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Permanency From the Perspective of Aboriginal Youth Who Have Aged Out of Care: An Exploratory Study

Stangeland, Jade

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Permanency From the Perspective of Aboriginal Youth Who Have Aged Out of Care:

An Exploratory Study

by

Jade Stangeland

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Permanency has been recognized as an important goal for children and youth in government care. However, two groups for whom the meaning of permanency has generated considerable debate are youth in foster care, and Aboriginal children and youth. A comprehensive literature review revealed that permanency for youth is both necessary and achievable, and cultural considerations were critical in achieving permanency. The purpose of this study was to explore the views of Aboriginal youth who have aged out of foster care on permanency. Individual, semi-structure interviews were completed with six young adults (ages 18 to 20) and a follow up focus group was completed with three of these participants. The data was analyzed using a basic qualitative, pragmatic approach. This analysis revealed that the goals of permanency and culture have been set up as competing priorities rather than as complimentary objectives working in harmony for the well being of Aboriginal children and youth in care.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Eminent psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner suggested, “every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her” (as cited in Brendtro, 2006, p. 163).

Unfortunately many children in foster care do not have this caring and committed adult present in their life. As of 2011 an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 children in foster care in Canada were awaiting adoption (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). In Alberta, Child and Family Services is working to provide children in foster care with this adult through permanency planning (Permanency planning, 2007). Permanency, premised on the conviction that all children need permanent, loving and secure relationships in order to become well-adjusted adults, means that children will leave government care to be a part of a family who is committed to provide for their care into adulthood (Permanency planning, 2007).

Atwood (2008) explains, “[t]he goal of achieving permanent, stable placements for children in the child welfare system is an over-arching objective, but “permanency” is a chameleon term in the child welfare world whose meaning varies from context to context and culture to culture” (p. 239). For each developmental stage and cultural group the meaning of permanency must be re-evaluated. Two groups for whom the meaning of permanency has generated considerable passionate discourse are youth in foster care, and Aboriginal children and youth (Samuels, 2009; Smith, 2009). As conversations regarding permanency for Aboriginal youth take place it is important that all stakeholders are given a voice. To date, the voice of Aboriginal youth has not been represented in literature discussing permanency planning. Consequently, this study was created to learn about the meaning of permanency for Aboriginal people who were formerly in foster care as adolescents. Their experiences and understandings

can contribute to a larger, ongoing discussion to shape permanency practices for this population. This knowledge can be operationalized to serve as the foundation of permanency work with Aboriginal youth (Walters, 2011).

As outlined in the 2011 Alberta Children and Youth Services Annual Report, meeting the needs of Aboriginal children, youth and families in a culturally competent manner is a priority for the Ministry. However, until recently permanency planning for youth in foster care has received insufficient attention from the child welfare community (Avery, 2009). Conventional work with these youth has focused on transition to adulthood services; while at the same time a growing body of literature is documenting new programs, which strive to connect youth with permanent, loving families (North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2009). Discussions regarding youth permanency are gaining momentum and are taking place across North America. At a recent conference in Calgary for example, Dr. Denise Goodman (2011) advocated that permanency for youth is both necessary and achievable.

Debates regarding culturally appropriate practices that would result in permanency for Aboriginal children and youth are ongoing. The construct of a nuclear family is a normative ideal in Western societies (Saggers & Sims, 2005) and this concept has informed mainstream permanency planning practices. Indigenous academics such as Gregory Cajete (2000) describe a different ideal. Cajete (2000) depicts a network of extended family and community members who create a web of relationship around a child and guide them into adulthood as the traditional approach to child rearing in Aboriginal communities. Literature reveals significant differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worldviews including an emphasis on collectivism in Aboriginal communities (Goforth, 2007; Mussell, Cardiff & White, 2004). Thus, permanency for

Aboriginal youth may need to be constructed in an entirely different way than for non-Aboriginal youth (Stangeland & Walsh, 2014).

Purpose of the study. In the introduction of Walmsley's (2005) book, "Protecting Aboriginal Children", Bill Simon advises social workers to stop telling Aboriginal people what is best for them and start listening to them. This fits well with the purpose of this study, which was to listen to Aboriginal people who were formerly in foster care in order to hear their perspectives on permanency. As outlined in the literature review, there are significant differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews; these will have an influence on how permanency is created for children and youth. This research study adds to the existing body of knowledge, which informs practice interventions and policy development and has implications for practitioners and future researchers. Practitioners will gain a better understanding of the views of permanency from the perspective of Aboriginal youths with lived experience of foster care. Measuring permanency has been identified as challenging (Trocmé et al., 2009), and a better understanding of the term could lead to improved measurement tools. Future researchers will be able to use the knowledge gathered from this study to pursue more in-depth research on permanency with Aboriginal youth.

Additionally, this study is important because achieving permanency for all children is a matter of social justice. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) clearly states that every child has the right to a family, identity and culture according to articles 8, 20, 21 and 30. State Parties that have ratified the convention, including Canada, are obliged to ensure that the best interests of the child are of primary consideration. In the case that a child cannot be returned to their biological family, this usually means finding alternative permanent caregivers

and maintaining cultural connections (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011).

Every child deserves to have a sense of belonging, regardless of their age or ethnicity.

Definitions. The term Aboriginal will be used throughout this study to refer to the original peoples of North America and their descendents (Aboriginal peoples and communities, 2010). When appropriate the terms First Nations, Métis and Inuit will be used to refer to specific populations of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal communities are far from homogenous, every community is unique and must be recognized as such (Ottmann & Pritchard, 2010; Voyageur & Caillou, 2001). As Klamn (2009) eloquently put it in her thesis, “[t]here is no universal depiction of any culture, or of any people. Therein is our challenge as humans as we try to interact with each other” (p. 11). In my research I made every effort to respectfully portray Aboriginal culture and engage with Aboriginal participants. My own self-positioning and ongoing reflection was an important part of this process.

Summary. Chapter Two will provide a literature review outlining the problem of youth impermanence, current research on youth meanings of permanency and relevant cultural issues. Ecological theory will provide the theoretical framework to outline the importance of permanency. Chapter Three outlines the methodology utilized within this study, including rationale for the basic qualitative design (Creswell, 2009) and pragmatic approach (Patton, 2001), techniques used for data collection and analysis, as well as a discussion about how ethical considerations have been addressed. Chapter Four presents the results of the study, outlining the themes that emerged from interviews with the participants. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings and their significance as well as limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Youth and Permanency

Aging out. When a youth leaves foster care without permanency it is often referred to as aging out (Avery, 2010; Walters, 2011). In this process youth leave government care without the support of a committed adult in their life and as a consequence face serious challenges in adulthood. Adam Pertman, Executive Director of the Adoption Institute, an American non-profit based in Massachusetts, outlines the problem that the child welfare system is facing across North America:

We remove thousands of children from their original homes each year because of abuse or neglect, with the implicit promise that we'll keep them safe and give them better lives. Unfortunately, a growing number are aging out without any connections to adults, so they too often wind up pregnant, on the streets, in jail or in poverty. Simply put, as a society, we are failing them. (2011, para. 3)

In Canada an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 children in foster care each year are awaiting adoption and, on average, only 7 percent of these children will find permanency through adoption (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). There are no statistics available on how many youths age out of care each year in Canada, however one study estimates that 680 children aged out of foster care in 2006 in British Columbia alone (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007). This lack of readily available statistics may indicate that this problem is not well recognized at this time.

Youth who age out of foster care without permanency face poor outcomes in adulthood. Research demonstrating this problem was conducted initially in the United States and dates back

to the late 1980s (Barth, 1986; Barth, 1990). This body of research consistently shows the disadvantages encountered by this population including an increased risk of poverty, homelessness, incarceration, unplanned pregnancies and unemployment (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Davis, 2009; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009). Recent Canadian studies echo these findings. Worthington et al. (2008) found that 62% of the youth in their study on street-involved youth (n=305) had been involved with child welfare services during their lifetimes. A three year longitudinal study from Victoria, British Columbia, for example, found high rates of homelessness, poverty, unplanned pregnancies, criminal activity and drug use among former foster youth (n=37) relative to youth who had not lived in care (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007). In Ontario a study on homeless Aboriginal youth (n=24) revealed a strong link between homelessness and a history of child welfare involvement (Baskin, 2007). Raising the Roof (2009), a charity dedicated to youth homelessness, found that 43% of homeless youth (n=689) in Calgary, Toronto and St. John's had previous child welfare involvement. In his overview of Aboriginal youth gang violence in Canada, Totten (2009) points to a lack of permanency as one of the major pathways to gang violence involvement. He explains that life in foster care can lead to attachment problems, instability and associating with negative peers in group home settings.

Avery (2010) conducted an extensive literature review on youth permanency and concluded that youth leaving foster care do not have the developmental maturity to succeed independently. This study however, did not examine the impact of ethnicity. The findings echo research on emerging adulthood which demonstrates that adults are not becoming fully independent until the third decade of life, relying heavily on social capital provided by their families to support them into their mid-twenties (Arnett & Taber, 1994). Emerging adulthood

refers to the period of time from a person's late teens to mid-twenties (Arnett, 2004) and is characterized as a stage of identity exploration, instability, self-focus and living in transition, neither adolescent nor adult. For youth in foster care, matters are complicated by the likelihood that this population is coping with emotional, psychological or behavioural issues due to early childhood abuse or neglect (Avery, 2010). The efficacy of transition to independence plans for youth has thus been called into question. Munson and Lox (2012) assert that approaches focusing on life skills fail unless there is a focus on providing youth with lasting relationships with supportive adults. As a result, researchers and practitioners are examining other options for youth in foster care, one of which is permanency.

Youth permanency. The importance of timely permanency planning for children in foster care has been well accepted. In fact, the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (2000) in Alberta was created with permanency goals in mind. This piece of legislation places limits on cumulative time in care for the purposes of timely permanency. Legal permanency through private guardianship or adoption is intended to provide children with a stable, committed family to support them into adulthood and facilitate healthy identity formation (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). The notion of permanency is founded on the premise that the need for a loving and supportive adult does not end when a child becomes a teenager.

Ecological theory suggests that young adults need a supportive network in order to succeed (Gitterman, 2011). As outlined previously, youth aging out of care without permanency are at heightened risk for poor outcomes in adulthood. Many youth in foster care have only paid staff to provide support; this lack of foundation makes it difficult for youth to focus on other goals such as education or employment (Collins & Clay, 2009; Jarboe & Agostic, 2011).

Additionally, youth are left without supports as they navigate the challenges of adulthood including parenting, pursuing education, and finding and maintaining employment.

Many practitioners and researchers believe that finding permanency for youth in foster care will improve outcomes for this group (North American Council on Adoptable Children [NACAC], 2009). This is supported by literature that demonstrates that adopted children fare better academically, socially and emotionally than their peers in foster care (Erich, & Leung, 1998; Triseliotis, 2002), as well as research which indicates that the presence of at least one committed, caring adult is a protective factor for youth aging out of foster care (Foster, 2011; Jacobs & Everall, 2003; Unrau, Seita & Putney, 2008). Pecora (2012) recommends permanency as a solution to poor educational outcomes for youth in foster care and Stott (2012) hypothesized that permanency could decrease negative behaviours such as substance abuse and risky sexual activities. During a needs assessment administered by Stiving (2012), youth aging out of foster care stressed that a mentor or supportive figure is one of their key needs.

Additionally, adoption is cost effective. The province of Ontario estimates that it costs \$44,820 per year to care for a child or youth in foster care for one year, not including administration costs (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). A study conducted in the United States indicates that governments spend approximately half as much to support a child who has been adopted from foster care as they do to support a similar child who is raised in foster care (Barth, Lee, Wildfire, & Guo, 2006). Barth et al. (2006) explain that the costs of adoption subsidies are less than foster care payments. In addition, children who remain in foster care frequently end up transitioned to more expensive placements such as group care (Barth et al., 2006).

There is a misconception that permanency is not achievable for the youth population due to their age and developmental stage (Louisell, 2009). While traditional approaches may not always be a good fit for this group, permanency is certainly attainable. Creative projects across the United States and Canada are successfully finding permanent connections for youth through adoption, child focused recruitment, family finding programs and supported reunification (Courtney & Barth, 1996; NACAC, 2009; O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg & Houston, 2012). Without diluting the objective of providing youth with permanent, supportive adults in their lives, the term permanency must be defined in a manner that fits for this age group (Walters, 2011).

Defining permanency. Several qualitative studies have explored definitions of permanency. Freundlich, Avery, Muson and Gerstenzang (2006), for example, interviewed multiple stakeholders and demonstrated that the term permanency is not clearly understood by biological parents (n=20) or youth (n=30) involved with child welfare. Child welfare professionals (n=38) in this study agreed that clear, simplified and well-explained terminology is essential in order for clear communication between stakeholders. In a study on youth transitions to adulthood, Collins and Clay (2009) reported that key stakeholders (n=34) took a broad view of permanency, pointing out the need for a strong emotional support and flexible, specialized permanency planning individualized for each youth. Samuels (2009) completed a qualitative study with foster youth (n=29), focusing on their experiences in care. She found that their definitions of permanency were tied to a desire to find something they had lost in childhood: a family and a home.

The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) has led initiatives on creating a youth led definition of permanency. On behalf of CPYP, Sanchez (2004) asked youth to speak to

three forms of permanency: relational/emotional, physical and legal. They defined relational permanence as an emotional connection; physical permanence was related to having a stable living environment, and legal permanence was interpreted as guardianship or adoption. Results of the individual and focus group interviews found that youth value permanency and see it as important. They identified relational permanence as the most important type of permanency and viewed physical permanence as necessary for creating a firm foundation for their futures. The importance of legal permanence was contested by youth, with some seeing it as essential, and others distrusting the legal system. An often-repeated theme in literature on youth permanency is the need for youths to have a voice in the process. Youth must define what permanency means for them and engage in the permanency planning process in order to find success (CPYP, 2005; Jarboe & Agosti, 2011; Jones & Kruk, 2005). While the study by Sanchez (2004) succeeded in giving a voice to youth, it neglected to acknowledge a cultural dimension of permanency.

Akin (2010) suggested that permanency planning needs to be culturally appropriate as well as age-differentiated after finding that these are two of the important factors to predicting permanency. Frey, Greenblatt and Brown (2005) provide a definition of permanency, which includes a cultural dimension:

Achieving “permanency” means having an enduring family relationship that: is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family members; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being; and assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion and language. (p. 3)

National convenings on youth permanency held in the U. S. from 2002 to 2008 involved multiple stakeholders, including current and former foster youth (CYPC, 2005). Early meetings

inspired people to believe that permanence was possible for youth; later convenings offered peer learning opportunities and action planning teams. More recent reports highlight the necessity of youth engagement and cultural sensitivity in permanency planning (Casey Family Services, 2008). Representatives of five Tribal Nations took part in the 2008 conference and emphasized the need to support cultural involvement and connections to a child's home community (Casey Family Services, 2008). As conversations regarding permanency for Aboriginal youth take place it is necessary that all stakeholders are invited to meaningfully participate.

Culture and Permanency

Cultural context. Aboriginal children and youth are greatly overrepresented in the Canadian foster care system, making up 48.1 percent of those in care while comprising only 7.0 percent of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011). In Alberta the numbers are even more dramatic. According to the Children and Youth Services Business Plan (2010), Aboriginal children make up 64 percent of the child intervention caseload in Alberta, while representing only 9 percent of the total child population in this province. This Business Plan identifies the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and youth as a serious concern and calls for well-informed strategies as crucial to improving this situation. Historic policies of aggressive assimilation failed at eradicating Aboriginal culture, but have had a devastating effect upon Aboriginal people in Canada (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). The disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal foster children in care cannot be viewed apart from the colonial history of violence and disempowerment. It is important to have a sufficient understanding of this colonial history and ongoing oppressive practices in order to inform future research and practice.

Historical context. Canada's colonial history, including the legacy of residential schools and the sixties scoop, linger in the collective memory of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal people

were originally viewed by the British as uncivilised and in need of assimilation; legislation was created and enacted to accomplish this end. The Bagot Commission Report of 1844 described reserves as operating in a “half civilised state” and the Davin Report of 1879 recommended “aggressive civilisation” (as cited in Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003). The Indian Act, implemented in 1876, defines Aboriginal people as Crown Wards for whom the state is responsible (as cited in Kirmayer et al., 2003). Initially Europeans used land to control Aboriginal people, and soon began using Aboriginal children to exercise authority and influence (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). Beginning in the mid 1800s, residential schools explicitly sought to assimilate children by removing them from their communities and banning all forms of Aboriginal culture (Bennett et al., 2005; Johnston, 1988). These schools, operated by the churches, have left a devastating legacy in Canada. Narratives and life stories recount horrific memories of abuse and forced assimilation, which are linked to the current economic, social and mental health problems of this population (Johnston, 1988; Milloy, 1999).

In 1951 the Indian Act was revised to make provincial laws applicable to First Nations people living on reserve (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). As a consequence child protection became the responsibility of the provinces. By the 1960s child welfare interventions became the preferred approach over residential school placement (Armitage, 1995). This period, beginning in the 1960s and stretching into the 1970s, has been called the ‘sixties scoop’ which refers to the high numbers of Aboriginal children placed in foster care, typically with non-Aboriginal families (Kirmayer et al., 2003). This practice was based on a belief that Aboriginal parents could not provide suitable homes due to the struggling reserve communities (Fournier & Crey, 1997). In non-Aboriginal homes children were disconnected from their culture and, by adolescence, many youth were as a consequence running away or turning to drugs and alcohol

(Teichroeb, 1997). Further, the mass removal of children was devastating for family systems and communities and continues to have an impact (Teichroeb, 1997). New tragedies associated with the residential schools, such as the medical experiments performed on students, continue to emerge (Porter, 2013).

Transgenerational effects of residential schools and the sixties scoop are apparent in the current functioning of many Aboriginal communities. Kirmayer et al. (2003) lists the effects of a history of cultural oppression which include: the disruption of families and communities, punitive parenting taught through institutional settings, mental health problems, lack of warmth and intimacy in childhood, physical and sexual abuse, loss of knowledge, language, tradition, Aboriginal identity, loss of individual and collective self-esteem and individual and collective disempowerment. Significant disparities currently exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families. For example, rates of child maltreatment investigations involving Aboriginal children are 4.2 times the rate of non-Aboriginal investigations (Sinha et al., 2013). Literature on residential schools indicates that the experience of returning as strangers in their own homes was traumatic for the youth, the families and the communities (Bennett et al., 2005). These residential school survivors found themselves caught between two cultures, feeling not fully accepted or understood by either (Bennett et al., 2005). Lacking the knowledge and skills to survive in either system may have forced Aboriginal youth to turn elsewhere, using alcohol or drug abuse to find an escape (Fiddler, 1985 as cited in Bennett et al., 2005). There are clear parallels between these accounts and current experiences of Aboriginal children and youth in foster care today.

Alberta context. In Alberta the unique needs of Aboriginal people were acknowledged by the provincial government and as a consequence child protection services were delegated to Aboriginal communities. Alberta has ten Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) that

provide child intervention services. Additionally there are 18 Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs), which serve 40 of the 45 First Nations communities in the province (Children and Youth Services Annual Report, 2011). The remaining five First Nations communities work closely with their local CFSAs to ensure appropriate service delivery. Additionally, one CFSA is dedicated to serving the eight Métis communities in Alberta. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on urban Aboriginal people served by Calgary and Area CFSA. Intervention services for Aboriginal families in this region are provided by the Native Services Office, a specialized team striving to provide services in a culturally appropriate manner (Native Multi Service Team, n.d.).

In Alberta the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (2000) dictates that “the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture, heritage, spirituality and traditions should be respected and consideration should be given to the importance of preserving the child’s cultural identity” (p. 14). The Enhancement Policy Manual (2011) requires that a First Nations designate be consulted whenever a temporary or permanent guardianship application is made for an Aboriginal child. The intention is for this designate to assist in maintaining ties to a child’s community and culture. Additionally, any application for an adoption order on an Aboriginal child must be accompanied by a cultural connections plan. Legislation and policy place a high importance on connecting Aboriginal children to their culture, heritage, spirituality, language and tradition.

Permanency and Culture

Frey et al. (2005) define permanency to include a cultural dimension, which involves maintaining ties to tradition, ethnicity, language and religion. Aboriginal youth have cultural needs that must be addressed in the permanency planning process. Although there is not yet a specific conversation in the literature regarding Aboriginal youth permanency in relationship to culture, there have been many discussions regarding adoption and Aboriginal children (Bertsch,

2010; Carrier, 2008; Klamn, 2009). Two themes that have been identified in the literature that are relevant to youth permanency include the contrast between collectivism and individualism, and identity developmental for Aboriginal young people.

Collectivism versus individualism. Western society tends to be individualistic and view individuals and families as autonomous; the concept of a nuclear family is a pervasive normative ideal (Saggers & Sims, 2005). Based on this perspective, permanency planning is the process of finding a nuclear family for a child. However the concept of a nuclear family is foreign to traditional Aboriginal child rearing practices (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Aboriginal communities historically operated as collectivist societies (Goforth, 2007; Mussell, Cardiff & White, 2004) within which parents, grandparents and community members all had a role in providing care for the children and teaching them to become contributing members of their community (Cajete, 2000). As Cajete (2000) explains:

The network of extended family and clan provided a web of relationship that profoundly affected perception. Children learned early the significance of family, responsibility, respect, and the foundations of relationship and kinship. Father, mother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, each in their turn and special way, influenced and formed children. Older children learned to care for younger ones. Through such experience they learned to share, nurture, and support others. (p. 96)

Historically, if primary caregivers were unable to care for children, someone else in the community would take that responsibility (Miller, 1996). However, contact would remain open between all members of the adoption triad and the biological family would be honoured rather than ignored (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996). In many Aboriginal communities children continue to be viewed as communal resources and a child's best interest seen as

inseparable from the best interest of the entire community (Klamn, 2009; Walmsley, 2005). Ideas about custom adoption that do not require the termination of parental rights have challenged mainstream permanency planning practices for Aboriginal children (Bertsch, 2010; Polasky, 2012). In the same way, permanency planning with Aboriginal youth must consider the unique cultural needs of this population. Collectivist values may influence how these practices are shaped. Questions arise regarding whether assigning one youth to one family should be held as the ideal permanency plan and what role a youth's community can play in this process.

Identity formation. According to Erikson's theories on development, identity formation is the primary developmental task of adolescence (as cited in Phinney, 1993). Arnett (2004) suggests that identity formation remains the focus of development through emerging adulthood. Research indicates that identity formation is especially challenging for members of an ethnic minority (Phinney, 1993). Phinney (1993) outlines a three-stage model of ethnic identity development, which includes unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, and ethnic identity achievement. He outlines the challenges that ethnic adolescents face in navigating this process in a Eurocentric environment. Anderson (2000) explains that Aboriginal identity is passed through generations and shared experiences, inseparable from the collective identity of Aboriginal people. Kral (2003) supports this hypothesis in his study exploring identity in Inuit communities, finding that group membership is central to identity for this group. Thus, according to this theory an Aboriginal youth disconnected from her or his cultural group will struggle to form a healthy identity.

Creating a healthy identity as an Aboriginal person can be challenging in the current Canadian context. Kirmayer et al. (2003) point out that, "[t]he cumulative effects of internal colonialism on cultural identity and continuing tensions between the values of Aboriginal

peoples and mainstream society complicate the efforts of Aboriginal youth to forge their identities and find their way in the world” (p. 20). Aboriginal youth raised by non-Aboriginal caregivers appear to struggle with impaired physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health (Carriere, 2008; Park, 2003). In contrast, Filbert and Flynn’s (2010) study of First Nations youth in Ontario found that a higher level of cultural assets was significantly predictive of more resilient outcomes in the case of behavioural difficulties. Tae Mee Park (2003) asserts that Aboriginal children adopted by non-Aboriginals have poorer self-esteem and are more likely to have suicidal thoughts or self harm (as cited in Smith, 2009) and Carriere’s (2008) research suggests the presence of a causal relationship between an individual’s health and their connection to birth family, community and ancestral knowledge and health. With identity formation as such an important task for this developmental phase and cultural group, it must be at the forefront of considerations in permanency planning.

Community healing. It is important to have the conversation regarding permanency planning for Aboriginal children and youth in the context of the wider situation in Canada. Actively working to reconnect children and youth with their cultures is only a small part of a larger process of healing for Aboriginal people in Canada. Conversations regarding permanency planning for Aboriginal youth are taking place within a much larger context. In Alberta, work is ongoing to create a child intervention system that meets the needs of Aboriginal people (Children and Youth Services Annual Report, 2011). Actively working to reconnect children and youth in foster care with their cultures is only a small aspect of a widespread process of healing for Aboriginal people in Canada. Kirmayer et al. (2003) explain:

Through individual and community-based initiatives as well as larger political and cultural processes, Aboriginal peoples in Canada are involved in healing their own

traditions, repairing the ruptures and discontinuity in the transmission of traditional knowledge and values, and asserting their collective identity and power. (p. 15)

Aboriginal culture has changed drastically since colonization to fit with current realities; however Aboriginal peoples continue to be distinct and separate from mainstream society (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). As a part of this, the role of children and youth in Aboriginal communities has become difficult to define. Young people traditionally played an important role in community life (Jenness, 1977) participating in daily activities of adults and learning valuable skills through an informal, experiential process (Lafrance, 2000). Currently there is less clarity about what a youth's role and purpose is within a community. In order for youth to succeed they need a strong sense of cultural identity and to take an active role in their community (Kirmayer, et al., 2003).

Moving forward dialogue must continue between people striving to find the best ways to work with Aboriginal children and youth in order to ensure their needs for cultural continuity, stability and safety are met. As Kirmayer et al. (2003) notes, “[o]nly collaborative approaches that focus on the transfer of knowledge, skills, power and authority can hope to get past the backdrop of structural violence, racism and marginalization” (p. 22). Policies must be developed within an Aboriginal context, looking beyond Western models (Baskin, 2007). The intention of this study was to provide Aboriginal people formerly in foster care with an opportunity to share their perspectives on permanency. Their thoughts provide insight into how permanency planning can best be negotiated in the future for this population.

Ecological Theory

Theoretical models provide a means of identifying the necessary factors to attain permanency for Aboriginal youth. Currently ecological theory forms a foundation for youth

permanency work and will inform this proposed study. This theory, originally shaped by Bronfenbrenner (1994) links an individual's developmental outcomes with the contexts to which they are exposed in their lifetime. The reciprocity of relationships is emphasized, both with other people and with the environment (Gitterman, 2011). Based on this theory one could assume that a strong, stable ecological system surrounding a youth would be predictive of future success. Gitterman (2011) explains that ecological theory, "offers a dual, simultaneous focus on people and environments" (p. 279). Social networks are an essential part of a person's environment, providing resources, emotional support and information. People who lack viable social networks lose these important supports. Gitterman (2011) uses the examples of widowers or those who suffer from chronic mental illness. I contend that youth aging out of care also face a deficiency of social networks. Forming strong relationships around a youth is therefore vital as they become young adults (Harris et al., 2009).

Ecological theory may parallel some Aboriginal beliefs. Cajete (2000) explains that Aboriginal people define individuals by their web of relationships including extended family, community members, spirits and ancestors. According to Cajete (2000):

Relationship is the cornerstone of tribal community, and the nature and expression of community is the foundation of tribal identity. Through community, Indian people come to understand their "personhood" and their connection to the communal soul of their people. (p. 86)

Additionally, Cajete (2000) speaks to the importance of a strong connection with one's environment, an important aspect of ecological theory (Gitterman, 2011).

Longclaws (1994) contrasts ecological theory with the Anishinabe medicine wheel framework, which comes from the teachings of Anishinabe Elders in Waywayseecappo First

Nations community in Manitoba. In this framework, Elders defined their worldview as interconnectedness between all beings and forces in the physical and spiritual worlds. The interdependence between a person and their environment is of the utmost importance. However, unlike ecological theory, Anishinabe healing principles emphasize spirituality and focus on centering oneself, acknowledging self as the principal resource. Longclaws (1994) asserts that the Anishinabe medicine wheel is not a theoretical model, but he challenges social workers to apply its teachings to practice. He stresses the importance of including Elders, ceremonies, spirituality and family in the ecological system of Aboriginal clients. He sees participation in one's culture as the primary way of restoring balance and harmony of the person and environment (Longclaws, 1994).

There are strong implications for permanency planning based on ecological theory and the Anishinabe Medicine Wheel Framework. These ideas challenge social workers to consider permanency planning beyond connecting a child or youth to a singular family. Viewing Aboriginal youth as interdependent members of their communities, rather than individuals in need of one or two parents, could impact how permanency is conceptualized.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Research Design

An exploratory, qualitative research design was chosen for this study for several reasons. As Creswell (2009) explains, “[q]ualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). This accurately describes the goal of this study, which was to explore the meaning of permanency for Aboriginal foster care alumni. Additionally Creswell asserts that when little research has been completed on a topic, a qualitative design is the best approach. Further, according to Marlow (2005) findings from exploratory studies can be used to raise questions that can be explored by explanatory studies in the future. As established in the literature review, a very limited body of research has offered definitions of permanency based on the perspectives of youth care recipients and none have specifically addressed culture. Freundlich et al. (2006) utilized a participatory action design to learn how multiple child welfare stakeholders understand permanency. Sanchez (2004) focused on the perspective of current and former foster youth on permanency through phone interviews and a focus group. Due to the fact that neither of these studies directly addresses culture, an exploratory, qualitative research design was determined to be more appropriate.

Qualitative studies can take many forms, for the purposes of this study I relied on the pragmatic approach which Patton (2001) explains “allows one to eschew methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness as the primary criteria for judging methodological quality” (p. 72). He further notes that “[t]he point is to do what makes sense, report fully on what was done, why it was done, and what the implications are for findings” (p. 72). I employed what Creswell (2009) refers to as “basic qualitative research” which means “the

researcher collects qualitative data, analyzes it for themes or perspectives, and reports 4-5 themes” (p. 184). The following chapter will explain this process in detail.

Setting and participants. For the purposes of this study participants were recruited who: (1) self identified as Aboriginal, (2) were between the ages of 18 and 30 years, and (3) had spent at least six months in foster care in Calgary, Alberta when they were between the ages of 12 and 18 years. It would have been advantageous to interview youth who are currently in foster care to gain their perspectives, however the young adult population was more accessible for this study. Also, one of the advantages of interviewing adults who were formerly in foster care is that they have had time to reflect on their experiences and evaluate how the permanency or lack of permanency they achieved impacted their adult life. Six participants were interviewed which is consistent with Marlow’s (2005) recommendation, “[w]hen qualitative information is collected, the number of participants in the study is often small, because the focus is on collecting in-depth information from each participant to understand the participant’s subjective experience of the phenomena under study” (p. 11). As a result, six participants were sufficient to complete exploratory research on this question.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited for this study through purposive sampling which “allows the researcher to handpick the sample according to the nature of the research problem and the phenomenon under study” (Marlow, 2005, p. 138). Martha Semeniuk, the vice president of Four Directions Foster Parents Association (Four Directions), aided with recruitment. Four Directions is a non-profit organization in Calgary aiming to assist Aboriginal children and youth in foster care dealing with cross-cultural issues. Ms. Semeniuk, a Métis woman, has extensive experience in the area of foster care for Aboriginal children and youth, both as the founder and vice president of Four Directions, and as a foster parent. I had a pre-

existing relationship with Four Directions as an employee. From 2009 to 2011 I worked as a family and youth support worker and since 2009 I have been employed as a home study writer for the agency. Ms. Semeniuk reviewed this study's purpose, proposed methodology and recruitment poster and provided feedback. She then agreed to assist in recruiting participants by displaying posters at the Four Directions office, providing current youth workers with information about the study and sending a mass email describing the study to foster parents and current and former youth affiliated with Four Directions. Through this process three young adults volunteered to participate in the study. Each of these participants had been a client of Four Directions as youth.

In order to expand the population group I used snowball sampling, which “involves identifying some members of the population and then having those individuals contact others in the population,” (Marlow, 2005, p. 147). Snowball sampling is commonly used when participants are hard to find (Greenstein, 2006). Former foster youths are a difficult population to contact; they are often transient and live high-risk lifestyles (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Davis, 2009; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009). As a result, the snowball strategy was thought to be necessary. Once a youth had completed the interview I invited them to recruit additional participants by sharing information about the study and providing contact information to interested youth who met the inclusion criteria. Through this process four additional participants were identified and three of these individuals followed through in taking part in the study. Each of the three young adults recruited through Four Directions introduced one or more additional participants to the study. The three young adults successfully recruited through snowball sampling had not been clients of Four Directions, although they all had had some indirect contact with the agency through their friend's involvement with Four Directions.

Data collection instruments. Data collection was completed through in-depth, semi-structured, in-person interviews with the six participants. Semi-structured interviews utilized an interview schedule of open-ended questions, leaving room for me to improvise and pursue hunches (Marlow, 2005). As Patton (2001) explains, “[t]he purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories” (p. 21). The goal was to provide a descriptive analysis of the youth’s understanding of permanency, particularly as it relates to their culture. Kovach (2010) notes that the use of an open-ended and conversational approach to interviewing is consistent with an “Aboriginal worldview that honours orality as a means of transmitting knowledge” (p. 42). Open-ended questions were asked in a manner that avoided yes or no answers, focusing on engaging youth in discussion. The questions developed for the study were as follows:

1. Can you tell me about your experiences with foster care, when did you first enter into foster care? How long were you in care?
2. When you were in foster care, did anyone talk to you about permanency? If so, how?
3. What does ‘permanency’ or ‘lifelong connection’ mean to you? Are there other words you use to describe this concept?
4. Do you think there is something different in terms of permanency for Aboriginal children and youth?
5. What did the word permanency mean to you when you were in foster care?
6. Permanency has been described as having three aspects: physical, relational and legal. How would you describe each aspect?

7. Do these distinctions make sense to you? How would you describe the differences between each?
8. Do you think permanency should have a cultural dimension? How would you describe this?
9. Do you feel you have permanency in your life currently?
 - a. What does this look like? How did you find this? How do you know it is permanent? How has this impacted your life?
 - b. What barriers do you feel prevented you from finding permanency? How has not finding permanency impacted your life?
10. Do you feel permanency is an important goal for Aboriginal children and youth in foster care? Which aspects of permanency are most important?

Additional questions were asked as necessary for clarification and I welcomed tangents that the youth presented. Each interview informed subsequent interviews as the process went on. All youths appeared to be comfortable discussing the topic and they engaged in meaningful conversation. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 45 minutes and on average lasted 40 minutes. At the end of each interview the youth was asked if there was anything missing from this conversation that they would like to add, and they were reminded that the purpose of this study was to hear their voices. This was done to minimize researcher bias. I gave all of the participants the option of contacting me to review their transcript within two weeks of the interview. None of the participants pursued this option. This study received ethics approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) (Appendix A). All of the participants were volunteers who completed written consent forms (Appendix B).

During the process of data analysis, described in a subsequent section, questions arose regarding interpretation. I was examining the data for intersections between the permanency and culture and these overlaps were not clear in the initial interviews. In searching how best to address these concerns I determined the addition of a focus group would be most effective. Focus groups are a common validity procedure which, according to Creswell and Miller (2000), is a form of member checking that “consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (p. 127). Ethics board approved this amendment to the research protocol (Appendix C) and participants were presented with a second consent form (Appendix D). Three participants took part in the focus group and it lasted for one hour and was audio-recorded. At the focus group I presented the themes that I had identified in the data and facilitated a discussion between the youth on how permanency and culture connect. The youth confirmed that the themes were accurate and reiterated points that were made during the interviews.

Procedure. The interviews were completed over a five-month time period. This time period was lengthy for two reasons. First, as noted previously, it was challenging to recruit this population group, their lives are often unstable and unpredictable. During the recruitment process several of the youth moved, changed their phone number or were without a phone for a period of time. Several of the youth suggested that email or Facebook were the only reliable ways to get in touch and provided me with an email address or username for this purpose. Secondly, once a participant identified himself or herself as willing to participate, it was extremely difficult to set up a time for an interview. On multiple occasions an interview was scheduled and then the youth either cancelled at the last minute or did not show up. Often this was due to the ongoing extenuating circumstances that appear characteristic of their lives. Each time that this happened I

would contact the youth and invite them to reschedule. I considered that not attending could be a sign that the youth did not wish to participate, so during our next contact I was always clear that they were free to change their mind without any consequences. One youth who had initially volunteered through the snowball sampling process to participate in the interview did not return my message and I assumed that he had changed his mind and no longer wished to participate. Interviews were scheduled based on the youth's availability and a location of their convenience was used. Three youths invited me into their homes, two of them explaining that this was the only place they felt comfortable since each had a young child; two chose to have the interview on the University campus, and one met me in a private area at a coffee shop.

Initially I planned to invite all of the participants who completed semi-structured interview for this study to take part in the focus group. During the process of contacting individuals, one participant informed me that they had a restraining order against another participant. She was aware of the other participant's involvement in the study because she had initially referred him to the project. As a result this second participant was not invited the focus group. In addition, one participant could not be contacted as his phone number was no longer in service and they did not respond to an email. In total, I invited four participants to take part in the focus group and all agreed to attend. Finding a time when all of the participants were available was challenging and it took two months before a day was arranged. The day of the focus group one participant did not attend. As a result, three participants took part in the focus group. Although it may have been beneficial to have more participants take part in this focus group, I chose to proceed with three due to the difficulties experienced in organizing the group.

Data management. The interviews and focus group were digitally recorded. I transcribed the interviews immediately after the interviews and proofread as I annotated the

transcripts. The audio-recorded interviews, transcriptions and field notes were kept on my personal computer, which is password protected. A back up copy was kept on a USB key in a locked filing cabinet. Consent forms were also kept in this filing cabinet.

Data analysis. Creswell (2009) outlines a clear set of steps for analyzing qualitative data, which I followed. I transcribed, organized and prepared the data on an ongoing basis as I completed interviews. I read through the data and noted my reflections in a research journal. Creswell (2009) describes qualitative data analysis as “...an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study” (p. 184). For this reason, and to increase the validity of this study, I kept a research journal throughout the research process. I assigned codes to brief segments of text throughout the five months of interviews.

Through the coding process themes were discovered that mirrored the literature and the topics of the interview guide. Once all of the data was collected I reviewed the data in its entirety. This revealed two distinct categories: permanency and culture. Permanency consisted of two sub-categories: descriptions of permanency and the impact of impermanency. Two sub-categories related to culture: importance of cultural connection and factors that promote cultural connections. Two themes pointed to the intersection between the topics of permanency and culture: Aboriginal children and youth need permanency and being Aboriginal is a barrier to achieving permanency.

Ethics. I followed all of the guidelines set out by the CFREB. There was minimal risk to participants in this study. These participants are not a vulnerable population as defined by the CFREB. Each participant was informed about the purpose and goals of the research verbally and they were then provided with a paper that outlines expectations of participants and the

researcher. Individuals voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Confidentiality was assured to all participants taking part in the interview process and was explained to participants in a letter as well as verbally. Confidentiality, according to Marlow (2005), “means that the researcher knows the identity of the respondents and their associated responses but ensures nondisclosure of this information” (p. 195). Absolute anonymity or confidentiality could not be guaranteed to participants of the focus group as I was unable to control what individuals outside of the group say. Participants were made aware of this at the time of focus group recruitment verbally and then through the provided consent form. During the interview each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym, which was used on transcripts, field notes and during the focus group.

Consent was strictly voluntary with no threats or inappropriate inducements. This was particularly important as I had a pre-existing relationship with all of the participants. Three of the participants had been involved in Four Directions programs while I was employed as a family support worker. The other three youth had met me through their friend’s involvement at Four Directions during those years. Therefore I emphasized the voluntary nature of this research project, giving them multiple opportunities to change their mind without any consequences. Interviews were kept to less than 45 minutes and the focus group was kept under one hour to avoid intruding discourteously on the participant’s lives. In compensation for his or her time and travel expenses, each participant was given \$20. Participants were informed of their right to stop participating in the study at any time. They were provided with the \$20 at the beginning of the interview and assured that it was theirs, regardless of their decision to proceed or not. However they were told that any information gathered before they chose to leave would be retained by the researcher. None of the participants chose to terminate their involvement with the research once

they had started the interview. Participants were told that if they became distressed during or after the interview they could contact Four Directions Foster Parents Association of Calgary who had agreed to provide support and counselling to study participants if necessary.

Limitations. Immediately following each interview and focus group I recorded field notes (Patton, 2001). This practice improves the trustworthiness of the study as the researcher consciously considers and reflects on both potential biases and emerging ideas. There are several limitations of this study. Purposive sampling was used; this is a common approach for qualitative research although it is limited in terms of its representativeness and its ability to be generalized (Marlow, 2005). There may be some selection bias as youth were recruited through Four Directions, an agency intended to serve Aboriginal youth and ensure that they are connected to cultural resources. The sample size itself is modest, and in order to establish trustworthiness I have provided a “thick description” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007), presenting detailed information on the methods and data analysis. The age range of the participants was selected so that they can look back at their time in foster care; however, this makes it impossible to gather a current perspective of youth in foster care. There were many variations between the participants including differences in lengths of stay in care and the youth had diverse histories. For example, the youth had been born in three provinces: Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan. They also hailed from three distinct cultural groups including the Métis, Dene and Cree nations. The ability to generalize from these results is limited.

Researcher’s role. Creswell (2009) writes that researchers should be careful to describe and study what kind of effects they might have on their research. In qualitative research a researcher can influence the data even while attempting to be objective (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). Thus, it is important to note the perspectives and experience that I brought to this study

and consider how this might effect my interpretation of the data. The primary researcher for this study was myself, Jade Stangeland, a Master's of Social Work student at the University of Calgary. Prior to beginning this study I recorded my reasons for choosing this subject area and history of working with this population group in a journal. While journaling I noted my biases and expectations.

My interest in permanency planning began while I was volunteering in a family run orphanage in Johannesburg, South Africa. The founder and matriarch of the home, Thea Jarvis, held a strong belief that every child deserved to be a permanent member of a loving family. Her dedication to finding a family for every child was inspiring. Two years later, as a practicum student at the Native Multi Service Team with Child and Family Services, the label of 'unadoptable' that was sometimes placed on adolescents in foster care troubled me. It did not fit with the belief that Thea had instilled in me that every person deserved to have a sense of belonging.

As an employee with a small Aboriginal non-profit in Calgary, I worked as a support worker with Aboriginal youth in foster care. I observed their desire for a sense of belonging and their need for connection with their culture. Plans of independent living felt inadequate for these young people who were trying their best in the context of few supports and a difficult history to overcome. I searched the literature to find solutions and found a growing body of work promoting permanency planning for youth, and even young adults. I found that many practitioners and researchers shared Thea's belief that no one should go through life without a family (Avery, 2010; Jarboe & Agosti, 2011; North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2009).

In my study, I explored the perspectives of Aboriginal individuals who have been in foster care. As a Caucasian woman I recognized that I was an outsider looking in from a different cultural lens. I strove to make my research culturally sensitive by engaging with participants respectfully and taking time to reflect on my own biases. Being cognisant of my biases allowed me to set them aside and reflect on a different perspective from my own. I believe that the participants are experts in their own experiences and hearing their voice accurately is the purpose of this study. My role as a researcher was to facilitate this process.

In reviewing my notes, two broad biases became apparent. I believe that permanency is important and can be best achieved in a family environment. I believe that cultural connections are important and need to be integrated into any permanency definition. By making these biases explicit I attempted to avoid finding preconceived ideas or themes in the data. I continued to make field notes and record journal entries throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the data.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This chapter presents the findings of the analysis of data collected during in-depth interviews and a focus group with the six participants. The previous chapter outlines the methodology used to collect and analyze this data. The following will provide a brief overview of the participants followed by a description of the themes that were identified from the data. Quotations, drawn from the individual transcripts, are used to illustrate the themes; pseudonyms are used to reference the quotations in order to protect the identity of the participants.

Demographics

Interviews were completed with six young adults who self identified as Aboriginal. Four (67%) of the participants were female and two (33%) were male; their ages were between 18 and 20 years, with a mean age of 18.6 years. The age of their initial placement in out-of-home care ranged from infancy to 14 years and the average age was 4.1 years. Five of the participants were apprehended from their biological parents prior to age 5, and one was apprehended at 14 years of age. The number of different placements each participant had in out-of-home care ranged from three to 15, with an average of 7.8 placements. This number did not include moves after the age of 18 years or locations where the participants resided when they were deemed Absent Without Leave (AWOL) from their assigned living location. Educational achievement ranged from completing the ninth grade to obtaining a high school diploma: one (17%) of the participants had completed grade 12, two (33%) were currently in school full time completing grade 12, one (17%) had completed grade 11, one (17%) had completed grade 10 and one (17%) had completed grade 9. One participant (17%) was currently employed full time, three participants (50%) were unemployed and two participants (33%) were full time students. Three (50%) had

stable housing including the participant who was employed and the two full time students. The other three participants (50%) reported that they were staying with friends temporarily. Three (50%) of the participants were parents; two (33%) had full custody of their child and one had regular visits with his child who was in the care of the child's mother. All of the participants self identified as Aboriginal and reported having an affiliation with an Aboriginal band, none however had ever resided in their First Nations community. Four of the participants (67%) reported that their First Nations reserve was in Saskatchewan and two (33%) in British Columbia. The participants self identified as being from three distinct cultural groups including two each from the Métis, Dene and Cree Nations.

Thematic Analysis

Permanency and culture were found to be two distinct overarching thematic categories as expressed by the young adults in the study. Permanency included two sub-themes: (1) permanency which involved participants' descriptions of the meaning of permanency and (2) the impact of impermanency in their lives. These themes closely echo the literature of this topic.

Culture, the second major category, was also comprised of two subthemes: (1) participants' reflections on the importance of cultural connections and (2) description of factors that have promoted cultural connections.

Permanency and culture were portrayed in youths' stories as two constructs with minimal overlap or interrelation. Further, discussions about permanency centered on relationships while culture was primarily related to culturally bound activities. Paradoxically, although participants described these two themes as disconnected concepts, youth in the study clearly articulated that being Aboriginal is a barrier to permanency and that Aboriginal children need permanency. The follow model represents the findings of this study:

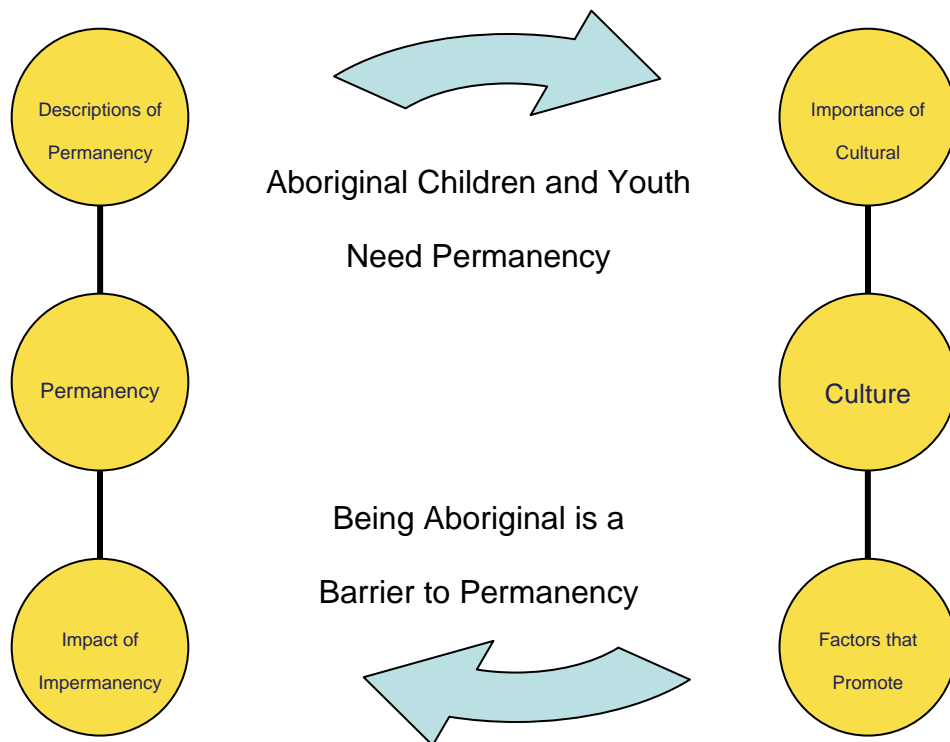


Figure 1: Illustration of the competing priorities of permanency and culture

As the model illustrates, permanency and culture are depicted as separate and mutually exclusive concepts according to the perspectives of young adults in the study. The link between these two concepts is that one need, culture, is creating a barrier to the second need, permanency. This is a problem because the need for permanency is paramount for participants in this study.

Permanency

Descriptions of permanency. Participants described permanency as a persistent relationship. As Myles explained, "...permanency would probably mean a lot of things, friendship, family, anything that has to do with relationships. Like lifelong relationships." Some of the core aspects of this relationship included belonging, connection and a sense of family.

Sophia described a situation in which she felt she had permanency: "I felt like it was permanent

because they treated me like their own family and everything. I felt, like, a family connection.” She further defined permanency as “...you feel like you belong and everything.” A relationship that exemplified the term permanency was described by youths as supportive. Sarah compared permanency to having a safety net,

Well you know it'd be a back up, it'd be security. It'd be, I'm 20 and if I'm getting an eviction notice or I'm falling behind it means I have somewhere to go, like for sure. Your friends are always willing to help out, but they can't necessarily move you in. Your parents are the people you expect will move you back in if you're having a rough time, and then they'll help set you back up so you can move back out. But with me I have to either make it or break it. There is no 'well you know, it'll be okay, I can always go here if things go bad'. I have to figure it out for myself.

While describing a friendship that felt most like permanency Myles repeatedly highlighted the ongoing support that this friend provided. Myles reiterated, “If I had no where to go to and I had no where to sleep he'd be right there. He'd be the only one who'd actually be like, 'I'll sneak you into my house' and if anyone says anything I'll be like, 'No, Myles is staying.'”

There was a significant emphasis on stability and having things stay the same in participants' descriptions of permanency. For example, Mark stated, “...permanency would be the same people or person around you constantly, actually they're with you in the different places where you've been or just in your life in general.” Relationships were central to discussions about permanency; however, the concept of stability extended to place in interviews with five of the six participants. Sarah defined permanency as:

. . . having at least one thing that is constant, rather than always having variables. You need something to ground you, something that's similar throughout your life or that's just

always been there that you can rely upon; it's stable. It could be a person, it could be a place, it could be having the same, I don't know, location. That's just how I would define it, having a constant."

Other participants commented on the pragmatic aspects of staying in one area such as knowing a family's schedule or easily accessing services.

Four of the young adults identified having one or more long-term relationships in their lives. These relationships included biological or foster siblings, former foster parents, cousins and friends. In most cases these relationships appeared unable to fully embody permanency in one or more areas that had been outlined by the youth. Myles and Sophia, for example, described having relationships that most closely resembled the term permanency as described by the participants. Myles said that his best friend is a constant support in his life but indicated that this was clearly different than having a family connection. Sophia indicated that her former foster parents continued to be supportive and helpful and she described their relationship as "like family" because, "...they call [my daughter] their grandchild." However, Sophia acknowledged that she did not feel a strong sense of belonging with these individuals. Mark identified his biological siblings as people with whom he has long-term relationships. He added however, that he had not seen them in several years. Mila described her infant daughter as the most permanent relationship in her life, but noted that it is not a supportive connection. Lexie and Sarah indicated that they had no permanent relationship in their lives. Sarah however, was optimistic that her current romantic relationship would continue to grow and eventually provide a sense of permanency for her. While describing her longing for permanency Sarah noted, "...it's something that I've always wanted to experience, someone who's with me for the rest of my life,

and I can only see that as being like a husband and that's about it." She offered that she would need a relationship to last more than five years before she would feel that it was permanent.

Impact of impermanency. All of the young adults interviewed indicated that they had not achieved permanency prior to leaving foster care or in their adult lives thus far. They identified several ways in which impermanency had impacted their lives, both as a child and as a young adult. These impacts were largely negative and included emotional and relationship problems, a detrimental impact on their educational success, addictions problems and challenges in their own parenting. The participants believed that they would have avoided many of these challenges had they achieved permanency in childhood. Some participants were able to identify positive outcomes as a result of impermanency including increased self-sufficiency and independence.

The participants in the study indicated that impermanency had taken a negative emotional toll on them during childhood. Mila stated, "...moving from foster home to foster home you never have a normal family, never feel like a regular child. You just feel like you don't belong." All of the young adults discussed the experience of not belonging; they also spoke about how this was associated with feelings of anxiety, stress and powerlessness in childhood. Sarah described it as a child looking for the person who could make decisions on her behalf, who was her guardian:

And with legal [permanency], that's basically one that I struggled with as a kid, is over who is your guardian. Who has legal rights to say what you can and can't do, where you can and can't go and I always had to have a social worker sign off that I could do things. It was never a [foster] parent, so I always knew that my [foster] parents were kind of useless, they didn't have much control at all, and even my workers didn't have a lot of

control, they always had to answer to someone else. It always had to be their supervisor or this or that, even they couldn't do very much for me. I didn't know who was the person I could look to who could actually make these decisions and I never usually saw them. I had a lot of social workers, I don't remember most of their names, they were always changing out and it was just difficult to understand who was my guardian. It was just some mysterious signature on a form that I got back through the mail or something through social workers. But I never really figured it out.

As young adults the participants reported that they are left with a legacy of feelings of confusion and frustration as a result of impermanency in childhood. In describing her current situation Lexie shared, "I'm stuck right now. I'm confused, I'm frustrated, I'm tired. I don't know what I want, I don't how to get what I want." Echoing feelings from childhood, these young adults described suffering through stress and anxiety as they navigated adulthood with few emotional or instrumental supports. Lexie explained the impact of this stress:

...after I turned 18 I started drinking more and then they put me on a contract saying I have this many days to start doing what I'm supposed to otherwise I'm going to get cut off. And that stressed me out even more and then I had to go to jail for a while and that screwed me up. And then, by the time it was done, I just got cut off because I didn't do what I was supposed to do by the deadline.

The emotional toll of impermanency is highlighted through the participants' visions of what achieving permanency would have been like. Despite indicating that they had not experienced permanency in their own lives, the participants had strong views on the perceived benefits of permanency. They focused primarily on the emotional benefits of stable relationships.

Common threads in these reflections were the positive feelings associated with belonging and being accepted. Myles summarized this in his comments on adoption:

If they wanted to adopt me I'd be so proud. I'd be so happy. I wouldn't think of it in a bad way, 'oh these people want to adopt me, no, no, no'. I'd be more or less into it and I'd be feeling so much more all right because someone actually wanted to adopt me. That someone actually wanted me in their family and someone actually wanted to commit to me, and all that shit. I'd be actually really happy and I'd be more stable and I'd probably have more benefits in my life than anything.

Other youth noted that safety and security would have been a desired outcome of permanency. Lexie recalled a time when a family planned to adopt her and she believed she had achieved permanency. She said, "I felt safe. I felt like everything was going to be okay again. And, yah, I don't know, mostly just safety and security." Having positive role models was repeatedly raised as a benefit of permanency. Sophia explained:

Who you become when you're older really depends on the people that you grow up with...the person who is like a role model for you, like your mom and your dad or whatever, like makes you become the person you are.

Other participants also wished they had someone to look up to and to consult with when faced with difficult decisions. Myles described searching for "...that one person who you can look up to."

According to the young adults in the study, impermanency in childhood impacts adult relationships. Sarah reflected on the connection between her childhood and her recent struggles to maintain friendships:

The only way [moving frequently] has helped me is being able to make fast friends. I know how to definitely get along with people instantly; I just don't know how to make them stick around. That's the part that often can sometimes falter in my relationships is that they're very short lived.

This instability was a common feature of the impermanency the participants had experienced. Four individuals in the study described experiencing multiple short-term or frequently changing relationships in their adult lives.

Three of the participants identified having difficulty trusting others. Mark said, "[t]he people I tried to go to, I tried to trust, turned away and then used that against me. So I just kept to myself as much as I could." Sarah also articulated that her difficulties in developing trusting relations was associated with the failure to obtain permanency while growing up, "[i]n my mind I have difficulties trusting that I ever have permanency, like even if the person likes me or loves me, I always feel like there's some way that they can be taken away or I will be taken away."

Five of the participants reported a paucity of supportive people in their lives, both presently and in the past. They discussed having no one available to provide emotional or physical support. Mark stated, "I was told to be independent and solve my own problems. And I was horrible at solving my own problems because I had no one to go to for that." Similarly, Myles said:

I grew up thinking, who is always there for me? Like you know? And I was always trying to look for that person but I couldn't really find that person... And I was like 'I don't need anybody' and that's when I did bad. Because I just didn't have that support and it's good to have support.

The participants specified tangible consequences of impermanency in their lives such as a lack of educational achievement, addictions and challenges in their own parenting. Four of the participants described the challenge associated with frequently changing schools; one participant indicated that he was required to repeat a grade due to multiple moves between provinces. To remedy this situation Sarah recommended:

...if they do have to switch homes, at least keep it within the same school district so that, you know, that was always a big thing for me, being the new kid all the time. Went through like eight different schools ... So I really know what it's like to switch schools where you've got new classmates, you've got new teachers, who knows? A new curriculum, a new way to get to school, nothing is consistent at all; it's a whole new place. And I mean, it would be nice if the family you're staying with, if it doesn't work out, you could at least go to the same school. 'Cause then you have something to hold onto. You have your friends at school. You can at least have some relationships that stay the same.

Myles traced his educational struggles to the same source, frequent foster care placements, "I think if I hadn't had to move all those time and if I had had a stable place I wouldn't be the way I am. I would've finished school." The disruption of the education was evident in the very low levels of education attainment; only one participant had completed high school; two were currently working towards their grade 12 diplomas and the remaining three participants indicated that they plan to complete their high school education in the future.

Three participants tied impermanency to substance abuse and addictions issues. Sophia explained:

I think that the people who haven't lived a stable life, they don't even know how to cope with it so they go to like different methods that aren't healthy, you know, like addictions, following the wrong crowd, stuff like that, just like not making good choices.

Lexie said that aging out of foster care at the age of 18 years resulted in immense stress for her, which led to increased substance abuse and ultimately incarceration. Three of the participants were parents, two were single mothers with full custody and one was a father who had occasional visits with his child. At least one participant attributed young parenting to the lack of permanency. Myles suggested that if he had had permanency at an earlier age, "...maybe we wouldn't be such young parents."

Overwhelmingly the participants indicated that permanency was both important and desirable. However, two of the participants recognized some value in having experienced impermanency. They reported that moving through multiple homes taught them to be strong and independent. Mila stated, "Being in their foster homes helped me make my own decisions and brought me to where I am, being independent. Because I hated foster homes, so I give them some credit." These two participants reflected that they would not make any changes to their past if they could because the challenges they had faced made them who they were now. Lexie explained, "In a way I'm kind of glad that I didn't grow up with [parents] because I think parents impact children a lot in the way they grow up and everything falls into place at the right time, so I'm thankful for that."

Culture

The importance of cultural connections. All participants highlighted the importance of culture for Aboriginal youth in care. All six of the young adults indicated that being Aboriginal

is an important aspect of their identity. Mark shared a personal story about the impact of connecting with an Elder at a cultural activity:

She [the Elder] said that a lot of things just can't be taught by books or by paper or by looking at the only way for someone to learn is to actually do something. Even if you make a mistake you learn more than you know. And I still follow what she says.

Myles connected involvement with his culture to positive outcomes in his personal life:

[Cultural involvement] made me a good boy. It made me like; you know how a Christian is? You can't drink; you can't do any of that. That's how I was. I don't know. It was a really good experience that I had and I should've never messed it up in the first place. I'd love to go back to it.

Myles explained that in childhood culture had been incorporated into his daily life through his immediate and extended family. He felt that losing the connection to his culture had led to his recent struggles with substance abuse.

There was a consensus that Aboriginal youth should be provided with opportunities to learn about their culture. Mark explained, "[e]ven if [foster children] are placed in a [family with a] different ethnicity they should still understand what the culture does and bring the [foster] parents along too so the [foster] parents can go with them and understand them." Sarah explained that she did not want to identify as Aboriginal as a child, but only learned about her culture as a young adult. She expressed that the desire to connect with one's culture was inevitable, "...eventually you do look to your roots, you do look to where you're from, everyone does, you know, you can't avoid it for the rest of your life." Two of the participants noted the importance of learning about their culture from other Aboriginal people. Myles explained, "With a Native person, because they already know how to do it, they can just do it and show it to you." Youth

also suggested that cultural activities must not be forced for youth. Sarah recalled feeling as though cultural activities were forced upon her in childhood, as she articulated:

I believe that everyone should be aware of their culture and be allowed to participate in activities that are related to it like I did. But just without having it be mandatory for children, you should wait for them to seek it out a little bit on their own because kids are curious, they'll always, you know, if you let them find it on their own terms like I did then we'll love it when we do discover it. Rather than having it be something that we're forced to do. 'Cause no one likes that, then you feel like you don't have a choice because kids are foster care don't feel like they have a choice over anything. So you should give them a choice over at least one thing in their life, you know.

Similarly, Mila discussed her intentions to teach her daughter about their culture, but she made it clear that she wanted to invite her daughter to be interested in her culture rather than pressuring her to participate in cultural activities.

Factors that promote cultural connections. All of the participants indicated that they had been provided with opportunities to learn about their culture through formal activities and events. These young adults were connected with these activities through Child and Family Services, their foster parents and biological family members. The activities included attending an Aboriginal school, naming ceremonies, sweat lodges, culturally based treatment programs, culture camps, Pow wows, meeting with elders, dance classes, and setting up tepees.

Four of the young adults reported that they primarily connected with cultural activities through their former foster parents. Sophia explained, “[m]y foster parents...they were actually a really good influence because they like would try to get me into things regarding my culture...like Pow wow dancing classes and stuff like that.” Similarly Mila noted that her “foster

mom was like all about that stuff, like different cultures, she always took us to Pow wows and such.” Mark spoke frequently about attending an Aboriginal summer camp, he added, “I loved that camp...we learned about, we made drums, we made new friends, fishing sometimes, they had a lake, tepees and all of that...We’d catch salmon and take it home.” He explained that his foster parents signed him up for the program and participated by attending the last day of the camp.

Participants also connected with their culture through Child and Family Services and their biological families. Myles reported that there are many opportunities for cultural involvement through social workers, he advised:

. . . the social worker office downtown, that’s what they’re like, because there’s always stuff on the boards about Aboriginal events and programs...there’s Pow wows, there’s ceremonies they can go to, there’s even Elders that you can go up to and talk to sometimes.

Biological family connections were also credited with encouraging cultural connections for two of the participants. Mark reported that he met his great uncle and grandmother at a cultural event and was able to listen to their stories and teachings. He described this as a very powerful formative experience for him. Myles talked about his biological mother listening to Pow wow music in their home when he was a baby and extended family members inviting him to cultural events before he was placed in foster care.

Culture and Permanency

After reflecting on the concept of permanency and the importance of culture, which were described as disconnected in the stories the youths shared, the young adults were asked to comment on the intersection between these two areas in a focus group setting. Two further

interconnected themes were identified: (1) being Aboriginal is a barrier to permanency and (2) Aboriginal children and youth need permanency.

Being Aboriginal is a barrier to achieving permanency. One of the most surprising findings of the study was that participants felt that their identity as an Aboriginal child had caused them to miss out on permanency in their lives. When asked about barriers to permanency, Sarah said, “[t]he only [barrier] I was ever aware of growing up that was made known to me was being Native. That was the biggest barrier in my life.” Youths in the study suggested that the legislation had impeded them from achieving the goal of permanency. Sarah explains, “the government has laws that the foster family has to be Native to adopt you.” Sophia echoed this sentiment saying:

Native children cannot be adopted by white people or people of other ethnicities. That they have to be adopted by Natives to like protect the culture and stuff...I was supposed to get adopted at one point, me and my sister, but then because we were Native and the people that wanted to adopt us were like, something else... they asked my band and my band had said no...Yah, and I think that’s stupid, because I think that permanency is a lot better than moving constantly and everything.

Mark, who had a similar experience, he was never told why he could not be adopted by a family whom he loved. In reflecting as a young adult he believes that it was a consequence of being Aboriginal. In fact, four of the six young adults discussed specific incidents in which their foster family was not allowed to seek legal permanency because they were Aboriginal children and the family was non-Aboriginal. Sarah described one placement she had as a child:

I loved it there and I loved those people, I had been with them for six and a half years and they wanted to adopt me but they could not because they were not Native...from looking

at it as a child that made me not want to reach out to my culture. It made me not want to be Native.

While legal limitations were the focus of much of the discussion concerning how their identity as Aboriginal children had impacted on their ability to achieve permanency, Lexie explained that racism also played a role in preventing Aboriginal children and youth from finding permanency:

You're more likely to get a white kid adopted than a brown kid... Unless you're lucky and you have like a Mexican family that doesn't really care and doesn't mind brown kids... when I was younger you see an Aboriginal kid and it just seems like gross in a way... a lot of them have a lot of defects too. No offense to them, but the parents, they drank with them and stuff, like a great amount of them.

Two participants did not identify that being Aboriginal was a barrier to permanency. Mila and Myles both indicated that they had never had a stable, long-term foster care placement in which adoption had been considered.

Aboriginal children and youth need permanency. Invariably the participants felt that permanency was an important goal for Aboriginal children and youth. When asked specifically about permanency for Aboriginal young people, as distinct from people of other ethnicities, Sarah said,

I think [permanency is] an important goal for anyone in foster care in general 'cause foster care is; pretty much means that you had an unstable upbringing. That's basically what it's synonymous with. It's not completely specifically to Aboriginals, it's to everyone, but I would have to say Aboriginals have been given a more minority group [status]; they would definitely have a harder time dealing with things.

Participants believed that due to the challenges Aboriginal people in general and Aboriginal young people, specifically, have faced historically, permanency should be a priority. As Lexie explicated:

Permanency is important because [Aboriginal children and youth] are one of the most highly affected in foster care. I'm not saying the other kids aren't different, but there's like a huge line of it that goes back to residential schools that are still taking place today. Like the fact that my grandma drank because of residential schools, she hit my mom because of it, and then my mom had the same issue because of her mom that was in residential schools. And my mom ended up committing suicide, and then that screwed up me in a way. And it's still going on because I'm still drinking; I'm still affected by just that line.

Having recounted the challenges associated with impermanency and the perceived benefits of permanency, the participants concluded that a disenfranchised group like Aboriginal children and youth should receive all of the potential benefits ascribed to permanency. Youth in the study expressed a great deal of frustration regarding rules that had prevented them from finding permanency as children. When asked what difference permanency would make in regards to this context, Lexie responded:

I think the line of, the generation of bums that you see as Aboriginals would go down. Because most of those people are lost and they don't understand things, almost like the same thing that I'm in right now. And when you don't have people believing in you, you just don't feel like anything's worth fighting for. And that's how I felt for a while until people believed in me.

The need for cultural connections was emphasized during discussions about the need for permanency for this population. A culturally appropriate placement was heralded as the ideal for youth in the study. When discussing placements in Aboriginal homes Myles clarified:

I think that that's the only way that you can really stick with your culture and really understand it more. Because with a non-Aboriginal person it'd be harder to understand. But with a Native person, they already know how to do it and they can just do it and show it.

However, the participants made it clear that the alternative to access to Aboriginal placements should not be impermanency, as Sophia elucidated:

With like the Natives I think that it would better if they, if we, if they were adopted even if it's not with a similar culture because sometimes it's best that way because there aren't very many Aboriginal families that are adopting and everything and it's like really low and I think that if we, if bands were willing to open it I think that there would be less kids under [Permanent Guardianship Orders] and stuff like that. Because I don't really think that like foster care is the best for kids because it's not really permanent and everything and they don't develop stability and stuff like that, you know? And kind of like in the residential school, they're not really taught what a family is and everything.

Sophia further offers a solution to the problem of culture being ignored in cross-cultural placements:

I think that that if Aboriginals are really worried about losing the culture and everything, if there was like an agreement saying as long as you are willing to be open to the Native culture and maybe experience it at some point. Because that's what my foster mom did, because she's originally from Poland and she would like take us to Pow wows and stuff.

As noted previously, most of the participants indicated that their former foster parents had been instrumental in connecting them with cultural activities. Sarah shared, “[m]ost Natives [foster children] have grown up in homes that aren’t Native, but that’s fine because as long as the people encourage you to, you know, take an interest in your culture.” The participants agreed that the goals of permanency and cultural connection should both be pursued to the greatest extent possible.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This study explored the perspective of Aboriginal young adults who had recently aged out of government care. A comprehensive literature review revealed that youth permanency is necessary and achievable, and cultural considerations were critical in achieving permanency. In depth, semi-structured interviews were completed with six young Aboriginal adults who aged out of foster care in Calgary to gain their perspectives on the topic. The data analysis revealed that permanency and culture are distinct multidimensional concepts. The experiences of these young adults suggest that both permanency and culture are important areas that must be addressed in order for identity development to occur and to support youth in effectively transitioning to adulthood. Unfortunately participants in this study indicated that the goals of permanency and culture have been set up as competing priorities rather than as complimentary objectives working in harmony for the well being of Aboriginal children and youth in care. The following chapter will discuss the themes presented in the results chapter, summarizing the significance of the findings and their implications for future practice and research.

Permanency

The findings of this study provide support to current literature regarding youths' experience with impermanency. Participants emphasized the negative outcomes of impermanency in their lives including homelessness, lack of educational achievement, substance abuse and addictions, and unplanned pregnancies. While the purpose of this study was not to evaluate outcomes for young people aging out of foster care, the demographic information collected revealed that the participants faced challenges similar to those documented in the literature. Homelessness was a current reality for three of the six participants in this study,

similarly Baskin (2007) and *Raising the Roof* (2009) found a strong link between a history of child welfare involvement and homelessness for youth. Only one of the six participants had completed high school, and two participants were currently working towards obtaining their diplomas as adults. Multiple studies point to a lack of educational achievement as being related to a history of foster care placements (Courtney et al., 2005; Rutman, 2007). Participants in this study explained that their struggle to finish school was a result of instability and multiple relocations in childhood. Mark, for example, complained that switching schools had caused him to have to repeat a grade and then, ultimately, fall too far behind his peers to catch up. Poverty is another risk factor for young people aging out of foster care (Courtney et al., 2010; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2003) and three participants in this study were unemployed with no stable source of income. The literature shows that youth who age out of care are more likely to become parents at a young age (Mendes, 2003) and, in this study, three participants had become parents prior to the age of 18 years. Rutman (2007) found that youth aging out of care in British Columbia had higher levels of alcohol and drug use than youth who had not been in care. Levels of substance use were not discussed in this study, but several youth indicated that they personally struggled with addictions or knew others who had aged out of care and now faced substance abuse problems. Lexie shared that the stress of aging out of the system had caused her to overdose on drugs, which resulted in a hospital stay. One of the youths in this study had been previously incarcerated, which is a risk factor identified in Rutman's (2007) longitudinal study of youth aging out of foster care in British Columbia.

Similar to other literature (Rutman, 2007) youths in this study implicated instability, frequent relocations and a lack of supportive people in their lives in their resultant struggles in childhood and adult life. The participants in this study described experiencing feelings of

powerlessness, confusion, anxiety and fear while growing up in foster care. Myles explained that he never felt like he had someone there for him. Sarah described not knowing who was making decisions on her behalf and explained that it was just “some mysterious signature on a form” that had the final say in her life. The participants indicated that it was difficult to form healthy relationships in adulthood as a result of these struggles. Sarah said that she could form short-term friendships with ease, but did not know how to maintain relationships. Totten (2009) explains that life in foster care often leads to attachment struggles and instability in adulthood. It is important to outline these struggles, as they appear to relate to the participant’s descriptions of permanency. Often what participants desired in a permanent relationship was the opposite of what they described experiencing in their own lives.

Descriptions of permanency provided by youth in the study echo definitions found in the literature. Although a single, cohesive definition of permanency was not elucidated from this study, several key factors were recognized. Youth identified permanency as a persistent relationship in which the young person gains a sense of stability, safety, belonging and support. It was compared to having a family by several youth; Sophia described it as “a family connection”. Sarah said that permanency would be like having “back up” and Myles defined it as “lifelong relationships”. As Samuels (2009) suggests, youths’ descriptions of permanency often sounded like a longing for something they lost in childhood, a family and a home. Collins and Clay (2009) indicated that an important aspect of permanency is strong emotional support, a point that was reiterated by youth in this study who said that they desired support in the form of having someone to assist them in making difficult decisions and a person to call when they needed immediate help. When describing a relationship that was most like permanency to him, Myles explained that his best friend would always ensure that Myles had a place to sleep.

Sanchez (2004) divided permanency into relational, physical and legal aspects. While participants discussed each of these categories in this study, they placed a significant emphasis on relational permanency. In this study permanency was most frequently described as a relationship that provides other positive benefits. Similarly, relational permanency was heralded as the most important form of permanency by youths in the Sanchez (2004) study. Stability was important to the youths in this study and this concept extended to having a stable place or location. This parallels “physical permanency” as described by Sanchez (2004). Several participants mentioned legal permanency in the form of adoption but, similar to other research (Sanchez, 2004), youths were divided on whether or not it was important to them. Myles stated that he would be “so happy” if someone wanted to adopt him, while Lexie suggested that adoption was only an option for younger children.

Invariably, participants in this study stressed the importance of permanency for children and youth in foster care. They stated that this was something they wished they had experienced in their own lives and desired for children and youths who are currently in foster care. The importance of permanency is well established in the literature, Unrau, Seita and Putney (2008) demonstrated the significance of strong relationships for youth by showing that the presence of at least one persistent and caring adult relationship is a protective factor for youth aging out of care. Additionally, Munson and Lox (2012) suggested that focusing on life skills was insufficient if youths were not provided with permanent relationships with caring adults. Moving forward this compelling evidence must continue to be used to shape strategies that emphasize creating long lasting relationships for children in care.

Cultural Connections

All of the participants in this study indicated that being Aboriginal was an important and valued aspect of their identity. Several participants indicated that their involvement in Aboriginal activities in childhood had resulted in a positive impact on their lives. Mark shared a life lesson he had learned from an Elder and continued to apply to his life; Myles indicated that he did not abuse substances while he was actively engaged with his culture. This supports literature that indicates that First Nations youth with higher levels of cultural assets have more resilient outcomes (Filbert & Flynn, 2010). However, incongruous to these positive comments, the participant's perceptions of Aboriginal people were frequently negative. Comments were made about Aboriginal people being unable to care for their children and references were made to the struggles of reserve communities. Although the youths' perspectives on Aboriginal peoples were not extensively explored in this study, the data analysis produced multiple examples of negative stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples suggesting that the participants may be experiencing internalized racism. Anderson (2000) describes internalized racism as self-hatred and negative self-concepts resulting from racist stereotypes. Aboriginal scholar Janice Acoose describes her personal experience of internalized oppression:

I learned to passively accept and internalize the easy squaw, Indian-whore, dirty Indian, and drunken Indian stereotypes that subsequently imprisoned me, and all Indigenous peoples, regardless of our historic, economic, cultural, spiritual, political, and geographical differences...I shamefully turned away from my history and cultural roots, becoming to a certain extent, what was encouraged by the ideological collusiveness of textbooks, and the ignorant comments and peer pressure from non-Indigenous students. (Anderson, 2000, p. 106)

Lexie described Aboriginal children as “gross” and “dirty” and asserted that no one wanted to adopt Aboriginal children. Sophia frequently switched between referring to Aboriginal people as “us” to referring to the group as “them”, separating herself from her own cultural group.

Negative self-concepts resulting from internalized racism are not unique to young people raised in government care; undoubtedly this is an issue that must be addressed on a broader scale (Kirmayer et al., 2003). Identity is not a stagnant concept, as Smith (2009) explains, Aboriginal identity continues to adapt and changes over time as Aboriginal realities are transformed. Carrier (2008) completed a study on First Nations adoptees that suggests the presence of a causal relationship between health and a connection to birth family, community and ancestral knowledge. Additionally, loss of identity appears to contribute to impaired physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health for First Nations adoptees. One of the participants in this study explained that it would be easier to understand what it means to be Aboriginal in an Aboriginal home. The adoptees Carrier (2008) interviewed expressed a need for connection with Aboriginal people, a desire for knowledge that was not filtered through well-intentioned non-Aboriginal people. Children need cultural understanding in order to achieve a healthy identity and self-confidence (Carriere, 2008; Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005).

Although access to and participation within varied, participants in this study indicated that formal cultural activities were the primary way in which they were introduced to their culture. Mark, for example, reported that a week long cultural camp was made available to him for three years while he was a teenager, Sarah refused to take part in cultural activities that were offered as a child and teenager, and Lexie attended several ceremonies while in government care. Youth who participated described these activities as positive and fulfilling. These activities however, were typically short-term or one-time events and did not result in lasting relationships

with other Aboriginal people or in identity formation in a deep, ongoing way. Green (1995) explains that the categorical view of ethnic identity is a restricted approach that focuses on a few folk expressions of culture, such as appearance, while expecting members of a minority group to conform to all other aspects of the dominant societies (as cited in Mackenzie & Morrisette, 2003). It is possible that the young adults interviewed for this study have experienced this restricted approach to ethnic identity development. Their experiences with Aboriginal culture have been limited to occasional activities and without the necessary relationships to other members of their cultural group or their communities. According to Longclaws (1994) participating in one's culture is heralded as the most important way to restore balance and harmony. Elders, ceremonies, spirituality and family are all celebrated as important elements of an Aboriginal person's ecological environment and the interconnectedness of all beings and forces in the physical and spiritual worlds is emphasized. Carriere (2007) uses the analogy of the tree of life to include multiple branches and roots needed to support an Aboriginal adoptees development; for example, these include extended family, birth family, community, ceremony, and language. In contrast, young people who participated in this study described their exposure to their culture as limited, short term and consisting of involvement in formal activities.

Several participants indicated that their non-Aboriginal foster parents had encouraged them to attend cultural events and learn about their heritage. Sophia described benefiting from a cultural exchange with her foster mother; together they learned about Sophia's Aboriginal heritage and her foster mother's Polish background and enjoyed traditions from each. Mark said that his foster parents advocated for him to attend a cultural camp each summer and actively participated in the parent's portion of the week long camp. Based on these positive experiences, the participants felt that permanent caregivers would also be capable of creating and adhering to

cultural plans in order to support this aspect of a young person's development. Carriere (2007) conducted a qualitative study examining Aboriginal adoption from the perspectives of non-Aboriginal adopters of Aboriginal children, and Aboriginal community members. Her rich study suggests ways to strengthen Aboriginal cultural identity and policies and practices that worked in both Aboriginal and Western adoption agencies. She found that non-Aboriginal adopters saw cultural planning as valuable and were committed and willing to engage in this practice. However these non-Aboriginal adopters were unsure about the process and wanted more support in this area. They would like to have assistance in facilitating meetings with extended family and the children's community in order to build bridges. They believed that support people in the Aboriginal community would be valuable and resources need to be developed to assist families in meeting the children's cultural needs. This echoes concerns raised in this study about the level of cultural involvement for children and youth and the absence of relationships formed between young people in care and their Aboriginal communities.

Carriere (2007) describes four areas of development including spiritual, mental, emotional and physical in her model to preserve cultural identity for Aboriginal children and youth adopted into non-Aboriginal families. Activities mentioned by participants in this study include ceremonies, games, meeting with Elders and dance classes and these activities fall under the spiritual and mental development categories as outlined by Carriere (2007). However, these activities fail to incorporate relationship development, something that is emphasized repeatedly by Carriere (2007) throughout her model. In addition, unlike the participants in the Carriere (2007) study, participants in this study lacked the support and involvement of a committed family to facilitate this model of cultural identity preservation. Many authors agree that cultural identity development must involve the presence of relationships in order to facilitate healthy

identity development (Carrier, 2007; Klamn, 2009; Smith, 2009). Based on the importance that members of this study placed on relationships it is recommended that cultural connections need to become more relationally focused.

Permanency and Culture

All of the participants in this study agreed that permanency is a necessary goal for all children and youth in care, regardless of their age or ethnicity. In fact, several of the youths felt that permanency was especially important for Aboriginal young people due to the difficult history of Aboriginal people in Canada and resulting consequences including poverty, mental illness and addictions. In pointing to the need for permanency for Aboriginal children and youth in care, Lexie explained that they are some of “the most highly affected in foster care”. Youths in this study indicated that it would be ideal for Aboriginal children and youth who cannot remain with their parents to find placements within their extended family or community in order to maintain direct, embedded connections with their culture. Myles explained that this would be the easiest way to learn about how to be an Aboriginal person. However, Myles also emphasized that this may conflict with his personal desire to be a part of a permanent family. Similarly, Sophia asserted that Aboriginal children should find permanency, even if it is not possible to find them an Aboriginal family. Klamn (2009) found the same thing in her interviews of Aboriginal community members,

Based on the voices of participants in this study, the “best interests of the child” were child-centred, ensuring the child was with a healthy family, with considerable focus on cultural considerations, maintaining contact with birth family and birth community, and finding what works for each child in their particular situation. For First Nations participants the hope would be for a placement with family. The role of a community that

learns to understand and overcome racism, through concerted efforts to understand and reach out to those from other cultures, goes a long way toward acceptance for children, their parents and their culture. (p. 52)

Atwood (2009) also noted that Aboriginal leaders often endorse the idea of finding a committed family for every child regardless of their ethnicity if an extended family or community placement is unavailable. This study provides support to this idea, emphasizing the importance of culturally appropriate homes but also giving emphasis to the need for permanency for all children and youth.

The participants asserted that the goals of permanency and cultural connections for youth in foster care are not working in harmony. Instead, they reported their perception that being Aboriginal impeded them from achieving permanency. Four of the six participants, Sophia, Mark, Lexie and Sarah, stated that they had resided with families during their childhood who wanted to provide permanency for them. However, they reported that these families were all denied this opportunity because they were non-Aboriginal. This was described as extremely frustrating for the youths. Sarah said that she felt being Aboriginal was “the biggest barrier of her life” and had consequently wished that she were not Aboriginal. Sophia said that it was “stupid” that she and her sister were denied a permanent family based on their race. She explained that after permanency was denied she and her sister had been separated in subsequent foster care placements and her sister had gone on to develop a severe substance abuse problem. Unwaveringly, the young people in this study agreed that being Aboriginal should not be a barrier to permanency.

The literature suggests that impeding the development of permanent relationships for youth is not the desire of Aboriginal communities or leaders. Klamn (2009) found that all

Aboriginal participants in her study viewed a safe home for children as paramount. Study participant expressed the hope to at least see children with a family who could provide cultural supports and make it a priority for children to attend cultural events. Participants in this study also voiced strong support for cross-cultural placements in which their cultural identity development was encouraged and supported.

The literature suggests that permanency may need to be reconceptualised within an Aboriginal context. For example, the Western concept of severance in adoption is not well accepted in Aboriginal communities, whereas a less absolute form of adoption that allows openness and contact with a child's biological family and community is preferred (Atwood, 2008). Custom adoption has been presented in the literature as a positive option for Aboriginal children needing permanency. In some cases informal custom adoption may best honour the youth's emotional attachments and cultural needs (Frey et al., 2005). This typically involves an Aboriginal committee of elders working with caseworkers to find a culturally appropriate placement for a child (Bertsch, 2010; Smith, 2009). Often children can maintain contact with biological parents in these scenarios. Additionally, open adoptions, in which non-Aboriginal adoptive parents are open to contact with their adopted child's birth culture in significant ways, are praised (Smith, 2009). Bertsch and Bidgood (2010) chronicled the adoption experience of the Lax Kw'alaam First Nations community in North-western British Columbia. They asked what this community needed in order to welcome more Aboriginal children into their community through adoption. Community members recounted memories of children being taken and never returned, and the resulting individual and community grief. They also spoke about 'cravings', the cravings disconnected children had for traditional foods, cultural experiences, and family and community connections.

Despite the negative history, the Kw'alaam First Nations community expressed openness towards adoption and working alongside government. They shared that they desperately want their children returned to their land and suggested ways in which adoption could be more culturally sensitive. These including improved information, community-government consultation, cultural preservation, social worker training and policy changes. The community members also shared that traditional adoption practices celebrate and include birth parents. They encouraged policy makers to consider openness in future adoption planning, and work towards a personal approach that includes First Nations people and leaders. These people expressed a desire to have positive relationships with social workers, recognizing that all parties would like to see the best outcomes for these children. Similarly, representatives of five Tribal Nations at a conference regarding youth permanency emphasized the need to support cultural involvement and connections to a child's home community (Casey Family Services, 2008).

Aboriginal community representatives also voiced their recommendations in the Carriere (2007) study. They wanted to see increased emphasis on family and community knowledge for adoption workers, more binding policy in regards to cultural planning, additional resources to cover costs associated with cultural planning and a better process to engage the child's family and community in creating a cultural plan. Additionally, cultural outreach for non-Aboriginal adoptive families, financial support, culturally appropriate home studies and initiating cultural planning when a child first comes into care were recommended in the literature (Carriere, 2007). Carriere (2007) developed tools to aid non-Aboriginal families who are welcoming Aboriginal children into their family including resource sheets that tie traditional Indigenous views with contemporary resiliency research. The intention is to help non-Aboriginal families preserve the identity of Aboriginal children. This fits with my contention that further work needs to be done

in this area to ensure that cultural plans extend beyond structured activities and are further integrated into the lives of these young people. Interestingly, in the Carriere (2007) study the focus of both the Aboriginal community members and the non-Aboriginal adoptive parents appeared to be a desire for strong relationships between people who care about these children. Young people in this study desired the same thing: enduring and loving relationships that provide them with a sense of belonging. Ultimately the goal is for every Aboriginal child and youth to achieve permanency and develop a healthy identity as an Aboriginal person.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The sample size was six individuals and I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants. As a result this study is not representative of Aboriginal youth who have aged out of foster care in Calgary; rather it describes the perspectives of these six young people. The six participants represent three different Aboriginal groups, Métis, Dene and Cree peoples. Each one of these groups is distinct and it would have been preferable to concentrate on a single Aboriginal group in this study. In addition, my identity as a non-Aboriginal person may be considered a limitation of this study. I conducted this research as an ally to Aboriginal people and I have made every effort to complete this work in a culturally sensitive manner by working with an Aboriginal agency, consulting with the Aboriginal leadership of this agency, reflecting on my own bias and focusing on the voices of the young people in the study and giving primacy to their experiences and recommendations.

Recommendations for Research, Policy and Practice

Looking forward it would be helpful to further explore how permanency might be defined in an Aboriginal context. In order to do this well it would be necessary to consult additional stakeholders including Aboriginal youth, community members, child welfare

professionals, leaders and Elders. It would also be valuable to learn about permanency promoting practices currently in effect in Aboriginal controlled Designated First Nations Authorities (DFNA) and further explore historical approaches to child protection. With the input of these important stakeholders it may be possible to create a definition of permanency for Aboriginal youth that could be operationalized and used in practice.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations can be made for future practice and policy. Young people in foster care must have both their cultural needs and their need for permanency met. Participants indicated that they valued the cultural activities they had participated in while in care and this should be acknowledged and celebrated. However, it appears that there is room to improve in this area through further integration of cultural experiences in daily life, learning directly from other Aboriginal people and facilitating better connections with the young people's home communities. The young people in this study asserted that their identity as Aboriginal people prevented them from achieving permanency, a goal that they indicated was extremely important for all children and youth in care. This claim must be further evaluated through a critical examination of policy and practice. In the future it is important to ensure that a child or youth's ethnicity does not prevent them from receiving the benefits of permanency.

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APPENDIX A



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

MEMO

CONJOINT FACULTIES RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD
c/o Research Services
Main Floor, Energy Resources Research Building
3512 - 33 Street N.W., Calgary, Alberta T2C 1Y7
Telephone: (403) 220-3752
Fax: (403) 229-0093
Email: rburrows@ucalgary.ca
Thursday, November 08, 2012

To: Jade D. Stongeland
Social Work, Faculty of

From: Dr. Kathleen Oberle, Chair
Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB)

Re: Certification of Institutional Ethics Review: The Meaning of Permanency for Aboriginal Foster Care Alumni

The above named research protocol has been granted ethical approval by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board for the University of Calgary.

Enclosed are the original, and one copy, of a signed **Certification of Institutional Ethics Review**. Please make note of the conditions stated on the Certification. A copy has been sent to your supervisor as well as to the Chair of your Department/Faculty Research Ethics Committee. In the event the research is funded, you should notify the sponsor of the research and provide them with a copy for their records. The Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board will retain a copy of the clearance on your file.

Please note, an annual/progress/final report must be filed with the CFREB twelve months from the date on your ethics clearance. A form for this purpose has been created, and may be found on the "Ethics" website, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/research/ethics/cfreh>

In closing, let me take this opportunity to wish you the best of luck in your research endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Russell Burrows'.

Russell Burrows
For:
Kathleen Oberle, PhD
Chair, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board

Enclosures (2): Dr. Christine A. Walsh (Supervisor)

APPENDIX B



Faculty of Social Work Consent Form for Interview Participants

Name of Researchers, Faculty:

Jade Stangeland, MSW Student, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

Supervisor:

Christine Walsh, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

Title of Project: *“The meaning of permanency for Aboriginal foster care alumni”*

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to listen to Aboriginal foster care alumni and hear their perspectives on permanency. I want to understand what permanency means to individuals who were in foster care. Additionally, I want to hear about the cultural factors that may or may not influence perceptions of permanency. If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to attend one, one hour interview at the University of Calgary or at a private, convenient location.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

You will be asked to share your thoughts about permanency. You will be asked questions about how you define permanency, how much importance you place on the concept, and your own experiences in achieving or not achieving permanency. The interview will last one hour and will be audio taped. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation without penalty at any time. The data collected prior to the time of withdrawal will be retained and used by the researchers. You will be provided with a \$20 honorarium to compensate you for your time and travel expenses.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

I will collect demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity and historical information including how long you were in care. I will record the interview to improve the accuracy of my work. Your responses to the questions will be considered anonymous. Your name will not be identified in papers and reports that will be prepared on this topic. Please choose a pseudonym that I can use in publications.

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

The risk that might arise to you in participating in this study is not different from what one may encounter in everyday life. Participation is entirely voluntary, and your decision to take part in the study (or not) will in no way affect any services you are receiving, or may receive.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Data collected for this study will be used to inform my Masters Degree thesis. Following the interview you will have two weeks period in which you can review your contribution and request changes. A lack of response will indicate approval of these materials as is. We will keep the audio tapes and transcripts locked in cabinets or stored on a password protected computer at the Faculty of Social Work or home office of the Principal Investigator for five years. After that, the audio tapes and transcripts will be erased.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:
Jade Stangeland, MSW Researcher, (403) 472. 7141 or jstangel@ucalgary.ca;

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact Russell Burrows, the Senior Ethics Resources Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403-220-3782; email: rburrows@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

APPENDIX C



MEMO

Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB)
Research Services Office
Main Floor, Energy Resources Research Building
Research Park
Telephone: (403) 220-4782 or (403) 210-9863
Fax: (403) 289-0693
Email: csjobrau@ucalgary.ca or rhurrows@ucalgary.ca

To: Jade D. Stangeland
Faculty of Social Work

Date: May 27, 2013

From: Dr. Kathleen Oberle, Chair
Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board

Re: Approval of Modification for: The Meaning of Permanency for Aboriginal Foster Care Alumni
Original Approval Date: November 8th 2012
File No: 7532

The Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review issued on November 8th 2012 continues in force and extends to the modifications as set out in your email/memo dated May 24th 2013. Your request to expand data collection activities to include the administration of a focus group session, recruiting participants from those individual interviewees who express a willingness to take part and using a consent instrument specific to this purpose, is approved as described.

You should attach a copy of the documentation you provided in order to request the modification, together with a copy of this memorandum, to the original Certification in your files.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Kathleen Oberle'.

Kathleen Oberle, PhD
Chair, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board

Cc: Dr. Christine A. Walsh (Supervisor)

APPENDIX D



Faculty of Social Work ***Consent Form for Focus Group Participants***

Name of Researchers, Faculty:

Jennifer Hewson, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

Daniel Lai, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

Title of Project: “*Social participation and baby boomers: Practices, future expectations and institutional readiness*”

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore social participation practices, expectations and institutional readiness for diverse community dwelling baby boomers as they age, using Calgary as a case example. Five research questions will be addressed: 1) What does social participation mean to baby boomers? 2) What are the current and anticipated patterns of social participation for baby boomers? 3) What are their expectations for provisions, structures and policies to facilitate social participation as they age? 4) What is the impact of cohort (early, mid and late) and cultural differences within the baby boomer population on social participation definitions, practices, and expectations? 5) How ready are service providers, decision makers, and funders to address the social participation expectations of baby boomers as they become older adults?

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to attend one, three hour focus group at an accessible community location (e.g., community hall, library). You will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the focus group. Demographic information will be collected but not your name or other identifiers that could be used to identify you specifically once the data is merged with other focus group participants. You will then be asked to share your thoughts about social participation in a focus group with several other community residents. You will be asked questions about what social participation means to you, your current and anticipated patterns of social participation, and your expectations for provisions, structures and policies to facilitate social participation as you age.

The focus group will last three hours, with the first half hour reserved for filling out a prefocus

group survey. The focus group will be audio-taped. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation without penalty at any time. Your contributions to the focus group prior to your withdrawal will be retained and included in the analysis since it would be impossible to remove individual contributions from the focus group transcript and notes, and the prefocus group survey will be anonymous so it will not be possible to retrieve your specific survey from those collected at the focus group. You will be provided with a \$10 honorarium in the form of gift card and complimentary lunch/refreshments to thank you for your time.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, demographic information (eg. age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, employment status, household income, education level) will be collected on questionnaire. This information will only be reported in aggregate, so that all of the information remains confidential. Your responses to the focus group questions will be considered anonymous. Your name will not be identified in papers and reports that will be prepared on this topic. Please note that absolute anonymity or confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a focus group setting. Focus group participants will be instructed to keep the information shared confidential, however the researchers will be unable to control what is said by individuals outside of the group.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

The risk that might arise to you in participating in this study is not different from what one may encounter in everyday life. Participation is entirely voluntary, and your decision to take part in the study (or not) will in no way affect any services you are receiving, or may receive. There is a minimal social risk associated with your participation in this study. Since you will be sharing your first name and your ideas in a group setting, your contributions will not be anonymous within the group setting. Focus group participants will be instructed to keep the information shared confidential. The research team cannot guarantee what focus group participants do once they leave the focus group setting. Your contributions provided during the focus group will be confidential and anonymous when the findings are reported. General themes will be reported and a generic identified (i.e., one participant said) will be used if quotes are presented.

We do not think that this study will harm you in any way but some of the discussions could bring up uncomfortable feelings. If this happens you are welcome to contact the Distress Centre for counselling support.

You may benefit indirectly through the sharing of your recommendations about social participation provision through enhanced programs and service provision in the future. Decision makers, funders and social services agencies will be encouraged to integrate the findings of this study into practice, funding priorities and policy changes. You will also receive a \$10 honorarium in the form of a gift card and complimentary lunch/refreshments to compensate them for their time.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

All data collected by the research team will be securely stored on password protected computers. Non electronic copies of raw data (e.g., focus group transcripts and surveys) will be stored in a locked office at the Faculty of Social Work. Once the data is entered into the computer, voice recordings will be deleted and hard copies will be shredded. Upon completion of the project, electronic data will be stored in a locked office at the Faculty of Social Work for five years and then all electronic files will be deleted.

Data collected for this study will be analyzed and a number of knowledge mobilization activities will be carried out with decision makers, funder and social services agencies. These activities will include a final report, workshops and meetings to disseminate this knowledge.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:
Jennifer Hewson, Professor, (403) 210. 5346 or jahewson@ucalgary.ca;

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact
Russell Burrows, the Senior Ethics Resources Officer, Research Services Office, University of
Calgary at 403-220-3782; email: rburrows@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.