him there [on the reserve] when I am successful... He only finished high school. I told him, he has his own interests and stuff like that and it doesn't bother me. He is smarter than me in other areas, like his trucking. (Andrea)

In a world where men are taught that women should be dependant and subordinate (a concept that both the Church and Government have attempted to impose upon Aboriginal people for centuries), a woman who surpasses her husband in education and in earning potential disrupts the expected power balance in the patriarchal family. By eliminating her financial dependence, a woman thereby, at least in his imagination, eliminates the need for her husband. Thus, a wife's desire for increased education becomes, at least in the minds of many men, the first step on the road to marital breakdown and abandonment, thereby making the previously described efforts to thwart their wives' educational achievement a logical, albeit extremely offensive and ultimately counterproductive response to a perceived threat to the marriage.

Interestingly, for couples who began their marriage with the woman in an inferior position, or even for those who began as equals, the continued advancement of the wife changes the power dynamics within the relationship, in a way that a husband's

advancement does not. In previous generations (and a large number of contemporary families), as Kingston (2004) explains, it was assumed that even if they had equivalent educations, once children came along the wife would stay home, in essence stagnating, while her husband advanced up the ladder. Indeed, she continues, such a situation was not only seen as natural, but in fact it was depicted as the preferred outcome. Women were and for the most part still are, expected to support and encourage the advancement of their husbands, often at the expense of their own careers and ambitions.

While an educated wife was often seen as an asset to a husband's career, as many of the women in this study found out, there is an important caveat to such assertions; she is not to get too much education, specifically not more than her husband. After working in education for years and witnessing the heartbreak of many of her students as their marriages fell apart, Claudia was well aware of the potentially damaging impact that her own return to education might have had on her relationship:

There are a significant number of students I see who have some issues with their personal lives it could be your children or it could be your partner... My husband said to me "if I hadn't caught up to you with your education I think that we might have broke up." Maybe he was right; he could have gone and got a very secure job working in mining as a shift boss... We probably would have more money now if he had gone to the mine but we did what we wanted to do. (Claudia)

As Claudia and her husband returned to school together, the maintenance of educational equity within the relationship mitigated the potentially damaging effects of education that were experienced by many other women.

The negative impact of a wife's higher education on the health of her marital relationship is apparently quite well known, at least among the women who were at the PhD level, so well known in fact that they had a term for this phenomenon – the "PhD divorce".

I had a partner up until the 90's, up until I went back for my PhD. I had a PhD divorce. They didn't tell us that. We weren't told that until maybe the spring or a year later. A year later we were in our second year and my whole ten year relationship had gone down the tubes, then they started telling us about the PhD divorce, about the high rate of PhD divorce because couples are returning to school... But why didn't they tell us that going into it. That should have been part of the whole orientation process. You know if you are signing on to do a PhD, socially and academically all these things are factors in your education. So I was a PhD divorcee. Then your whole emotional world is gone. That was your support right. It is not even a danger [of divorce]. It is high, high statistics. If you come out with your relationship intact you are one of the lucky ones. They didn't tell us that. If they told you, you could plan your life around that. You have your timetable of where you are going to be going and what you are going to be studying. You are going to have to understand that if you both become students this is going to affect both of you. I thought we would grow together right. I assumed in your relationship... I guess this is from my side of it [the woman's side], even if it was a job, or if your husband is transferred, it's not like you say "well you go ahead." You roll with it. You know. But I think it comes with higher education. It's that whole sense of their personal security in that. You could do a whole study on PhD divorces. (Elaine)

While, Elaine suggested that if she had known about this tendency for marriages to fall apart during the course of a PhD program she may have been able to do something to prevent it, she later concluded that it was an "effect of colonization" and, therefore, the result of "that western mentality of the men can do whatever." Therefore, it was not likely something she could have changed.

The attribution to colonization of this sense of entitlement among our men - this feeling that they possess the right to do as they please - provides a very interesting insight into the negative responses of male partners to their wives' educational attainment. As Elaine comes from the Mohawk Nation, she is very aware of the fact that in her society traditionally women had a great deal of power. They controlled the home and the agricultural production and indeed the clan mothers had the power to select and depose the male chiefs of their nations. As Claudia pointed out, in the past, at least among her people, the men had to deal with, and defer to, women of power all the time and would

presumably have been accustomed to, or at least better emotionally equipped to accept such situations.

Given the apparent history of feminine power in many Aboriginal communities (Anderson, 2000; A. Smith, 2005), the current inability, or unwillingness of Aboriginal men to deal with the rising success and power of Aboriginal women is unquestionably a sign of the ongoing influence of colonization. Specifically, the imposition of patriarchal concepts has apparently influenced the attitudes and behaviours of Aboriginal men in negative ways as they have come to believe in their divinely ordained superiority in relation to women, or perhaps more correctly, in their right to be superior to Aboriginal women (as they are well aware that the process of racialization negates the possibility of being superior to White women). Claiming that Columbus (and other colonizers thereafter) brought patriarchy, among other ills and “inflicted it” upon Aboriginal nations, Manitowabi explained that as a result “our men learned how to oppress us” (quoted in Anderson, 2000, p. 188).

While the imposition of colonial structures taught Aboriginal men to expect a position of authority and superiority over women, the racism inherent in such structures simultaneously denied these same men access to the resources that would enable them to fulfill their duties as husband and father by providing for their families. During the process of colonization, having been “deprived of natural authority through impoverishment and the theft of land” according to Fournier and Crey (1997), Aboriginal men were “handed in exchange the weapon of absolute possession and control over their wives and children” (p. 145). Therefore, insofar as increased levels of educational attainment allow Aboriginal women to escape their proscribed position of inferiority,

such education is simultaneously seen as a direct attack on what little power Aboriginal men have left in society. It is therefore not surprising that many Aboriginal men were seen to be actively discouraging the educational achievement of their wives. It is also not surprising, therefore, that family breakdown and divorce were often described by these women, as the price to be paid for educational achievement. While the community clearly benefits from their efforts, as Brayboy (2005) found, those “who engage in transformational resistance often incur serious personal costs” for the greater good of the community and the survival of their tribal nation (p. 193).

*Conclusion: Definitions of Success - Changing the World and Changing Diapers*

For the purposes of this study and the selection of appropriate participants, academically successful Aboriginal women were defined as those who had recently graduated or were near graduation. However, as this study set out to understand, from their own perspectives, the experience of academic achievement for Aboriginal women in mainstream institutions, it was therefore important to discuss how they defined success for themselves. Most of the women indicated that success was not about money but rather it was about being happy; specifically being happy with one’s self, and being happy with the choices they had made. This sense of internal satisfaction is more important than the usual empirical indicators of success such as wealth and position. While many had described motherhood and all the attendant responsibilities as a significant barrier to academic achievement, these same women indicated that in their definition success meant having both a good education and a family. Indeed, for many the pursuit of higher education and the motivation to help their community were inextricably connected to a desire to provide a better life for their children and to give them access to opportunities

they had been denied. Clearly having children was a primary source of motivation for the pursuit of higher education, but ironically, was simultaneously one of the biggest barriers to such pursuits. Furthermore, the goal of providing one's family with the opportunity for a better life was inextricably connected to the larger goal of helping their communities, which were often seen as an extension of family. For instance,

Even when you think about how society measures success and I have heard our National Chief get up and say this and it drives me nuts that he says 'we are successful, we have doctors and we have lawyers'. If our National Chief and our own institutions define success the way that White people do, the way that the mainstream does, by status and acquisition and the amount of money we make, then I think we are in big, big trouble. To think that you need the big house. I just tried to pass on what my grandparents taught us, whatever you do, you do it well and you try to help your people. (Janet)

This sense of familial and community responsibility pushed these women to persist and ultimately succeed in education in spite of their awareness of the numerous and multi-faceted barriers that would impede their progress. Much like the women described by Dill (1983) who were prompted to use any and all "resources at their disposal to make the best of what they recognized as a bad situation" (p. 145, quoted in Hubbard, 1999, p. 373), rather than becoming discouraged, these women were motivated by their increased awareness of the intersection of race and gender in the structuring of opportunity in society, or more accurately the lack thereof.

This awareness of structured inequality in society, in combination with the desire to help their people (social justice motivation), is in fact what makes the educational achievement of these women a form of transformational resistance rather than an example of race betrayal. From an Aboriginal perspective any activity, in this case schooling, that requires a denial of your heritage, indeed your very being, must be resisted. In the words of an Odawa elder:



Our way of life is being assaulted from every direction. Even if I as an individual Indian might be able to hold on to my identity, I am undermined by the collective fate of my people. For every North American Indian that begins to disappear, I also begin to disappear, because I cannot be an Indian, if that identity is taken away from all the rest of the people, my people. (Pelletier, 1971, p. 5)

These eloquent words articulate the importance of resistance and finding a way to achieve in education, without surrendering to the demand for assimilation. Because education is desired as a tool for tribal empowerment and not individual advancement, the maintenance of community ties and cultural integrity are paramount. Indeed, not one single person suggested that education was a means of escaping the Aboriginal community and joining mainstream society.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Closing Words

This thesis was undertaken with the express purpose of developing the critical concepts that would enable an understanding of how it is that Aboriginal women, who are unquestionably among the most marginalized of all Canadian citizens, are currently experiencing increasing academic success, particularly in comparison to Aboriginal men, as evidenced by post-secondary enrolment and graduation statistics. To that end this study set out to 1) examine and identify the difficulties, cultural conflicts, attitudes, aspirations, and survival strategies of female Aboriginal students who have persisted in post-secondary programs; 2) develop the critical concepts that will allow for an understanding of how Aboriginal women specifically, despite numerous barriers, were both able and willing, to benefit from the current educational system; and subsequently 3) identify guiding principles which will hopefully provide direction for future educational policies and practices aimed at increasing overall Aboriginal student persistence at the post-secondary level.

By listening to the voices of the Aboriginal women themselves and allowing their perspectives to shape the research, the stories shared herein provide unique insights into the underlying meaning of their decision to pursue higher education in spite of numerous barriers and the source of their strength and resilience in the face of institutional and systemic racism and patriarchal power relations. As a result of the time spent with the academically successful Aboriginal women in this study, I believe I have developed new understandings of the ways in which the intersection of race and gender in academic institutions specifically, and the larger society generally, influences the approach taken by

Aboriginal women as they endeavour to use education as a tool for both individual and community empowerment. As I have previously argued, contrary to earlier resistance theories that focused only on the self-defeating oppositional anti-school behaviours of so-called involuntary minorities, there exists a wide range of resistance strategies, “some of which are subtle and silent” (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 334) and therefore often go unnoticed. Armed with a more sophisticated conception of resistance, we can now understand that the academic achievement of these Aboriginal women is not an example of assimilating and ‘acting white’ or ‘selling out’ in order to achieve success in the dominant society, but rather a self-conscious and strategic employment of subtle and therefore often invisible forms of internal transformational resistance.

This final chapter will provide a summary of what I believe to be the key issues arising from the research, a critical examination of how the awareness of racism and gender discrimination in combination with a social justice commitment influence the strategies employed by Aboriginal women in their struggle for academic achievement, and suggestions for new guiding principles based on the aforementioned understandings of how the education system simultaneously works both for and against Aboriginal students.

Apparently, while these women were well aware of the countless ways in which pervasive racism and sexism in the school system specifically and in society generally created multiple barriers to achievement and social mobility, they were also aware that education is simultaneously the primary vehicle for social mobility in modern society and that a lack of education almost guarantees a life of poverty. They were therefore prepared to work twice as hard as others in order to achieve half as much and endure

voicelessness and invisibility in order to obtain the kind of skills and credentials that would allow them to 'uplift' their families, communities, and nations.

The decision and ability to engage in transformative resistance was found to be rooted in a strong tribal identity developed in the family and in the empowering conceptions of Aboriginal womanhood developed in the relationship between mother and daughter specifically and supported by extended family, women centered networks, and in a more complex manner, faculty and teachers. Although the small sample size of the study prevents generalization, this study supports previous research that identified the support of family as a critical factor in the educational success of Aboriginal students (Bowker, 1992, J. Davis, 1992; Falk & Aitken, 1984; A. Jackson & Smith, 2001; A Jackson et al., 2003; Montgomery et al., 2000; Reyes, 2000; Reyhner & Dodd, 1995; Rindone, 1988; Willetto, 1999). Furthermore, although the stories of these women illustrated the complex influence of their relationships with faculty members and staff, the identification of positive relationships as encouraging persistence and academic achievement concurs with the previous work of Bowker (1992, 1993), Gloria and Robinson Kurpius, 2001, Hornett (1989), A. Jackson and Smith (2001), A. Jackson et al. (2003), Lee 2007b, Tate and Schwartz (1993).

Based on Ogbu's (1987a, 1987b, 1991) theories of resistance I had expected to find that Aboriginal women feel compelled to sacrifice their culture in order to achieve in mainstream institutions; however this was not the case. Neither did these women find accusations of 'acting White' to be a problem, nor did they find that education threatened their continued adherence to Tribal cultural norms. Although they had learned to how 'play the game' and appear compliant and conformist, such appearances

functioned as a mask, disguising and therefore protecting a tribal cultural identity and a strong connection to Aboriginal community. I did, however, find a significant conflict between academic achievement and the performance of a conventional gender role as subservient wife and mother. In so far as a woman's increased education threatens the husband's ability to maintain his 'appropriate' superior role and the time spent in school precludes the adequate performance of intensive mothering, education is indeed incompatible with being a "good wife and mother" (at least as defined by the dominant patriarchal culture). However, in spite of such challenges, the definition of success that these women are striving for includes academic achievement, motherhood, and the pursuit of social justice.

#### *Gendered Approaches to Resistance*

I have argued herein, that Ogbu's theories on involuntary minority responses to schooling are a useful tool for the conceptualization of the ways in which the educational system itself is responsible for the oppositional behaviours and self-defeating resistance of certain students. However, insofar as these theories remained focused on the purposeful lack of educational achievement and other overt manifestations of resistance and their function in the reproduction of social inequities as students are re-inscribed into a subordinate position in society, Ogbu and many who followed failed to perceive, much less account for, the variety of subtle forms of internal transformational resistance that I have described in this study.

Much like the Navajo women in Willeto's (1999) study, these women (accurately) believe that marriage (and dependency upon a male) is not a reliable means of ensuring a secure future for an Aboriginal woman. Given the history of traditional Aboriginal gender

roles (wherein women were expected to work as hard as the men to support the family) and the reality of life in a post-colonial society (wherein men are denied the resources necessary to fulfill their role as provider), the women in this study have been taught by their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties that they are expected not only to have to work, but to work hard to support their families. Therefore, despite an awareness of the soul crushing experiences in schools that many Aboriginal people have endured historically, education is still valued for its role in the future economic stability of the family and as a means of resisting the subordinate position occupied by most Aboriginal people in contemporary society.

It has also been argued that Ogbu's theories specifically and resistance theories generally did not consider how gender influences the experience of racial identity and the nature of the response to persecution and discrimination (Camarota, 2004; Gibson, 1997). Fordham's (1996) study had suggested although female African American students were just as aware of the ways in which society limits their opportunities for success, they were more able than male students to ignore the reality of such discrimination and are consequently more likely to persist in education. Although this study included only Aboriginal women and, therefore, conclusions about the differential responses of male students are not possible, one of the women indicated that in her experience Aboriginal women did indeed seem more able, or perhaps just more willing, to remain focused and continue in their efforts despite their experiences of racism and discrimination. Lisa believed that the inability of Aboriginal men to ignore perceived attacks was directly impacting their ability to persist in education:

I am only going by what Carl has said and he seems to think that everything is against him in some way, I do think that there are barriers and I outlined those but

I don't think it is practical to think that way. I think that if you want to be there, be there and if you don't then do something else. I don't find it helpful to be all that antagonistic is what I am trying to say and I don't know if that is probably a product of me being a woman like just finding my own way thru it instead of bemoaning the fact that it is hard... just shut up and do it. Um. I think that might be a difference too is like I realize that there are barriers and I know that they are there, I am not trying to say that well everybody is equal and there should be no barriers, there are, there are real ones but I think that it is more productive to just show them that you are better than to think that it's not worth doing or why do I try so hard because nobody is going to take me seriously anyway. (Lisa)

Much like the successful Indigenous Alaskan women in Reyes (2000) study who reported their own experiences of racism in generalized terms and a calm "matter of fact" manner as compared to the men who responded with greater "shock, emotion and anger" (p. 158), the stories of how the Aboriginal women in this study were able to cope with persistent racism in the academy indicate a similarly calm pragmatic matter of fact approach.

Indeed, as Lisa's words indicated, although she was very much aware of the barriers that she has had to face as an Aboriginal woman in a racist and sexist institution, she was similarly aware that it was not productive to be antagonistic while in a vulnerable position as it often only exacerbated the problem. It was therefore important to remain focused on the possibility of long term change rather than the dwelling on the negativity of the current situation.

Furthermore, another participant in this study explained that she felt the socialization received by boys and men, results in an inability to deal in a productive way with the inevitable emotional conflict of the educational experience:

They are not ever encouraged to be whole people. I think it is true and patriarchy infantilizes men and makes them unable to deal with their emotions a lot of the time. And in university it is so hard [for Aboriginals] and there is so much sadness and baggage and anger and a lot of different kinds of things and they have a harder time coping. (Cora)

It is possible, as Cora suggests, that the higher academic achievement of Aboriginal women and the lower academic performance of Aboriginal men is due to the male's inability to deal with the emotions that invariably arise for racialized members of mainstream institutions particularly as they become increasingly aware of the numerous ways in which they are disrespected, disempowered, and marginalized. Although such insights extend well beyond the parameters of this particular study, they clearly indicate a need for further exploration of the gendered and racialized experiences of Aboriginal men in higher education. As Shaunna explained, the observed inability of Aboriginal men to cope emotionally is perhaps the inevitable result of the historical experience of colonization:

They don't know how to communicate. They don't know how to get out of their own context and get out in the world. I think it is hard for them. They really have a hard time communicating... I think that if you were to look at the issues that they have, there is probably a lot of anger in them, there is a lot of frustration and a lot of anger in the men. It is understandable [after] what has gone on in the last five hundred years... (Shaunna)

Whether it is a result of nature or nurture, biology, or socialization, these women suggested that the confrontational behaviours and the overt resistance of their male counterparts in the academy were a common, if not particularly effective, response to discrimination. Apparently, like the Aboriginal women in Martin's (2001) study, the ability to cope effectively with cultural conflict (that arises from the attempt to adapt to institutional cultures while maintaining integrity as a tribal person) appears to influence the ability to persist in educational endeavours for the Aboriginal women in this study.

*Implications of the Research: Guiding Principles and Recommendations*

It seems that any solution to the longstanding problem of racialized educational disparity must involve the transformation of what has often been described as a hostile



educational environment into one that meets the needs of the individual learners, regardless of their race, gender, and social status. While educational credentials are unquestionably an important tool in the struggle to liberate our nations, the underlying values, assumptions, and ideologies of mainstream school systems (that reflect, reinforce, and reproduce the dominant Eurocentric culture and social structure) are antithetical to the necessary process of empowering Aboriginal students and the overall struggle for social justice. Therefore, so long as we continue to ignore the workings of racism and sexism within post-secondary institutions, Aboriginal students are left with little choice but to disengage from the denigrating process of achieving academic credentials (and thereby reinscribe their own subordinate position in society), or as these women have chosen, to endure personal degradation, disempowerment, and marginalization in order to have access to the 'masters tools' so that these might be put to use in the ongoing war for the liberation of our people individually and our nations collectively.

As mainstream schools are seen to be responsible for the reproduction of social inequity and therefore simultaneously responsible for the resistance and/or disempowerment of Aboriginal students, there is a strong argument for the creation of educational environments and processes that, being based on truly alternative foundations, might actually be empowering. Certainly, providing Aboriginal communities with an educational model that was not designed to facilitate their upward mobility in society, but rather to purposefully eradicate Aboriginal culture and by extension Aboriginal peoples, has for most part not lead to positive educational outcomes, as the statistics on Aboriginal retention rates would seem to indicate.

Conversely, as the academic success of these Aboriginal women would similarly indicate, Aboriginal students can, if they so desire, modify their learning patterns, adopt new behaviours and adapt to the system, but often at immense personal and emotional cost, which makes it a less than effective alternative. Certainly, as Hampton (1995) argued, we must continue the process of defining for ourselves what a genuinely appropriate and potentially empowering, educational model might look like.

### *Approaches to the Transformation of Education*

Until such time as Aboriginal nations can establish their own educational institutions and operate them in a way that is appropriate according to our cultural values and therefore empowering for our students, Aboriginal people will continue to have little choice but to learn how ‘to play the game’ and follow the rules of the dominant culture as reflected in mainstream academic institutions in order to succeed in education specifically and the larger society generally. However, as Friere declared in his foundational work on the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the “solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves” and thus realize their full potential (2002, p. 74). Indeed, as Graveline (1998) confirmed, educational theory has traditionally focused on the supporting of people to adapt to the dominant norms (or forcing them into compliance if necessary) rather than conceiving the very possibility of “new paradigms of knowledge” (p. 9). So long as we persist with such approaches, those who are working for meaningful social change will continue to feel the need to silence their counter-hegemonic knowledge (at least in the context of the education system) and camouflage their subversive activities.

Furthermore, this study has demonstrated Banks (1992) contention that a truly empowering education cannot be achieved by uncritically adding content about marginalized groups, such as Aboriginal people, to the existing Eurocentric system. Such a method does not challenge, much less change, the underlying values, beliefs, ideologies, and paradigms that serve to reproduce existing societal inequities. Students must be supported to develop the knowledge and skills needed to critically examine the structures of oppression and the ideologies used to justify inequality and the continued marginalization of particular populations in society (Banks, 1992). Ryan (1998) suggested that the “decentering of Euro-centric norms and ideals” is a critical aspect of the necessary process of transforming the current education system. Indeed, Banks concurred that encouraging the presence and valuing, of multiple voices will enable students to perceive reality from a range of perspectives and the dominant (Eurocentric, homophobic, sexist) worldview will become therefore only one of many viewpoints on the world around us. Surrounded by a multiplicity of perspectives, it is hopeful that the voices of Aboriginal women will no longer be constrained by the need for self protection and silence and invisibility will no longer be the price paid for academic success as these women work to change society and their position within it. Clearly, in addition to Native Studies programs, and curricular materials that speak from Aboriginal perspectives and embody Aboriginal values, we will need to create anti-racist and anti-sexist educational environments where all students, regardless of race or gender will be respected, supported, and valued.

Moreover, as the primary delivery agent of the curriculum, according to Graveline (1998), educators must examine their role in rationalizing societal inequality and/or

perpetuating the alienation and disempowerment of Aboriginal students. Indeed, as we have seen through the experiences of the Aboriginal women in this study, if educators are not actively opposing discrimination, racism, and sexism, they are through complacency supporting the reproduction of the system. Conceptualizing the classroom as a political and cultural site, Graveline explains how, in their every day interactions, teachers and students “produce, reinforce, recreate, resist, and transform” (p.12) ideas about race, gender, and social justice. As the stories of these academically successful Aboriginal women have demonstrated, even in “the face of powerful structures of domination,” (Graveline, 1998, p. 12) there remains the possibility of resistance and ultimately the potential for social change.

#### *A New Approach*

Even as we create our own educational institutions that are founded upon Aboriginal values and employ Indigenous perspectives, Aboriginal students will for a variety of reasons still enroll in mainstream universities and colleges, and continue to have to “play the game” if they hope to succeed. Therefore in addition to consciously advancing the development of Aboriginal educational institutions, we as Aboriginal people must take the time to determine for ourselves what constitutes a truly decolonized approach to education, rather than relying upon the institutions to modify their current approach. We need no longer accept the dominant ideology and the social construction of Aboriginal peoples as inferior, as propounded in the schools we have attended and the universities we have endured. We can no longer be satisfied with merely surviving in mainstream educational systems. We have the fundamental right to a quality education in

any post-secondary institution, one that does not demand assimilation, or the denial of Aboriginality, as the price of achievement.

In order to create an educational process that would be truly empowering and would have the potential to provide actual social mobility, we must expose and address racism and sexism, and eliminate any and all practices that are based upon a belief in, and a valuing of, the superiority of a White patriarchal (elite, Eurocentric, heterosexist) culture and, by extension, the devaluation of all non-white, non-western cultures and peoples. Such conceptualizations are diametrically opposed to the advancement of, not only Aboriginal women as a group, or even Aboriginal peoples as a collective, but they also reflect and unquestionably function to reproduce existing societal inequalities and, thereby, perpetuate the continued disempowerment and marginalization of large sectors of the general population who are similarly disadvantaged by White male privilege.

#### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

According to Gayles (2005) “when concepts are mutually understood, one may be less likely to seek a broader explication of these concepts” (p. 253). Therefore, as an Aboriginal woman currently struggling with the pursuit of academic achievement and social justice in a mainstream patriarchal institution, my identification with the women in this study and the mutuality of our understandings may have influenced my interpretation of their stories and experiences. As I have shared similar experiences of racism in the academy and sexism in my family I understand and agree with the decision to conform to mainstream demands in order to get through the system. As I can claim no scientific objectivity in this work, I would not dare to suggest that anything has been proven, but

rather than the interpretations herein offer a perspective, an alternative way of looking at a situation.

It is important to assert, at this point, that this research is by design and of necessity, essentially exploratory in nature. None of the observations, or the claims, made throughout the thesis have been positively verified, nor was it my intention to do so at this time. As Mackenzie and Thomas argued in 1970, studies of such short duration hardly provide sufficient evidence for anything more than “significantly tentative conclusions” (p. 109). The analysis as presented is meant to illustrate the experience of a particular gendered cultural group in a specific social, political, and economic environment. Clearly, a study that was not constrained by the limitations of institutional time frames could provide more detailed evidence and more definitive conclusions. Moreover, as issues of alternative constructions of gender and sexuality did not arise this research did not, and cannot, address the experiences of two-spirited or transgendered individuals. However, I remain hopeful that by offering the perspective of these specific heterosexual Aboriginal women as an alternative viewpoint, the reader may ultimately obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the dilemma existing for those who have found that educational success is dependent upon the negation of self and the adoption of (or at least the appearance of having adopted) the dominant culture and the acceptance of and belief in the attendant racist, sexist ideology.

I expect that what I have offered herein will ultimately contribute, in a small yet significant way, to the limited body of research on the academic success of Aboriginal students in contemporary educational institutions. The physical violence and abuse of the residential schools are by now a matter of public record and have been a focus of a great

deal of media attention, especially as Aboriginals sought restitution and redress, yet the symbolic violence that is still inflicted upon Aboriginal peoples through the ideological structure of the formal education system often goes unnoticed. It is my hope that this thesis will incite further interest in and research into this area of study. Furthermore, as the opinions expressed herein are illustrative of the experience of a rather small group of Aboriginal women, more research needs to be conducted. Clearly, substantive research needs to be conducted on a much larger scale to confirm a potential commonality of experience for other Aboriginal women. I also believe that a longitudinal study of the educational experiences of Aboriginal women would provide interesting insight into the evolution of internal transformational resistance strategies as students mature and learn to cope with discrimination in all its forms. In addition, given the tentative insights into the male experience offered by the Aboriginal women in this study, the field of Aboriginal educational research would greatly benefit from further research into the construction and experience of masculinity for Aboriginal men and their gendered experiences in relation to performance in higher education.

#### *Final Words*

It may appear, as Lorde's oft-quoted words articulate, that the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1979, p. 98). To be sure, while many Aboriginal women have found that once they had been granted access to the academy, learning to 'play the game' (i.e., not challenge White privilege or the dominant ideology) facilitated academic achievement, their personal success did little to change the overall status of Aboriginal people as a marginalized population in the

institution. However, the First Nations tradition teaches us to consider the consequences of our actions not in our own generation, or even in that of our children, but in how it will affect the lives of the seventh generation. From such a perspective we can see how intentional silence becomes an act of defiance and, as educational achievement was seen to have no inherent value, but rather was perceived pragmatically as a means to an end, it was believed to be prospectively transformative, even if not currently empowering. Therefore, the revolutionary power of educational achievement for Aboriginal women has simply not yet been realized, as we are still early in the overall process.

As we have seen, the analysis of the educational experiences of high-achieving Aboriginal women must include critical understandings in order to provide genuine insight into the counter-hegemonic nature of internal transformational resistance. Recognizing that the schools have always had - and continue to demonstrate - an assimilationist agenda, the mere existence of Aboriginals as a culturally distinct people in contemporary society, indicates the extraordinarily successful nature of Aboriginal student resistance. While many have conceptualized Aboriginal student resistance as consisting of only the kind of self-defeating oppositional behaviours and anti-school attitudes that ultimately further disadvantage the students and therefore serve to reproduce existing inequalities, one must remember to always seek alternative perspectives. These women have been able to achieve academically while maintaining their cultural integrity by developing and maintaining a façade of conformity and compliance as a means of disguising their counter-hegemonic thoughts and actions. Until the education that is being offered to our Aboriginal students is seen to respect and accommodate



our beliefs and contribute to not only the assumption of our rightful place as equals in our own territories, but also to the overall struggle for social justice, it is likely that resistance in all its forms will continue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It is important to note at this point that the terms used to describe the original inhabitants of this continent have undergone much transition over the years. Due to the ongoing attempts by government to define and categorize our peoples, as well as our own resistance to this imposed definition, any discussions on the subject of terminology are inevitably fraught with confusion. The term ‘Indigenous’ was made popular by the American Indian Movement and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood in the 1970’s, as a term that encompassed the oppressed original peoples of the world (L.T. Smith, 2002, p. 7) however the implication of international scope is not necessarily the most appropriate for our purposes. The popular historical use of ‘Indian’ is not only offensive, since legally the category of ‘Indian’ as defined by the Indian Act includes only status Indians and thereby excludes those who, for a variety of historical reasons, are deemed non-status and/or Métis and will, therefore, be avoided (unless used in citations). Some prefer the use of ‘Native,’ however, this term also creates confusion as it can simply be an indication of one’s birth in the specific geographic region, although the use of capitalization generally indicates connection to the original peoples. Most prefer to refer to themselves by their own tribal affiliations and usually in their own language, such as the Anishnawbe people. While such terms provide tremendous insight into linguistic and cultural specificity, they are not functional when referring to the total population. Thus, in order to be as inclusive as possible for the purposes of this research I will use the constitutionally recognized term ‘Aboriginal’ when I am referring to our nations’ original inhabitants as a collective and the terms First Nations, Métis, or Inuit if referring to these populations specifically.

In order to prevent confusion, for the purposes of this research, I have used the term Aboriginal whenever possible, which quite simply means from the original people. In doing so, I am referring to all those who are the direct descendants of the original inhabitants of this continent. Indeed, we as Aboriginal people do not recognize the arbitrary borders that divide the nations on this continent, that were imposed within our traditional territories, and upon our then sovereign nations, without consent or even consultation. According to our own oral traditions, we have been here since time immemorial, and are clearly the original people. The category of Aboriginal encompasses the multiplicity of distinct tribal cultures, as well as legal entities, including Status, non-Status, Métis, and Inuit.

However, it has been argued that even the term ‘Aboriginal’ is misleading as it implies a “degree of homogeneity” that “undermines” the reality of diversity both between and among various Aboriginal populations (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 7). Thus, according to Wotherspoon (2003), one must openly acknowledge that “Aboriginal people are distinguished

from other Canadians by particular legal statuses and historical social, and cultural experiences, but like any social group their circumstances are also marked by internal differences and inequalities” (cited in Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, citing numerous studies, Kingston (2004) explains that even when matched for age, education etc., depending on the country, a married man earns between 10 and 40% more than a single man, and married men with stay-at-home wives have significantly greater salary increases than men with working wives (p. 247). Clearly, the presence of a woman in the home is a tremendous resource for the advancement of a working male. Unfortunately, for women, being married offers no such career advantages, in fact marriage is often seen as a liability, especially for women of child bearing age as employers may be less willing to hire, or invest in the training of women who could potentially go on maternity leave (Kingston, 2004). Thus, predictably, studies have also further demonstrated that overall married women earn less than single women (Kingston, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The cost of childcare can be very prohibitive for those working with such an extremely limited budget. In fact, 50% of the women in this study indicated the lack of affordable childcare spaces created one of the biggest barriers to their educational success. However, Aboriginal women are not alone in this situation as such concern is common to many women in Canada. Apparently, according to the study released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the childcare system in Canada was ranked last among developed countries in terms of availability of early learning and childcare spaces (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). Due to this severe shortage of regulated childcare spaces available, the report also indicated less than 20 % of the children under six with working parents could be accommodated (as compared to 60% in the UK, 69% in France and 78% in Denmark). Interestingly, within Canada, Quebec has the highest number of available daycare spaces and all such spaces are subsidized, and therefore as would be expected, Quebec also has the highest percentage of women participating in post secondary education and the workforce as compared to all other provinces and territories (OECD, 2005). While clearly the lack of affordable childcare is a barrier to employment and education for many women in Canada generally, and low income women of colour specifically (Khosla, 2003), according to the Urban Aboriginal Task Force (2007) for Aboriginal women living in urban settings particularly, childcare is an absolute necessity if these women are to be able to obtain education, training and ultimately employment. To illustrate, according to the 2005 government statistical report on women in Canada, for a

typical woman with a yearly income of over 60 000 dollars and only one child (which ironically already makes her atypical as the national average for women is 36 500 per year) 46% of her after tax income goes to childcare (O' , Almey, Lindsay, et al., 2005). Obviously, for women with more than one child, those with less income, or those without a husband (which describes many of the women in our study) the cost of childcare throws into question the economic feasibility of even attempting to work or study. Regardless of the potential long-term financial payoffs, the short-term costs can be too great.

<sup>4</sup> See Fine, 1991; Fordham, 1988; and Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, for explanations of how academic failure can be interpreted as resisting assimilation and/or subjugation.

<sup>5</sup> As Anderson (2000) explains, for very practical reasons in traditional land based economies the division of labour was gendered as men ventured out in war and hunting parties, while women who were simultaneously “reproducers as well as producers” remained in the community focusing their efforts on housing, childcare, food preparation, and for some tribes agriculture (p. 59). Yet, Anderson is careful to point out that the work performed by men and women was seen as having equal value and the high valuation of Aboriginal women’s productive work, brought her great power and authority within the family and community.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to putting in a full day of work at the band administration office, the overwhelming majority of female chiefs (47 out of the 49 chiefs studied) were still shouldering the full burden of the household duties. While these women occupy the top position in their communities, and some may therefore have the economic resources to obtain paid domestic assistance, like many other women in our communities most rely on the assistance of female relatives such as mothers, sisters, and daughters, especially when they have to be away from the home for business. Thus, the gendered divisions are maintained and the entire system still relies on the caring work of women in the home, except that in this case it is other women.

<sup>7</sup> The movement of women from the confines of the home and into the workforce has done little to redistribute the gendered assignment of domestic chores. Thus, the taking on of employment outside the home has resulted in what Luxton (1980) termed the ‘double day’ for working women. Citing both Canadian and international research, Luxton (1980) found that (most) men are only minimally involved in housework whether their wives have formal employment or not. Thus, Luxton continues, men spend more time per day in (paid) formal work,

while employed women spent less time at paid work than men did and half as much time on domestic chores as housewives did, but in combination working women spent more time overall working than either employed men or housewives.

<sup>8</sup> Citing the 2001 study of Chun and Lee, Kingston (2004) describes how men with wives who work full time make significantly less than men with stay-at-home wives.

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## **Letter of Information**

### **The High Price of Success: The Study of Academic Persistence Among Aboriginal Women In Several Canadian Universities**

#### **Greetings, Shé:kon, Ahnee,**

My name is Dawn Harvard, I am a member of the Wikwemikong First Nation, and a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the experiences of academically successful Aboriginal women at the university level and I would like to invite you to participate in this research.

The aims of this research are to increase the understanding of how it is that Aboriginal women are currently experiencing increasing academic success, especially in comparison to Aboriginal men, as evidenced by postsecondary enrolment and graduation statistics. To that end the research will examine and identify the difficulties, cultural conflicts, attitudes, aspirations, and survival strategies of female Aboriginal students who have persisted in post-secondary programs.

Information for this research will be collected through traditional Sharing Circles. Along with other Aboriginal women you will share your stories, comments in a Sharing Circle which will be approximately two or three hours in length. Discussions will be recorded on audio tapes which will be subsequently transcribed for analysis. All data, tapes and transcripts, will be stored securely for five years, in order to allow sufficient time for potential publication, after which it will be destroyed. Circles will be conducted in a suitable non-academic environment to be determined jointly by all participants. Further Sharing Circles will be conducted if the participants feel they are warranted to a maximum of four circles possible. If there is not sufficient participant numbers, or for anyone who is not comfortable with the Sharing Circle process, I will offer opportunities for individual informal interview processes.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used. You will be allowed to choose a fake name for identification during circle sessions and in the final release of findings. Real names will not be used at any point and any potentially personally identifying information will not be included.

Should you consent to participate in this research, please be aware that you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, should you wish to do so, or to decline to answer any specific questions you would prefer not to answer.

The High Price of Success: The Study of Academic Persistence Among Aboriginal  
Women In Several Canadian Universities

I have read the Letter of Information relating to the above-titled project, I understand the proposed research and my questions have been answered fully to my satisfaction.

I understand that data for this research will be collected through traditional Sharing Circles. I also understand that if there is not sufficient participant numbers, or if for any reason, and at any time, I am not comfortable with the Sharing Circle process, I will be provided the option of an individual informal interview process.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring a penalty of any kind, that I may decline to answer any specific questions should I choose to do so, and that the information collected is for research purposes only.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

**APPROVAL OF PhD THESIS PROPOSAL****Form A**

If the proposed research does not involve human subjects or the direct use of their written records, video-tapes, recordings, tests, etc., this signature form, along with ONE copy of the research proposal should be delivered directly to the Graduate Education Office for final approval.

If the proposed research involves human subjects, this signature form, along with ONE copy of the research proposal and THREE copies of the Ethical Review Form must be submitted to the Chair of the Ethical Review Committee, Graduate Office, Faculty of Education.

**IT IS THE STUDENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE A COPY OF THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL (INCLUDING REVISIONS) TO THE THESIS SUPERVISOR AND ALL MEMBERS OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE.**

Student's Name:

DAWN MEMEE HARVARD

TITLE OF THESIS:

The High Price of Success: A Study of Academic Persistence among Aboriginal Women in Several Canadian UniversitiesDOES THIS RESEARCH INVOLVE THE USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS: YES  NO 

Name of Thesis Supervisor:

Goli Rezaei-Rashti

Name(s) of Members of the Thesis Advisory Committee:

Ellen SingletonWayne Martino**APPROVAL SIGNATURES:**

Graduate Student:

Thesis Supervisor:

Advisory Committee:

Ethical Review Clearance:

Review #:

0601-2

Date:

Jan 13/06

Chair of Graduate Education:

Date:

Jan 16/06

**A STUDENT MAY PROCEED WITH RESEARCH WHEN A COPY OF THIS FORM CONTAINING ALL APPROVAL SIGNATURES HAS BEEN RECEIVED.**



## VITAE

Name : Dawn Memee Lavell Harvard

Education: University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario  
PhD in Education, 2002-present

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.  
Master of Education, 1999-2002

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.  
Bachelor of Education, 1997-1999

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.  
Bachelor of Arts (Honours)1992-1996

Awards: 2003 Trudeau Foundation Scholarship.  
2003 Faculty of Education Thesis of the Year, Queen's University.  
2002 Casino Rama Awards for Excellence for Aboriginal Students.  
2002 President's Scholarship for Graduate Study, UWO.  
2000 Dean's Visible Minority Award, Queen's University.  
1999 Queen's Graduate Award, Queen's University.

### Professional Experience:

2003-Present President, Ontario Native Women's Association. Thunder Bay, Ontario.

2003/2004 Instructor, Teaching First Nations Students, University of Western Ontario, Faculty of Education.

### Publications:

Lavell-Harvard, D.M. & Corbiere Lavell, J. (2006). "Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance, and Rebirth." Demeter Press: Toronto. 2006.

Lavell, D.M. (2002). If This Is Empowering Why Don't I feel Better? An Aboriginal Educator's Perspective on Action Research as a Strategy for Facilitating Change in Aboriginal Education. Voice, ETFO, Fall 2002. 14-18

Lavell, D.M. (2002). If This Is Empowering Why Don't I feel Better? An Aboriginal Educator's Perspective on Action Research as a Strategy for Facilitating Change in Aboriginal Education. In The Ontario Action Researcher, online publication, Fall 2000.