

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Native Women at University: A Study of Lived Experience

by

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ABSTRACT

In cooperation with ‘The Native Centre’ at the University of Calgary, the present study sought to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of University life for Native women. A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach allowed the exploration of individual experiences through the expression of feelings, meanings, values, thoughts and beliefs as shared with me by five Native female students.

The process metaphor of “Climbing my Mountain” was chosen as one which aptly describes this phenomenon. The five metathemes that make up this journey are: (a) reaching the foot, (b) support for the journey, (c) rough spots, (d) pacing myself, and (e) reflections on the journey (so far...).

Suggestions for change with respect to the need to make University a more enjoyable and fulfilling educational experience as highlighted by these women are discussed in detail. Impacts on my personal and professional development, together with implications for future research and counselling are also addressed.

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...Go Raibh Mile Maith Agaibh!

Dedicated to:

‘The Native Centre’

&

Alison, Rachel, Kate-lyn, Candice and Laura

*... May our paths continue to meet
and our journeys be ever more fulfilling*

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CHAPTER ONE:

DECIDING ON A DESTINATION

Why did I choose a Native population as the focus of the present study? In order to answer that, a little personal history is required. Firstly, a true appreciation for the value of diversity developed during my first Master's degree while carrying out fieldwork in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. While there I began to appreciate diversity for the richness it provides, rather than fear it for its difference. Coming to Canada to study Counselling Psychology, I was immediately attracted to the richness of diversity as an everyday part of life that stems from the culturally pluralistic atmosphere here. Hence, I again was attracted to focus my research efforts on issues with a cross-cultural flavour.

Secondly, a class in multiculturalism introduced me to the Native culture, and demonstrated to me how little is really known - or more accurately *understood* - about this population within educational and counselling contexts. Without more appropriate and culture-specific information in these regards, I could not foresee how my counselling skills would enable me to be an effective therapist with members of the native population. I saw a need for change – both in myself and in the literature.

On a more personal (or perhaps naïve?) note, I wished to undertake a process that would mean more on its completion than getting three extra letters after my name.

Because I'm entering one of the helping professions, I guess I wanted to help.

What I Found

In my initial introduction to the research literature in this area, I found to my dismay that much of what is written in regard to the Native female population has a tendency to focus on predominantly pathological issues. Given my belief that difference

does not imply disease, I find it hard to swallow that the majority of the literature focuses on issues of alcoholism, drug use and abuse, violence, suicide and depression. Not only that, but the majority of this work is quantitative in nature, and is generally fraught with methodological problems affecting its applicability, generalizability, and hence acceptability. This kind of literature, I felt and feel, has little benefit for those in the Counselling profession who espouse individual difference, who believe there is more to a person and a culture than what the majority society chooses to focus on, and who understand that it is necessary to try to understand the 'context' of the client, including her or his culture, history, values and beliefs, before being able to be effective as a therapist.

Given my reactions - both practical and epistemological - to the literature, I felt that doing research in this area, if done sensitively, could add insight to what appeared to be a primarily fact-driven research culture. I also felt that the focus chosen would build on some of the notable exceptions to the previous 'rule', including the qualitative work done by Napier (1995), together with culturally sensitive information drawn from the work by Medicine (1988), Paterson and Hart-Wasekeesikaw (1994), LaFromboise (e.g. 1984; 1988; 1990; 1994) and many others. Notably, those researchers with articles most relevant to the present study were most often of Native ancestry, and more often than not female.

Defining the Journey's Purpose

As a result of a discussion with my supervisor early in 1996 about a desire to focus my thesis research on issues related to the Native population, I first approached George Calliou of 'The Native Centre' at the University of Calgary. It was through

lengthy discussion with him concerning this interest together with his desire that 'The Native Centre' have more information about the needs of Native women in particular, that the format and purpose of the current study was developed. The result of our meetings was an investigative study designed to explore the lived experience of Native Women who attend the University of Calgary's Native Centre.

Global objectives of this cooperative study included:

- a) To provide greater awareness of the actual experience(s) as lived by Native Female University students. With this knowledge, the 'Centre' may be able to provide more beneficial services specifically directed to the possible needs of this population. The major advantage is that the participants themselves, and their successors, will be the recipients of and benefit from these services. In addition, it was hoped that the insights gained might add to the broader arena of research with Native women in education.
- b) Completion of the study would satisfy the criteria for a M.Sc. in Counselling Psychology for myself. In addition, the process would serve to increase my personal awareness of Native women's issues. The insights and knowledge gained by this means, I felt, would benefit the appropriateness and effectiveness of my future work as a helping professional with members of this population.

George Calliou (Director of the Native Centre), and Noreen Demeria's (Native student, member of the Native Students Association, and primary contact-person for the study), consent for the study was sought and received before the process was initiated. This consent was based on the unanimous belief of all concerned that the outcomes

would be beneficial to each of the participants, 'The Native Center' and myself alike.

Mapping out the best path

In order to appreciate and respect the unique historical and cultural context of the participants, it was decided that a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach was the most appropriate methodology. Using this theoretical framework enabled a cooperative, sensitive approach that allowed for flexibility and change. The uniquely positive aspects of this approach are encapsulated by its focus being an interpretation of *the participants' own experience(s)*, which includes their own meanings, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, values and perspectives. Focusing on my participants' stories constitutes my attempt to understand the lived experiences of this population. The findings outlined herein will hopefully serve to enable those working with members of this group to be more sensitive to and cognizant of some of the major issues as defined by members of this population.

What to expect

The objectives of this study are outlined more fully in the following chapters. Metaphor has been used throughout this thesis. I have respectfully 'borrowed' this usage from my participants, in the hope that I can convey the image of a journey, a process, a never-ending adventure that extends past the 'findings' into the thesis and indeed life itself. As well, in doing so, I hope to convey myself as in connection with this work. It is written in this way to illuminate the fact that learning is a journey – one that doesn't stop, and in fact often only begins when outside the classroom. This lesson I learned from my participants, and it is one I hope to share.

Chapter Two is an overview of the literature as it exists with regard to the Native female population. Contrary to its place in a quantitative endeavour, its inclusion is not

for the purpose of developing a smooth passage from concept to study or as a basis for forming research 'hypotheses', but merely to delineate what information there is available. For me, this research helped to develop some understanding of the research 'context' for this study, and in doing so helped me to develop an approach of my own.

Chapter Three outlines in depth the methodology used for this study, as well as a discussion of some of the important ethical issues involved in doing research within a cross-cultural setting.

Chapter Four is the 'womb' of this study, and includes the interpretive account of the lived experience of these women, subsumed under the process metaphor "Climbing my Mountain".

Chapter Five summarizes this description, followed by a discussion of the possible implications of this interpretation for future research, educational policy and counselling professionals.

A Final Thought

I have learned a great deal since embarking on this adventure. I have learned more about the wonderful women who became my co-researchers than I could have learned in a lifetime of reading books, I have begun to uncover the wonder of doing qualitative research, I have become less naïve about my place in the world by coming to know myself better than I did before. Best of all, I have had fun along the way while sharing laughter and tears, pain and joy.

I have chosen to write this thesis in the first person to indicate my presence in it and my relationship with it - we are on a first-name basis, and have become friends. I want you, the reader, to become our friend too, and enjoy your own journey as you read

the pages to follow. Feel free to nod your head in agreement, or to shake it in disbelief. The words contained herein are not written in stone, or proposed as the only true interpretation of the experience of these women. They are the product of an interactive experience that developed over more than 18 months, and can only reflect that place and time. Things change, people change - and change is good.

CHAPTER TWO: LEARNING FROM PREVIOUS EXPLORERS

If you and I were sitting in a circle of people on the prairie, and if I were then to place a painted drum or an eagle feather in the middle of this circle, each of us would perceive these objects differently. Our vision of them would vary according to our individual positions in the circle, each of which would be unique ... The perception of any object, either tangible or abstract, is ultimately made a thousand times more complicated whenever it is viewed within the circle of *an entire people as a whole*.

(Hyemeyohsts Storm, Seven Arrows)

Trying to provide a suitable context for the present study was approached through a thorough review of the research literature. With all of the possible vantage points from which to start, I acknowledge that the results of my process are coloured by my position as a student, researcher and European (among others) - uneducated in Native ways. In other words, I started from 'scratch.' The review to follow is comprised of a drawing together through my own worldview the literature created by others, which in turn is guided by their own reality and experience. Throughout this presentation, I caution the reader to remain aware of your own biases and conclusions, and to understand from the outset that what follows is my own understanding of how the sparse literature in the areas of counselling and higher education with Native women comes together.

Introduction

With increased awareness of cultural, ethnic, and economic pluralism in North American society, "therapists have increasingly devoted themselves to understanding the meaning of cultural diversity and advocating its usefulness when counselling individuals of distinct cultural, co-cultural, multicultural, racial-ethnic, and/or socioeconomic

backgrounds" (James & Hastings, 1993, p.319). Thus, while the conceptual models of 'genetic deficiency' and 'cultural deficiency' with regard to cultural and ethnic difference have certainly had their time on 'centre stage', the much more proactive and positive 'cultural diversity model' is increasingly attracting recognition and respect as that which accounts for alternative lifestyles and bicultural/multicultural experiences and perspectives (Sue, 1990). With this increased attention and recognition, the area of Counselling with diverse populations is becoming more prominent in the literature. However, only a small percentage of this literature deals with Native American populations, and even less addresses the specific issues and needs concerning Native Women.

The rationale for assuming that Native women should be given more attention and a greater voice in the counselling literature is demonstrated by the fact that women, the poor, and members of ethnic and minority groups have much higher rates of mental illness than do men, whites, and the more affluent (Gutierrez, 1990). With Native women featuring prominently in each of these three groups, the unfortunate fact is that these women are an extremely 'at risk' group for psychological issues. More specifically, Native Women in higher-education settings are commonly cited as being 'at risk' for psychological stress. The following review addresses these claims, with the sections to follow attempting to outline: (a) the issues relevant to Counselling with Native Women (with an emphasis on Native women in higher education), (b) the mental-health outcomes of these issues, (c) the role and competency of Counsellors within a cross-cultural counselling situation with this population, and (d) therapeutic approaches most commonly used in cross-cultural situations with Native populations. Each of these

sections provides research 'context' for the present study. More specifically, this context bears relevance to the participants, the non-Native researcher and the methodology developed in this study.

Native Women's 'Issues'

Literature regarding Native women's issues was gleaned from several sources, including the areas of Anthropology, History, Education, Social Work, Politics, Women's Issues/Feminist thought, and Counselling. While research studies concerning Native peoples often focus on a specific tribe or band, it is understood that there is no one way of native knowing that incorporates all native cultures (Morrison & Wilson, 1991). However, certain themes recur within the literature and it is these 'themes' that are included here on the basis that they *appear* to be the most 'global', and have the most relevance for Native Women.

Acculturation

While it is generally acknowledged that the overwhelming result of acculturation has been the breakdown in the societal structure of Native communities, some authors have postulated that Native Women have suffered perhaps the greater of the two genders (e.g. Chiste, 1994; Miller, 1994). Indeed, in some communities where a woman was "once an influential member of her society, participating in the governing process and commanding the highest respect as the life-giver of her people," she has now been reduced to a subservient role by the Indian Act, enforced by a foreign and patriarchal system (Canadian Council on Social Development [CCSD] and the Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], 1991, p.3). Of course, this is not the case in all Native societies. However, even in those communities where women did not typically hold

societal positions of power, they often had some opportunity to exercise their power outside of their homes (Neithammer, 1977).

Acculturation has contributed to an increased distance and dissonance within male-female relations, with an accompanying increase in the dominant nature of males' relationships with and over women (LaFromboise, Heyle, & Ozer, 1990). Currently, even changes to the Indian Act through the introduction of Bill C-31 (which among other changes restored Native status to women who had once given up their rights to same through marrying a non-Native man), has not done much to reinstate their position in Native society. Indeed, these women are finding it difficult to exercise *any* power because they are often not being accepted back into Native reservations and bands/tribes by their own people (Dempsey, 1994).

Acculturation has also contributed to the collapse of traditional religious and spiritual roles within the Native community. The loss of these roles and their accompanying world-view has been theorized to lead to anomie, social disintegration, and personal pathology for Native Women (Griffen, 1982; Kasee, 1995). Of course, one needs to be careful about making broad generalizations about 'power' and women's roles historically in Native societies. Therefore, I feel it necessary to point out that the above serves merely to reflect current perceptions as witnessed in the literature.

Poverty

In 1989, about 31% of American Indians were living below the poverty line (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, 1993). Indeed, poverty, which can often be traced again to acculturative factors (i.e. being 'forced' to leave the reservation/band for personal, financial, or educational reasons), is perhaps the

most widely reported factor related to mental health problems for minority women in general. In fact, the poverty rate of 'women of colour' (i.e. minority women) is more than double that of white women (Gutierrez, 1990). This is perhaps both as a result of the general 'trend' for women of any colour to be disadvantaged in the North American context (Albers, 1985), but more importantly, because:

Racial status serves as an institutionalized marker for segregation in an economy where women of colour are concentrated in the lowest paying jobs, have high levels of unemployment and constitute a disproportionate number of females living in poverty. (Albers, 1985, p.109)

As a result, Native Women in 1984 were seen as the most "under-represented, underpaid, and unemployed group of minority women in our society" (LaFromboise, 1984, p.471).

As with any disadvantaged population, poverty is and has been associated with several mental health outcomes, including increased risk for depression, stress, social isolation and substance abuse.

Abuse

Abuse is a common theme in Native Women's issues throughout the literature. Indeed, Native Women often confront (sexual) violence in a context in which several generations have been victims of such violence (Razack, 1994). The thought that "it is an exception rather than the rule to know of an Aboriginal woman who has not experienced some form of family violence throughout her life" (CCSD & NWAC, 1991, p.25), seems to be the general consensus in the literature. While this may be an over-generalization, the fact remains that abuse is a prominent theme in the literature about Native Women (Rundle, 1990).

Cultural and value-laden issues confound the process and resulting success or

failure of separation from the abuser by the battered Native Woman who decides to leave. This woman is faced with the task of learning about her rights and privileges, as well as resources that need to be tapped into (e.g. legal aid, counselling supports, etc.), in addition to losing community and social supports. Thus, this task is a monumental one for the Native woman, who is often "mistrustful of the 'white system' and apprehensive about approaching resources for assistance" (MacKenzie, 1985). Of course, when viewed in association with acculturative factors, family violence and abuse in Aboriginal society has its own unique dimensions. It should be kept in mind that it is not simply women who have been rendered powerless - these women belong to a culture that as a whole has been oppressed, which confounds the profundity of their powerlessness (CCSD & NWAC, 1991). This point indicates the need for extreme sensitivity to cultural and gender-specific issues when interacting with Native women, and indeed with any member of a culture different to one's own. (Note: While alcohol and substance abuse could conceivably fall under the heading of 'Abuse', it is considered for the purpose of this paper as a Mental Health 'outcome', and as such will be addressed in a later section).

Education

Education, despite its negative connotations derived from past experience with the now infamous 'residential school' system, has come to be viewed as a means of improving economic status, both for Native Women themselves, and their families and communities (Payton, 1985). Other reasons cited for and increasing desire among First Nations students to attain a higher education include a wish to learn the politics and history of racial discrimination, to provide the expertise and leadership needed by First Nations Communities, to engage in research to advance the knowledge of First Nations

and to overcome dependency and 'neo-colonialism' (Archibald & Urion, 1995; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Napier, 1995). However, in the words of Patricia Monture, a Mohawk and professor of Law at Dalhousie University, "getting a University education is an indispensable, often unpleasant step to attaining self-determination" for Native students (cited in Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p.6).

Entrance to higher education for members of the Native community is associated with a great many stressors associated with both culturally- and academically- related changes. These include "stress related to financial aid, the old home environment, and the new home environment, the institution itself, and the new culture they find themselves in" (Wiesen, Scott & Bynum, 1992, p. 155), all of which serve (to varying degrees) to increase the attrition rate of Native students from University life. Indeed, the participation rate of native people in higher education is less than 20% of the rate of others, where at the undergraduate level more than 70% of native students who begin University do not complete a degree (Archibald & Urion, 1995).

For Native women, additional stressors often impede continuation in post-secondary education. Firstly, for women in general the college environment is often regarded as foreign, chilly, and alienating (Johnson, 1989; Moore & Amey, 1988; Williams, 1990). This places Native women at an immediate disadvantage for adjustment. Indeed, the experience of women in academia generally has been equated with that of Native persons whose worldview is often incongruous with the patriarchal system that characterizes higher education (DeFaveri, 1984; Paterson & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 1994). In addition, Ponterotto (1990) posits that "being a member of a minority group on campus is stressful, and this is true regardless of how internally secure

and self-confident a person may be” (p.54). In the case of Native women then, it would seem that the incongruity of the learning environment and the Native tradition, together with being female as well as a member of a minority group places additional interrelated stressors on an already stressful situation.

An assumption that often appears to underlie patriarchal educational systems that truth can be lectured to another and therefore learned is not a belief held within the Native tradition (Paterson & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 1994). Instead, learning in traditional Native belief is regarded as a journey unique to each individual, where the role of the learner is to learn what they feel they must know in order to realize their own individual vision (Ross, 1992). However, while fostering this type of learner independence is central to the Native view of learning, Tamaoka (1986; cited in Peterson & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 1994) found that non-native teachers are more inclined to discourage this type of independence than are native teachers.

Also, the Native woman who "holds to the tradition that family and tribal bonds are of the highest priority" (Payton, 1985, p.78) may question the relevance of higher education to her life's goals and values. As well, poverty, and the lack of resources to alleviate this, put extra constraints on pursuing graduate-level education (Medicine, 1988). Several other issues drawn from various literature sources have been associated with the attrition of Native women from higher education. These include: *not* having a traditional family background (Lin, 1990), being 'channeled' into careers (most often teaching and social services; LaFromboise, 1984); being victims of racial and sexual stereotyping by faculty, who view them as either academically incompetent or exceptional (Wilson, 1983), and being subjected to verbal racism from others students

and staff (Huffman, 1991); feeling pressure to marry Native men, who are often threatened by their educational achievement (LaFromboise, 1984); being head of a household - which nearly one-quarter of the women who reach this educational level are (Anderson, 1983); experiencing increasing stress, self- and tribal identity issues, dysfunctional families, drug and alcohol abuse (Bowker, 1992), and sharing a common perception that "university is a cold, unsociable place" (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1985).

In addition, a fact that is only rarely alluded to in the literature is the stress faced by female students who are also mothers. If one equates full-time or part-time education responsibilities with work responsibilities, it is easy to see how even an unemployed Native female student who is also a mother may encounter additional stress. This is particularly salient when considering the fact that these female students may often not have access to extended family networks for child care support, thus contributing to increasing role conflicts and child care difficulties akin to those observed in working native women (e.g. Snipp & Aytac, 1990).

The importance of social and family supports cannot be ignored when describing the life of Native persons, and specifically female Native students. Garrison (1993), when speaking particularly of gifted minority students, emphasized that:

Family support is especially important for students from low income and working class homes because if these students fully develop their potential, they will assume positions that may separate them professionally, financially, culturally and geographically from their families. While persons outside the culture often perceive these changes as advancements, some within the culture see them as 'selling out.' (p.161)

Indeed, LaFromboise (cited in LaFromboise, Saks Berman, & Sohi, 1994), indicated that Native female college students were most likely to rely on social support

when under stress, while those living near their home communities were more likely to rely on family for this support. From the literature, it does not seem unreasonable to make a link between “tradition” and “family support”, where Lin (1990) found that for native college students from traditional families, grades were higher and they applied themselves more directly to academic tasks than those from more “modern” families.

Other strategies included cognitive methods such as self-talk, or recall of personal and cultural spiritual beliefs, and behavioural actions such as working harder, or exercising to relieve tension. Of the students interviewed, 17% sought help from formal support systems such as counselling services, Alcoholics Anonymous, or university programs providing financial or academic aid. (LaFromboise et al., 1994, p.43).

Another consideration of going to University is the possible negative impacts that education may have on relationships with family and their home community. Indeed, the women in Napier’s (1995) exemplary microethnographic study of nine gifted native women pursuing doctorate degrees indicated the difficulties faced by women in returning to their home community or reservation. Some of the participants of her study found that their community often did not want to recognize the accomplishment. Indeed, changes that occur are often not seen as advancements, but as an indication that the person has ‘sold out’ (Garrison, 1993), making acceptance and respect often difficult to re-establish.

In summary, it would appear that Native peoples, with specific attention to women in both society and higher education, face many and varied stressors and stressful situations resulting from cultural, historical, societal and racial issues. Unfortunately, the life-situations outlined often result in any of a variety of mental health issues for Native women. The following section outlines those outcomes that are referred to most often throughout the literature.

Mental Health Outcomes

The Mental Health issues outlined above - especially those involving role or racial identity, acculturation, stress, socioeconomic and education barriers - have all been demonstrated in the literature to elicit significant negative effects on the mental well-being and coping of Native women. Often, the outcomes of these 'issues' can be observed in the form of various maladaptive behaviours and negative affective states that require intervention in a counselling or therapeutic setting.

Alcohol/Substance Abuse

According to French (1989), alcoholism (and its multigenerational effects) is the most critical mental and physical health problem plaguing Native Americans today. More salient, "females account for nearly half of the American Indians dying of liver cirrhosis and in the childbearing years, American Indian women have a proportionate mortality ratio for liver cirrhosis that exceed that of Indian men" (Johnson, cited in Marshall, Martin & Johnson, 1990, p.46). Other serious physical results of heavy drinking include disabilities such as fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and fetal alcohol effect (FAE) in the children of these women with studies indicating a high rate of their incidence among Native populations (May et al., 1983; Whittaker, 1982). Societal results of drinking may include ostracism from society (as a result of producing FAS children in some Native communities), and may serve to reinforce this drinking behaviour, as a means of coping (Marshall et al., 1985). While some of these studies may appear 'dated,' many researchers assume that their content is still applicable, given the continuing high rate of alcohol abuse in Native populations (French, 1989; Martin & Johnson, 1990). Obviously, the need for therapeutic interventions oriented specifically to drinking

problems and alcoholism with Native women is great.

Of course, the roots of alcohol abuse are complex, and are not clearly understood or outlined in the literature. While possible explanations may include oppression/acculturation, powerlessness, abuse and lack of social support, among others, some findings have demonstrated that a majority of female substance abusers in Native treatment programs are survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Dixon, 1989).

Depression and Anxiety

Depression, anxiety and adjustment reactions, while not necessarily the most critical, certainly appear the most prevalent of mental health issues noted within Native communities (LaFromboise, 1988), where 76% of women using IHS mental health services are reportedly suffering from depression (LaFromboise et al., 1994). Although inaccurate (read: culturally biased) diagnosis using clinical measures may account for some of these incidences (Timpson, McKay, Kakegamic, Roundhead, Cohen & Matewaapit, 1988), when depression is defined in non-clinical terms such as hopelessness and despair, the results are more conclusive. Indeed, Shore and Manson (cited in Timpson et al., 1988) found “76% of Salish Indian Women patients to have a higher prevalence of depressive mood and much higher rates of reactive depression than non-Indians”. Again, these affective disorders may be as a result of the complex interaction of cultural and societal factors, where published reports of the systematic investigation of these ‘interactive’ factors on mental health outcomes in Native Women is minimal. However, various theories have been suggested for this high rate of depression, including: spiritual illness and shame (Timpson et al., 1988), rejection, discrimination, guilt and moral disorientation (Guilmet & Whitehead, 1987), personal losses and

acculturative pressures and the demands of family in attempting to cope with the psychosocial stressors associated with cultural change (Manson et al., 1985).

Suicide

Reports in 1988 that the annual suicide rate in some tribes had increased by about 200%, to a rate of 18 per 100,000 (LaFromboise, 1988) is frightening. While suicide attempts by adolescent Native women occur more frequently, but are generally less lethal than those of Native adolescent men (LaFromboise et al., 1994), statistics from Health and Welfare Canada (1990) point to the fact that for almost all age groups, Native Women have a consistently higher suicide rate than all female Canadians.

In an analysis of suicide rates of working male and female Indians through the years 1979-1981, Young and French (1995) found that the percent of women in the labour force correlated with the suicide rate for women, but not for men. The authors cite the fact that cultural issues, including the lack of traditional social support networks for these urban women in times of stress must be taken into consideration as a precipitating factor. Also, in a review of female suicides in custody, the Native female inmate population in Canadian prisons was pinpointed as particularly 'at risk' for suicide (Grossmann, 1992). Theoretical reasons for this included factors associated with education, employment, income, history of violence, ethnicity, social isolation, and racism/discrimination (Grossmann, (1992). A recent study of suicide (both actual attempts and ideation) among 84 native college freshmen found that 39% of the females as compared to 16% of males had attempted suicide (Howard-Pitney, LaFromboise, Basil, September & Johnson, 1992). Suicide attempts by Native females have been linked to depressive symptomatology, alcohol use, and a perceived lack of family support

(LaFromboise et al., 1994).

The Significance of Culture and Values

The mental health outcomes described above all have a similar theme or basis – that of ethnic and cultural (especially acculturative) factors associated with and/or precipitating their onset. It follows, then, that the importance of culture and values in the counselling situation certainly cannot be dismissed or ignored. Despite the premise that Native women have been studied “to death or to distraction” (Green, 1980, p.249), it is obvious that there is an appalling scarcity of literature specifically related to counselling with Native women. However, assuming that the cultural value-systems of Native and dominant (read: White) populations are gender-free and global, then the following is a brief outline of those that may be construed as sufficiently ‘different’ to warrant consideration in a cross-cultural counselling relationship with Native Women.

Culture & Values

While it is impossible and indeed inappropriate to generalize values across cultures within the Native tradition, a number of values appear to be common (at least through their description in the literature) to most tribal groups. These include: co-operation, concreteness, lack of interference, respect for elders, the tendency to organize by space not time, dealing with the land as an animate not inanimate object, respect for age, present-orientation, sharing freely, humility/anonymity, reliance on extended family and holistic being (e.g. Darou, 1987; Heinrich et al., 1990; McGaa, 1990). These are often in direct contrast with the traditional western ‘values’ of competitiveness, autonomy, fame, verbal expression, future-orientation, power over others, and youth orientation (Atkinson, Marton & Sue, 1990; James & Hastings, 1993).

Education, Culture & Values

'Values' such as those outlined above are often in direct conflict with those espoused as appropriate in the higher-education setting. The significance of cultural values within the educational system has been outlined by a number of researchers (e.g. Archibald & Urion, 1995; Edgewater, 1981; Haller and Aitken, 1992; Napier, 1995), where it has been postulated that unless the Native student has become completely "acculturated", they must face the fact that they may live by a different set of values and priorities when compared to their White counterparts. Entering the University or College society under these conditions places the Native student immediately in a defensive position, resulting in stress which may affect the students' self-assurance, personal comfort, attitude toward self, others and towards learning. Indeed, "a student's Indianness and self-identity may be questioned" (Haller & Aitken, 1992, p.187), which is a challenge *in addition to* the same stresses faced by white students (Edgewater, 1981). Support for this contention is demonstrated in Napier's (1995) microethnographic study where the native women participants were "often confronted by bureaucratic red tape, gender bias, and challenges to their own Indianness." (p.43) during their doctoral studies. One component of this that has received little attention in the literature, but which appears to be troublesome to many native students is the difficulty in seeing the native culture(s) and language(s) inappropriately objectified and trivialized in University courses (Te Hennepe, 1992; cited in Archibald & Urion, 1995). In sum, where there are constant clashes between values and qualities emphasized in Anglo schools and those held by native students, much psychological stress and 'disharmony' can be expected to ensue.

The sentiments above may perhaps be best summarized by the following quote from Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991):

For the First Nations student coming to the University (an institution that is a virtual embodiment of modern consciousness), survival often requires the acquisition and acceptance of a new form of consciousness that not only displaces, but often devalues their indigenous consciousness, and for many, this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make. If they enter and then withdraw before “completion”, however, they are branded by the University as a “dropout” – a failure. Those who persevere and make the sacrifice can find themselves in the end, torn between two worlds, leading to a further struggle within themselves to reconcile the cultural and psychic conflicts arising from competing values and aspirations. (p.7)

Thus, it would seem that the importance of culturally based values cannot be over-emphasized when considering ‘context’ for counselling with Native women, whether they are involved in higher education, or part of the greater society. More specific to the population of this study, the research literature confirms a need for First Nations-specific support programs on campus (Archibald & Urion, 1995; Wright, 1985).

The Counselling Situation

At this point, I feel it is necessary to take a look at the information related to counselling and Native issues. The reasoning for this, as indicated earlier, is based on one of the goals of this study, which is to provide a more sound knowledge base and understanding of Native issues and concerns toward a goal of offering a more successful counselling experience for this population. In addition, as a result of the extensive nature of the psychological stresses and stressors faced by Native Women both in and out of a University setting, it is safe to assume that the need for Counselling and mental health care is great among this population.

However, many contextual and interpersonal factors are involved in a cross-cultural counselling situation that must be addressed, with specificity to Native Women. Salient to the preceding statements is the fact that the attrition rate of Natives generally from counselling after the first session far exceeds that of Anglo clients - 50% compared to 30% respectively (Sue & Sue, 1977). However, it is important to note a replication of the study by Sue, Allen & Conway (1978) in the Seattle area found this “failure to return” rate to be decreasing, and postulated that this phenomenon is more strongly related to personal level of functioning than minority status (O’Sullivan, Peterson, Cox & Kirkeby, 1989).

Due to the nature of the causes of psychological stress for Native women, i.e., loss of power, autonomy, spirituality and social and familial networks due to acculturative factors, and the conflicting value-orientations encountered in the acculturative process, cross-cultural counselling is fraught with problems and communication barriers. While much of the literature outlining these obstacles comes from ‘theory-experts’ in the field of cross-cultural counselling theory, some research has been carried out with Native populations to assess their opinions and perceptions of the counselling process. Of course, it must be kept in mind that again, only a small percentage of the counselling literature deals specifically with Native women. In addition, while many of the studies use student or college /university samples, there is a tendency for these (primarily American) studies to have used a mixed ethnic sample(s). While mixed-inclusion results from legislation aimed at improving ethnic minority group equity in the U.S., it should be acknowledged that doing so serves to obscure some of the issues - particularly qualitative differences in life experiences of diverse ethnic groups (Archbald & Urion, 1995). In

addition, where the majority of research with Native populations is carried out with student populations, this very homogeneity lends question to the generalizability of the findings to the greater sphere of Native peoples in society.

Situational Factors in Counselling

Ethnicity. The literature concerning ethnicity of the counsellor, and Native client preference is often contradictory. While some researchers purport the belief that:

To the extent that the counselling process replicates a social influence attempt, it can be hypothesized that attitudinal similarity between counsellor and client may be a more important determinant of preference for a counsellor (and hence of successful counselling) than is the membership-group similarity. (Atkinson, 1983, p.79)

others disagree. For example, a study by Haviland, Horswill, O'Connell and Dynneson (1983), found that both male and female Native participants indicated a strong preference for Native counsellors, where similarly designed studies using Native student populations by LaFromboise and Dixon (1981) and Price and McNeill (1992) failed to find any such preference by or for either gender. As well, a number of studies which controlled for commitment to culture showed that those Native students with strong cultural commitment did indicate greater preference for ethnically similar counsellors (e.g. Bennett & Subia Bigfoot-Sipes, 1991). Notably, the study by Price and McNeill (1992) found Native women showed more overall favourable attitudes toward counselling than men.

Gender. Little research is available which includes an investigation of attitudes toward counsellor gender with Native populations. However, the study by Haviland et al. (1983) found that Native male students preferred male counsellors, regardless of their presenting issue (academic or personal), whereas females expressed a preference for

female counsellors only if the problem was personal. Other research which incorporates a gender-specific tone is that which advocates the use of feminist therapy with Native Women - much of which is written by female therapists regarding female clients (e.g. Gerrard, 1991; Boyd, 1990; Saks Berman, 1990; and Espin, 1993).

Trustworthiness. The extreme mistreatment of the American Indian population by the Government, including broken treaties, unwarranted violence and attempted genocide has clearly fostered a great deal of mistrust of the Government and Non-Indians on the part of Native people (LaFromboise, Trimble & Mohatt, 1990). The importance of trustworthiness on the part of the counsellor, therefore, is paramount in the cross-cultural counselling setting. Indeed, Atkinson (1983) and LaFromboise and Dixon (1991), among others, report that ethnicity of the counsellor may perhaps be less salient to counselling effectiveness than a counsellor who is trained in the use of culturally appropriate and *trustworthy* behaviours in the interview. For these researchers, trustworthy behaviours include eye-contact similar to that of the client, erect positioning in one's chair, little reference to time, and an aura of confident humility. Valuing and displaying respect for the client's cultural identity is also very important, and is one of the most common values cited as necessary in a Non-Native counsellor. With respect to female Native clients in particular, trust has been elicited in cross-cultural contexts by 'being the client's advocate' and communicating respect for her cultural heritage and customs, without idealizing and romanticizing them (Saks Berman, 1989).

Counselling Approaches

Because the primary goal of the present review is to provide a better knowledge-base for counselling, I am providing a brief overview of those counselling approaches

most cited in the literature. This inclusion, while highly related to the overall concern of this study, it is not entirely relevant to the specific research of this study. Therefore, please read it with the understanding that its inclusion is primarily for the benefit of the reader in an effort to further expand and deepen the 'context' of this study.

While the foregoing sections outline some of the important issues, outcomes, values and situational factors to be aware of and sensitive to when counselling Native women, it is also important to be able to choose a theoretical approach that has been researched and demonstrated as appropriate, effective, and sensitive for use in the therapeutic context with Native female clients. Unfortunately, however, studies that focus on Native populations typically make broad assumptions concerning the 'best' type of theoretical orientation to use when counselling a Native client. During the course of the present literature review, five theoretical orientations were found to occur most frequently in the literature: Humanistic, Social Learning, Behavioural, Network/Systems and Feminist. None but the last was found to give specific mention to Native Women.

Generally Advocated Approaches

General comments on the efficacy of the first four theoretical approaches (mentioned above) with Native populations include the following gleaned from the literature reviewed. For example, the non-directive, individual-centred approach of Rogerian – 'Person Centered' – theory, which is much-espoused in Counsellor training situations today, may not be the best approach with a Native Client (LaFromboise et al., 1990). Indeed, the "quiet" or untalkative, restrained nature typical of many traditional Natives often makes this type of orientation particularly unsuitable, where empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard may not be enough to engage a Native

client. In addition, the concept of 'self-actualization' – a 'core' theme in the Rogerian approach – has questionable value in a culture that emphasizes cooperation and harmony over individual achievement.

The use of Social Learning and Behavioural Therapy both have certain value, such as being less culturally biased, and more directive than person-centered therapy (e.g. Bach & Bornstein, 1981). However, theories of behaviour change (e.g. Skinner), where social control is essential, would need to be modified to respond to a different attitude towards individual behaviour, and utilize unique, culturally specific reinforcers (Lowrey, 1983). In effect, these approaches can and have been misused, by a narrow or inappropriate focus, for example when the goals of the client are not the goals targeted for change in therapy, or when behaviour change processes are controlled by professionals who do not respect the client's goals (LaFromboise et al., 1990).

LaFromboise et al. (1990) have postulated that Network and Systems theories have generated the most favourable response among cross-cultural theoreticians dealing with Native populations. One explanation for their success is that these approaches are far more culturally sensitive than other more individually-oriented approaches in that the client and her or his problem are considered and treated within the context of a larger family and community social system. For example, Morrissette (1994) espoused the use of a systemic approach in dealing with Native peoples while understanding the negative effects of the residential school system on parenting practices. In the Network approach, the counsellor merely acts as a 'catalyst', to initiate help from an individual's social and familial network.

Unfortunately, discussion of particular theoretical orientations and their benefits

and limitations with Native populations are sparse. Generally, literature gives guidelines of ways non-Native counsellors should and should not act in the counselling situation - i.e. trustworthy, humble, educated, culturally aware and sensitive. However, there seems to be a distinct lack of definitive research that indicates *the* framework that is most beneficial in these situations. In fact, many of the suggestions for a counselling approach are based on assumptions of 'androgeneity' of Native populations, together with a tendency toward vague generalizations across culture and gender.

The Feminist Approach

One theoretical approach that has focused some of its attention specifically on issues related to counselling Native women is that of feminist therapy. While the body of literature on feminist therapy with Native American women is, again, disappointingly small, some does exist.

One of the central tenets and objectives of a feminist orientation is an attempt to 'empower' women in general. Empowerment in this context can be defined as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that Native Women can take action to improve their life situation (Gutierrez, 1990). Because there are tribal differences in the position of women in Native society – i.e., some tribes are matrifocal, matrilineal, or matrilocal, but not matriarchal – the actual societal treatment of women and their relative power may vary from culture to culture (Saks Berman, 1989). Thus, it is important for the (feminist) Counsellor to know something of the status of women from any particular tribal group. Related and relevant, Patriarchal dominance within tribes may prove devastating and even life-threatening, with Native women often hesitant to speak out due to fear of retribution or ostracism (Saks Berman, 1989). Thus, the

counsellor needs to be aware of these types of tribal/cultural issues within the therapeutic context and *risks must be addressed when attempting to empower Native women through enhancing self-esteem and assertiveness.*

For many minority/ethnic women, defining a sense of identity through rituals and traditional customs is paramount in developing a stronger sense of self – individually and collectively (Boyd, 1990). This is particularly salient for the Native Woman (Kasee, 1995), for whom acculturation has caused the loss of much of her traditional societal role and spirituality. Rituals such as dance or the preparation of native foods are demonstrations of the interconnectedness of the individual with her (or his) history, culture, community and nature (Cardwell, 1990). These ritual acts could be important aspects of her empowerment process if integrated into counselling in an appropriate and sensitive manner.

Considering that much of the data concerning feminist theory is garnered from the experience of White women (Espin, 1993), great flexibility and understanding on the part of the therapist is necessary when dealing with Native women in a feminist-therapeutic context. Failing this ‘flexibility’, it can be seen how the values of the White feminist therapist can overshadow the commitment and values of the minority-group woman, which can in turn cloud the constructive nature of the therapy-relationship (Boyd, 1990). In effect, because Native women who seek feminist therapy will likely be involved with a White counsellor/therapist, it is important for this therapist to:

...be aware, educated, and actively involved in dealing with the influence of racism in one’s own life to counter the existence of these forces in oneself, and in therapy with women of colour. (Espin, 1993, p.106).

While the feminist approach attends to Native women’s needs, it is certainly has

its limitations. As with the orientations of Social, Behavioural and Network Therapy, Feminist Therapy's success seems reliant on the willingness of the therapist to 'put aside' his or her own cultural and ethnic biases, together with any preconceived ideas of what the goal(s) of feminist therapy *should* be, and become educated in the culture and values of the client. This may best be achieved by internalizing the belief that "no source outside the woman knows better than she herself what is best for her" (Greenspan, 1983; cited in Skodra, 1992, p.91). In particular, it is important to try to avoid some traditional feminist approaches that dismiss women's multiplicities, i.e. differences of language, values, multiple roles, etc. If this is not done, "then [the] risk [of] reproducing the oppression [that] clients experience in most other situations of their lives" is great (Skodra, 1992, p.93).

While the Systemic or Network approaches appear to better involve the Native values of 'holism' and 'harmony', Feminist theory attempts to empower the Native woman. However, the importance of cultural values and historical issues specific to this population in the counselling setting should not be ignored or dismissed, and thus only feminist knowledge that respects the cultural values of the client (including community and sharing) should be incorporated into the therapeutic approach. This is particularly relevant in a culture where it is not only the women who have become disempowered, but the Native community as a whole (CCSD & NWAC, 1991). Bearing in mind all of the above, an informed 'eclectic' approach seems the best alternative at this time, pending further research.

Group Therapy

Having demonstrated the need for incorporating an 'eclectic' and 'culturally

sensitive' approach to counselling with Native individuals, it may not be surprising that group work is becoming the treatment of choice for a number of agencies with programs serving Native Americans (LaFromboise et al., 1994). Using a group format seems to adhere closely to the cultural mores of Native peoples, who highly revere the 'circle' in many aspects of their traditional and spiritual lives. A quote from Black Elk (Neihardt, 1961; cited in Rhinehart & Engelhorn, 1984), a holy man of the Ogalala Sioux, demonstrates the Native meaning of the circle in this way:

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished. (p.37).

Indeed, Native Americans have a history of making decisions as a group, and as such are most likely to be receptive to this approach (Dufrene & Coleman, 1992). In summary, it is postulated that because most Native persons of today are a product of the dominant society and their own Native heritage, a blend of traditional techniques and group counselling methods may be the best approach for social ills (Dufrene & Coleman, 1992). It may be helpful, as counsellors who deal with Native female clients, to take a leaf from the book of Native elders, who believe in the holistic care of people, where all aspects of the person (mind, heart and spirit) are given consideration in any encounter with an individual. Indeed, their approach may be summarized by the belief that "if an ill person's mind is treated in exclusion of his or her emotions and spiritual beliefs, it is believed that such a person will remain unwell" (Paterson & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 1994, p.73).

Summary of Learning

While the foregoing attempts to outline what is known with regard to counselling Native women, it is obvious that much of the information is based on 'best judgements' rather than sound knowledge. In addition, the published theory tends to focus on what the counsellor should do, typically does, and what she or he should avoid doing in the cross-cultural counselling context. Thus, the literature dealing with choice of theoretical approach most often appears to be typically counsellor- rather than client-focused.

My overall impression of the literature pertaining to Native women is that it is sparse and fragmented. Indeed, the tendency to ignore this population, or include them only in comparison to men and/or other ethnic groups is a little naïve, given the growing awareness in the counselling and psychological fields of the existence and importance of ethnic- and gender-specific differences in therapeutic settings.

However, some broad generalizations can and have been made regarding those issues and outcomes most pertinent (as measured by literature focus) for Native women. Generally, it would appear that the acculturative process has had far-reaching negative effects on the lives of Native women. While some authors refer specifically to the loss of their 'historical positions of societal power', more generally it must be acknowledged that increasing social isolation, poverty and abuse have taken their toll.

Even for those native women who make it educationally to the higher echelons of College and University life, culture and society place extreme pressure on their place and well-being. Thus, it is not surprising that Native women have a reportedly high incidence in frequency and severity of mental health issues. Approaching these issues, either in a therapeutic or educational setting should be done from a framework and understanding

that allows and respects diversity, flexibility, difference while incorporating Native tradition and spirituality. Indeed, it is important if not imperative to acknowledge (in an unbiased, non-idealizing way) cultural, historical, racial and gender-specific issues that can compound or confound any cross-cultural counselling relationship.

In conclusion, while the foregoing literature has provided a comprehensive contextual basis for this study, the fact that there are methodological problems associated with the literature has left me with some doubt as to the veracity and validity of the findings outlined. More specifically, the predominant use of quantitative measures has given me an impression of a research culture that has detached itself from the 'humanity' of the population it is studying. This study is a response to these particular shortcomings.

Therefore, the purpose of the foregoing literature review has not been an exercise in 'preparing you for the worst' given what may be construed as a predominantly negative content and tone. On the contrary. The study herein has little to do with pathology, and a lot to do with life. Please try to acknowledge what you have read, close this chapter, and move on - prepared to really 'listen' to the lived experience(s) of the women who participated in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: PREPARING FOR EXPLORATION

The literature outlined in the previous chapter has served to delineate the extent of my knowledge prior to conducting this research. It is also a reasonable echo of what there is available to the counsellor or psychologist as a resource in learning about Native women. As can be seen, however, it is a fragmented and sometimes contradictory maze of knowledge, which at least for me proved incomplete and at times frustrating. What is abundantly clear is that attention needs to be given to those issues concerning Native women in higher education whose potential stressors are numerous and thus risk of stress-reaction (physical, psychological, social and emotional) is great. What research there is available is predominantly comparative and positivist in nature (with a few notable exceptions, e.g. Napier, 1995). While reviewing this literature has been helpful in attaining some degree of knowledge about this population, I admit that it has failed to instill in me any significant degree of understanding of what Native women's experiences are. Far from wishing to be derisory or judgmental, I admit that it was in part as a result of this failure that the impetus for this study was gained. Therefore, I wish to acknowledge this literature for its strong influence in the creation of the present study.

My belief in and about qualitative research is that it allows the researcher, and the reader, to gain an understanding of a phenomenon from a different perspective than quantitative approaches have historically allowed for. Indeed, my choice of approach could be seen as a selfish one, one that has permitted me to get to know five Native women in a way that a survey would never have. I have gained a personal knowledge and understanding that has been challenging to put into words, yet the challenge and

experience is something that I will be eternally grateful for.

The fact that I am pleased with the outcome of the process is not enough to satisfy the rigors of academia, however! Therefore, what follows is an in-depth explanation of the 'who' and 'how' of my research adventure...

The 'Who' (Research Design)

As stated earlier, I chose to undertake this study in order to gain an understanding of the lived experience of Native women in a University setting. I have been unsatisfied with the primarily quantitative and often fragmented literature in this area where too often the research in this area has been fuelled by predetermined 'quantifiable' objectives. It is my belief that a positivist approach does not allow expression of the voice of lived experience - without which numbers are rendered meaningless. Therefore, in order to fill what appeared to be a gap in the literature, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate given the culture (Darou, Hum & Kurtness, 1993; Mihesuah, 1993) and gender (Thompson, 1992; cited in Canadian Research Institute for Aboriginal Women [CRIA], 1996) of the participants, and the cross-cultural¹ flavour of the present study. In specific, hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the best suited to the purpose of this study, that is, to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of lived experience.

The central tenet of phenomenology can be traced back to Husserl's treatise on lived experience, intentionality, and the essence of things to which we attend (Bergum, 1991; Jardine, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology (as opposed to empirical,

¹ Given that (a) I am a non-Native engaged in a study with Native women and (b) I am as much a part of the research process as they (and vice-versa), I consider this study to be cross-cultural in nature.

experimental or traditional) is that which allows the investigation of interpretation of experiences (e.g. van Manen, 1991). Hermeneutics as a qualitative approach was chosen as that which allows and emphasizes the human experience of understanding and interpretation – both of which I felt were necessary in order to respectfully begin to understand the meaning of the lived experience of Native female students at university. This hermeneutic process ideally represents or attempts to attain a “Fusion of Horizons” as posited by Gadamer (1975), where the horizons of understanding between two people come together to form a ‘shared understanding’ or interpretation of the phenomenon (Chessick, 1990; Smith, 1991). These horizons are understood to involve customs, institutions and language of a given culture, not just the idiosyncratic perspectives of isolated individuals (Chessick, 1990). Returning again and again to the object of inquiry, the researcher and participants find themselves in continuous process of interpretation and understanding – one without beginning or end – in what has been termed the “hermeneutic circle” (Allen & Jensen, 1990; Smith, 1993). Within this circle of communication, the process of discussion and interpretation serves to deepen understanding, not define it ‘correctly’ (Smith, 1993); moving back and forth between the parts and the whole, all the while understanding each in terms of the other (Woolfolk, 1992). Interpretation’s goal then is to illuminate the connections between the lived world and human experience (Jardine, 1992), giving credence and validity to subjective perception and individual reality. Developed in this way, the outcome of hermeneutic interpretation may be considered “good” not because of its definitiveness and finality, but because it “keeps open the possibility and the responsibility of *returning*, for *the very next instance* might demand of us that we understand anew.” (Jardine, 1992, p.57)

For this study, a symbiotic mixture of phenomenology and hermeneutics was used that allows inclusion of those hermeneutical elements that resonate best with my constructivist worldview that are not held by a 'pure' Husserlian phenomenological approach. Those elements to which I refer are (a) acknowledging an inability to completely sever oneself as researcher from the experience, (b) the impossibility of completely "bracketing" one's experience(s), and (c) 'reducing' the eidetic information to arrive at 'essences' (e.g. Jardine, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). In choosing the 'best of both worlds', I am able to both focus on the lived experience of these women (phenomenology) while interpreting this experience within its appropriate context (hermeneutics).

It is impossible to say in general and ahead of time what the practice of interpretation will be like, as there is no 'set of rules' that can easily be applied to the phenomena of interest to us (Jardine, 1992). Not only that, but it is important to remember that all descriptions are interpretations, and no one will ever exhaust all possibilities for "another complementary, or even potentially richer or deeper description" (van Manen, 1990, p.31). Thus, it is important to acknowledge before starting that in the present context, the interpretation(s) are only one possible view of the phenomena, where a multitude of others may be equally possible. Drawn into this understanding is the cross-cultural context of this study, which cautions us to understand that:

...both groups in a meeting of cultures have an obligation to *expect* difference, to expect that our interpretations of the other's words and acts are liable to be incorrect. (Ross, 1992, p.5)

Understanding that the "method of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there

is no method” (van Manen, 1990, p.30), we are left to determine what are the ‘best’ methodological themes and features to incorporate into the study process. For myself, I admit to ‘knowing what I don’t know,’ and thus allowed myself to adhere to the six inter-related and dynamic research activities of the hermeneutic/phenomenological approach as described by van Manen (1990). Those steps that I willingly allowed to inform my approach to this study and its participants are as follows:

- (1) Turning to the study phenomenon of interest
- (2) Investigating experience as we live it, rather than how we ‘see’ it
- (3) Reflecting on the essential themes characterizing the phenomenon
- (4) Describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting
- (5) Maintaining a strong relation to the phenomenon
- (6) Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole

These steps allowed me to orient myself in an approach that I hoped would be as flexible and accommodating as it was inherently respectful of the participants and their stories. The actual process developed in this study is outlined in detail in a following section.

Who am I? (Situating myself in the research)

Contrary to Husserl’s belief, and central to my own approach to this study, I do not propose that I am able to completely ‘bracket’ myself from all prior knowledge and experience, and hence be completely objective to the participants and the knowledge gained through the research process. I cannot and do not deny those parts of me which are as essentially a part of me as they have become a part of this research (e.g. Benner, 1985; Thompson, 1992). That is, those aspects of self that can be defined as middle-

class, White, female, heterosexual, Irish-European, educated, counsellor, student, worker and so on. Instead, I try to actively document the research process throughout, and to examine and challenge my own beliefs, values and biases with respect to both the participants and the knowledge given by them. With particular reference to the present study and the participants, while I might claim bias-free status given my European upbringing, I cannot deny a childhood which included John Wayne movies and games of “Cowboys and Indians” with my brothers. While these may have been innocent and naïve incidents, I would be foolish and disrespectful to deny their influence on my perceptions. In addition, I confess to the influence of the initial research into this topic to this point that has shaped and influenced my thinking and beliefs about the participant population. Indeed, my belief that this study will be helpful was first spawned from my reactions to what I found in pursuit of knowledge in this area.

Given all of this, however, I strove throughout this research process to be present with my participants, to listen and to share, to interpret only from what I heard (not from what I ‘knew’), and to verify and validate with the participants the interpretations and conclusions made throughout the interpretive process. Despite constant and thorough ‘checking’ of the ‘goodness of fit’ (to use a quantitative term!) of the interpretations made, I acknowledge and own the interpretations included in this work as those constructed by myself and my co-researchers over a particular time and place in history. In doing so, I refer to those theorists who voice the opinion that objective interpretation is impossible given that an argument for an alternate interpretation can always be made (e.g. Allen & Jensen, 1990; Jardine, 1992; Mishler, 1990; Schwandt, 1994; Smith, 1993).

In summary, I believe in the aspects of both phenomenology (honouring and

respecting lived experience), and hermeneutics (interpretations that take into account context and history) that attempt to represent the storied nature of life. The approach as it developed within this study is also respectful of individual experience while inherently advocating value for diversity and difference – elements that are important given the cross-cultural nature of this study.

The 'How' (Research Process)

While the basic research question – “What does it mean for you to be a University student?” – has remained essentially the same since it was originally proposed to both George Calliou (Director of ‘The Native Centre’) and Noreen Demeria (Native Student) in January 1996, the method by which it has been approached has slowly metamorphosed. An understanding of the cooperative nature of this study, conducted as it was in cooperation with the ‘The Native Centre’, is central to understanding both the methodology and the development and impact of it on the researcher and participants. Indeed, it is my belief that the *process* of this study holds equal importance in terms of outcomes as do both the content of the interviews and the interpretations thereof.

The idea for the present study was first discussed with George Calliou in January 1996. Meetings, discussion, research, proposals, ethics approval and arrival at a mutual understanding of the design and methodology for the present study developed between that date and the initiation of the research interviews proper in January 1997. The time taken to develop a trust and a friendship with both George Calliou and Noreen Demeria has resulted in a research design and process that is both methodologically sound and culturally appropriate. Continuing process changes resulted as interviews progressed with the participants, and moved from being an issue solely between ‘The Native Centre’

and myself to being more personally between the participants and myself.

Setting the Scene

All interviews and the majority of contact with participants were done at and through 'The Native Centre', with the exception of 'phone calls to their homes to arrange meetings or to reschedule missed appointments. 'The Native Centre' is an on-campus resource for Native students of all denominations, and provides educational, emotional, and spiritual support for the students who access it. It also hosts what they call the SAMS (Society for Aboriginal Masters Students) project each year, which arranges peer support and instruction by experienced students in tutoring, money management, time management, study skills and emotional support. Also, 'The Native Centre' is where Native Students who know of its existence before applying to University can register for courses, find out about courses, and develop a study program.

Recruiting Experienced Co-Researchers

The participants who took part in this study were included on the basis of three criteria: that they identify themselves as Native, that they be female and that they attend the University of Calgary. As such, there were no age or Band-affiliation restrictions. Thus, my central question allowed finding suitable participants to be relatively easy – i.e. female, Native, University student. Of course, being able to do so resulted from the developing relationship with 'The Native Centre', and the importance of that connection to the study cannot be over-stressed.

Developing a Cooperative Research Process

It is important to acknowledge that it was the express wish of George Calliou, and primary condition on which the research was able to take place, that the methodology be

qualitative in nature. In addition, given the cross-cultural nature of the study, and my own prejudice, this was an easy wish to grant. From the outset, George Calliou and myself sought to come to a meaningful and mutually beneficial agreement for the research process. Before initiating the study, a research agreement was developed and signed by all parties concerned (see Appendix A). At each stage of the research process, from the formalization of the study concept, through the research proposal and ethics approval to the interviewing stages, George Calliou, Noreen Demeria and Dr. Lee Handy were kept informed of decisions as they were made (in the nature of phenomenological/interpretive research). For each change made to the original study proposal, approval was sought and gained before its implementation.

The multi-party cooperation involved in developing the current study is an integral part of its significance. Not only is this methodology one that allowed empowerment for 'The Native Centre' (from the knowledge gained through its completion), but also for the individual participants whose opinions and suggestions were incorporated into the very nature of the study.

Discussing the Phenomenon. An initial 'focus group' was scheduled for any women interested in learning about and/or participating in the study. This meeting was arranged with the much-appreciated help of Noreen Demeria. It was hoped that from this meeting, co-researchers would be tempted to participate. Five women attended this initial meeting, where we discussed the focus and process for the study. All five women showed interest in, and indeed participated in, the entire study process. (Interestingly, two of these women initially believed that they would be of "no use" to the investigation, given their belief that their experience to date of University life had been essentially

positive. The reason I propose that point as ‘interesting’ is the fact that it illustrates that at least some of the women attending this meeting had a preconception that the purpose of the study was to look for only negative accounts of the University experience. While a discussion of this point could represent a thesis in itself, suffice it to say that this interpretation has obvious links in previously outlined literature with Native populations, which primarily focuses on negative elements of their life, adjustment and relative position in a dominantly White university culture).

The initial interview for each participant was scheduled at this ‘group’ meeting. It was made clear that participation was completely voluntary, and that should they have any questions they were free to call me. Copies of the cover letter (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) were distributed to each individual, and they were asked to bring a signed copy of the latter to our first individual meeting. All of the women who agreed to participate were regular users/attendees of ‘The Native Centre’.

Sharing knowledge. Developing an understanding of each individual’s lived experience was based on personal interviews that were largely unstructured in nature, and revolved around the central question “What does it mean for you to be a university student?”

As outlined earlier, I was a participant in this process, and as such the interviews were as much informal conversations as possible. Many of the decisions and steps taken on the research path were at the suggestion of my co-researchers/participants. For example, as the cover letter (and my initial plan) outlined, each participant would engage in three individual interviews with me. At the suggestion of one of the participants, and on discussion with each of the others individually, it was decided that a group format for

the final interview would be desirable, and 'appropriate' – both for cultural and social reasons. Unfortunately, even the best-laid plans sometimes don't come to fruition, and one participant was unable (at the last minute) to attend the final group interview. The group then consisted of four of the participants, and an individual meeting with the fifth participant was scheduled 5 days after the group meeting. During this final individual interview, I tried to outline the comments and suggestions made by the group members as comprehensively as possible, while asking her for her own input at that time.

In the final meeting(s) there were no changes made to the themes as they had developed, and the group interview itself served as a forum for discussing several sections more in-depth, while giving the opportunity for the participants to talk, listen and be heard by her peers and myself.

Almost from the outset of this research, George Calliou indicated a desire to speak with each of the participants at the conclusion of the interviewing process, in order to bring some closure to it for himself and them. When George came to speak to us all at the end of our final group meeting, discussion centered on his desire to ensure that none of the women felt that they had in any negative sense of the term been 'used' by this study. He invited all women to approach him at any time about any of the issues that were addressed through the study process. In particular, his concerns lay with the desired changes and outcomes that are discussed through theme 5, 'reflections on the journey' (see chapter 4). This meeting with George lasted only 15 minutes. At its conclusion, all women seemed agreeable to approaching him with any concerns they may have stemming from, or indeed entirely separate to, their participation in this study.

On a personal note, I acknowledge and respect the openness and sincerity of my

co-researchers in this project. I found the women to be articulate, open, and willing to share. At times I found myself brought to tears by what they were telling me, and at other times I shared in their humour. At all times I felt that there was a mutual respect, and an atmosphere of trust, which I hope enabled the participants to feel safe in disclosing what were personal and individual accounts of experience.

Developing Process. A more in-depth 'technical' description of our study process is perhaps necessary in order for the reader to gain a better understanding of the all-important context for the interpretations arrived at in this study.

The timing of all interviews was arranged to suit the participant and myself. While there were a couple of incidences of 'no shows', good faith was demonstrated by all of us, and rescheduling was not a problem.

All interviews were undertaken by me, incorporating basic counselling microskills of listening, attending, reflecting and paraphrasing (Ivey, 1994). As well, all of the interviews were audiotaped (excluding the first focus group and the last short meeting with George Calliou), and transcripts made of each. All transcripts were compiled by me, and the initial interpretations were drawn through my experience and understanding of what was being told to me by these women. Being completely immersed in and responsible for the process both provided me with a greater connection with the study content, and also ensured confidentiality for the participants. After each transcript was complete, it was read while listening to the audiotape twice, in order to get a better sense of the 'whole'.

Participants were given a verbatim copy of each interview at our next meeting and at that time were invited to take time to read it before we continued with our scheduled

interview. This offer was made in order to give each participant the opportunity to comment on, request deletions of, or question the content of the transcript(s). No participant desired to read their transcript before continuing our next interview, and only one participant made comments at a later time regarding her first transcript where she pointed out some typological errors made by me. As these errors referred to place names, it was of no real consequence to the study as I re-asserted that no identifying information such as placenames would be included in the text of the thesis.

All of the participants completed three interviews each, with each of the interviews lasting anywhere between 60 and 110 minutes, with an average of about 75 minutes each. The first interview with each participant was completed, transcribed and interpreted before starting the second interviews with any of the others. This same process was engaged in between the second and third interviews. On a broad time-span, the first round of interviews was conducted between mid-January and the end of February, the second round conducted between mid-March and the end of April, and the final interview(s) at the end of May.

The Process of Interpretation

Echoing the circular nature of the hermeneutic process, interpretation was for me a continuous interplay of interviewing, transcribing, making meaning, verifying, validating, refining, and so the circle begins again.

Making Meaning. Making interpretations of what my co-researchers told me was the source of both great satisfaction and enormous self-doubt. I found myself constantly questioning what I did, the interpretations I made, and why I was making them. The first step in my interpretive process involved transcribing, listening and verifying, and going

through the transcripts line-by line to ascribe meaning or interpretation with a conscious emphasis on those elements that had a connection to the 'lived experience' of these women (e.g. van Manen, 1984). Once these significant statements or elements were identified, they were given a "label" that then helped me to classify the transcripts (Ely, 1991; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Once a new "label" was added, I then would re-investigate not only that transcript for other instances of what was found, but those of the other participants as well.

Discussing the process of interpretation with the participants was something that occurred at all stages of the study process. In our initial 'focus group', the intended process was discussed, with the caveat that there would be a certain degree of flexibility within that process. After the first interview with each individual, through the process of transcription and underscoring themes from each individual's interview, a rough outline of the metaphorical journey up a mountain was outlined. The second interview with each participant began by asking if there was anything they wished to add in retrospect to that which we discussed in the first interview. Generally, the participants added some further elucidation on the content of our first individual interview together, but not a great deal that was largely new or significantly different. Following that, the remainder of the time was spent discussing and clarifying meaning(s), and going more in-depth with respect to individual experiences (Field & Morse, 1985; May, 1989).

As the number of 'labels' grew, they were grouped into clusters of like units, which represented units of meaning. These clusters together then represented a 'theme', each of which in turn symbolized a significant aspect of the phenomenon under question. From here, these themes were then clustered together with other themes that represented

a similar but significantly unique aspect of the phenomenon, such that it deserved a category of its own was labeled a 'metatheme'. Key statements that represented the central meaning of each theme were drawn from the transcripts for inclusion into this thesis, and are included throughout Chapter 4. Finally, the metathemes were drawn together in a fashion that best expressed the interpretation of the experience.

For this study, all of the themes and metathemes have been subsumed under a superordinate descriptor of the experience, a metaphor of meaning. This framework developed through both a progressively deepening understanding of the content of the interviews, and discussion with the participants in the second and final interviews. All sub-themes, themes, metathemes and the superordinate theme name choices were discussed and amended with the help of my co-researchers in order to assure that the titles best described the meaning(s) they represented.

In summary, I find that my part in the process was that of pulling together the information given to me, and checking for validation and verification of that process with the participants. Indeed, I feel it is important to stress that ownership and authorship resides primarily with the five women, for without them and their hard work in contributing the content and also helping to formalize it, this thesis would not exist in the meaningful form that it does.

A Question of Ethics

We must remember at all times that we are guests in another culture, that we are not the "bosses" in that context, and we must respect community-accepted ways of thinking and doing things. (Mawhiney, 1993, pp. 41-42)

Because of the cross-cultural nature of this study (where I as a White researcher

was participant in rather than observer to the study process), ethical considerations were paramount to both its application, and acceptance by both 'The Native Centre' and the University ethics committee. Before embarking in the study process proper, I felt it important to gain an understanding of the ethical issues involved in communication with a Native population from the perspective of a person, a researcher and a counsellor. It was only from there that I felt relatively confident pursuing the process further. The following is an outline of both the ethical 'understandings' I gleaned from the literature prior to the research process, and also those 'ethical hurdles' which were navigated by 'The Native Centre', the participants, and myself.

What the Literature Told Me

Cross-Cultural Research Ethics. What little literature there is available on choice of methodology with a Native population espouses the use of qualitative approaches (e.g. Darou, Hum & Kurtness, 1993; Mihesuah, 1993). The fact that the study population is Native (e.g. LaDue, 1994) and that I am non-Native (e.g. Allen & Baber, 1992; Reid & Kelly, 1994) together imply various ethical considerations regarding culture, gender and (possible) power issues. However, I tried as much as possible to follow suggestions in the literature (together with my own intuition and sensitivity) in order to be culturally appropriate and ethically correct in my approach. The four steps outlined by Trimble and Lee (cited in Darou et al., 1993) that were helpful as an initial starting point emphasized (a) obtaining formal consent and cooperation (b) organizing a local advisory committee (c) preparing culturally sensitive instruments and interviews, and (d) providing feedback after the project completion and implement community programs. While these points refer specifically to projects with a more ethnographic purpose undertaken in a Native

community setting, each was appropriate and taken into consideration for this study. Indeed, points 'a' through 'd' have each been addressed and incorporated as part of the fundamental process for this study (refer to 'the How' section above).

The process of cooperation and sharing, of giving and receiving feedback from participants, is seen as a means of demonstrating responsibility to the participant group (Monroe & Monroe, 1986). Incorporating this approach is in accordance with the tenets of both phenomenological methodology, and the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists' (1992) principle of Respect for the Dignity of Persons. Mihesuah (1993) emphasized the importance placed on respecting values, needs and wishes, not being intrusive, gaining permission from the appropriate sources, cooperating with the society involved, and providing feedback. Most importantly, the researcher should not look upon Native people as curiosities. There should be a worthwhile purpose for the research, and the question "who is benefiting?" should be foremost in the mind of the cross-cultural researcher. At a minimum, there should be some understanding and respect for traditions and values within the culture being approached. This is especially true for a non-Native researcher (such as myself), who should avoid assuming the role of "Indian Expert", and instead acknowledge that:

...professionals should avail themselves of readings, trainings, and consultation to increase their skills as well as awareness of their own possible biases ... non-Native professionals must NOT participate in activities which promote or condone the stealing and inappropriate use of spiritual activities. They need to be willing to acknowledge their ignorance and to *avoid* calling themselves Indian experts. (p.108)

Feminist Research Ethics. While I do not approach my participants or my study from a strictly feminist perspective, the facts that females are the population included,

that I am female myself, that I have a belief in the empowerment of women, and seek to bring voice to those who seldom have one, make a brief discussion of relevant feminist research principles appropriate to include here.

It is commonly understood that the aim of feminist research is to provide knowledge that promotes equality and provides a voice for those without one (Thompson, cited in CRIAW, 1996). However, issues of power and control are inevitably part of the equation when a white researcher attempts to engage in a research relationship with a woman of colour. Indeed, a common and valid criticism of feminism is that it is a white, middle-class, heterosexual, liberal movement (Allen & Baber, 1994). If that is true, then, how can white feminists still be cross-culturally sensitive? These questions are particularly salient in the relationship between a White researcher and a Native female research participant, whose personal and family history often include instances of racism, oppression, genocide, alcoholism – the list goes on – which have often been attributed to White influence (e.g. LaDue, 1994).

When contemplating the use of feminist approaches to research with women of colour, it is important to understand some of the ethical and epistemological tensions involved. One concern voiced in the literature at present comments on the fact that just when we have finally begun to accept that the essentials of human behaviour cannot be represented by only one (read: male) perspective, we instead accept the universality in women based on ideas of shared and representative experiences! (Reid & Kelly, 1994). Indeed, Reid and Kelly claim that to some extent, expectations of women's similarities have replaced those which assumed women's similarity to men. Further extending the gap between understanding, knowledge and practice is the fact that very little research on

“common” female experiences has been undertaken with women of color. Indeed, women of color are more often targeted for participation in studies of atypical behaviour (Reid & Kelly, 1994), with that fact now prompting a radical change in assumptions about what is worthy or appropriate for investigation.

The above speaks to some of the feminist principles that affect the ethical decision-making process involved in the present study. However, it is important to point out that there are a great many tensions in feminist epistemologies, not least of which is that inherent in the philosophy that is most consistent with my own beliefs – Feminist Postmodernism (Allen & Baber, 1994). Because this approach is “constructivist” in that it perceives knowledge, truth, power and gender relations as created through process (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988), some authors might contend that it does not allow for a common view of reality on which to guide policy and practice – a basic goal of ‘true’ feminist research (Allen & Baber, 1994). It is for this reason that I postulate that while I consider elements of my personal approach to the ethics of this research to be feminist in origin, I do not espouse a wholly feminist perspective. That is, while I do not and am not proposing a ‘common view’ or a generalizable theorem for the lived experience of the participants of this study, I in turn do not make the assumption that the findings of this study cannot serve to instigate change in policy and/or practice.

Applying Ethical Knowledge

Firstly, all of the appropriate channels were broached before approaching any prospective participants. That is, after my academic supervisor, George Calliou was the first person with whom the possibility of the study was discussed. It was not until after speaking with him, with the (then) head of the First Nations Student Association (FNSA),

and with Noreen Demeria that the idea of the study was accepted. Actually, the idea was not acceptable to the head of the FNSA for primarily cultural reasons (not least of which was her belief that Native people have been studied far too much, and without gain to them). However, because of George's interest in it for its possible positive outcomes for 'The Native Centre' and female Native students it was given the 'green light'. Noreen Demeria's influence was significant in her acceptance of and trust in both me and my intentions. In fact, the process of discussion and trust-building that occurred for the year before meeting prospective participants was in itself an ethical test, and one which I am honored to feel that I passed.

More specifically, however, all participants were given a cover letter and consent form at the outset which described in detail the limits of confidentiality, and the measures taken to ensure same. All were given the option of discontinuing their participation at any time. Also, I made it clear that if there were any questions they had of me, or my intentions, that they were more than welcome to ask. I feel that because my 'intent' for the study was a good and proper one – i.e. that its purpose was not solely for selfish reasons – I was culturally ethical.

Oral and written consent (Appendix D) was obtained that allowed inclusion of verbatim excerpts of their transcripts in the body of the thesis. This was obtained at the conclusion of our interviews together. In addition, a draft copy of all five chapters was provided for the examination of each participant prior to its submission to the examining committee. At that time, all participants were asked to confirm their acceptance of the content as presented. If they had reservations, they were asked to point out (a) what they had reservations about, and (b) what changes they expected to see before they would

consent to its submission.

All transcripts were kept in my place of residence, and were not accessed by anybody but myself. I did not have copies of any transcripts kept on the hard-drive of a computer, and only floppy disk and hardcopies were made and kept. The tapes were kept separately from the hard and floppy disk copies. All copies will be destroyed/erased three years after the conclusion of this project.

At the study outset, pseudonyms were chosen by four of the participants and I was asked to choose a name for one participant. At no point was the real name of any participant used in the body of this thesis. Only in the hardcopy of the final group interview that was distributed back to the participants was the first letter of real names used to indicate the speaker. It was decided that this was the most appropriate decision, given that using the initial of pseudonyms might disclose the ownership of excerpts from other individual interviews when the thesis is published in its final form. All participants were cautioned of the possible limits to confidentiality for themselves that may result from participation in the final group format. No demographic data, tribal community, Band-affiliation or places of origin names are included in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

In consideration of the fact that the content of the interviews might contain emotionally laden material, provision was made for referral either to a Native elder, or a professional counsellor. Fortunately, neither of these options was necessary.

CHAPTER FOUR: DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE

Prologue

What follows is a description² of the results of the interpretive process outlined in chapter three. Before embarking on that, however, it is necessary to address an important aspect of doing qualitative research – that is, being able to demonstrate an element of trustworthiness in the findings. Where in quantitative work there is a prescribed route to follow in order to satisfy our cravings for positivist ‘truisms’, there has developed a distinct distaste among a majority of the educated for that which cannot supply die-hard evidence and unquestionable facts. This was not the purpose of the present study. Reaching for an understanding of another’s perspective by definition does not mean seeking a single ‘truth’, but in the true constructivist tradition values individual perspectives of reality. While social constraints may design some shared understandings of this life, basically, “to each their own” (in the constructivist sense of the phrase!).

It is on that basis that it is almost impossible for me to use research and theory to ‘validate’ (to use a positivist term) what you are about to read. I realize that I could quote various theorists and researchers who work using qualitative methodologies (e.g. Hunnisett, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). However, my beliefs are such that firstly, no one can be an expert in another’s experience, but they can share in an understanding or interpretation of it. Secondly, only the individual whom you are addressing can validate your interpretation of what was said. It is for this reason that I include here support for

² For reasons of confidentiality not all verbatim excerpts are identified with their source. However, please note that the voice of each woman is represented within each theme, unless otherwise stated.

the trustworthiness of the interpretations to follow, not from books or articles, but from the participants. If I truly value their lived experience, then I should value their opinion on whether this represents an accurate description of it.

Initially, when I used the metaphor of climbing a mountain to represent the lived experience of the participants, I was anxious that they might construe using metaphor as inappropriate, or worse, insulting. My reasoning for these thoughts was my awareness of the importance of metaphor in the Native oral tradition together with the spiritual sacredness of Mountains. Thankfully, these ghosts were somewhat laid to rest in the second interview, with the perception from Alison that substantiated the 'trustworthiness' of my approach to that point:

...yeah, I think it's a good, I like your analogy too, of the mountain. 'Cos the mountain, I mean is sacred, right. They're the Grandfathers and they, they give us the strength, y'know. When you're in the mountains you feel a real sense of, like you can feel that energy, y'know, in the mountains, and so, being here is like climbing a mountain sometimes, like, y'know, sometimes you fall back off, but you climb right back up, and you get to different levels, and... so it's a good analogy. -- Alison.

Supporting the feeling that the experience of being a student was analogous to the trials of climbing a mountain, Rachel pointed out that "I don't think you ever really reach the top anyway, because you just go down and you start over again, and away you go again, y'know. It's always a continual cycle." More specifically, though, for her:

There are certain victories along the way and in a way you sort of mentioned them y'know because, starting out you're at the bottom, and then you're trying, y'know, work your way through here, and so you get to some spots, but it's tough, it's hard going, y'know. And, so yeah, I can relate to that... you need to look at it here at the University, yeah, I could definitely see it as a mountain... -- Rachel.

The use of this metaphor is in some ways 'borrowed' by me from the culture and

tradition of these women. As such, I sincerely hope that it has been used and presented in a respectful way, a way in which the *process* of the journey is emphasized, rather than reaching the top. This point was emphasized by Candice, who accepted the metaphor with the condition that mountains not be misrepresented, as in:

... that whole climbing movement, you know, and it becomes an obsession to conquer this mountain or conquer that mountain. As long as there's a distinction, I think, because I don't see mountains as things that need to be conquered you know. I have a lot of respect for mountains...
-- Candice.

More important than the metaphor used was my concern that the interpretation(s) spoke to each individual, while encompassing all. As I found out through my own journey, (the one which brought me up and around the slippery slopes of my qualitative research mountain), being respectful and inclusive of all significant experiences of each participant while avoiding generalizations is difficult. However, the 'impostor syndrome' that led me to question my process and the interpretive outcomes as some kind of semi-fiction was quenched with Alison's statement that

Yeah, you can tell it's not made up. I can see myself in every one of those, y'know like I can see... where I, where this pertains to me in what I said to you. It's interesting because, it's almost like there's nobody else...
-- Alison

Comments such as "I feel that I've been heard" are the greatest compliments one can expect as a qualitative researcher. These comments helped to allay the constant fears that my interpretations might stray from the co-researchers lived experience. Kate-lyn, too voiced her belief that the interpretations developed between us were appropriate:

...just glancing at the headings, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah... just the way that you have worded it, y'know, I think yeah, yeah, that was it, that was it! Just thinking about my own experiences and, and yeah, that sums it up fairly well! -- Kate-lyn.

While in my work as a counsellor, I espouse the feminist value of the importance of empowering others, this study was not in itself designed to empower. Interestingly, however, I found that this empowerment came merely as a result of participation, at least for one participant.

I'm glad that things developed between you and me and the tape-recorder in the way that they did, because, I've discovered something new about me. I've been able to put into words feelings that were very hard to identify. -- Kate-lyn.

Even Laura, who at times indicated that she felt somewhat differently to the others in that her 'rough spots' at school were more academic than ethnically-related, explained that she saw herself in the interpretations through her identity as a Native person:

It does [the interpretations speak to me] because, because yes, I'm an individual but I'm Native and I'm very proud of that and in, in that we are a whole community ... so it does, speak you know, about me as a Native person. -- Laura

In summary, I feel that the interpretations to follow have been validated and confirmed by their source. For those comments above, I am both grateful and flattered.

With regard to the transferability of the findings presented here, Chapter 3 provides the reader with a thorough description of the study process and the setting involved. I do not purport that what will be read here will be indicative of all Native women's experience at University. Indeed, I cannot guarantee that your interpretation of what you read is the interpretation will be that intended and developed by us. However, please understand that what is contained herein is as true and insightful a representation of these women's experiences as possible. From here, it is up to the reader to determine

the applicability of the findings to her or his own situation and experience (Kennedy, 1979).

"Climbing my Mountain"

The meaning of the university experience for the five Native women who took part in the present study is one that is testament to hard work and dedication, interspersed with personal victories, tragedies and barriers to forward growth. Metaphors, in keeping with the oral tradition of Native peoples, were considered the most appropriate in describing this experience - both for clarity and descriptive ease. Indeed, what can be more challenging yet more satisfying than climbing a mountain? What is more awesome than the sight of a truly magnificent mountain?

The superordinate metaphor of "Climbing my Mountain" indicates the personalization of all experiences as described to me by the participants. Throughout, experience was owned, and valued. Those interpretations to follow are owned by Rachel, Laura, Alison, Kate-lyn, Candice and myself. Importantly, what is to follow is a reflection of our unanimous agreement regarding the interpretation of their lived experience. Hence, while I admit to being tempted, I have avoided making further interpretations or adding to those already made since our final meeting. With this restraint, I hope to have maintained the co-operative research relationship that resulted in our shared understanding.

I can only hope to be as respectful of the Native culture and the women I interviewed as they were of me. In doing so, I wish to emphasize that in using this particular metaphor, it is the *process* of climbing that is the most important to acknowledge, not the end result. As Candice explained, mountains in the Native tradition

are holy and sacred places and are not there to be 'conquered'. Therefore, I ask you to read this chapter with respect for the meaning of its continuous content. No one section deserves less attention than another does.

Within the journey, several aspects of the process were drawn out as those being most meaningful of the University experience for these women. These components of the journey were labelled 'metathemes', and are identified as: Reaching the Foot, Support for the Journey, Rough Spots, Pacing Myself, and Reflections on the Journey. For the first and the last of these there is a somewhat different 'tone' to the content. That is, for the first the participants spoke from a somewhat distanced place in speaking of their memories about coming here. In the last, the women are speaking of the changes they have noted in themselves to date, and the changes that they envision for the future. The middle three are more process-oriented, and speak to what the experience of being a University student *is* like for them.

While there is a slight difference in tone, however, it is very important to realize and recognize is the inter-relatedness of experience. Despite the content of this chapter being presented in what might be construed as a linear fashion, the experiences and meanings are very much interrelated into the greater picture of lived experience - memories of the past and desires for the future are inextricably linked to experiences in the present. Circularity in life is one of the central tenets of Native traditional belief. To find oneself trying to separate out individual elements of experience in order to describe it feels akin to dissecting an animal in order to try and understand how it lives. Therefore, I apologize in advance for the linear structure, and accept responsibility for that as merely a concrete representation of my continuous struggle to understand and

accordingly represent a culture and a phenomenon with which I cannot boast a truly 'lived experience.'

Metatheme 1: Reaching the Foot

There are significant experiences, thoughts and beliefs that we count as significant to our being in a particular place at a particular time - so too with the participants of this study. The meaning of being at University is inextricably linked with the reasons for being here. Indeed, the experience of these women would be inaccurately portrayed without placing them in this context.

The participants of this study described the experience of coming to University as that which was often a mixture of Pride, Vision and Apprehension.

Pride

Coming to University was seen as something that was a great accomplishment and the reason for a great deal of pride, both in themselves, by their families, and also for the pride they themselves got from the effects that this move made on those close to them.

A Sense of Personal Accomplishment. One of the biggest things about having initially come to University for these women was a sense of accomplishment. The sense of being able to achieve an educational goal such as reaching University was something that had a positive effect on self-esteem and self-worth.

I think one of the biggest things is a sense of accomplishment, because I'm a high school dropout, and I had to upgrade... and it helped for me to do it that way to decide well hey, I'm doing so well at this stage that I could see that, being in University was something I would be able to actually accomplish, and part of that had to do with what was going on in my life at the time. That was, very negative for my self-esteem, and feeling like, I could really accomplish something and.. It was a transition phase for me,

something in my life *towards* something at that time. I really needed to have something to look toward ... but it was, because of being accepted at University that I received that feeling of self-fulfilment. It gave me a real boost of self-esteem. -- Kate-lyn

Being accepted at University was a time filled with pride for some of the participants, where having come this far in the education process was not something considered as a common feat for others in their home communities that they had known prior to coming to University. Indeed, there was a sense that this experience was different to that of the majority population, where "I mean, even growing up, I could count on probably one hand, or maybe two hands, how many of my friends went to University...." My sense from this statement was that 'friends' was a statement that encompassed the majority of peers in the home community.

Family and Community Pride. To have a family member accepted to and attending University was something for which the families and community of the participants felt proud:

When we were growing up my Mum and Dad were always saying, you know, education is really important. My mum didn't get very far in her education because somebody torched the residential school on the reserve when she was young, and they never rebuilt...so it was a big thing for me to go, to come here... So I get an awful lot of satisfaction, I don't know what's the word, a lot of pride, because I know how my mum and dad must feel. You know like, I'm doing it for mum and dad too. -- Kate-lyn

Some of the participants felt that education was a very important part of their life, and advancement was and is very much supported. However, not all families had parent(s) who had had a great deal of school-based education and often the idea of going to University was something that was not supported or encouraged. This feeling was very much pronounced by one participant, who felt that while her parents were proud of

her educational achievements prior to coming to University, they found it difficult to demonstrate this pride (this point and others will be elucidated in the theme of 'rough spots'):

Oh yeah, like they would, let me know that they were proud, but they wouldn't actually say it but, just, you know, you could sort of.. When I for example, when they didn't hear from me, or they knew I wasn't working, they would say, "oh, you know, we miss you, we know you're not working and, and so they would know that and they, so that was their way of saying that they were proud of what I was doing. -- Candice

Instilling Pride. Coming to University was something that meant a lot more than personal pride for the participants. While it was certainly more of a personal accomplishment for some, others saw it within the broader context of their community. For some, going to school had served to instil the same kind of belief and pride in self to members of their own family. One participant feels that her going to school at a 'mature' age opened the door for other members of her family to feel that it was possible for them to go too:

...so I like to think that, you know, I have.. I had a little bit to do with that, in terms of, setting an example, like even for my mother, and you know I told her, when I started school that she should go to school and she thought she was too old and I said "You're never too old to learn", you know... so she's doing it, and it, it makes me very proud. -- Alison

In the stories of the participants, respect and pride are closely linked, where engaging in continued education is a way in which to show respect for and pride in one's culture and community:

I was finding that, as a Native person that, that I definitely had a calling, and that, because of all the people who, who hadn't I guess, slipped through the cracks, you know, that that was my way of paying respect to the, you know, by not taking it for granted. By not throwing it away, and I guess it wasn't too clear then but I knew that there was something that I had to do... and so I thought well, get an education, I don't know what else

to do, you know. – Laura

Vision

Reaching University was not the ultimate goal for any of the participants. Indeed, each participant had a vision for coming, with that of four out of the five including returning to their communities in order to "give back" and "make a difference." There was a real sense among most of the participants of wanting "to be able to go back and somehow, whatever, help my community", while also having a chance to better themselves through education. One participant described herself as having avoided a fate that might otherwise have awaited her such as "just get[ting] pregnant like [her] sisters did", and having overcome negative comments like "oh, you'll be back." Instead she had proved herself able to survive away from the home community, and for that she was proud.

Vision for Self. Much of the vision of the future after education entailed what they would be able to do - for their people, or for themselves. It was only with maturity that some of the participants decided that University was a possibility, where prior to that "the thought had never even crossed my mind really, until I thought, started to get older, and started to look at what was attainable. What did I want from my life, you know?" This kind of thinking led to thoughts of home and community, and enabling and empowering others - "yes, I wanna make a difference." An example of this forward-thinking is demonstrated by a quote from the first interview with Candice:

I guess, you know, I mean it was a conscious decision to come to University, and, I mean, I was thinking the reason I'd come, 'cos I think it's, ah, I want to be able to go back to where my home is, and be in a position to help and make changes that empower people, like, I mean, not just aboriginal people, but people who are generally marginalized by this,

by whether it's economically, or socially, or culturally. I wanna be able to do something, like make a contribution back, you know, to where, to where... you know, where I've come from, and I couldn't do that without a degree, I couldn't be in a position to make decisions, without a degree... –Candice

This vision was not necessarily well formed, and indeed many of the participants echoed sentiments of "I don't know how yet" with regard to how they would eventually be able to "help." For some, they could see that merely *coming* to University might have a positive effect on others at home:

I guess I just wanted to show my nieces and nephews that there is something out there and, and I didn't know what that was... I guess ultimately, that was my push. Because I just, they [my nieces and nephews] teach me so much... – Laura

Apprehension

For all except one of the participants, coming to University was tinged with some apprehension, which was often related to aspects of any or all of self-doubt or low self-esteem, bitterness due to cultural factors, negative perceptions of the educational system and a felt lack of choice.

Self-Esteem Issues. Feeling 'different' is not something unique for any of the participants. For some, however, feelings of inadequacy or doubt coloured the emotions felt on acceptance to University. Some of these feelings were described in a social context and others were personally owned. Memories of previous educational experiences which had had a negative effect on self-esteem played a role in tainting the experience, at least initially, for one of the participants:

...out of highschool because of the curriculum and the way teachers sort of treated, ahm, the way I felt I was perceived as an Aboriginal person, I felt inferior to sort of, you know, people with a European origin who were living - Canadian, Euro-Canadians I guess. I felt inferior to them, and so I struggled with that and that came up very loud and clear again when I was

thinking about going to University, I just, I didn't think I could cut it..." and ".and in terms of school, and probably a bit of my job too and the idea of going to University scared me very much, and I was very afraid and, I didn't feel that I was quote unquote "good enough" to go to University, or smart enough, or... you know, capable enough.. it was very much a scary thing. -- Candice

Returning to school after a number of years absence also made University a daunting vision, where for one participant, it'd been "17 years since I finished grade 12 and so I was very apprehensive about the fact of going back to school after so many years..." Laura, on the other hand, exemplified the difficulties faced when trying to assume a new identity – that of a University Student – which is so foreign to her own. Indeed, her initial reaction to the research question was to observe that she didn't actually identify herself as a 'University student' at all. Later, however, she clarified that statement, and provided a social-learning basis for her perception of 'being separate from' the mainstream student body:

I mean yes I am a University student. We're all University students. We come here with students, but I guess it's, it's that stereotypical thing that's inside everybody I'm sure, and just, just feeling very.. like just coming from y'know, what I've felt was it happened to nobody else in the whole wide world, y'know, alcoholic father, my mother was always going to work and, six or five siblings, my sisters who are old, three of them are all older than me and they all have kids, teenage pregnancies. So I guess felt like, it just y'know, just me and them, y'know... -- Laura

Cultural Factors. Coming to University was a big step for some of the participants, where doing so was completely foreign to their culture and society:

It wasn't a spoken thing, but I mean like none of my family went to University so.. You know, you just see it; you see it as an Aboriginal person I think you see it as.. like a non-Native construct that you know, isn't easily penetrated by Native people, you know? And so, I don't know where that thought came from though, I really don't. -- Alison

Worry about what University life might do to one's beliefs and values were also a

concern, where "I was really scared to come to University as well because I didn't wanna become conditioned." However, the impact of culture was not mentioned in the stories of apprehension of all of these women. While this may be a factor of forgetfulness, or that it was not an issue at the time, the impact of culture and cultural-difference within the University setting comprises a large section of the third theme.

"Rough Spots."

Perceptions of Education. Social conditioning and beliefs about the educational system contributed to the fears of applying for or reaching University.

... for me it means a lot, because I never ever thought that it was possible. Like, I never thought I was smart enough, I thought you had to be like really smart to be in University, and it was never, pushed in my family, so, you know if we graduated that was, a real accomplishment. — Alison

For Alison, post-secondary education was something that was perceived as being open only to others, others who were 'smarter' than her. This quote demonstrates her perception of post-secondary education as exclusionary - restricted to an 'elite' population that before recently, did not include herself or her family.

A perceived lack of choice was only overtly noted by one participant, where for her coming to University was an achievement "not because I had a choice. For me, coming from the reserve, the only other alternative was, stay home, get pregnant, or something like that...." While for her it seems that coming to University was the only viable option, for others it appears as if coming here would not have been the decision most favoured had there been other options available. Some of the positive alternatives to coming to University here as described by the participants included being able to remain in their home community while still garnering the respect of mainstream society,

or having the provision for a University closer to home. These sentiments are echoed and elaborated upon within some of the subsections of the following metathemes...

Metatheme 2: Support for the Journey

During the interviews, there was a great emphasis on the importance of support for the ability to persevere and grow within the educational setting of the University. Most of the emphasis was placed on 'The Native Centre', and the interactions of the participants with others there. In fact, the description here cannot do justice to the non-verbal and palpable cues which led me to believe that the Native Centre is indeed 'a home away from home' for each of the participants interviewed. In addition, the participants gave great weight to the importance that the support of their immediate families and communities play in their continuing status as a University student.

The Native Centre

The importance in the lives of each of the participants of the Native Centre cannot be done justice by its description within this theme, as its importance surpasses the confines of its four physical walls. Perhaps the words of one participant can best summarize its significance in the student and personal lives of these women:

I don't know, I believe that University for me would not have been such a wonderful experience if this place was not here. This is my home, you know, and it feels, because I have this little piece here that I call my own and share with others like me, meaning the Native ancestry, it makes the whole place seem warm, rather than the cold institution that it really is!.. This place puts a human face on it for me... -- Kate-lyn

In attempting somehow to segregate the various levels on which the Native Centre plays a role in supporting the educational journey of these women, again I find myself

apologizing for segmenting a phenomenon that in reality represents a number of inter-related and symbiotic elements of support.

Educational Support. Application to and successful acceptance by the University of Calgary of the participants was achieved through communication with 'The Native Centre.' Indeed, for at least one participant, this communication began long before her educational life at University began:

I was in touch with the Native Centre, three years before I actually even started school, or so, every year I would, I'd phone and say "okay, what do I have to do again?", and, so they were quite instrumental in my coming here, you know, and just coming to the orientation before school started, seeing other Native people on campus, and so that was really important for me. -- Alison

Just knowing that there was a Native Centre here was helpful in alleviating some of the anxiety about coming to University. In retrospect, some students mentioned that the existence of the Native Centre was something that was not made known in the registration packet they received, and often they found out about the Native Centre by chance, or through some research into the University itself.

In addition to its availability, the participants noted some of the practical bonuses that 'The Native Centre' offered them which helped in the transition to University life. For example, the transition year program was important to one participant because it gave her "a chance to upgrade [my], whatever [I] needed to upgrade", and the SAMS program that at least two participants participated in when they first came to the University. In both situations, the women noted having made long and lasting friendships, and learned skills necessary to manage time, money, and study.

Emotional Support. More important than the practical supports received at and

through the Native Centre, however, was the emotional support received through friendships developed there. No participant felt that emotional support was lacking within the Native Centre, and all emphasized its importance in maintaining their self-esteem and perseverance with their educational programs. From the wide range of personal experiences shared with me, including the loss of friends, terminal illness of close family members, alcoholism, friends' illness and personal illness, each participant emphasized the significance in their lives of the friendships developed at the Native Centre:

One of the things that was very, you know, I have a very wide variety of people who are my friends. And the people here at the Native Centre, I mean, its amazing what I've gone through here...so there's been, our people know a lot of tragedy, and its amazing how we, we stick together and I can honestly say that it was from the support of my friends here that helped me, personally to get through... -- Rachel

Other participants whose words are equally forceful on the subject echoed these sentiments:

Actually, the Native Centre is where I met, you know, friends that I just, I couldn't imagine not having met! They have each become so important in my life, and so much, so main, and that have just helped this experience at University. -- Candice

Where one participant did not mention the Native Centre at all in our first interview, on investigation later, her response indicated that in fact, contrary to it not being important to her, "I guess I maybe overlooked it because I'm just here every day..."

Spirituality and Tradition. The Native tradition is heavily grounded in spirituality, and the importance of this grounding, or achieving spiritual 'balance' was stressed during my interviews with each participant. Indeed, spirituality incorporates a large and important part of each of the participants' lives. In this respect, one participant

acknowledged that the Native Centre had helped her identify with the Native part of herself:

...it was through my contacts here that I was able to, become involved with Spirituality, that I got to know my Spirit-self. So that has been important to me, that kind of support that I get.. Ceremonies that are held here and, Ceremonies that are held, that I find out about because I come here and they support me. Those Ceremonies support me and breathe new life into me so that I can go again... -- Kate-lyn

Regaining spirituality in order to achieve balance and continue in what is otherwise a difficult academic year, one participant recounted how she was helped to regain her balance through spirituality at the Native Centre:

This year has been totally different. I think that a lot of it has to do with me just being around here. We had Pipe Ceremonies here and, it just helped me to get connected, and if this wasn't here, then I don't know where I would've gone for that to happen. -- Laura

Nature plays a major role in the Native tradition, and again, one participant echoed its importance in achieving a 'balance' in her life as a student and a mother:

...places where I go to sort of build up energies out on the land and, the mountains and I have to go quite regularly I tend to sort of go there, go out to nature more. I don't feel as judged out in nature, and I feel that that's where I belong, like, I feel like I know who I am, I don't know where I belong right, but I belong, you know, with, and I feel that out on the land, I feel that that's where I belong. -- Candice

The thoughts and feelings shared with me regarding spirituality emphasized it as one of the most important components of being a Native person who lives in a traditional way. Having a place within the University institution where this kind of spirituality can be practised in order to maintain a balance of a spiritual and emotional nature for these participants was central to their feelings of success and achievement within this setting.

A Shared Understanding. As noted, the women described the importance of

having people with whom issues could be discussed, or from whom emotional support could be gained, or knowing that spiritual guidance could be obtained if needed. However, the fact that there was a 'sameness', a sense of 'shared understanding' between those individuals who formed the student community at the Native Centre seemed of paramount significance to the sense of community and belonging that these women described feeling. This sense of community and understanding has served to foster increased and more in-depth learning than they feel would be possible with contact restricted to individuals from another cultural group. Perhaps Rachel's words may best summarize this perception:

I would never have learned as much, never, because a lot of what I've learned I've been able to share, and, many of the ideas, that's what's so unique about being up here, with Native, other Native students who, are studying in books and that too because, we can talk about certain things that I really can't talk about with anybody else. I suppose I could talk to, to a certain extent with University students, but, but they still wouldn't be able, I'd have to go back and explain so much to them before I could even begin to sort of, we could even begin to say talk about Machiavelli or something like that. Whereas, I can go up to say, philosophy since that's what Machiavelli.. and if we were, if I were to go and talk to another Native student who I know has been taking some philosophy, and because I know their background, being a Native person, we could talk about Machiavelli, we can talk about certain things and, what we will see in our perspective and understanding of that is gonna be very different than other students. And so, I get a lot of, I've learned a lot from them, see. And then I might have an idea and they can go, oh, and do you know how that fits in? And they'll, y'know, so some of the conversations have been really profound, and a gift, because of the, the intellectual space that they come from is really, really neat. So that has been a very very big part of my intellectual journey, has been sharing those, concepts with students... -- Rachel

Laura echoed this sentiment, saying:

The whole reason why, the reason why we can stay here is because there's a sense of community here. Like right here in the Native Centre and, like I said we all come from a similar background so it's easier to just kind of

talk about right now, you know, rather than having to fill in everything... --
 Laura

In summary, the importance and significance of the role that the Native Centre plays in the lives of these Native women as they attend University cannot be overstated. There is a strong emotional and spiritual attachment, from which each participant derives significant support for her climb, and without which the path would be perceived as considerably more difficult. 'The Native Centre' is like an oasis, a nucleus of activity and support, but it also symbolizes the bridge between the Native tradition and the University structure:

Which is why the Native Centre is so important, because that is, that is the bridge. That is the only bridge I, I believe, besides y'know, professors that are open to that, and wanting to learn about that as well. Y'know, I see the Native Centre as that's the only bridge there is, y'know, because I can come here and get things going and it connects me to the community and, there are other people that are walking the traditional people too that I can go, "oh, I'm losing it", y'know, and they understand. -- Alison

Family and Community Support

Luckily for these participants, however, support for the journey is "not just limited to the Native Centre." While emotional support received through relationships with other Native students is crucial to achieving and maintaining balance in student life, all participants acknowledged the fact that "definitely, financially I wouldn't be here if I didn't get an allowance cheque at the end of every month" from their respective Bands.

More significant, perhaps, is the importance of family and community in the lives of these women as sources of emotional and spiritual support. The emotional support of immediate family, including children, siblings, parents and grandparents was acknowledged in some way by each of the participants. These sources of support were

acknowledged in the context of community supports - again echoing the interconnectedness of the Native community and the importance of same in achieving and maintaining spiritual and emotional balance and well-being. Reported examples of the type of support gained from these sources include, "...my family support is just huge... they share just as much in my getting and maintaining this", "...my siblings and everything they're, you know like, if I can't come home, they're okay, well, hang in there, and keep praying... they are a major support."

The belief and knowledge that support is available, and will be when it is needed most is something that seems to be particularly empowering for the individuals who participated. For example, Alison stated:

I got a letter from my Mum a couple of weeks ago, and, and actually a nice card and it said, "don't give up, we're so proud of you", blah, blah, blah. Yeah, it seems like, when I need that, it comes, y'know, 'cos it's not the first one I've received from her, and it seems to come at a time when I'm feeling low. -- Alison

Rachel echoed and built upon the perceived sources of support by including reference to "the community support, the Elders and the teachers are all out there, that's part of that community, and so they give me all the support that I need to survive here, and encouragement..."

What I note from the way this sort of support is expressed and experienced is that it is intrinsically connected with spiritual beliefs and values - again emphasizing interconnectedness and the importance of balance. More significant, however, is the need for and importance of having strong perceived social supports when contending with the content of the following theme...

Metatheme 3: Rough Spots

On a mountainous climb there are usually some parts that are more difficult to traverse than others. So too with the journey travelled by the Native women who shared their experiences with me. In fact, and unfortunately, this theme incorporates a larger 'step' on the journey than the others discussed in this chapter do. Within it are descriptions of the university as a non-Native construct, questioning, racism and the outcomes of these. Through the first three of these, it is possible to see the hardships and barriers to continuing the climb towards higher education for these women. Through the last, you will come to acknowledge both positive and negative outcomes of these areas of personal hardship. However, before going on I feel impelled to once again reiterate that the material presented by the participants *appeared* to fall into the following interpretative areas, and that these areas were questioned for their 'fit' with the story of their own personal lived experience.

University as a Non-Native Construct

All of the participants agreed that the institution of the University represents a construct foreign to Native traditional beliefs and values. Most poignant was the hierarchical structure of the learning process, as it is divided into the Institution, the Educators and the Learners. Because this is how the University's educational process is segmented in the eyes of those Native women interviewed, the present section is also divided similarly. However, again it is important to point out that this is a representation of how it is viewed by these women - *not the way that they wish it to be*. Kate-lyn reinforces that statement by emphasizing that "it's appropriate to have it separated like that because it's, the way it is!"

The Institution. Much of the dialogue regarding the Institution dealt with the perception that the University was a place where stereotypes were perpetuated, where there was an acceptance, a lack of questioning regarding the texts used, a lack of openness to change, and an intolerance for difference. The fact that there are no Native teachers at the University was a point of serious concern for these students, and more pointedly the fact that there was little compromise in this regard, where "it's that sort of stuffiness, that I find really offensive... like I mean that [employment of Native professors/teachers/Elders] could happen right now, because then you're saying "we value your knowledge." This statement seemed to be in recognition of the fact that sources of information very valuable to Native peoples (i.e. Native Elders and teachers) are being disregarded and given little if any respect by the University as a viable and appropriate source of education.

Indeed, there was a perception that the University as an institution was continuing a subtle form of support for the oppression of races other than Euro-North American. This was especially noted through the content of some linguistics courses, within which at least one participant interpreted a lack of respect for culture and diversity that she believed is contributing to the death of the oral tradition and its richness:

They're standardizing the language so that (sigh), you can make an alphabet for it and you can, teach it, rather than maybe concentrating on the oral first, and having the old people come into the schools and teaching young people, and, but that, that rush to write it, to get it on paper, legitimize it, is so strong.. What I'm saying is that, that's a very subtle form of oppression, in the sense that it's keeping the, it's objectifying the oral tradition in a sense that you know what's best for it. -- Candice

On top of feeling this form of oppression in their communities, and the effect that

it has had on them and their culture, the participants were angry and disillusioned at the perpetuation of biased stereotypes within the literature used in the courses taught at the University. Feeling a sense of being 'objectified' and 'dissected' as a culture was very much a theme of those participants who acknowledged the existence of this stereotyping.

A lot of the stuff that's written is always judged from a place outside of the culture, outside of that 'worldview', that worldview cannot present itself with dignity and respect because it's always being sort of, looked at from the outside, and dissected from the outside... and it's almost like, a cat and a mouse, and the cat being sort of the European, we'll say anthropology, anthropological thought, okay, and the mouse is kind of a culture being studied. It's very difficult for the mouse to say to the cat, "well, I want to study you now" (laughs), you know, it's just not going to happen - there's a difference in power. -- Candice

This 'power differential' and feeling of being in an oppressed position was a theme that was derived from three of the participants. However, this oppression is very subtle, and seems to be expressed by a feeling of inadequacy, or inability to speak up in class. These sentiments will be dealt with in more detail in the section to follow entitled "the Learners." It was common to hear, however, the feelings of frustration that led from that sense of disempowerment:

...these other people [without Native lived experience] are teaching students about Native people and, they don't have the experience necessary to, accurately portray Native people. The resources they have generally are anthropological, and which means they're from non-Native sources, and interpretations of Native people, and that's really frustrating... although, I cannot say, I can't stand up and say, you are wrong, you know, because I didn't experience a lot of what was going, what was, you know being said. I don't have knowledge, of what is being spoken about in the classroom, but I've, because of what other people have said to me, about certain things, it's in direct contradiction to what is seen, to some, a lack of respect of and... And I'd really really like to see a change. -- Kate-lyn

In summary, much of what the participants told me about referred again to the language used, echoing the insensitivity to and disregard of the oral tradition, in addition

to the perpetuation of stereotypes, where "the terminology used and all of that creates a hierarchy of societies..." From the interviews we had, it appears that often within the institution of the University, Native women felt as if they are on the bottom of that hierarchy, with a palpable perception that they are not respected, not appreciated and not valued for their diversity. When texts that are used to educate about Native peoples are presented from a European view of Canada, that serves to objectify the culture.

Other examples of how the institution does not support or advocate for diversity or difference are the facts that (a) there is no Native Studies Program offered here, and (b) Aboriginal teachers are not accepted here because they do not have a recognizable 'degree' - "I want to know why there aren't Aboriginal people, or people that have lived experience that are teaching these courses, you know, and furthermore, why isn't there a Native Studies program?." It is important to note here that one of the five participants did not express as many negative views about University itself or the educators, where her own perception of an explanation of this was the fact that she is the only one of the five women interviewed that is involved in a course of science-related study.

The Educators.

There should be more progression in the teaching styles, and one thing that I might, would like to add at this time is, and it goes into the experience of some of the things that I've experienced here is that, when you, when you label something 'The Educators' and you label something 'The Learners', these two things switch back and forth, like, the educators are also the learners and the learners are also the educators. But see what happens when you're in a place like this is, your Professor doesn't necessarily think that way.. So they're not open to that type of style. --
Alison

This quote represents the participants' collective ideal view of educators' and learners' roles. However, the following represents the reality of the role of educator for

those participants who shared their opinions with me.

The perpetuation of stereotypes through the perceptions of professors and educators in the classroom has the effect of tainting the Native women's views of the educational system. It also affects the emotional well being of the students, who can be very emotionally distraught, often for a long time, after hearing something culturally insensitive being put forward as truth within the classroom:

And I turned to her and she was almost crying that, that day you know she was so upset when we were all talking together when we first met [when we met in the initial focus group], you know. I was there in class that day, 387 students were enrolled in his class and he's saying this really horrible stuff, but... it's bad in that, you know like there's this guy is going to impress, people are going to be impressed upon by this guy's ideas, so they will come away with certain ideas, because of what this guy has said.
-- Kate-lyn

Rachel too emphasized the negative impact that professors can have in the classroom, where in one Canadian studies class, she saw that "There were Native students in that class who were brought to tears by things that he was saying that were so wrong." To add insult to injury, the lack of lived experience in Native culture of this same Professor invoked disbelief and anger in a system that appears to support these kinds of inadequacies in teachers, where:

"This professor didn't know what it [sweetgrass] was, y'know, other than reading it he'd never seen it, he'd never smelled it, he'd never met, never spent any time with a Native person! Now to me that seems wrong, y'know, it just does. -- Rachel

These women presented as very sensitive to the possible far-reaching effects of insensitive comments made by even one professor in one class, and the feelings of powerlessness and frustration were palpable in their voices as they talked to me about this. The way in which professors were categorized by two of the women stemmed from

something George Calliou "...was told by an Elder. There's two kind of people in the world. Those who don't know what they don't know, and those who know what they don't know." From these women's stories, the negative incidences encountered in the classroom with some professors placed them solidly in the former category.

Not only is it the promotion of stereotypes through ignorance on the part of the professors that is so enraging for these students, but how the professors teach, where sometimes "the instructor is.. I wanna get a cattle-prod!.. Talk about what I need to know." This perception of disinterest on the part of the teacher often results in the feeling that "learning just doesn't take place in the classroom" - again emphasizing the value placed on lived experience and experiential learning by the participants.

Some of the stereotypes perpetuated are so blatant, it seems difficult for these learners to comprehend how professors can say some of the things in class that they do, and not realize what it is they are saying. An example of one professor not "unpacking her statements" may best describe this frustration:

I have this professor say last week, she's talking about, the 'New World' because we're deal[ing with], it's a critique of Western Civilization so we're in the Baroque period, but she was looking at the 'New World' and just saying that simple statement that, you know, she doesn't realize that she's perpetuating colonization, and it's a classroom of 300 people you know and I'm going, like, she's, I bet she doesn't even understand what she's saying! -- Alison

This 'unpacking' refers again to the perception that professors have a lack of self-awareness, a lack of critical thinking about what they are teaching that is both insulting and degrading for those students who feel dishonoured by such blatant statements which exhibit their ignorance, their lack of cultural sensitivity and their complete lack of respect for diversity.

However, it is not only a feeling that some professors can be 'globally' insensitive, but also pointedly aggressive towards the Native students in their classes. Indeed, one participant could tell me that in a particular class "I felt attacked. I felt an attack like: who are you?" - again demonstrating the apparant power differential.

Perhaps the most disturbing personal experience of aggression by a professor was recounted by Candice, who "...tried to present the problem as I saw it and got yelled at." The effect that this incident evoked in her is best described in her words: "...it just felt really bad. I just felt so frustrated and so beaten at that moment in time. I bounced back, but at that time I felt really beaten and a lotta old stuff started to come up that I wasn't worthy enough." The outcome of this led to her admitting that "I actually got suicidal."

Not only did some participants feel attacked both in and out of the classroom, but also felt patronized and degraded, in one instance due to a professor "...[going] on to explain how to write a paragraph.. Now come on, that's patronizing...." The feeling that professors 'use' their position of 'power' in their teaching role is elucidated by Kate-lyn, who recounts what she noticed happen to another Native student in a classroom just two days before our second meeting:

...there are two Native people there [including herself], and the other Native person made a comment about something we were discussing. And the instructor questioned the comment made by this, the other student and essentially put him in his place so to speak. I'm the professor; you're the student... he had posed a question to the student that left the student, quiet. I don't know what he's feeling, but it left him quiet. The instructor looked at me and asked if I had anything to add to it. I just looked at him, just shook my head... -- Kate-lyn

What was noticeable through some of the women's stories was that they found the ability to look beyond what may be construed as insensitivity and ignorance on the part

of the teachers, and try to identify some barriers to their being better teachers, with comments like "this professor I think feels a little bit inferior... so, she, I think feels uncomfortable in this class teaching oral tradition to Native people." However, no amount of reframing is able to extinguish the feeling that this is not the way teaching/learning should be.

She [the professor] can learn from me too, you know? But she doesn't see this two-way, thing, so I feel bad that she doesn't respect me. Personally, this is how I feel. I don't know what the other students feel like. Personally, I think it's power. -- Rachel

It is important, however, to note that there was acknowledgement of the fact that some of the professors did indeed admit to knowing what they don't know, and sought to learn from those that do:

You do get professors who are [open to two-way learning and teaching] and they say "I've learned so much from you people", y'know, or "I've learned so much from this classroom", and so you can tell that they are open to that, that cycle of learning, where they don't think they know everything. -- Alison

This was verified by Rachel, who claimed:

I know professors in this University who are very very capable and very competent in what they're teaching, and they also recognize that they don't, they know what they don't know. And they can say it, and they are respectful of other Native people in the classroom. -- Rachel

The Learners. Echoing and building on the previous two sections, there was a distinct feeling of powerlessness on the part of the participants who described their experiences within the learning environment of the University. Even Laura, who generally felt that she did not encounter the same type of issues that her peers did due to the fact that she is in the sciences, recounts a negative experience in a Geography class:

I just had this anxious feeling, like I wanted to say something and I was in the front row and I knew like it's, it's a first, it's a first year course. So I mean, it was a full, a full class, big, you know, big class, and I thought, you know, so what am I gonna tell them, you know? But to me it just, okay fine, that's how they do it, okay, and that's how they understand it, but for me I just, right, the unknown.. I didn't know if it would come out right, I didn't know, like, as if they're gonna change it just cos I said it, y'know. --
 Laura

What is important to recognize through the words of these women is that when they refer to or describe situations where they are anxious or afraid to speak out in class, the situations are not ones that merely constitute asking for factual information, or giving a personal opinion. Indeed, what they feel they are being asked to do is defend the beliefs, values and history of their entire tradition and culture. The enormity and weight of this kind of perceived responsibility cannot be adequately described in words.

There are things about me that I can't, they are a part of who I am that I cannot change. And sometimes I feel so hurt, like... I feel so hurt in the Anthropology classes that I have taken, I've taken two, and I feel so hurt in them, and I feel so shamed, and I feel so... judged and objectified... --
 Candice

The situation of feeling attacked or objectified in class is, in reality, a no-win situation, at least for Candice, who told me that:

It's difficult, because you know you almost, you get under this intellectual 'attack' about something you emotionally feel so greatly, and it's difficult to articulate the sort of... articulate ideas in an intellectual manner so that you can maintain some sort of credibility.. it's just so much pressure. And yet, if I don't talk, I feel... the shame and the guilt and the humiliation, and I leave with that. When I do talk, I usually leave with anger, and, you know, I mean and then I usually go home and go on the couch or the bedroom and I stay there and I kinda have to have... I kinda go through a 'healing', a depression, and maybe I'll cry, and then, you know, get strong again, and ah, but my family doesn't have me for that whole night! You know, so when I speak out, there are repercussions. If I don't speak out, I feel like I carry the shame or humiliation, depending on the severity of what was said, like my, interpretation of the severity of what was said. And then I don't feel equal to everyone in that class anymore. It's like I

feel this 'burden' to speak out... -- Candice

For the learners, it is sometimes difficult to try and find meaning in being at University, given that they have to give up so much of their own cultural and traditional self in order to be 'successful' here. When Western-based education is not given priority in one's life, it seems that it makes it more difficult to achieve the goal of good grades and educational satisfaction:

But I think you know, for the most part I, I just see [University education] as a stepping-stone to get what I want, to where I wanna be, y'know, so, so maybe that's why it's so hard to see sometimes. Because I don't see that it's of real great importance in my life. It's important, but, when I look at my overall life, there are other things that are way more important. My family, and I'm so far from them right now, and, learning traditional cultural things... outweighs this by far, y'know. And balancing those two roles is really hard, and if I could give as much time to that life as I do to this life, y'know, I'd be a far better person I think, but.. to give that the time that you need to grow, and the same pace that I try to grow here, they're unbalanced. And it's hard. It's hard to walk in two worlds... -- Alison

Feeling that it is necessary to try to constantly be in two worlds, and wanting to survive and be successful in both, makes it difficult to maintain a positive outlook. The educational system, which to this point of our discussion seems to have left a 'sour taste' in the mouths of some of the women interviewed, leaves those with a strong traditional belief feeling that they are being 'forced' into changing in order to become more adapted to the Western mindset, "like, it's almost like, sometimes I get really negative I guess, and I view education as a means of brainwashing the masses, y'know." In addition, the focus of education on the processes of the mind is in direct conflict with Native tradition, where "...in my culture we're taught not to think with our heads but to think with our hearts."

The effect of hearing the inaccuracies being taught in class with Native content

results in discomfort in the Native students "as a Native person who's sitting in there and you bite your tongue and you bite your tongue..." finally leaving no other choice but "after a while you can't swallow it down anymore and you simply say something."

However, not all students feel able to speak out in class in front of the other students, or in other cases feel that their complaint should be heard at a higher level. Indeed, "there's repercussions for awareness... there's repercussions for voice, like, you gotta think about all the things, and a lotta students won't get involved..." The repercussions talked about ranged from "...like, how does that affect your education? You know, if you rub a professor the wrong way, how does that affect that, mark you'll be getting?" to being "afraid of it getting bigger and out of control.. and then I'm kicked out or, who knows what, I don't really know, when you don't hold a lot of power...."

In fact, two of the participants were convinced that there had been personal instances of biased marking, which they attributed to having had 'voice', if not solely for being Native. One example of this was given by Rachel, who pointed out a situation where "I must've flunked the final exam because everyone in my group got an A, I got an A-.. The only Indian in the group... and I got an A-!" Based on the best knowledge available to her, she felt the grade received was related to ethnicity and not to ability. This kind of perception again echoes the feelings of disempowerment within the classroom setting encountered by these Native female students. More importantly, however, it symbolizes an uncertainty within the educational environment, which the participants themselves linked to ethnicity and culture.

Trying to be objective about a system or institution that advocates a type of learning and a content that is disrespectful of one's beliefs and values can difficult to

reconcile in oneself:

It's hard when you don't, when you're a mouse so to speak, and you're not a cat, you know, and it's hard to be... to try to... to be in that place where you value human beings and all the differences, when you feel very vulnerable for where you stand, because you know you don't have the Universities, and you know that you don't have a huge society behind you that, that can back you up. Instead, you look and you have texts written by people outside of your culture, slowly more aboriginal writers now, but there is not as much to sort of... keep you grounded in who you are... -- Candice

Feeling like one's identity is being not respected while it is being slowly eradicated and replaced by something new and foreign is a sentiment not uncommon in the stories of these women. The effects on the students of what is said and/or taught in class is not limited to those women whom I interviewed. Indeed, it was evident from how some of these women talked that their experience was something that was shared by other women who frequented the Native Centre, where:

...sometimes they're really angry, and they're you know.. they just can't believe it like, that this Prof. said this and that, and, sometimes they're very hurt and they're you know, withdrawn, and, yeah, so it's actually it's hard. -- Candice

As noted earlier, the Native Centre is the place where many of the students come to get comfort, and solace from what goes on outside of it's walls.

Rachel was perhaps the most poignant in her description of her experience as a Native student learner in the greater structure of the University:

I feel lotsa times I am all by myself when, soon as I leave the comfort of this, ah, little, 'Earth Womb' here, and I get out there, often I'm the only person in the class who, who is Aboriginal and who, who has that Spirit. And I find myself constantly having to defend and teach people, all the time, you know. -- Rachel

And there are other fears, fears about how much coming to University has changed them

as a person. This can cause distress for traditionally-minded individuals. The distress is not, however, linked to change, but to what it is that is changing. Too often, it seems that the perceived changes result in a loss of tradition and spirituality. Alison thinks: "when you're by yourself and you wanna go back to that sort of, wholistic way of thinking, how much conditioning have I really taken in?"

I guess it's difficult that way because, we're expected to learn all the things that, you know that non-Native people can teach us. We're supposed to, take the best that we can from it, and we're trying our best to do that, but at the same time, what we already know, what we have lived for thousands of years, it doesn't mean anything, you know, like, that knowledge. So, that's difficult, to be able to I guess, to respect it in that sense because it's not reciprocated... -- Laura

It seems then, that instead of gaining respect from the institution for their ability to change and their willingness to compromise their values and tradition in order to learn, they feel treated with derision.

The participants can envisage not only how devastating the effects of this educational system are on themselves, but the ripple-effect it has or can potentially have, on those close to them. Feeling a burden to speak out places a huge responsibility on a student, one which entails defending or protecting an entire culture or heritage, and one which often feels like a burden that is just too heavy to carry. More about the outcomes of these and other 'rough spots' is contained within the theme of 'outcomes' at the end of the 'Rough Spots.'

Questioning

Perhaps as a result of, or perhaps in combination with the effects of University as a non-Native construct, the participants in this study demonstrated a great deal of questioning: questioning the value of this education, questioning truth, and questioning

their own beliefs and values.

Questioning the Value of Western Education. Each one of the participants voiced in one form or another their struggle with the education they are receiving here, specifically how it relates to them as a Native person, and how it 'fit's with their worldview. That is, the climbers question the reason for climbing.

...sometimes when you're in those depths and, those weak spots, y'know, and you lose sight and it's dark, and you can't see anything and, and you start out at the base, and you know how high it is, but you get to a point where you just feel like you can't go on, and why go on? -- Laura

Returning to the aforementioned concept of 'brainwashing' Alison put forward, it is reiterated when she emphasizes that being a University student is difficult for her. "especially when you're, y'know, involved culturally, 'cos your culture tells you one thing and then you come back here and it's almost like it's opposite... so you're living, it's like it's two worlds, two polar-opposites...." Again, this constant 'tug-of-war' seems to place doubt in her mind as to "whether, y'know, that conditioning is gonna help me in the long run, like for what?... It's like asking the meaning of life!." In the end, she keeps going, despite "letdown after letdown", with the hope that "one day, it'll be worth it."

More global concerns regarding graduation with a 'Western' Degree were expressed by Kate-lyn, whose confusion with the term "elite" and what that will mean for her when she graduates (i.e., will she in fact be 'elite' and moreover, does she want to be?), is further compounded by the knowledge that "there are going to be within the next few years so many people with degrees that it will not, it will no longer be an elite group." On top of these concerns, and instead of looking toward the time of returning home as graduates with hope and pride, there is in some a doubt, a feeling that "Here I

am, you know, is this the way? Should I learn all this and then go home and then, and you know like, will it really mean anything?"

Questioning 'Truth'. Seeing the 'untruths' in the literature and the content that is taught in Native courses, for some, has led to a continual questioning of the validity and truth of the content of other courses:

...when I took two courses, both of them were Latin American studies and knowing the kind of information that is written about Canadian Native people, when I would read anything in the texts for that, those two courses, or for any other course that, touched on, talked about in any way an Indigenous group of people in another country I definitely had to have my salt-shaker, put it that way... -- Kate-lyn

Not only does this affect other courses but it has led to the loss of interest in one course by one participant, and to the drop-out by another participant from the final exam of another. The basis on which the latter did so was explained by her saying that "when you see that someone's not unpacking something that I know to be true, then how do I know that she's not unpacking everything else? So I lost interest, right..."

As well, Candice - through those same inaccuracies - began "to see the judgements made on other cultures by other cultures, and then, why is it one is right and one is wrong, and like who's deciding that?"

Questioning own Values and Beliefs. It appears that the force of one's place here, the value of the education and the truth of what is being learned had a strong impact on the self-concept of some of the women with whom I talked. Even the fact of being a status Indian, which entitles each of the participants to a righteous identity as a Native person is brought into question, where one participant felt strongly "why do I need to feel validated as an Indian, through the Government's eyes? I'm accepted in this community

[‘The Native Centre and the Native tradition] as a Native person...”

More specific to the formal education context, Alison who spoke of her reaction to getting a C- on a paper, explained that “it just sort of, really sort of tainted my view as to, who I am, and how. like, marks do make an impression on you...” Not only that, but she felt that “[the teaching assistant] didn’t really validate what I was writing about, how does that validate me, in the system...” Starting to question one’s beliefs and abilities is often the outcome of this lack or absence of validation, leaving the feeling that “oh God, I’m stupid! I’m dumb! I’m not as intelligent as I thought I was! God, I shouldn’t even be here...” The confusion over this strong pull between a valuable education and Native tradition, or for one participant, the pull between validating either the Native or White side of herself, leaves some students with an internal struggle that is concretely witnessed through the words of one participant, who felt “I don’t know whether to accept it I don’t know whether to reject it. I don’t know what to accept, I don’t know what to reject...”

The perpetuation of stereotypes results not only in the questioning of self, but also, at least for one participant, one’s identity as a woman. This question resulted for her through the depiction of women in literature and history, which resulted in her beginning “to question what it is about being a woman that, you know, sort of becomes synonymous with oppression and inequality...” This brief remark served to elucidate the fact that these women are triple subjugated. That is, they are Native in a predominantly White society, female in Native society, and a woman in the greater patriarchal society.

Racism

Unfortunately, participants had much to say about how racism has touched and affected their lives while at University. Two of the participants were quite explicit in

how they themselves have been the victims of and/or have directly witnessed overt racism, while the other three explained how the racism directed towards their friends indirectly affects them: "I am affected by racism when my friends are victims of it...." Not only does it affect them through their friends in an objective way, but in the sense that:

... I'm an individual but I'm Native and I'm very proud of that, and in that, we are a whole community, and I think that racism is a major issue, so it does speak you know, about me as a Native person. – Laura

In addition, more covert or systemic racism was a sore-point for three of the participants, with the other two acknowledging its existence. In sum, all agreed that racism is a major problem, with one participant's felt lack of personal experience with racism at University attributed to the fact that "... I think that I've just chosen something [the discipline of science] that, where I'm not facing those issues."

Covert/Systemic Racism. Racism with covert or subtle expression is something that is acknowledged as existing by all the women with whom I spoke. While one acknowledged that she did not witness this type of racism in her courses or classes due to the fact that she is in the sciences, she admitted, as the others did, that it does exist in a magnitude large enough to make life difficult or uncomfortable for at least some of her peers. Systemic racism was described by Rachel as "... a hidden kind of racism, you know? it's, it's just you know, it's a hidden... but it's there, and it's even worse among students...." However, in my own thinking about covert racism, I feel that much of what has been said with regard to the University setting as a non-Native construct represents what seems to constitute the systemic manifestation of racism. This includes the lack of explicit valuing of Native traditions and knowledge, and the perceived bias/aggression

towards Native students on the part of some professors.

Overt Racism. In addition to the covert racism explained above there were also overt experiences of racism:

I've even had obscene phonecalls at the Red Lodge [a meeting room in 'The Native Centre']... this was a few years back, but I got one phone, one phonecall where a guy called up and just breathed. And then I got another phonecall where, the guys said: "you, you fuckin' squaws should, get off the campus.. you better watch out because ahm, ahh... you're gonna get it", and then breathing... -- Rachel

Others were comments about more global occurrences of overt racism, where "I think, as an Aboriginal person I can find it anywhere if I'm looking for it..."

Further to the theme of 'questioning' above, some women even question whether what they have experienced is in fact racism. One participant felt that "I always think that, well, maybe I'm just looking for it, y'know, maybe I'm making it up", which seems to lead to self-blame and uncertainty, and an inability to trust one's own perceptions and instincts.

One participant felt so strongly about the reality of racism and oppression on campus for Native students, she said:

I don't know, like, I've talked to students who say that they, like I don't know if they're in denial or what but, they say that they've never had any problems here as an Aboriginal person. And you know, I can't buy into that. Maybe I'm just too sensitive but I, you know, I've talked to far too many people who've had problems here, to say, y'know, that, that maybe there was one or two people that have never had a problem. Like, I don't know, but I, I can't be critical or judgmental of their experience either... -- Alison

Related to this theme is the fact that there is no group that deals specifically with racism on campus. "People who are harassed racially go to the sexual harassment office because there's nothing to, no person to go to to complain" – leaving the victims of such

abuse to deal with its effects alone. Again, 'The Native Centre' and the support it gives often serves to fill this gap in the best way that it knows how – through friendship, tradition and spirituality.

Outcomes

Having gone through the major 'rough spots' on the journey towards climbing the mountain of University-level education, all of the women had their own personal stories to share which represented the outcomes of these difficult areas. These 'outcomes' were included here because the participants wanted to refrain from putting forward a wholly negative view of the educational process. Indeed, they wished to not only point out what is undoubtedly negative or undesirable, but to acknowledge the experiences that are positive and/or strengthening. The most significant positive outcome outlined by the participants is a strengthened sense of self. Others also include: anger and sadness, and effects on personal relationships.

A Strengthened Sense of Self. Despite the negativity that is apparent through the preceding 'rough spots', each of the participants acknowledged that having been through these difficulties made them, in some way(s), a stronger person. Learning to distance oneself from the issue (by talking about it and reflecting on it), know that something must be done about it, and in turn feel ready to meet that challenge is what at least one of the participants described as her most positive outcome. Her thoughts at this time are: "Yes, we gotta change things around here!." Being in this strengthened position also entails being able to distance oneself emotionally from what is going on around you, and not taking "on other people's crap" (this idea will be dealt with more fully in the section entitled 'pacing myself'). Rachel summarizes the positive outcomes she has attained

through overcoming the difficulties here:

It's made me a stronger person, and it's bettered my mind. It's, it's made me want to learn I think, more, it's helped me to try to develop and learn ways of, of how we're going to live on this earth, and, it's helped me to try and establish and think of ways of how I'm going to do that. So it's, you know, there's been tough times for me, and there's been tough times for many students, but generally, I think people can come here and go to school and learn, and not learn a thing. And I think that goes for everybody... -- Rachel

Not only has dealing with and working-through the doubting, questioning and other social and educational 'rough spots' led to a somewhat increased sense of self, but for at least one to a state of "... paradox. It [the University experience] has strengthened my beliefs in who I am as an Aboriginal person, and it has also shattered and shaken them up..."

Being aware of the shortcomings of the institutionalized education of the University has helped to instil a sense of personal strength that has allowed Alison to overcome some of the challenges she faces:

I was really afraid of that when I first came in, and I was really afraid of losing who I am as a person, as a free-thinking person. But I think that being conscious of that, always, I've been able to maintain that 'funkiness' within me you know, and that, that free-thinking person and, in fact University has made me stronger in that area, because of the things that I've come up against, and, you know, being called a 'radical' and different things like that because I can speak my voice, you know? ... It's made me stronger, and it's made me more protective of that, that part within me that is an individual, you know? And so that's changed me, my voice has gotten stronger... -- Alison

In addition, University education is seen as something that is attainable, where once "I always thought it was beyond me, like beyond my comprehension... I see that you know, its possible for anybody - it's not an elitist thing."

With this greater sense of self, there is also a sense that there is an assumed

responsibility to help and teach others, and to right some of the wrongs witnessed in the schooling system. Indeed, wherever possible, the participants helped to correct misperceptions of their peers as derived from texts about Native peoples.

Anger, Sadness and Disappointment. These three emotions were felt most strongly as negative outcomes of the 'rough spots'. Anger was represented both overtly, as anger at how things are handled at the University, and also as a form of bitterness at having had to leave their home community and give up all they had known in order to achieve some form of social acceptance. This anger is compounded by the 'wrongs' that are done to the Native people through the educational system, and trying to resolve these feelings within oneself is a constant challenge:

...this [referring to negative experience(s) with professors, etc.] has happened to me, and it's and I guess it's, I'm viewing it right now as negative, and I'm trying to resolve this within me, within myself, this anger. And I'm so angry, you know? I am really, really filled with anger. And, I'm trying to deal with it and, but, I'm truly angry about things. --
Rachel

Feeling a sense of sadness or disappointment may be demonstrated by the feeling that there is something 'missing' from the education received:

I mean, I do well, marks-wise. I do well, and I 'play the game', but I certainly don't feel like I'm getting as much out of the education process as maybe as someone who is sort of from middle-class sort of home. --
Candice

This disappointment is reflected also in the wish that University cannot be an easier place to be – 'easier' in the sense that yes, it should be challenging and rewarding, but not a painful, disheartening and derisory experience. Candice perhaps expressed her sentiments on this issue most poignantly through this quote:

I mean, there's so many times I've just felt like the hell with this

(laughing), like, just I don't want to do it, I don't want to be here, it's too much, it's too much, you know? 'Cos you're doing this [referring to combating racism and other barriers] on top of learning the theories, and memorizing the dates, or whatever, y'know, your paper. You're doing this on top of the regular workload... -- Candice.

Again, however, the felt responsibility to continue to fight the wrongs witnessed in the system is demonstrated by her wish that "...sometimes I wish I could just go to sleep, you know, and accept the way things are and just live my life ... but I can't, I don't... it just doesn't seem right...."

The disappointment of finding that the system teaches in such a way that it seems, at least for Alison, to assume a "generic perspective of the world." Those professors from whom "you expect more, you expect more from the professors because they're supposed to be intelligent, and sort of put them up on a pedestal", some of the participants found they "don't do that anymore." These sentiments were expressed in a framework of having become less 'naïve' in their expectations of education and University.

Not only was and is there disappointment in the professors themselves, but in the system, where "I guess I never thought that there would be sexism, and racism and prejudice... I just thought that they would never exist here because these people are beyond that..." This participant was referring to her perception of the university as a whole prior to coming here.

In addition, for some there was sadness tinged with bitterness at what was sacrificed in order to come to school:

I do feel in a certain way that I am... succumbing to a system, by being here. But this is the only way that I sort of can gain a professional respect, taking the things like to do, if I come here. But I'm sad because, you

know, as I, while I'm here, old people are dying in my community where I could learn from them... -- Candice

Relationships. The effects on personal relationships are of major concern to some of the participants. Given the importance of community and family in the Native tradition, the decision to come to University is perhaps best framed in view of the weight of the decisions that had to be made in order to do so:

It's like you can't win! You know, you stay [in your home community], but then you be[come].. You might get caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and abuse and dependency, and anger, and all that stuff, and, but when you get out, when you go back in you're also rejected, and so if you stay in the cycle you 're forever labelled and judged from the outside, and if you get out to empower yourself then you're not welcome, sort of, back wholeheartedly... -- Candice

This disconnection from community happens due to that fact that "because you are becoming educated in a Western sort of fashion, your own people don't view you as the same." In fact, they start to view you more as "part of that other system, part of the outside system." This in turn serves to place at least some of the students both outside of the system within which she is studying, and also outside of her own community.

Even where it is still 'okay' to go home, the amount of change that happens while at school – i.e. learning to communicate in a different way – can have notable effects on relations with home communities. Trying to communicate with those still at home often leads to the acknowledgement that changes have taken place which, .". places you outside of them, right. Disconnects you from them... whether there's that intention, there is a disconnection taking place...."

In addition, for those women with children, being removed from the extended social network of family and community can place " a lot of pressure to be everything to

my children" on the Native mother while at school.

As well, there was mention of how becoming educated as a Native woman can have serious negative effects on personal relationships with spouses and partners. Indeed, Rachel describes how her own partner "... started feeling 'less than'. He started feeling inadequate and, and threatened and was concerned about.. like, I'm not sure if it was independence or what, but I think he became, he got a little worried...." However, while Rachel's relationship with her partner has continued today, she found that she had:

...seen it happen lots of times... I've seen women whose marriages just break apart, families break apart, because the women will come to school and are getting an education, and it's serious in terms of what it can do to the men... And they'll do everything they can to disrupt you from, studying, finishing papers, because they want you to fail, and drop out. -- Rachel

This perception that male partners start to feel inadequate and threatened was echoed by another participant, who described her partner at times as expressing himself like: "what d'ya think, you're smarter than I am?", where her own interpretation of this type of statement was that is "because of education...."

Metatheme 4: Pacing Myself

The metaphorical journey thus far has been a trying one for these participants. In order to keep going along a difficult path it is necessary to try and pace oneself, in order to make it through the difficult patches, and enjoy the easier parts. For the participants, learning to pace oneself was one of the most important elements of being successfully able to navigate the 'rough spots' on the journey. In fact, one participant even clarified her perception of 'pacing' as "more as enhancing. Enhancing my experience here as a person, as a student...." Each of the participants was eloquent in describing the means by

which she found what for her made perseverance possible. These often included aspects of Finding Balance, Finding Voice and Being Involved.

Finding Balance

Being able to find a balance, between one's 'head and heart' is something that each of the participants strives to do, and it appears that being able to successfully maintain some kind of balance in this respect is necessary for their successful continuation as a University student. Of the three themes within 'pacing myself', being able to achieve and maintain balance appears the most crucial for attaining academic focus for these women. Without 'balance' (where spirituality plays a key role), there is no focus. Finding balance included playing the game, and knowing and learning limits.

Reframing/Playing the Game. Despite the fact that University life can be difficult for these women, it seems that very often they use the skill of reframing in order to cope with an otherwise difficult situation. For example, one participant, while often feeling the huge responsibility of speaking out and having to "get up and do battle every day", says "... I guess I consider myself really, really lucky and very, very fortunate, and I'm thankful for all the gifts, and I thank, I thank the Great Mystery every day, for that..." Learning to live with the various issues of racism and oppression has left some feeling strong, where: "I guess it's, just you know, you deal with it. You know you just go, "well, that's the way it is!" Hence, some have now come to ".". a place in my education where I just go, that's okay, y'know, like, I don't take it personally anymore...."

One participant did compare herself negatively to her peers, saying that "some people play the game better than others. Like, I'm not a very good player..." For others, taking stock of one's personal abilities and seeing one's victories and abilities in

perspective helps to remain focused on the courses and tasks at hand. In this respect, Laura feels that she has “learned a lesson on exactly how much I can handle and how much I can’t, I guess, in subject-wise.”

Given all that has gone before, it seems appropriate at this point to assume that making the sacrifices that are entailed in being at University for some of these women is often difficult to balance with what the possible outcome might be. However, looking to a ‘Greater Power’ leads at least Candice to trust that “there must be some reason I’m here now....”

Knowing the unwritten rules for ‘playing the game’ is something described as paramount to success as a student at University:

One thing that I was told when first coming here was that it was very important to get to know your professors. That’s one of the rules of the game. And, to go to your professors whenever you need help so, when I have gone to the professors to get help for assignments, whatever it is, I’m playing the game. -- Kate-lyn

Not only is there a perception of finding balance in oneself, but also being the balance for others. For example, Rachel states:

...actually [the professor] was, she was trying to lean on me a little bit because, the way that I am I was more balanced than other people. Like, I sort of played, like I was right in the middle of the group and so I offered, offered her the chance to, through me to try to keep a balance in the class.
-- Rachel

It seemed through our discussion, however, that it is sometimes necessary for the students to take stock, and to ‘chalk up’ some of their negative University experiences as a learning experience. An expression of this is seen in: “... but you know, I really learned a lot from it, so I figure okay, well, there, it didn’t go to waste ‘cos I learned from it, you know....”

... I'm thinking of actually climbing a mountain and actually climbing, and that's what you gotta do and that's kinda the game, is climbing. But through it all there's the struggles and, and all these things, but it's actually climbing you know, and just, and knowing the skills and knowing how to tie and just whatever, to get you there. – Laura

As evidenced by the foregoing section, the impact that spirituality and tradition have on learning to reframe and 'play the game' seem to be central components of success. Where the term 'reframing' has been used, it could be replaced with a spiritual approach to difficult times, where difficulties are opportunities to learn. However, we all have limits, and maintaining a personal equilibrium in the face of challenge is also dependent on recognizing these limitations. Learning to recognize just what you can and cannot do is the focus of next part of this section.

Knowing/Learning Limits. Trying to balance home and school life, together with family finances is difficult to do. However, after a number of years at University, Candice has found that "... it's worked out really well this year so we don't have to get a babysitter, but what it means is that we're always running home and covering off for each other", which while it is economically beneficial, means that Candice can spend much less time at the Native Centre than she has been able to in the past. This is upsetting for her, and understandably so, given the importance of that source of support to the well-being of these women.

Recognizing that there are physical and mental limitations to what can be successfully undertaken, despite how enjoyable it may be, is something that Kate-lyn learned during her time here thus far. She acknowledges that you can "drive yourself crazy if you take on too much." With particular reference to the existence of racism, and the ability to function despite that, Kate-lyn admits "that there is racism, I accept that

there is ignorance, I also accept my limitations to what I can do about it.” “I’m able to close the door, shutting myself from those people who would want to cause pain.”

Finding balance, however, is not only about how to look after oneself in a selfish, egotistical type of way, but often a perception that what is important is “not just what I get out but it’s what I can give back...” Learning to become a ‘catalyst’ for their own families and for their peers is a metaphor that seems to represent how the women interviewed feel within the University system. “The thing is, with the catalyst, it never gets used up. It starts the reaction but then at the end of it, it comes out. It’s not used up, and it’s not deformed when it’s done.” Looking at oneself this way seems to be positive and self-protective in terms of both empowerment and remaining within the educational system.

Altogether, balance is something that helps these women to achieve and maintain success in their educational lives. Most importantly, it is not an appendix or appendage to study skills or time-management skills, but an essential ingredient to the whole. “...for me, the balance lies in, like, just in everything. Being able to learn and applying everything, you know.”

Finding Voice

Finding voice is an important part of survival both as an individual and as a Native person while at University. All participants agreed that having and being able to use their voice in order to be heard and to voice concerns is vital to personal and professional growth, with the acknowledgement that “it’s really important there’s somebody out there who will listen.” This section is not subdivided, as finding voice is a combination and interplay of both learning to take time to process hurt and being able to

speak about it.

At least one participant feels a strong responsibility to use voice in order to help others, where she feels that “I am a strong woman, and sometimes I have to say things that I don’t really like to do, but when I see so many people being hurt, somebody has to speak up.” While at times this may present a burden, this information was clearly offered in such a way that it was seen not just as a responsibility or burden, but as an honour.

However, not all participants felt this kind of obligation or even the power to speak out in such a manner. Alison was particularly clear about how she had learned to use and trust her voice, and the struggle that that had been:

... what has happened was I learned the skills to say, okay, what am I comfortable talking about, and what am I not comfortable talking about? And you know, gradually that would change, like, from being able to talk about certain things and the things that I wasn’t able to talk about at one time, I’m able to talk about now, you know, and so a lot of that anxiety has gone. It hasn’t gone entirely, but it has gone to a greater degree, and I’m able to speak, you know, speak out against certain things I don’t believe in. Or, voice my opinion in, in an arena where I would never have before because I was scared, you know? -- Alison

It would seem then, that a great deal of introspection is required on the part of these women in translating their experience into something that they then decide whether to speak out for or against. For this to be a real option, they must learn the skills to do so. However, for whatever reason, some of the women felt unable to always speak their mind, either because it was too emotionally draining to do so, or that it was not an ability to which they aspired. For example, Kate-lyn felt strongly that:

I know that there are some people who, take it to their heart, deep into their heart, issues that concern Native people and Native women and, they are able to find the voice to speak out. To find the strength within themselves to do that sort of thing, and I think that that’s really great

because we need to have people like that. We need to have women like that. I don't see that it fits for me... -- Kate-lyn

However, Kate-lyn differs from some of the other participants when she can say that "I have no fear when I go to an instructor." Others, such as Candice, while they experience some fear, engage a different process. In cases such as this, Candice states that she finds it helpful to "...practice sort of mental disobedience. I sort of sit in class and hear something in class... and in my mind I say, I don't believe that, I don't believe that at all." However, she has also taken the next step, and states that she would generally "remember it, and I, and it's something that I would like to go back to challenge. Sometimes I do speak out...." For her, a stronger voice is borne of the pain incurred through being taught out-of-context content in the classroom.

Given the importance of achieving balance and the most important balance in the educational system for these women being that between the head and the heart, using voice plays an important role. Indeed, being able to speak one's voice is:

...truly a positive thing, because the strength you gain from speaking out is the strength you gain from following your heart, y'know, nobody can take that away. It becomes part of your Spirit, right, and it'll, that Spirit will carry you farther than, you know, past the confines of this building...
-- Alison

Finding voice is not only knowing what to say, but also when and how to say it. Indeed, Rachel has found that as a reaction to negative experiences in the classroom, she is "trying to think of ways to teach" her professors to respect her. Because she feels that it is important for these professors to "come to that understanding [themselves]" (i.e. that they should respect her and her Native peers), without having to tell them, she is finding this self-imposed task a difficult one to achieve.

Being Involved

Being 'involved' includes various aspects of the women's lives, which range from feeling a part of nature and the environment, being involved in a Spiritual way with peers and cultural tradition, and also being involved in various clubs and organizations which help to better their minds and themselves as persons. These sentiments harken again to the feeling of wanting not only to receive, but also to give back to their social, physical and educational environment. Being involved, "is really important, no matter what it is."

Nature/environment. The importance of Nature in the Native tradition is commonly acknowledged. While all participants alluded at various points in our conversations to the importance of nature and animals in their lives, one participant echoed its importance in achieving 'balance' in relation to her student life:

I go to sort of build up energies out on the land and, the mountains and I have to go quite regularly. I tend to sort of go there, go out to nature more. I don't feel as judged out in nature, and I feel that that's where I belong, like, I feel like I know who I am, I don't know where I belong right, but I belong, you know, with, and I feel that out on the land, I feel that that's where I belong... — Candice

Spirituality. Throughout the previous sections, the importance of Spirituality in the lives of these women has been emphasized and highlighted. Finding balance is related to spirituality, finding one's identity as a Native person is related to spirituality, valuing nature, people, teaching, are all related to spirituality. Indeed, having a separate section for spirituality almost seems redundant given its influence, impact and presence in all aspects of these women's lives. Spirituality is intrinsically linked to the Native tradition, and those that practice the traditional Native life link spirituality to all aspects of their lives. Indeed, all of the participants voiced the fact that spirituality and their

involvement with it has a pronounced positive effect on their emotional well being, which in turn enhances their University performance.

Finding a spiritual balance, and feeling close to tradition helped at least one participant, Laura, to find a focus not only for herself, but also as a guide to others that may view her as a potential role model. In addition, Laura feels that having a balance through her spirituality is something that is important, and returning to her involvement in same has helped her to regain focus for her reason for being at University:

There have been times like I didn't wanna smudge when I was lost, y'know, when I was drinking a lot or when I was very resentful I couldn't do it, but, it feels really good when I do and I, you know, and I, and it just, and because I know that I need to feel centered, then, then I know that it's something that I strive for, and definitely the Creator, you know, every day I give thanks, ah, I give thanks just for the choices that I have... --
Laura

Clubs/Organizations. Being involved in various sports clubs and Native organizations both inside and outside of the University is something that at least three participants indicated as being important to her own balance and well-being. However, perhaps because of the study setting, or simply because of its paramount importance in these women's lives, involvement in 'The Native Centre' and its functions was foremost in the stories of these women's involvement.

Indeed, being able to give back to the University and to the experiences of their fellow students is something that is important to the participants. One participant found that perhaps her largest contribution was teaching a course that entailed a great deal of spirituality, where its effect on the students was to "change(d) their whole way of living! And it made them, you know, they had a chance to experience a part of their culture they had never been given before." Others, such as Alison, echoed this involvement in

teaching, and the satisfaction that doing so has given her:

...just as a peer, 'cos they're my peers, they're other students, to be able to speak to them about, you know, things that aren't they aren't necessarily hearing within the educational process, right. About Aboriginal people or, you know, that has to do with them directly, like as a human being... it's stuff you can't learn from a textbook. -- Alison

Being involved, for these women, did not necessarily entail a physical act, but most often it was a spiritual or emotional type of involvement achieved through sharing. For example, sharing traditional knowledge, which is an important component of involvement and developing a sense of (Native) community is something that was described in the stories of these women. In addition, Rachel found an outlet for sharing and being involved through expression of the Native value for bi-directional learning:

Everybody is a teacher, and so I learn from everybody, and sometimes it's a little bit, and sometimes it's a lot. But I'm a teacher too, and things that I share sometimes, I consider them to be a gift, because I know that it was ancient knowledge... and when people share things with me, I accept it as a gift, and I am honoured that they gave me that gift, you know? --Rachel

Involvement happens outside of the classroom too, where some of the participants are involved with Native young people, spreading the word that University is a goal accessible to all: "I really stress that, it's possible for, for them to go to school here, at University. That it's possible for anybody at any time, to, attain a Degree..." Doing this kind of work again echoes the felt need, and importance of "giving back to the community."

In addition, being able to share knowledge, especially about the Native culture with non-Natives is another route to greater involvement. Kate-lyn takes:

...every opportunity I can, when people ask me, to, for information, to be truthful. Truthful to myself, to show respect for, not only my culture, where I'm coming from but also, from wherever the person is asking for it

is coming from. And, to be open, and willing to share. That's why I'm here! (in this interview) This is my way, this is how I do, because I know this is something I can do, something that's positive. This is what I do! I open myself up to people, I talk to people who are interested, about, what it is, how it is, to be, what it's like to be a Native person. Walking a mile in my Moccasins... there's almost no better way than to share, and you reach out and you share with people and that's what'll bring the walls down. And so, I know my limitations and I know what I can do so, I'm doing what I can do! -- Kate-lyn

This quote demonstrates the difficulty and near impossibility of separating the totality of the Native experience into individual components.

Metatheme 5: Reflections on the Journey (so far...)

One of the most important aspects of the educational and self-development process for the participants of this study was an acknowledgement of where they are now in their educational journey. As well, they voiced suggestions for changes that they feel would have been, or would be, of benefit to their life as a student at the University. This section is divided thus into two parts: Where am I now? - indicating where each of the participants feels they are on their own educational journey; and considerations for the path ahead - indicating areas both within the Native Centre itself and more institutional/systemic changes that they feel need to be made for positive change to happen.

Where am I now?

The experience of University for the participants was one that was tainted with 'rough spots' that had both academic and personal underpinnings, making this journey at times a difficult one to make. In this section only, I felt it was important to give (at least in brief) individual voice to the participants, so each in turn could give voice to the summary of her experience(s) here to date.

Rachel. In Rachel's words "University means a lot more to me... in terms of just coming here to go to school and get a degree and sail through. It hasn't been a sail at all! It's been really rough waters, from almost from the beginning..." Despite this, she sums up that her experience here, "has been good, and I've learned a lot, and it is some of the things I learned here have really enriched my life. I've grown a lot, and I've changed my mind in a lot of ways. I've developed and grown different opinions."

Laura. The changed perspective from originally coming to school to get a degree and leave, to the learning process being a more meaningful experience in itself is something that was commented on by Laura, who feels that her focus and self-discipline are "finally coming back to me and, it just feels really good..." She found that re-discovering herself and her purpose through tradition and spirituality has helped her to refocus:

I know I was in the right place for this time, you know. And so I guess I didn't, I'm not just going through the motions because for me this is, what I've decided so I'm gonna include and get all that I can out of it and not just the course material, but what can I actually learn from this, you know, being here... and I think I really am, doing that 'cos I feel that I am healing in a lot of ways... -- Laura

For her, at this time, "it is totally different. It is totally a learning process", where she feels she is "facing that storm, and not shying away from it" Her view of her mountain at this time is that "there are different ways to climb it, different paths, but ultimately you know, for everybody it's their own achievement." She is proud of being able to say "nobody dragged me, nobody did my homework for me, y'know, and no matter how difficult that final was, well I passed it, y'know, and I kept on trying..."

Candice. Candice found that her experience here at times was a struggle, often

tinged with feelings of bitterness and anger for having to leave her home in order to gain societal respect. However, she was able to frame her experience in this way:

I learned a lot about myself as an Aboriginal person at the University, and it has helped to shape my identity and shape my worldview and broaden it and shake it up a bit. Also, it has made me not as naive, and a little bit more, you know, just to have a better understanding of why things are the way they are in sort of the dominant mainstream society... -- Candice

For Candice, University has given her the “opportunity by showing me, by providing a lot of information, I am able to say what I, what fits for me and what doesn’t fit for me.” Having been here has also led her to understand that “we all have an equal place kind of in a big circle... I want to live in a place where we all could be heard, like, and given an equal chance to be heard and listen...”

Alison. Alison feels that despite the times where she feels invalidated and the brunt of racism, that “it’s been fun, you know. University has certainly given me a lotta different things, you know, a lotta different experiences.” Her original view of University as being a place that was inaccessible to her has now changed. “I’ve been there like, I thought it was way up there too, right and y’know, and I’m going, well, it’s not, y’know what you think it is, like, anybody can go to University really...” and “it’s nothing like I thought it was going to be. Like, I had perceived it as something very large”

Kate-lyn. For Kate-lyn, she has realized that University is only one part of a life-long learning process, which has given her the opportunity to develop skills to access resources in order to keep on learning:

When you realize it [learning] is a life-long process, you know, I don’t feel as though, I’m in my fourth year now, I don’t feel as though, well as soon as I graduate I’ll be done learning. I mean, ‘cos I have all these other

resources now that I know where I can go to to get information that I want to know about! -- Kate-lyn

However, for Kate-lyn, her view of University is one which is perhaps more personal than that of the other four. For her, coming to school was her 'saving grace', to the extent that she feels had she not made the decision to return to school when she did, she doesn't "know where I would be right now, if I didn't have it to help me, help me through...." For her, as with the others, she has realized that "education is more than sitting in the classroom and having some talking head boring you with information that you have no interest in, or little interest in, or you wish the instructor was more interesting because it's stuff you need to know." For her, the "important things are actually receiving the education and sort of seeing it as, Native people here, finding out, more about that Native part of me, and the self-esteem, the confidence, the experiences, both in the classroom and the Native Centre, with the Native students...."

In our group interview, Rachel summed up the sentiments of reflecting on the journey in this way:

Our people are involved in the system, trying to make changes, and we're recognized now. And that wouldn't have happened if they, if y'know, hadn't gone to this place, to a Higher learning institution. But it changes you. There's no doubt about it. I'm changed permanently, so are you, and you are, all of us are... so y'know, 'reflections on the journey', I think is recognizing part of it in ourselves. Where am I now is recognizing that I'm a changed person. -- Rachel

Considerations for the Path Ahead

For each of the participants, there were ideas and hopes for changes that, if implemented, they felt would make the journey easier for themselves and their peers, and those who will follow in their academic footsteps. These suggestions are presented here

are just that – suggestions. It remains to be seen if and how they will be taken seriously, if the words of these women will be given any weight within the realms of power, academic and otherwise.

The Native Centre. Considerations for the Native Centre were those most easily and frequently suggested by the participants. Perhaps this is because the Native Centre seemed, at least in our discussions, to be that place closest to home and heart for these women. In any case, suggestions were made by all, suggestions that they felt and hoped might make the 'Centre more appealing and helpful for Native women at the University.

One suggestion that a number of participants felt strongly about was that there be some kind of 'Advocacy Committee' or 'Advocacy Path' which students could access when necessary. This Advocacy committee would possibly tackle several of the 'sore points' addressed by the participants of this study, including "not having a Native Studies program" and "who's teaching Aboriginal courses...." It is envisaged that this source of support would be particularly relevant when the situation is ambiguous, and where the student did not know what the 'outcomes' of speaking out might be. Candice envisioned her student life being easier if:

...there could be someone that you could work one-on-one with like, you know, and they could help you sort of take it to a different level, and you know, I don't know... give some options of what you could do – you could write a letter, you can do this, you could do, sort of empowering you, and then you, you know, and also being very straightforward about the possible repercussions that could happen and, then you know, you can make your decision based on that. -- Candice

At this stage, the participants feel frustrated at the sluggishness demonstrated by the University to offer a Native Studies program, and are beginning to feel:

Why should we wait for the University to recognize and create a Native

Studies program? Like, if we start just doing it, and offering things, eventually they will recognize it, y'know, but that's sort of like, in spite of, like in spite of them not recognizing it we want to do this anyway, y'know! And just take control over it, and create and start moving in that direction, right. And so that, you're empowering yourself because at this point we're going "well, we want a Native studies program!", and y'know, complain, complain, complain, complain, complain, and where is it going, y'know? Nowhere. And so, in the process it's being lost, that, those opportunities are passing us by where we could be just going ahead and doing it. -- Alison

Other suggestions were based on the desire to be more inclusive of the experience of all Native women attending 'The Native Centre.' Rachel, for example, felt it important to address the fact that:

...sometimes it's simple things, I mean, helping, you know, certainly helping people, you know, money management, time-management to understand that this is the way that you know, deadlines and time, and understanding those kinds of things. But also, you know, I mean things like, again, even having the support of having a computer at home. Then that's something that then, themselves and their husband can work on... -- Rachel

Because Spirituality is such a large part of these women's lived experience, both at school and in their (more) personal lives, it is not surprising that these women saw a need to increase and enhance the provision of Spiritually oriented Ceremonies at the Native Centre. More specifically, the inconsistency of what is offered at the Native Centre was something that was a challenge for these women. Candice recommended perhaps "four times a year or something, that, you know, that an Elder will be coming to do a Pipe-Ceremony. Usually it works out that way, but sometimes it doesn't. Something, sort of a regular thing, that you could rely on, you know, that there's someone coming in." This was particularly important for those participants who were far away from their homes and community, and who found such Ceremonies a link to their

home and their tradition, as well as a form of maintaining balance in their everyday lives. Another practical suggestion included:

...just using one of the back rooms for, just kind of a meditation room where we had, if not every month then, have an Elder come in and pray with us and, bless the room and, if we had, just things in there that, just to kind of bring us home, you know. I think that's something that we all need to do, it's just kind of, being home wherever we are, you know, and, being able to see an Eagle feather that, you know, that would take us far away, or even a drum or something that we could, just to be able to sit and, you know, when things are going wicked and whatever, you know, to just sit there. I mean, because sometimes here in the City you don't get time to 'hop out' to the mountains or, or just whatever. You just don't have that time and, I think that that would be really great. 'Cos I know that for a lot of people, you know, the different Pipe-Ceremonies that we had here... we have many people who, that's where they, you know, that's their balance, that's their balance, it's to pray. We've always been a prayerful people, so I know that that's kind of where it needs to begin and to be able to come here if we have that type of [room]... -- Laura

Not only would the traditional and Spiritual needs be met by increasing this type of intervention, but so would the women's psychological needs. Indeed, Kate-lyn, in her own experience has discovered that "psychological counselling has to come through Spirituality" within the Native community. In her mind, having Elders come into the Centre more often would somewhat fulfil the services of a Counsellor.

An additional suggestion, which focuses on the negative effects of student life on personal relationships emphasizes that "we need to find some way of bringing the men in... We need to find some way of making it more family than it is now, so that the men won't feel threatened. Helping them to get through that part..."

The Institution. With regard to the changes that need to be made on an Institution-wide basis, at least in the eyes of the participants, Candice perhaps summed up the group's feelings with her statement:

I think about all the people who've come, who, who for whatever reason had to leave and I think about those people and I sometimes think, y'know, if the University was somehow more inclusive, that they would have more chance of finishing, and staying, and getting their degrees. I know there's always personal struggles and things like that, but I, it's not exactly, y'know, a very easy place to be at academically, like, the learning, but on top of that you add the things that we have to sort of face as Aboriginal students... This makes it even more hard, and when you're not getting any kind of validation from your Prof. And, y'know, if certain things, if maybe you, your first month at school you haven't made friends at all, y'know, here at the Native Centre, you just haven't 'clicked' with someone, it could be a very lonely place and so I think about those people... --
Candice

The other participants, who mentioned some ideas that they felt would make the Institution better equipped to serve Native students, echoed the struggles mentioned in this quote. Practical suggestions such as "if it's gonna be Native studies it should be by Native people", was something that was felt strongly by all of the participants (except one who is in a science-based program). However, it was not necessarily thought by all that the professor need be of Native origin, but at the minimum have some connection with Native culture, someone who "knew what they were talking about, you know, that it didn't come from a book" - qualifying him or her to teach the subject. Indeed, Rachel felt passionately that "there's something wrong with our learning, if the only way, the only thing that's given any credibility is because it was written like in a book, and if it's taught by the professor." This point was further stressed by Kate-lyn, who felt that it is important that "the Institution accept Native written work", which is thankfully becoming easier to obtain, despite the fact that "it is a White construct, books, writing books."

It is not only courses with Native content that were the subject of criticism, but professors in general who are not open to diversity and discourse within the classroom.

I mean, it doesn't matter what they look like on the outside, I mean as, for

me, as long as there's that openness to diversity, and diversity in the way in which we think, diversity in discourse... then it allows for other people's voices to be heard in the classroom. And it doesn't put the onus on, one person to always, have the right answers or have 'the' answer. Like, it maybe allows for different voices to be heard, and it allows for a richer learning experience for everyone. -- Alison

Finally, it was mentioned by a number of participants in our individual interviews, and agreed upon by all members at our final interview(s) that including mention of 'The Native Centre' in the registration packet sent to all prospective applicants to the University would be an important and positive step. This belief resulted from the perception that "every year there seems to be students who've been here for years, and just happen to come across The Native Centre, Native students who say 'I never knew this was here'." Given the importance of the Centre in the lives of the participants interviewed, I extrapolate that many Native students are not given an important opportunity to connect because they often have no knowledge of the 'Centre.

Alison sees the University, or at least education, as the place where changes need to take place in order to make the future for her people more positive. Her ideas are founded on her belief that "...this is a place of conditioning. We are conditioning our young minds that are gonna be the next generation out there in the workforce, and I think it has to start somewhere, like in the educational system."

Insights into the types of institution-wide changes that are wished for by these Native women were given through their comments about selected professors whom they idealized and appreciated. Indeed, it seemed that it was exhilarating for some of the students "when you do have a Professor who's really, like who's willing to learn as well, right, and who don't think they know everything, things just bloom so much better."

When the teacher can approach the student “not even from the perspective of an educator, but from the perspective of a human being”, it made the educational experience much more fulfilling for these students. Being humble, and “recogniz[ing] that they don’t know what they don’t know, and they can say it, and they are respectful of other Native people in the classroom” are traits that were also recognized and respected. Having this type of educator-learner relationship seems the ideal for future change.

In summary, the participants could identify several changes that they not only would like, but believe need to be made in order that the unnecessary ‘rough spots’ be smoothed out. The strength of these women is admirable and is perhaps best demonstrated by Rachel who describes: “...out of all the courses I guess if you take you know, Okay, 40 courses ... I would say, there was a problem with, quarter of them. That’s not that bad.” Rachel’s attitude seems to be a necessary condition for maintaining herself in the academic environment. What seems troublesome is the ratio of good to bad courses that she is describing. These are prohibitive odds to beat - odds which students should not be faced with. The extent of the distress and difficulty of the obstacles encountered by these women cannot be minimized, and needs to be addressed.

CHAPTER FIVE: LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE

The stories told by Alison, Kate-lyn, Laura, Candice and Rachel are ones descriptive of success and failure, of triumph and loss. Each of the women in her own way and for her own reasons found both joy and sorrow as a result of being a University student. Overall, the journey involved in 'Climbing my Mountain' is one which, both by definition and description, testifies to the importance of lived experience. This journey, far from being a linear path from the base to the top of the mountain, is instead one that sometimes curves, bends, slopes downwards or steps upward. As a result, much of the learning that is experienced by these women is done through the process of navigating these 'rough spots', often with the help of others, and reaching a step higher on the climb as a result.

The five participants did not describe a uniform experience of University life, and it is this uniqueness that makes the story so interesting and complex in the telling. There may be very many reasons for the variances, including age at coming to University, discipline of study, community/Band of origin, and personal beliefs and values which have developed as a result of social interactions. Perhaps the simplest explanation, however, is found in the diversity of individuals. While acknowledging the individuality and uniqueness of their stories, each woman agreed that the journey outlined in this thesis resonates with her own experience.

What Have We Learned?

Through the description of the lived experience of University life for these women it seems all too apparent that our present knowledge is seriously lacking in terms of understanding this experience. Just 'knowing' that Native female students experience stress at University due to socioeconomic, cultural and political factors seems insufficient in really understanding the experience of being a Native woman at University. This study was able to get to know more in depth the experience of these women, by asking them to explain their experiences. In doing so, *the participants* directed what issues were the most important for them, thus trying to avoid assumptions about what they life *must be like*.

The story told is one that places heavy emphasis on the trials of making the journey, where bias, racism, perpetuation of stereotypes - all within an institution that does not seem to live up to its promise to value diversity - have to be contended with on a daily basis. While the participants do not ask or expect that University be an easy experience, they do perceive their load to be heavier than that of their non-Native peers. It is made so by the constant challenge to self, to beliefs and to culture that they encounter almost daily – both in and out of the classroom. Even for those like Laura who feel that their course of study places them apart from much of the systemic racism, the knowledge that her peers and friends suffer from this type of prejudice is in itself distressing.

The overriding tone of the stories told is not one of oppression and prejudice. Indeed, what is perhaps most significant about the journey as described is the realization that each of these women, in her own way, faced each of the difficult spots in the best

way she knew how, and became stronger for it. Especially at the end, when reflecting on their journey(s) so far, each emphasized that they had changed significantly, and that (hopefully) this change has been positive. These women are able to see new strengths in themselves, and concur that they are (at this time) strong enough to continue.

Acknowledging the presence of this strength often comes in conjunction with the knowledge that there are others like you making their own journey beside you on the path, and they will help you when you stumble. Indeed, helping others on this journey is often a source of regeneration in itself. All of this emphasizes the importance of community and sharing, and the necessity of a place on campus where this kind of communication is fostered and enhanced. These needs are to a great extent met by 'The Native Centre', and its importance in the academic, personal and traditional lives of these women cannot be over-emphasized.

In sum, where once a journey through a 'rough spot' would have almost surely made major negative impacts on self-esteem and self-worth, the participants tell of new strengths, strengths acquired on their journey to the top. Reflecting on the previous chapter, much as the women reflected on their journey thus far, it is possible to see and feel the movement through the emotional and physical hurdles and stages of their own individual and unique mountains. Each woman, while describing her experience also very much owned it, and clearly indicated the extent of her experience with the issue, and her limitations of knowledge about it. This ownership again reflected the importance of lived experience, where only that which one has experienced personally is given true voice, and anything 'merely' witnessed is divulged with hesitancy.

So, What Do We Know Now?

The stories of these women, while of great significance in and of themselves, have served to provide a great deal of insight into their lived experience as university students. In consideration of the outcomes of this study, this insight has provided many answers to the question “So What?,” and so are extrapolated in detail within the following sections.

Values of the Women

One theme that seems to stand out in the knowledge gained from and about these women is the values by which they live their personal and academic lives. Having an understanding of these provides a significant knowledge with which to approach communication with Native women (at least these participants) in a higher education setting. The values that seemed to have most voice during our interactions were the importance of a shared understanding, the desire for change, and the willingness to share.

The Importance of a Shared Understanding

Perhaps most significant to the academic dedication of these students is their link with tradition and with each other, and it is here that the most important role of ‘The Native Centre’ comes into play. It seems that it is almost a universal phenomenon that we as humans are attracted to groups of like people – whether it be for reasons of ethnicity, personality or other self-selected criteria. Why, then, should it be surprising that these women find comfort in a place where they are reinforced for being who they are, where they receive strong emotional, practical and social support, and where they can socialize with people similar to themselves? A shared spirituality, culture, heritage, history and tradition are important factors in feeling accepted and understood. Indeed,

for the Native culture, the importance of a balance between mind, heart and spirit is paramount to healthy adjustment (Paterson & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 1994). This has been an issue which is emphasized in the literature, and which seems to have been echoed in this study. Having their emotional and spiritual support needs met through 'The Native Centre' and Native peers has been a source of achieving and maintaining balance for these women. In turn, balance achieves focus, and so continued success in academic life. It is for the role that it plays in achieving this focus that having 'The Native Centre' available as a rock of support plays a central role in the student life of these women. Indeed, without it, some feel they would not have made it thus far in their educational journey.

Again, the largest source of concern at this point is not those who know about 'The Native Centre', but those who do not, or who have not accessed it as a resource. These are the students that Rachel worries for, who are losing their tradition in order to 'fit in.' As a result, the question now is, will they lose their vision, balance and focus? The fear is that they will. Of course, I feel it is important to speculate that these other students may in fact have adjusted very well to University life, and perhaps have to contend with even less stress than those women who shared their stories with me.

The Desire for Change

Each of the participants saw the need for change while recognizing the inevitability of same. Change happens despite the best intentions and desire to retain beliefs in a tradition that holds a place of great significance in the lives of these women. However, Candice, Rachel, Alison, Laura and Kate-lyn are testament to people who have decided that complaining will not necessarily make the situation any better, and indeed

may make it significantly worse. While change is often a scary prospect to any person, for these women its possibility is welcomed and encouraged. It seems from their stories that any change from the way things are at this point would be welcome. More specifically, they envision change in the texts used, change in the hiring protocol of the University that would allow Native teachers and elders to share their knowledge in this setting, change that might allow all Native students to be proud of their culture, rather than being ashamed, or constantly having to defend it.

These women do not only desire change, but they value it and are determined to instigate it, through the creation of an advocacy committee, the development of a Native studies program or some of the other suggestions made, such as creating a healing/talking circle, or having a meditation room at 'The Native Centre.' It is not surprising that these women feel empowered at this time to make these changes. Indeed, their own process of change and growth has inspired their empowered state (Skodra, 1992). Their awareness of change, in themselves and around them seems likely to fuel this strength, enhancing the circle of power evidenced in these women.

It should be noted, however, that a sense of doubt was witnessed in the participants regarding the feasibility of making these changes. Doing so requires a great deal of effort – perhaps more than full-time students can give. Questions which are foremost at this point include: How important is the retention of these students - and their successors - to the University as an institution? What amount of compromise and co-operation will be possible to see these kinds of changes implemented?

The Willingness to Share

It is obvious from the willingness of these women to share their stories with me that they value and respect openness and sharing. Indeed, in the words of one participant, the type of sharing that resulted in this thesis represents a small step towards “Bridging the Gap” between cultures. Where there is a strong perceived need for increased communication between these students and the University institution, it would seem that a building block on which future communications may be based already exists. Indeed, the impact of the positive experiences with some professors, teachers and students is an indication of their belief that ‘the system’ is not all bad, and that there certainly is hope for positive change in the future. Not only that, but they are eager to share in the implementation of that change.

Reflections...

The information gathered in this study appears to comprehensively reflect the themes in the literature outlined in Chapter Two. Specifically, where the literature delineated the cultural values of sharing, community and respect, these women’s stories were testament to their lived expression. Where the importance of lived experience was alluded to, these women epitomize that belief. Where the research pointed out that Native students, particularly women, are at risk for emotional and psychic stress related to the imposition of Western and patriarchal values, the experience of these women reflect same.

However, what the literature in Chapter Two did not and could not foretell was how these stressors and challenges combined with a strong belief in tradition could result in women who were resilient, strong, courageous and willing to share. The stories told

by these women wove the mosaic of literature findings into a story of real life. In doing so, the most significant outcome of this study is not that it differs from what was known, but that it reflected the knowledge with a human face. That is, the findings surpassed the depth and breadth of what positivist research findings can tell us by providing specific examples of racism, and contributed to the understanding of a phenomenon that is very complex.

Considerations for Change

Where a woman says that she feels “hurt, shamed, judged and objectified” as Candice did, then there is a very strong chance that there are serious systemic issues that are not being addressed, and are at best being ignored. For these women, it is not enough to just say that diversity is valued, but requires also taking the responsibility to pay attention to the larger context of those people whom we purport to value. As Candice said, taking the bug out of the forest leaves the study of that bug meaningless because it is out of context. Incorporating appropriate context when studying or teaching about Native peoples and their culture is central to demonstrating respect for them.

It is easy to see that the constant struggle encountered in the everyday life of these students has tainted, or may in the future taint the overall experience of student life, and increase feelings of bitterness and anger for these participants and students similar to them. From the described perceptions of these participants, the University as an institution is serving to distance cultures rather than bring them together. Where the stresses encountered led some students to feeling so overwhelmed that they consider taking their life, or ‘merely’ dropping out of school, there are serious issues to consider.

The importance of education in the lives of these participants is evidenced by the

fact that they continue their studies despite periods of great personal stress. The pursuit of education is not a selfish thing for these students, and the importance of making higher education accessible to greater numbers of Native people – especially for the Native youth – is of paramount importance to the women who participated. According to these women, in order to achieve this it is imperative that the educational system change enough that value and respect for individual cultures are incorporated into the teaching process. As indicated by Alison, it is obvious that a teaching style that ignores individual difference is not appropriate for at least some of these women. This echoes findings in the literature that purports that traditional Native teaching and learning values individual difference. I can only surmise that the teaching style often currently used as described by these participants makes learning difficult for other traditional Native students.

The Meaning-Making Process

The process of interpreting the stories of these women is of as much significance as the outcomes and discussion are. For many reasons, the co-operative process of this study validates and strengthens a belief that this type of cross-cultural research (i.e. where in qualitative research the researcher is as much a 'part' of the study as the participants) can be done in a respectful and positive way. In addition, I believe the outcomes to be 'worthwhile and valid' to satisfy even the most staunch advocate of quantitative methodologies, through its echo of what the predominantly positive literature has said. Regardless, the following constitutes a brief discussion of the strengths and arguable weaknesses of the study design and process which my co-researchers and I developed.

Unquestionable Strengths

The outcomes of this study have demonstrated that this type of research is not only appropriate and respectful for use in this type of cross-cultural situation, but it achieved *and built on* our understanding of a phenomenon that could be only superficially understood after an exhaustive review of research literature.

In addition, specific strengths of the process are not difficult to outline. Firstly, the time taken (1 year) to establish a trustful and cooperative relationship between 'The Native Centre' and myself served as a strong foundation on which to build the study. Without it, obtaining and maintaining the trust of the participants may have been difficult, although it is acknowledged that this is merely a supposition on my part. In addition, I believe that I have managed to portray these women and their culture in a respectful way that does not idealize or romanticize them or it (Saks-Berman, 1989).

Another strength of this research design is the fact that because I am female, doing qualitative unstructured interviews with female participants placed me at a distinct advantage for gaining trust and acceptance – despite the ethnic difference. As a female, I was able to share experiences and feelings that possibly would not have occurred in a cross-gender situation, and which I feel enhanced the confiding nature of the relationship.

As well, the fact that the study interviews took place in a 'safe', familiar environment, i.e. 'The Native Centre', automatically instilled some degree of emotional comfort for the participants. In the words of Candice, I didn't "take the bug out of the forest", but I went into the forest and did my best to adjust.

The fact that the study process was a cooperative project, developed to fit the needs of all concerned (i.e. 'The Native Centre', the participants and myself) was a

unique and significantly positive feature of the entire process. This flexibility in approach fits with feminist approaches to counselling and therapy. Because of this very nature, I hope that the participants were made to feel a significant part of the entire process, and not just interview 'subjects'. This design allowed for the women to have voice, to be heard and most importantly to have a safe environment in which to assert when they felt they were not being heard. It is my hope that these women felt comfortable with me. Evidence of this is the content of what these women told me, and trusted me with. I sincerely hope that their trust has been earned and respected in the pages of this thesis.

On a more personal note, I found that this process served as an important skill-enhancing exercise for me, and I can't help but feel that I did, in the end, gain a lot more from this project than the participants could possibly have. I have learned more about the Native culture than I think I could ever have from a book – the subtleties of communication and the importance of building a relationship out of trust and openness are two of the main insights gained by me. These are also the experiences of learning that will mean most to me in my career as a Counsellor, where no doubt, I will always encounter individuals from other cultures. I have learned much from this experience, but most of all it has shown me how much I do not know. Having said that, I look forward to future opportunities to expand this knowledge, and to use it in ways that empower others.

Questionable Limitations

At this point, I am tempted to fall into the positivist paradigm by explaining and making excuses for elements of the process that could fall under this type of scrutiny. The aspects to which I refer, most notably number of participants and the

'representativeness' and 'generalizability of the data', are those which any self-respecting qualitative researcher would feign to defend (e.g. Jardine, 1992; van Manen, 1990). However, I feel that some explanation on that point is warranted, given that not all readers are familiar with qualitative assumptions.

Firstly, because the study was looking for a description of the 'lived experience' of female Native students, the number of participants is not an important issue. The reason for this is that we were not trying to find a 'number' that represents how these women feel, but a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Interviewing five women gave me a better understanding of the phenomenon, and allowed me to look for some understandable and meaningful patterns of similarity and possible sources of difference (Benner, 1985).

With reference to 'representativeness' and 'generalizability', what was sought through this study was an expression of lived experience through the eyes of the participants *only*. Indeed, the goal of naturalistic inquiry is not generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), "but rather to unveil the nature, essences, characteristics and meanings of phenomena as fully and completely as possible within a particular context" (Leininger, 1992, p.403). Perhaps, then, the only viable validation of the outcomes is that the final structure was shared by all participants, with the understanding that not all aspects of the structure necessarily appear in the experience of each participant (Osborne, 1990). Thus, the findings explained are not expected to hold for all Native women in a University setting, everywhere. As mentioned earlier, it is up to the reader to decide on its resonance with her (or his) own experience(s). Therefore, the representativeness of the sample extends only to itself (Kennedy, 1979), where its generalizability is open for

debate.

Of great significance to the outcomes of study is the fact that these women to a large extent were self-selected. While the argument can be made that this is only the story of five women, and may not be representative of all Native women (and it is not presented as such), I would urge caution. It is clearly possible that the fact that these women chose to participate is a function of their own personal strength and confidence. If their stories tell of pain and burden, does this not indicate that other students whose personal resources are not so strong may be suffering all the more? What about those students, as Candice spoke about, who have left without graduating? What would their stories tell? These women are students who have persisted and are victorious despite the 'rough spots'. What of those who were unable to constantly navigate – alone - what may have been a path strewn with rock and shale?

One aspect of this study that may have had negative effects either on the outcome or on myself as researcher was my own feelings of inadequacy, and persistent 'imposter syndrome' feelings which affected me throughout the study. Not only were these feelings related to the process itself, but to my interaction with a culture that I admired, but was clearly not a part of. While this feeling dissipated slowly over the course of the study with the help of my co-researchers' acceptance and trust in me, it was never totally eradicated. However, again I can find a positive 'reframe' for this, and say that those feelings instilled in me a drive to make this study the best that it can be, and to constantly question and introspect in an effort to be clear about my process and the reasons for my decisions and actions. In a sense, it made me a better qualitative researcher.

Future Research Considerations

Given the 'success' (defined by all that has gone before) of the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach with this population in terms of both the process and the outcomes, I feel that using this type of approach to studying ethnically diverse populations may be well served by this type of co-operative qualitative approach. Not only is it respectful of culture and diversity, but it provides a forum for first-hand experiential learning on the part of the researcher. One caution: where a researcher is only interested in fame and glory for results for quick, definitive and generalizable results, soul-searching and status-quo upsetting (one's own) process will not be worth the effort.

Considerations for future research in specific terms would be beneficially directed at repeating this process with a Native male population. This suggestion is not made in order that comparisons can be drawn, but more as a means of getting an idea of the 'bigger picture'. In doing so, it may be made more clear whether the confusion and distaste for the patriarchal system witnessed in these women is a function of their gender, or the Native culture. Additionally, if future research is concerned with the experience of those women (and men) who are unable to navigate the 'rough spots' of University as the participants of this study learned to do, then talking with some of these people who have chosen a different path might be enlightening. Indeed, the outcomes of that type of study might also be useful for making a case to the University for implementing changes designed toward retention of these students from an ethnically-sensitive vantage point.

Counselling Implications

In closing, it would be inappropriate to ignore the implications that this study has on the field of cross-cultural counselling. I have spoken already about the personal gains made through climbing my own personal mountain – that of conducting this research. I have learned greater sensitivity to cultural cues, and I have also learned that humility and humour are my two greatest assets in this situation. However, I will not always be in a researcher role, nor do I have a wish to be. To be able to bring what I have learned from this process into my counselling practice will be an added bonus. However, outlining what the implications of this study are for the greater counselling community is my charge here...

From the outcomes of this process, it is evident that counsellors in educational settings need to be very sensitive to the nuances of the Native culture if they wish to be effective in a therapeutic way with this population. From what at least one of the participants told me, it is not enough to be non-judgemental, warm, accepting and non-denominational. Since much of their balance and focus stems from a grounding in tradition and spirituality, then it is important that these elements be interwoven into the counselling experience. While I agree that not all counsellors will be able to, or even wish to fully embrace the Native values and beliefs in order to be 'appropriate' in the counselling setting, it seems necessary that at least some genuine effort be made to address what represent very large parts of a traditional Native persons life. Suggestions for doing so might include at a minimum being relatively cognizant of Native values, beliefs and traditions, which might be gained through reading, or talking with Native people. Better still, developing some contact with the Native community (much like

networking with any other professional colleague) in order that referrals might be made to elders or other knowledgeable persons from the clients' tradition.

From the positive outcomes of this study it seems that my personal orientation to counselling (and my belief about human nature in general) has been very appropriate in developing respectful communication between the Native people with whom I've had contact and myself. In particular, I refer primarily to my constructivist beliefs that tell me reality is to a great degree individually constructed, so there is no one truth to explain all experience. In addition, the flexibility with which this study was approached, and the positive way in which this flexibility was received by the participants substantiates feminist approaches to counselling and therapy. Thus, I feel that approaching Native clients from a similar standpoint, allowing and respecting realities different to my own, and facilitating growth and change in a positive, accepting and empowering relationship seems appropriate given what is and would be a cross-cultural context.

One more belief I hold at the conclusion of this study is that there is a great need for Native women to enter the field of counselling and psychology. Within a culture where lived experience is valued as much as it is valued by these participants, having a counsellor or therapist who is of similar ethnicity and background *may* provide the most appropriate therapeutic setting.

Of course, there is no 'prescription' for approaching members of any ethnicity, even your own. If we adopt a stance of 'knowing what we don't know' (to paraphrase Rachel), then I think that is the most respectful point from which to start.

Summary and Conclusions

The research outcomes of this study seem insubstantial when compared to the rewards I have reaped as a result of being a part of this study. Again, 'imposter syndrome' ghosts haunt me, as now I contend with the possibility that my gains have been greater than those of my participants, 'The Native Centre,' or indeed my research peers. I have learned a great deal about my participants, but more importantly, I have learned a great deal about myself. Most of all, I realize how little I know, how much I have yet to learn, and how much my experience with these wonderful women has taught me. It is my hope that this knowledge will guide me in a more respectful approach – both personal and therapeutic – with other Native peoples, and indeed people of all cultures. It is for this lesson, together with their time and consideration that I remain eternally grateful to these women.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate and important to outline those areas where change would be most welcome as delineated by my co-researchers. While these points do not represent a 'prescription' for all of the issues raised by this study, provision for at least some of them would go some way towards making the footing for the educational and personal journeys of these women, and hopefully their peers, a little more solid.

- The introduction of a Mediation Room at 'The Native Centre'
- Visits/ceremonies by Elders more often and/or more regularly at 'The Native Centre'
- More support for Native students on first arrival to the University of Calgary (e.g. more focused action taken for students coming from Reserves, etc.)
- The development of an Advocacy Committee/Path
- Hiring of Native Professors and/or inclusion of Native Elders in the teaching process

- Provision for a Native Studies Program
- Inclusion of more Native authored books/texts in Native-content courses
- Inclusion of information about Native Centre in Registration packet
- A Program to include the partners/families of female students in the activities of 'The Native Centre'

While it falls outside the scope of this study to deal with the practicality of implementing these changes, the content and outcomes of this study clearly define the desirability of giving them serious consideration. These women have spoken. Things *can* change, people *can* change – and change *would be* good!

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Appendix A:

Research Agreement

This is to acknowledge that Tanya McFadden has sought and been given consent to carry out a study entitled *Native Women at University: A Study of Lived Experience* in association with 'The Native Centre' at the University of Calgary. By this agreement, 'The Native Centre' agrees to assist, where possible and appropriate, in the data-collection process. Accordingly, the primary investigator agrees to respect the wishes and cultural values of participants, and to carry out the study in a culturally and ethically appropriate fashion.

This consent is given with the understanding that the results of the study will be made available for the use of 'The Native Centre'. However, for the sake of confidentiality, the raw data will only be accessible by the primary investigator, and will remain in her possession. Further, it is understood that by participating, should 'The Native Centre', or any of the women involved feel that participation involves any greater risks than those ordinarily experienced in daily life, or for any other reason, they are free to withdraw from the study without any negative repercussions of any kind.

While it is understood that initially the study-process will involve in-depth one-to-one interviews, should it collaboratively be determined that the development and administration of a survey questionnaire would be desirable, Tanya McFadden agrees to facilitate that process.

It is understood that the data obtained will also be used for the purpose of completing an M.Sc. Thesis in Counselling Psychology by the primary investigator. Prior to reporting the results in this thesis, Tanya McFadden will obtain the written consent of the individuals concerned. At no point in any written report will the name of any or all participants be made known.

Each of the undersigned acknowledge having received a copy of this agreement.

George D. Calliou,
Director: 'The Native Centre',
University of Calgary.

Date

Noreen Demeria,
U of C Student,
Member of Executive Committee -
First Nations Student Association (FNSA)

Date

Tanya McFadden,
M.Sc. Counselling Psychology Student,
Department of Educational Psychology,
University of Calgary.

Date

Dr. Lee Handy (Supervisor),
University Counselling Services,
University of Calgary.

Date

Appendix B:

Cover Letter for Participants

Dear Participant,

My name is Tanya McFadden. I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Calgary, conducting a study under the supervision of Dr. Lee Handy as part of the requirements towards an M.Sc. in Counselling Psychology degree. This study is being undertaken in co-operation with 'The Native Centre' at the University of Calgary. The present letter is by way of providing some information regarding this study entitled "Native Women at University: A Study of Lived Experience" so that you can make an informed decision regarding your participation.

The purpose of the study is to attempt to understand Native women's experience of University life. That is, it will try to identify the reality of your lived experience - *as you live it* - as a University Student. As a collaborative study in association with 'The Native Centre', the results of findings concerning any 'needs' identified by participants will be used to facilitate the provision of additional services by the 'Centre', aimed at better serving the Native female population at the University of Calgary.

As a voluntary participant of the study, you will be asked to participate in at least two one-to-one interviews with me. The interviews will be arranged for times suitable to both you and me. These interviews will be audio taped, and transcripts made. These transcripts will be coded, meaning that at no time in the written transcript will your real name be used. The transcripts of each interview will be shown to and discussed with you, should you desire to do so. In addition, I will be making some interpretations of what was said in the interview(s), which I will discuss fully with you.

You should be aware that even if you give your permission, you are free to withdraw at any time for any reason and without any negative repercussions of any kind.

Data will be gathered in such a way as to ensure confidentiality. Only myself and my supervisor (Dr. Lee Handy) will have access to the raw data (i.e., tapes and original transcripts) obtained from participation. Once transcripts have been made, all tapes will be deleted. All responses will be kept in strictest confidence, and will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the University. All raw data will be destroyed two years after completion of the study. Although results reported in the M.Sc. thesis may contain some responses obtained from the interviews, these responses will only be included with the express consent of the participant(s) involved and at no time will the name of the person who gave the response be released or mentioned.

There is no reason to anticipate any particular risks from involvement in this study beyond dealing with concerns which you as a student already encounter in student life. However, should any issues arise of individual concern, appropriate resources will be made available (e.g., University Counselling Services). Some of the foreseen participant benefits to you include a chance to voice your own story as a University Student, and knowledge that you are contributing to the resources of "The Native Centre", which in turn will serve to benefit Native women attending the University of Calgary, now and in the future.

In addition, a questionnaire *may* be developed resulting from our discussions. This questionnaire will only become a reality should it later be decided, in collaboration with 'The Native Centre,' that input from a larger number of Native female students would facilitate greater understanding of the issues, and better service provision at 'The Native Centre.' This questionnaire would then be given to and completed by those women interested in participating and having their concerns voiced.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: 220-3669 (University office); my supervisor Dr. Lee Handy at: 220-4084; George D. Calliou, Director of 'The Native Centre' at: 220-3916; Noreen Demeria at: 220-6034 ('The Native Centre'); the Office of the Chair, Faculty of Education Joint Ethics Committee at: 220-5626; or the Office of the Vice-President (Research) at: 220-3381. Two copies of the consent form are provided. Please return one signed copy to me and retain the other copy for your records.

Thank you for your interest and co-operation.

Sincerely,

Tanya McFadden

Appendix C:**Consent Form**

I hereby consent to participate in the research project entitled "Native Women at University: A Study of Lived Experience." As such, I will participate in at least two one-to-one interviews with Tanya McFadden which will be arranged for mutually suitable times. Should I feel that participation in this project affects me negatively in any way, or for any other reason, I am free to withdraw at any point without any negative repercussions.

I understand that all information that I supply will be obtained and kept in strictest confidence. Any information I provide in this study may be included in the thesis only with my prior knowledge and consent. In addition, at no point will my name be made known in any written manuscripts. I understand that information resulting from the responses I give may be used in the development of a questionnaire as a later part of this study.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my records, and know that if I have any questions, I can contact Tanya McFadden at: 220-3669 (university office); Dr. Lee Handy (M.Sc. Supervisor) at: 220-4084; George D. Calliou, Director of 'The Native Centre' at: 220-3916; Noreen Demeria at: 220-6034 ('The Native Centre'); the Office of the Chair, Faculty of Education Joint Ethics Committee at: 220-5626; or the Office of the Vice-President (Research) at: 220-3381.

Signature

Date

Participant's Printed Name

Appendix D:
Consent Form
(for release of data)

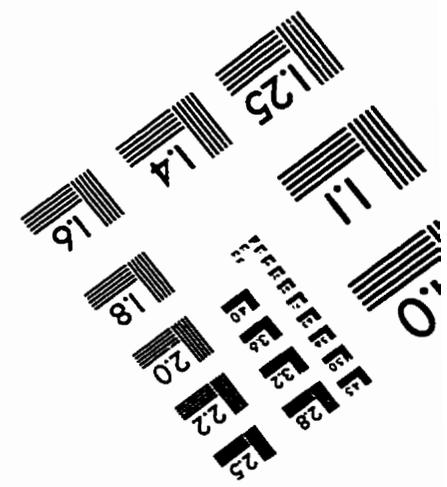
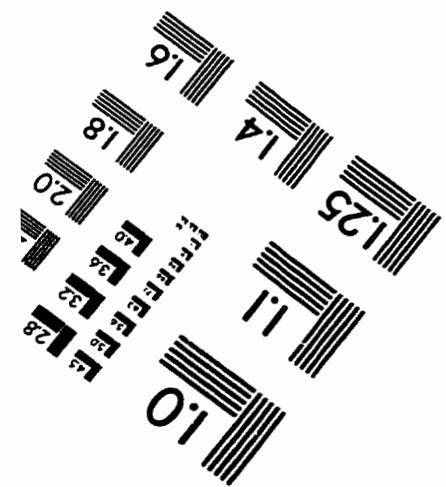
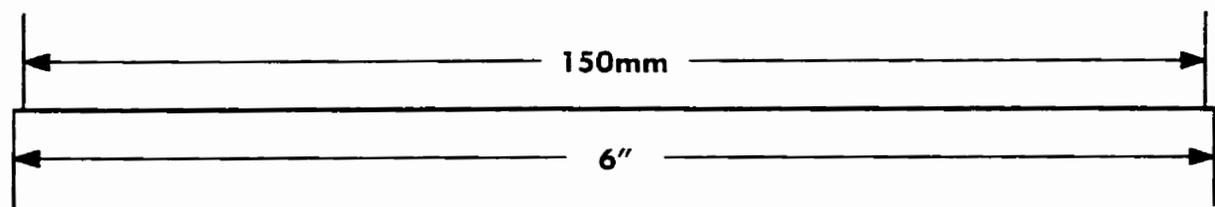
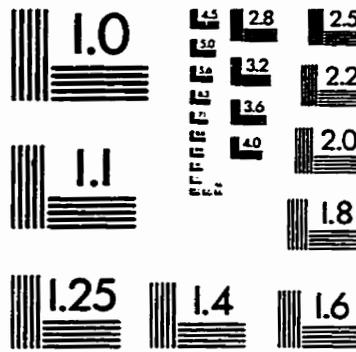
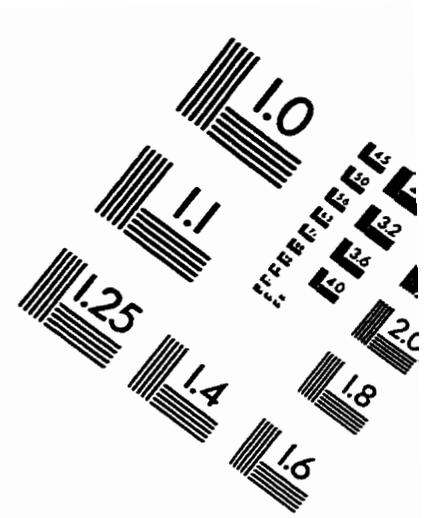
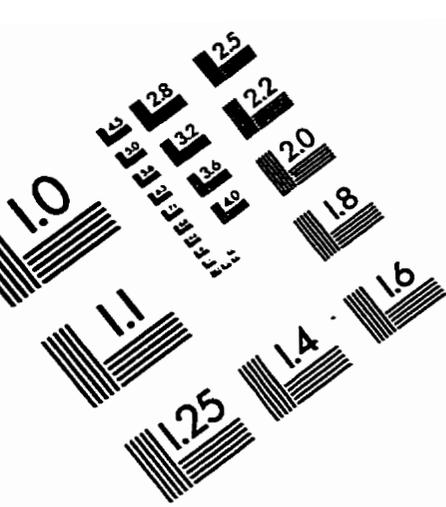
This is to acknowledge that I have read the transcripts of my interview sessions with Tanya McFadden, and I agree to the release of information provided by myself for inclusion in her M.Sc. Thesis entitled "Native Women at University: A Study of Lived Experience".

Signature

Date

Participant's Printed Name

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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