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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Cultural Construction of Suicide as Revealed in  
Discursive Patterns Among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Caregivers.

by

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A THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to current research, the Aboriginal suicide rate is three to six times that of the rest of Canada's population (Kirmayer, 1994; Sinclair, 1998). The ethnocentric, non-Canadian focus of current research suggests the need for alternative approaches in order to elucidate the cultural and linguistic embeddedness of social phenomena like suicide. A discourse analytic approach was used to analyze nine hours of group interviews involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants discussing suicide and suicide prevention. The analysis focused on the identification of the manner in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants constructed suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Findings revealed several hegemonic devices supporting the general construction of Aboriginal people as “deficient” and of suicide as a symptom of this deficiency. This thesis concludes with an exploration of how this construction may be understood through the lens of post colonial theory, most specifically, Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978).

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## **DEDICATION**

**For Madsen**



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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE RESEARCH FOCUS : ABORIGINAL SUICIDE

#### Introduction

##### What This Thesis is About

It is not enough to simply speak the right language, to participate in the appropriate discourses. We must also find the *truth* of psychological statements within ourselves (p. 3).

Burman, Kottler, Levett & Parker, 1997

I've started with this statement for two reasons. The first, is to provide you, the reader, with some insight as to what this thesis is about, something to keep in mind as you read. The second, is to serve as a reminder to me, the writer. The topic of this thesis was not an easy one to discuss. Not only because of the obvious--it deals with suicide--but also because of the construction this thesis reveals.

I set out with trepidation when interviewing Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members and Aboriginal caregivers on the topic of suicide and suicide prevention. For someone who grew up hearing about conflicts such as the Cardston blockade and the Oka standoff, I was well aware that Aboriginal people and the RCMP have had a rocky relationship in the past. Stories of racism, violence and hurt between these two groups are not uncommon in the media, and the notion of working in such a strained atmosphere was intimidating. I did not know if I was prepared for the discussions that might surface both about suicide and about Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal<sup>1</sup>/RCMP relations. While each location did involve heated and emotional discussions, it was not at all

what I expected.

Within each of the three group interviews, the participants, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, came to the discussion groups in friendship and mutual respect. Their goal, to discuss suicide prevention and reduce suicide in their communities was the issue of importance, and all else was set aside. According to the participants, working together towards the prevention of suicide had improved RCMP/Aboriginal relations in each of the communities, to the point of friendship (for details see Rogers & Holton, 1999). The conversations between these participants were filled with regard, politeness and admiration for each other and their respective cultures. This was a group who had bonded against the common enemy of suicide.

The initial purpose of this study was to examine the different manners in which the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants constructed suicide. Due to the amicable interviews conducted, I naively (very naively, I now realize) did not expect to find much evidence of racism or power differentials embedded in the discourse of the participants. At first, it was easy to ignore what could be called discourses of racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) but it quickly became apparent that this pattern permeated and transcended every participant within each transcript--despite the well intentioned respect and admiration shown during the conversations.

Racism is a very loaded word- it implies intentional hurt and hatred. Both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants would be appalled to discover that their discourses contain patterns attributable to racism. It is at this point that the above quote

must be brought up. Yes, both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people appeared to have spoken the right language, and participated in the appropriate discourses. On the surface, and according to conventional non-Aboriginal societal rules they were “politically correct”, and I sincerely doubt any of them **are** racist in the conventional, intentional sense of the term. However, even in their sensitivity and well intentioned effort they were still prisoners of a discourse that has been producing and reproducing itself since the beginnings of colonialism. Our way of knowing and making meaning; the psychology within which we live and produce ourselves and those around us, constructs a much different picture than what I heard on the surface, during my interviews. And it was here, in finding that the talk of my participants was rife with racism, that my difficulties in writing this thesis arose.

However, I came to realize that in not writing about these findings, I would be doing these participants a great disservice. These people were dedicated to improving suicide prevention and Aboriginal/RCMP relations. I believe that they would unequivocally support anything that provides even the smallest step towards understanding how Canada with its high rate of Aboriginal suicide, and poor RCMP/Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations came to be the way it is today. Furthermore, finding that these conversations carried subtle discourses of racism within their well intentioned frame is an important insight in terms of our two cultures working together towards an understanding of suicide.



Why study the cultural construction of suicide? Suicide among Aboriginal people in Canada is a growing concern. As more and more Aboriginal youth choose to end their lives, we are left to question why. Numerous studies have been conducted in Canada over the years in an attempt to comprehend this social tragedy (see Leenaars, Wenckstern, Sakinofsky, Dyck, Kral, Bland, 1998; Kirmayer, 1994). Within these studies, suicide has always been examined through the traditional lens of scientific inquiry. Conventional psychology has been constructed to mirror the natural sciences, historically bound to a positivist framework, in order to establish credibility in regards to other scientific disciplines. In order to solidify its claim as a science, psychology in general has built upon the notion that there is one objective truth, and that “real” science may find this truth through the use of the “objective” scientific method. This means that value laden, socially, culturally or personally influenced views did not belong within psychology (Klenger, 1994). However, what scientists have failed to notice is that results stemming from the use of the scientific method are not truly “objective” but are also products of social and cultural origins (Danziger, 1990). First, the researcher is influenced by her own social, personal, and cultural factors throughout the research process. She brings herself and her influences to the table. Second, by attempting to remove her value laden characteristics from the investigation, she actually re-enforces the cultural and social traditions from which the scientific method initially derived (Klenger, 1994).

Alternative approaches do not adhere to the view that there is one truth, one “natural” way in which to look at the world. Postmodern discursive research destabilizes this

position by holding that the world and its inhabitants are created through our social relationships, which are historically and culturally situated (Billig, 1997). Truth then, is constructed by individuals from within their own social and cultural influences, and is therefore contextual. Investigating suicide contextually provides an alternate, and perhaps richer, understanding, by privileging many voices, and many possible truths. By examining the cultural construction of suicide amongst three groups of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in a Canadian context, we are privileging the voices of the people and the context.

However, before exploring this possibility, some background on Aboriginal suicide, and previous research is required. Aboriginal people in Canada have lived through a very different history than their American counterparts. Furthermore, several researchers have determined that there are differences between the two countries in terms of suicide patterns, such as attitudes, rates (Canada's is higher) and methods used (see Lester & Leenaars, 1998; Sakinofsky & Leenaars, 1997). This thesis will privilege the Canadian context and will attempt to concentrate mainly on Canadian statistics and research. Chapter One continues with an epidemiological comparison of suicide among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. This will be followed by a review of mostly Canadian research on suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Then, following a critique of past paradigms and methodologies, this review will continue with a discussion of discourse and suicide, concentrating on discourse analysis as the appropriate tool with which to conduct this investigation. The introduction will conclude with a foray into

patterns in Aboriginal discourses and the concept of power in examining suicide across cultures. Chapter Two will outline the methodology used in this study. This section summarizes the evaluation from which the data were obtained, the participants involved in each group interview, the materials used, including the instrument and recording equipment, and concludes with a discussion of the procedure. Chapter Three begins with a description of discourse analysis, including an explanation of the coding procedure and a preview of the overarching theme and each device. The rest of this chapter is the analysis proper. It explores each finding in detail, and explains how each one contributes to the cultural construction of Aboriginal people and of suicide amongst Aboriginal people. The final chapter of this thesis, Chapter Four, summarizes the findings, explores an interpretive caveat, and attempts to understand the unexpected findings through the lens of post colonial theory, most specifically, Edward Said's landmark publication, Orientalism. Chapter Four concludes with an exploration of the limitations of this study, areas for future research, and hope for a new beginning.

Two concerns. Before delving into the statistics, there are two issues of concern that I wish to illuminate. First, the Aboriginal people of Canada, and by this I mean the original inhabitants of this continent, are often lumped into one grand "culture." Even when Aboriginal people are referred to in sub-groups of Inuit, Native and Métis, each of these groupings is often mistaken as "one culture." It is true that culture can have many meanings and is often used to represent one people. However, to generally accept Aboriginal people, or even Métis, Native or Inuit as one culture is incorrect. Métis,

Native and Inuit people speak many different languages, follow different traditions and have varied genetic, and personal histories. This is not to say that there are not some similar characteristics. For example, it may be argued that: Aboriginal people were, as a group, treated in similar fashion by the colonizers and that they do have some similar spiritual beliefs, such as the representation of the circle as symbolic within many Aboriginal ceremonies (Yellowback, 1998). Furthermore, one concern that does bind many (although not all) of the Aboriginal people in Canada together is the growing rate of suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Regardless, the reader will notice that I do refer to the Aboriginal people frequently in this thesis as one people or culture. This is done for two reasons. First, much of the previous data does frequently generalize to the Aboriginal people as one group or culture, and therefore, this is the only way in which I can report the data. Second, in my own analysis I refer to the Aboriginal people of Canada as “a people”, or “a culture” only in reference to similar treatment as a whole by the “dominant” culture (in the past and present); most bands’ similar concern with suicide; and their place as the original people in Canada. This is done with the full acknowledgment that there are many different tribes and cultures within what I am referring to as the “Aboriginal people”. I’ve done my best to honour this understanding in what I’ve written here, but recognizing that adopting the “general” category of Aboriginal may have some negative effects on my discussions. Readers are encouraged to comment on places where this may have occurred.

The second issue of concern has to do with the definition of suicide. When I refer to the cultural construction of suicide, I am referring to the construction of suicide amongst and of the Aboriginal people in the context that has been put forth by the participants of this study. (Although I do keep in mind the notion that our society does produce and reproduce its discourse on grand as well as small scales and not in a vacuum). Finding a definition for suicide which could apply to anyone and any culture would be a difficult task indeed. Suicide is defined differently by different people and cultures. The most common Western society definition of suicide reflects mental health discourse. Suicide is understood as a “multidimensional malaise” which involves the intention and act of killing oneself. This is usually understood as an immediate act, in which the individual either inflicts fatal injury upon themselves, or puts themselves in a situation where fatal injury may be inflicted upon them. However, there are also people who believe that the act does not have to be immediate, but could be a longer process, with an indefinite moment of death. Such people often view anorexia and chronic substance abuse as forms of suicide.

Regardless of the length of the process, suicide in Western culture is discussed through a mental health discourse. Indeed this is the manner in which the participants of this study discuss suicide: as a problem, an illness that needs to be cured. It is here that the definition of suicide becomes “fuzzy.” This definition of suicide as a “malaise” (Leenars et. al) may not apply to other cultures. It is possible that individuals from different cultures do not view suicide as a mental health problem, or even as a concern. Therefore, it must be noted that this study is built upon the Western culture definition of suicide as a

mental health concern that needs to be addressed, and as a problem that requires a solution. This is again, done with the full acknowledgment that there may indeed be hundreds of different definitions of suicide across the many cultures our world holds.

### Epidemiological Differences

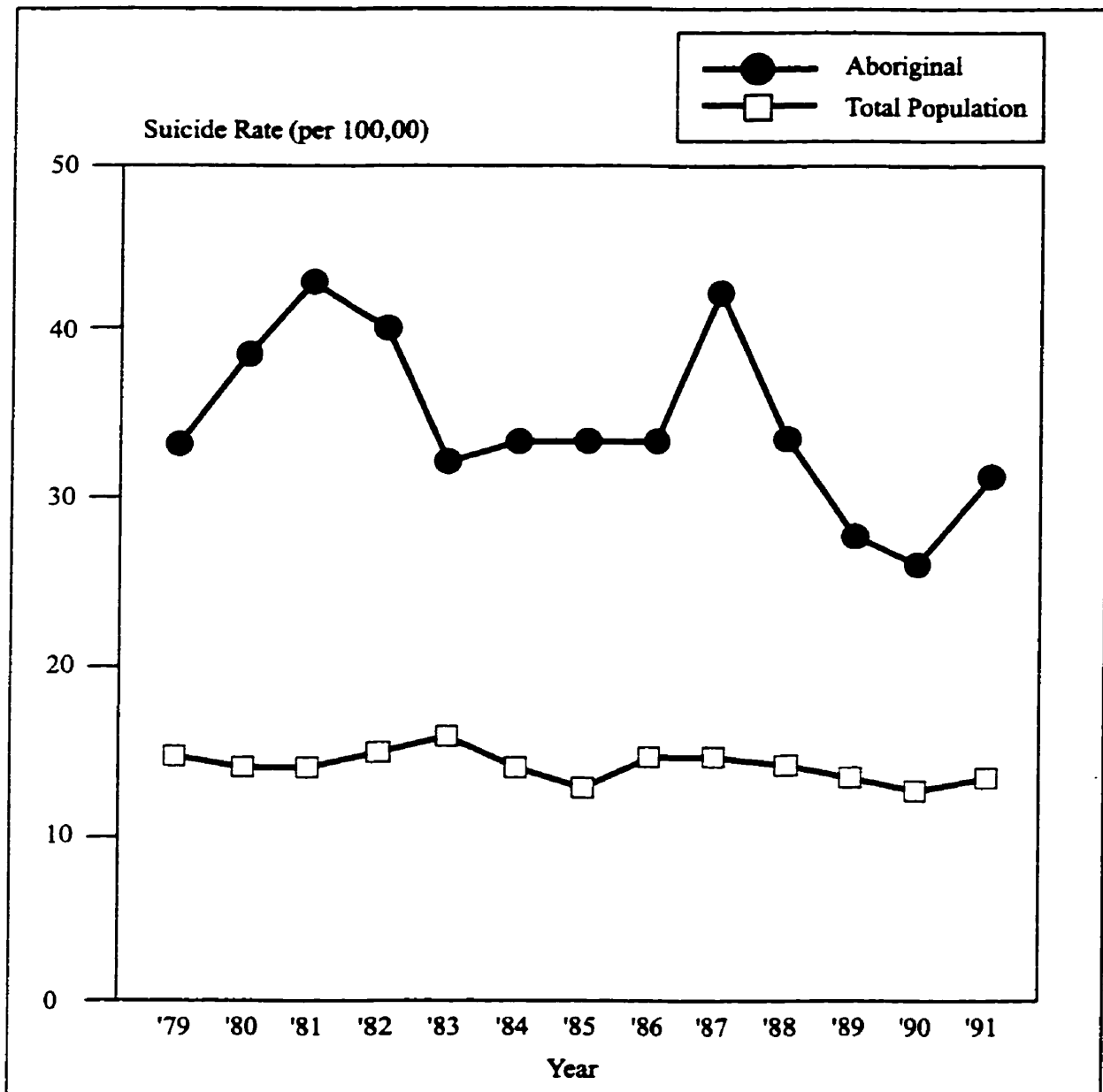
According to section 35 of the Constitution Act (1982), Aboriginal people in Canada compose three general groups: Inuit , Métis and Indian<sup>2</sup> (sic) (Allain, 1989).

Approximately 600 bands live on over 2,000 reserves across Canada, each with their own distinct history. There are very little data on suicide among the Métis (Kirmayer, 1994), and the data that exists on Inuit and Native suicide refers only to those registered with the government as “status” Aboriginal people (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). Therefore, this epidemiology may well be an underestimation of the Aboriginal suicide rate. Cooper, Corrado, Karlberg and Adams (1992) found, in a study of coroners’ reports, that a fair number suicides classified as non-Aboriginal were in fact Aboriginal. However, there is also concern regarding the overestimation of suicide in Aboriginal communities, due to rates being estimated from small populations (Cooper et al., 1991). As the reader may have guessed there is a lack of research and statistics on Aboriginal suicide in Canada, and much of what is available generates more questions than answers. Consequently, the following epidemiological outline is based on the available, although admittedly problematic data on Aboriginal suicide in Canada, as it is all we have to draw from at this point.

The suicide rate among Aboriginal people in Canada is reported as being between three and six times that of the rest of the population (Kirmayer, 1994; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995; Sakinofsky, 1998; Sinclair, 1998). This may vary as a function of the multitude of backgrounds, bands, traditions and ages of the diverse people incorporated under the “blanket” term, Aboriginal. However, to date there has not been a study comparing Aboriginal suicide rates across the varying groups (Kirmayer, 1994). Figure 1 demonstrates the consistent difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal suicide rates in Canada from 1979 to 1991. As can be seen, the rate and eruptive nature of suicide for Aboriginal Canadians is on average three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal Canadians. What the figure does not reveal is that there are an estimated 15 times as many attempted suicides as completed ones among Aboriginal people (Sinclair, 1998).

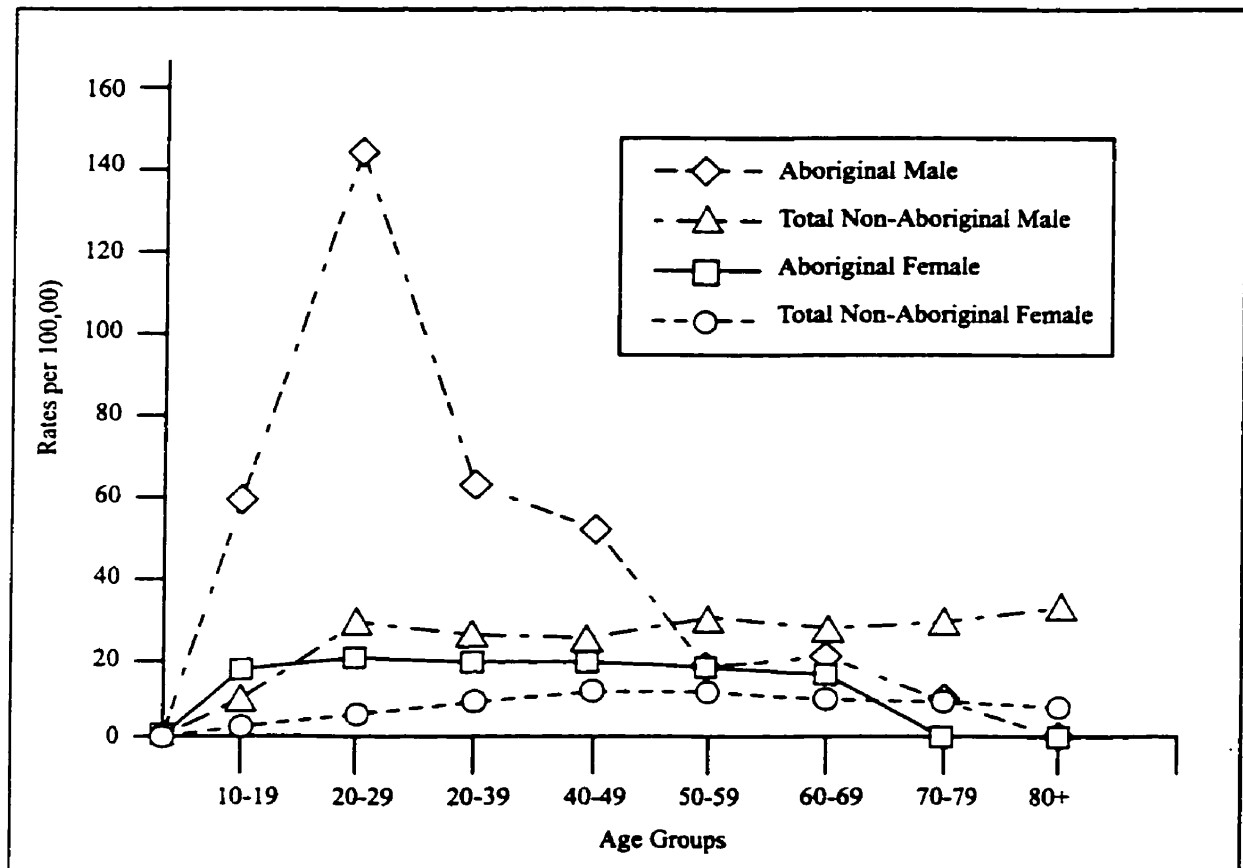
Irrespective of culture, the majority of completed suicide attempts in Canada occur among male teenagers and young adults (Kirmayer, 1994; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). Young women of the same age group are actually even more likely to *attempt* suicide, but are usually less successful than their male counterparts (Cheifetz, Posener, La Haye, Zaidman & Bernierakis, 1987). This appears to be because male youth chose more violent and absolute means of killing themselves, such as hanging or shooting, while female youth tend to choose less immediate means such as pills or asphyxiation (Sakinofsky, 1998; Kirmayer, 1994). Figure 2 illustrates the similar gender difference in suicide rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The fact that

**Figure 1. Suicide Rate for Registered Aboriginals and Total Canadian Population.**  
(Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, 1995)





**Figure 2. Comparison of Registered Aboriginal and Total Canadian Suicide Rates by Age Group. (Kirmayer, 1994)**



youth suicide is so high amongst Aboriginal people is especially disturbing because their current birth rate is reported to be twice that of the non-Aboriginal population. Two out of three of Canada's Aboriginal people are under the age of 25 (Sinclair, 1998), which means a large proportion of the Aboriginal population falls into the high risk group.

In terms of behaviour, one of the more striking differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal suicide is the state of the person and the time at which they end their lives. According to Cooper, et al. (1992), Aboriginal people attempting suicide are more likely to do so impulsively, while intoxicated. They are also more likely to end their lives on a weekend, generally after midnight. In contrast, non-Aboriginal people are less likely to be intoxicated, and are more likely to plan the event. Suicides amongst non-Aboriginal people do not, on average, group around a specific time of the week. Also of interest, suicidal behaviour among non-Aboriginals is less likely than that of the Aboriginal population to take place in clusters<sup>3</sup> (Kirmayer, 1994), and is less likely to be related to economic and educational factors (Cooper, Corrado, Karlberg and Adams, 1992).

A great deal more research needs to be conducted on suicide amongst Aboriginal people in Canada because there is little data available on attempted suicide amongst Aboriginal people, and no research attempting to explain variance in rates across communities (Kirmayer, 1994). When confronted with the details that are available, especially relative to the rest of the population, three obvious and loaded questions may spring to mind. Why do Aboriginal people have such a high rate of suicide relative to the rest of Canada? Why do their suicidal patterns differ from those of non-Aboriginals? Can

anyone do anything to rectify this situation? These three questions have fueled several studies on suicide amongst Canadian Aboriginal people (see Leenaars et al., 1998). The next section of this paper will look at how researchers in the past have attempted to comprehend this tragic problem.

### Historical Viewpoints on Suicide

In a clinical sense, the traditional manner of understanding a problem is to trace the patient's medical history to the moment of onset. This has been one way of examining suicide in North American Aboriginal people. Has their rate of suicide always been high? There are many obstacles that face us when trying to answer this question. Aboriginal people are traditionally an oral culture (Ong, 1982). Their history of suicide was not written down, but passed along orally from generation to generation. While oral cultures are known to keep very accurate records (Ong, 1982), many of the stories, languages and traditions were lost or altered upon the colonization of North America. There is no written evidence, predating 1535<sup>4</sup>, that discussed suicide amongst Canadian Aboriginal people. Their traditions, history and cultures were modified or eradicated as they merged with Western culture. Conversations with Elders suggest that even the altered evidence hints at what many suspect: Aboriginal health and society began to deteriorate upon contact with Western culture (King, 1995; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). Aboriginal Elders report that despite cultural variation towards acceptance and methods of suicide in Aboriginal groups, suicide among their people was uncommon before Europeans came to North America (King, 1995). This is not to say that suicide

did not occur in Aboriginal cultures before contact with the now dominant culture. It most certainly did, as there are totems discouraging the act which predate colonization (Connors, 1998). However, according to the stories that remain, it appears that it was rare (Pine, 1981). In fact, some bands, such as the Ojibwa, do not even have a word for suicide (King, 1995).

There are many possible reasons for the perceived rarity of suicide- perhaps suicide was unheard of or perhaps it was viewed as an altruistic act. It appears that when suicide did occur, it was usually for specific reasons. In certain bands, these reasons allowed for the act to be condoned. According to Connors (1998), acts committed to better the situation of the group were viewed with honour. In many tribes, young men who intentionally set out to die in battle and further the tribe's chances of winning a war were often immortalized in oral traditions passed on from generation to generation (Androlio, 1998). An Inuit Elder's act of wandering off to die in order to relieve the tribe of the impediment of caring for an infirm was, at times, sanctioned (Durkheim, 1951; Lester, 1997). Suicidal acts such as these demonstrated a great respect for life- from which the rest of the tribe ultimately benefited. The view of suicide as infrequent and altruistic is believed by many Aboriginal people to have changed into a more frequent expression of despair as a result of colonization (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995).

Since the Europeans are a literate culture, they have a documented history of suicide from which to draw. Suicide among European Christians (who colonized Canada) has not always been viewed as taboo. Neither the Old or New Testament refers to suicide as a

sin (Pangrazzi, 1984). However, in the fourth century, St. Augustine (and later, St. Thomas Aquinas) decided that suicide was an infraction against the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”, and declared that all persons who completed suicide would go to hell (Alvarez, 1972; Pangrazzi, 1984; King 1995). Suicides were viewed with fear and were discouraged. For example, suicidal people who were unsuccessful in killing themselves were often killed if found out; people who died from suicide were not permitted to be buried on consecrated ground; and the families of suicide victims were often ostracized from the rest of society (Alvarez, 1972; Pangrazzi, 1984). Theoretically, it was this view of suicide, as a sin and taboo, that traveled with the colonists as they filtered into Canada and forever changed Aboriginal cultures.

Concern regarding the high rate of suicide among Aboriginal people appears to have begun around the turn of the century. In a 1935 attempt to see if Iroquois had increased their rate of suicide since early colonial times, Fenton (1935) researched oral reports from Ontario based Iroquois tribes and written accounts from colonists dating from the early colonial times to the late 1900’s. The accounts describe suicides completed through poison or hanging for the purpose of jealousy, shame, loss of a loved one, and escape from violent death. Fenton reports that “the greatest frequency (of suicides among Aboriginal people) came during the period following white (sic) contact when conditions were ripe for social disorganization” (Fenton, 1935, p. 134). He suggests that the most remarkable factor regarding suicides amongst the Iroquois was that the patterns of suicide had remained stable following initial contact. David Lester (1997), one of the Western

world's leading suicidologists, has found similar results while engaged in a study tracking early written reports of life threatening behaviour amongst North America's Aboriginal people (irrespective of country). His research has found accounts dating back to early colonial times which suggest that Aboriginal people would commonly poison or hang themselves if they felt they had dishonoured a friend or family member.

Over the past two centuries, several theories of suicide have been explored, from psychological, to social and cultural. As high rates of suicide among Aboriginal people became more and more apparent, research in this area flourished and began to propagate around the 1960's and 70's (Narcisse, 1998). The main concentration of Canadian research on suicide amongst Aboriginal people has been in collecting prevalence rates and other trends, as outlined in the epidemiological section of this thesis. In terms of the research that remains, most favour social theories exploring social and cultural factors. This next section will examine theories of Canadian Aboriginal suicide.

### Aboriginal Suicide: Past Research

Reviewing the small amount of research conducted on Canadian Aboriginal suicide, we find a tremendous bias towards social and cultural theories.

Suicide itself is not classified as a mental disorder, as it is not present in the DSM-IV (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). However, the DSM-IV does indicate that individuals with mood disorders may suffer suicidal ideation and suicide. For the most part, psychological theories on suicide, have concentrated upon determining the

relationship between suicide and mental (or psychiatric) disorders, such as schizophrenia, depression and antisocial personality. In all societies for which the data exists, the research conducted appears to indicate a relationship between suicide and mental disorders (Sakinofsky, 1998; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1995). According to a brief review of the relationship between mental disorders and suicide, approximately 15 percent of those individuals with mood disorders (such as depression) are at risk of suicide, while those with other disorders such as schizophrenia and substance abuse are at less risk (Sakinofsky, 1998). This reveals that the relationship between suicide and mental disorders is not as simple as it may seem, because many people with these disorders do not end up killing themselves. Furthermore, mental disorders may contribute to some social factors such as isolation, loss of job, or inability to attend school, all of which could also influence an individual's decision to complete suicide.

In terms of Aboriginal people, an investigation of coroners' reports in British Columbia, indicates that Aboriginal people who completed suicide were less likely to have a mental illness than were their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Cooper et al., 1992). Furthermore, according to research conducted for a report on suicide by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1995), mental disorders are not as common among Aboriginal people as they are among non-Aboriginal people. However it is further suggested that the incidence of mental disorders in Aboriginal people in Canada is not well reported (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). Ross and Davis (1986) examined suicide and parasuicide in a Canadian Aboriginal community and reported that

none of the suicides investigated had any contact with the mental health system.

Therefore, the possibility remains that the lower rates of disorders may result from reduced contact with those able to make the diagnosis.

One issue that strongly overlaps theories is that of drug and alcohol abuse. Substance abuse is an element present in the DSM-IV and has been correlated with Canadian Aboriginal Suicide (Spaulding, 1986; Gotowiec & Beiser, 1994; Kirmayer, 1994). For the most part, researchers have preferred to examine substance abuse in the context of social factors such as the repression, and varied other violations of Aboriginal people over Canada's colonial history. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1995), Aboriginal caregivers feel that to medicalize depression and other mental illnesses amongst a people who have been socially shattered is a form of "blaming the victim" (p.21), and that to understand the relationship that these mental disorders have with suicide in Aboriginal people, one must examine and consider the social and cultural context. This essentially is what the social theories that lead the research on Canadian Aboriginal people have done. The next section will examine these theories.

### Theories

Durkheim's 1887 study Le Suicide, which was translated into English in 1951, greatly influenced the notion that suicide resulted from social factors rather than mental or genetic disorders. According to Durkheim's social theory, the rate of suicide is contingent upon levels of social integration, the extent to which a people are bound together socially; and social regulation, the extent to which a people's feelings and aspirations are controlled by



their culture's customs. Most suicidologists today believe that social disorganization (such as the breakdown of familial, social, and cultural factors) is related to increased suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Theoretically, this social disorganization results in a decrease in Durkheim's social integration and social regulation (Lester, 1997). This leads to an environment ripe for suicidal ideation. Today, the social theory of suicide has permeated Western culture. Suicide is not included in the DSM-IV and generally most suicidologists prefer theories relating to social disorganization (Sakinofsky, 1998). Of the studies that are conducted on suicide amongst Aboriginal people in Canada today, many fit into three broad interrelated sets of risk factors which appear to deal primarily with social disorganization (see Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995; Kirmayer, 1994). These are Familial History; Culture Tension; and Social-Economic factors.

Familial History. The first factor regarding the high suicide rate in Aboriginal people involves familial problems, ranging from conflict, broken families, abuse, and substance abuse in parents. The general understanding is that family relationships began to breakdown as colonial Europeans tried to "civilize" the Aboriginal people (Ross, 1992).

For the most part, Aboriginal people in North America were a nomadic people, living in camps close to other family groups during the summer, traveling hundreds of kilometers to trap lines during the winter, where they would live and hunt with their immediate family, until it was time to move to the summer camps again. It was during these winter months that older family members would pass down skills and knowledge to their children.

When Europeans colonized North America they thought it important to help “civilize the savages” and introduce them to a Western way of life (Ross, 1992; Echohawk, 1997). Very generally, this consisted of providing them with Christian and Western education. Elders were forced to give up practicing Aboriginal spiritual traditions in favour of Christian ceremonies and rituals. Mission schools were set up mainly for the purpose of converting Aboriginal people to Christianity (Ross, 1992; Echohawk, 1997). In the 19th and mid 20th century, the American and Canadian governments set up compulsory boarding or residential schooling for Aboriginal children. Attendance at school was mandatory, and promoted as what was thought to be “best” for the children. Unfortunately, the children lived at the schools during the winter months, the traditional time during which they would have traveled to the trap lines and learned about their culture and tradition. Children lived away from their homes for most of their lives, and never really knew their parents. Clearly, the interference of Western Europeans left little unchanged in Aboriginal culture. The construction and location of homes; language; education; religion; and even the diet of the Aboriginal people was altered (Berry, 1990). As these changes developed over the colonial times and onwards, an entire generation had lost their families, their cultural identity, and were unable to pass what was left of their culture, tradition and morals on to their children. As Ross (1992) indicates, “these men and women were robbed of virtually all sources of self-sufficiency, pride and self esteem” (p.106) and widespread alcoholism developed soon after. This theory holds that the breakdown of many Aboriginal families has lead to increased suicide among Aboriginal

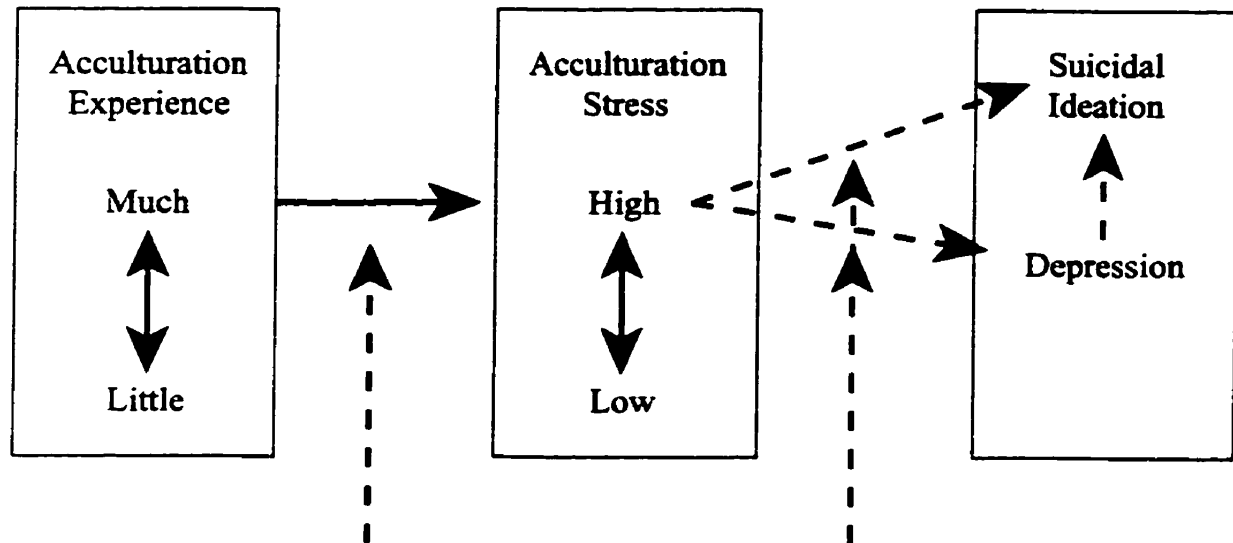
people, especially the youth.

Indeed several researchers have looked at familial problems in relation to Aboriginal suicide. Gartrell, Jarvis & Derksen (1993) looked at Aboriginal children in Alberta from grades 7 to 9. They found that thoughts of suicide were higher in children with no paternal figure present, and a previous suicide in the family. Family disruption, depression and suicidal acts were more common and more often fatal than in non-Aboriginal children. Gotoweic & Beiser (1994) also found higher family violence, failure in academia and higher incidence of suicide amongst Aboriginal children than those in the dominant culture. Research by Minde & Minde (1995) indicates that Aboriginal parents who have been removed from their traditional culture find it difficult to provide their children with suitable cognitive and behavioural skills. Finally, Aboriginal peoples indicating what they felt needed to be done to reduce suicidal behaviour in Aboriginal youth, suggested that improvements in parenting skills are crucial (Cooper et al. 1992).

Cultural tension. The second factor regarding the high incidence of suicide among Aboriginal people involves the notion of acculturation, in which two cultures are in constant contact, one being more dominant than the other. The tension which develops in the minority group may cause them to feel torn between the two cultures, leading to feelings of anxiety and alienation and possibly suicide (Hovey & King, 1997; Lester, 1997). The majority of acculturation studies look at immigrant and native peoples. According to Kirmayer (1994) studies conducted over the past few decades have indicated that there is a positive relationship between acculturative stress and suicide in

Aboriginal populations. In their study on suicide and acculturation, Hovey and King (1997) elaborate on a model created by previous researchers to demonstrate how high levels of stress brought on by acculturation may result in suicidal ideation. See Figure 3 for a representation of this model. As can be seen, there are cultural and psychological aspects that might act as guides between acculturation and mental health. These are attributes such as “Family Cohesiveness” and “Social support.” Notice that some of these factors such as “Age at Immigration,” do not fit with the Canadian/Aboriginal situation, although the notion of acculturation still applies to Aboriginal people (See Berry, 1990; Kirmayer, 1994; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). Hovey and King (1997) extended the model to include possible results of stress brought on by acculturation, such as suicide and depression. Consider the stress faced by traditional families, or groups attempting to retain the cultural traditions and teachings pre-dating Western contact, even when these teachings conflict with the dominant culture. For example, some Aboriginal peoples express the importance of non-interference when dealing with others, for fear that telling someone what to do could cause them embarrassment (Ross, 1992). Therefore, an Aboriginal individual in a dominant culture setting who is asked for advice or input on a given situation is faced with a difficult situation. Traditionally, to give advice in the Aboriginal culture is thought to be rude (more on this later). Therefore, the individual has two options, offer advice, and be reproached by his Aboriginal acquaintances, or not offer advice and be thought indifferent to the situation by his non-Aboriginal acquaintances. When faced with this and similar

**Figure 3. Model of Acculturative Tension, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation.**  
(Hovey & King, 1997)



**Variables Moderating the Relationships Between Acculturation, Acculturative Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation.**

**Family Cohesiveness:** Family intactness and family functioning

**Social Support:** Access to social network and perceived effectiveness of support

**Socioeconomic Status:** Includes work-status changes

**Premigration Adaptive Functioning:** Includes self-esteem; coping ability; psychiatric status

**Prior Knowledge of the New Language and Culture**

**Motives for the Move:** Voluntary versus involuntary; internal versus external

**Cognitive Variables:** Attitudes toward acculturation; expectancies toward future; plans

**Age at Immigration:** Less stressful adaptation is expected with movement prior to age 12

**Generation in New Community:** Less stress expected with later generations

**Degree of Cultural Pluralism within New Community:** Multicultural ideology within community; acceptance of the specific culture within community.

situations, this acculturation experience is likely to accumulate in the individual, which, as hypothesized by Hovey & King (1997), could lead to depression and possibly suicide.

Berry (1990) notes that the non-dominant culture put into this situation has four possibilities: 1) to integrate with the dominant culture, but maintain cultural identity; 2) to assimilate with the dominant culture and lose cultural identity; 3) to separate from the dominant culture completely and maintain cultural identity; and 4) to be marginalized, to separate completely from the dominant culture, and not maintain cultural identity.

Indeed Berry (1990) found that suicide rates in Aboriginal people are at their highest in communities which do not have strong traditions and a strong sense of culture.

Interestingly, Bagley (1991) examined suicides among Aboriginal males aged 15-24 in 26 Alberta reserves and found that the reserves that were more isolated from contact with non-Aboriginals had higher rates of suicide. Kirmayer (1994) brings up the point that acculturation models ignore the fact that the Aboriginal people derive from various cultural backgrounds and have varying rates of suicide depending on the community. The Aboriginal people have reacted in many different ways to acculturation. Furthermore, Kirmayer (1994) finds that acculturation models ignore the notion that historically, Aboriginal peoples' contact with other cultures was not in the form of a "choice" as the models rely upon, but oppression which limited their adaptation.

Social and economic. The third factor focuses less on the notion that loss of culture is the main source of the problem, and more on the idea that social and economic problems are the culprit (Lester, 1997; Sakinofsky & Leenaars, 1997). According to the Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the social and economic conditions on Aboriginal reserves are substandard to those of the rest of the Canadian population. Aboriginal people on reserves are more likely to have low education, high rates of poverty, high rates of substance abuse, deficient housing, and low community cohesiveness (Kirmayer, 1994). The theory suggests that these factors lead to a general inability to improve living conditions, which in turn causes feelings of helplessness, depression and substance abuse-factors often thought to be precursors of suicidal ideation. Poverty, unemployment and substance abuse are frequently correlated with high rates of suicide.

Bagley, (1991) found that poverty and suicide were positively correlated in Aboriginal males from 26 reserves across Alberta. In a study on suicide rates among Ojibwa bands in Northwestern Ontario, Spaulding (1986) revealed that substance abuse was found in over half of the suicides he investigated.

In a study of suicide in British Columbia, Cooper et al. (1992) found that suicides were more often completed by youths (usually male) who had a history of family and personal social problems, such as violent tendencies (verbal or physical) and drug abuse. Stressful events, such as mental and physical health problems, relationship (family and otherwise) and employment problems, financial and school related difficulties, were often found amongst those who had completed suicide. The possible solutions that Cooper et al. (1992) solicited from Aboriginal participants in a telephone survey involve suggestions to improve social factors. These include recommendations such as: developing a positive self image in young people; addressing community wellness needs;

engaging youth in traditional customs; teaching parenting skills; teaching caregiver skills; and enabling Aboriginal people to help develop and implement their own aid programs. In essence, the participants recognize that the cohesiveness and strength of their community and community traditions need to be re-established.

Gotowiec and Beiser (1994) found that Canadian Aboriginal children were more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to drop out of school. Even after an Aboriginal youth has beat the odds and enters University, she is more likely to drop out than her non-Aboriginal classmates. Similar to the findings of Cooper et al. (1992), Gotowiec and Beiser (1994) found that Aboriginal children are more likely to be involved in drug and alcohol abuse, that they begin drinking earlier, and that they drink more heavily than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. They are also more likely to complete suicide, with the majority of suicides taking place among young people and in relation to alcohol and relationship problems.

### Summary of Risk Factors

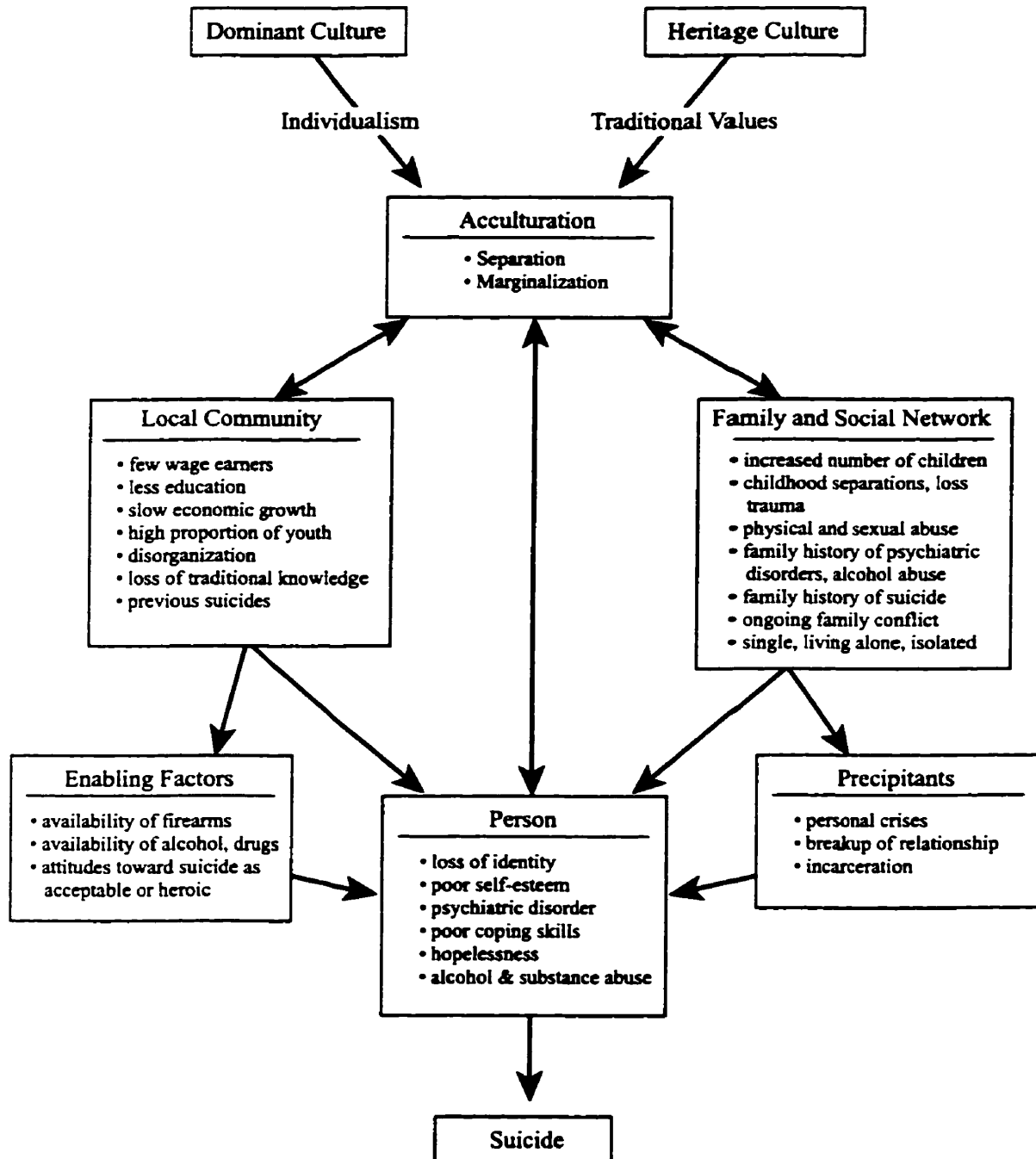
The theory of social disorganization also speaks to the interrelatedness of these apparent risk factors, encouraging effective acculturation , improvement of familial problems, and reduction in unemployment and substance abuse in order to reduce suicide. For example, the report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People discusses the social disorganization faced by Aboriginal people and emphasizes the importance of community development, through the nourishment of Aboriginal culture and traditions by concentrating on helping youth and children; and strengthening community and family



relationships. This includes involving the whole community in prevention and encouraging community control of workshops and prevention programs. Furthermore, despite his dislike of the acculturation theory, Kirmayer (1994), created an overview of Aboriginal suicide in Canada, in which he developed a model outlining the “collision of two cultures” (Kirmayer, 1994, p.40) which resulted in three levels of interrelated social problems brought on by acculturation, resulting in social disorganization, and involving the individual, the family and the community. Community problems include a lack of economic and scholastic advantages, previous suicides, loss of traditional knowledge; a decreasing number of elders; and a high percentage of youth. Family problems involve alcohol and drug use, family conflict, physical and sexual abuse, childhood trauma and loss, a family history of completed suicide, and isolation. Personal problems include poor self esteem, poor coping skills, alcohol and drug abuse, incarceration, relationship problems and accessibility of firearms. Kirmayer’s model is displayed in Figure 4. As can be seen, this model illustrates how each social factor, including those discussed here, are interrelated, and may each act as an influence on suicide.

Suicide is widely believed to be a multidimensional concern stemming from multiple psychological and social factors working in conjunction. As can be seen from the foregoing, past research indicates that there is no **one** “cause” or correlate of suicide amongst Canadian Aboriginal people. Although there is less support for the acculturation theory than the family and social-economic theories, they all appear interrelated. Each issue, from cultural and family problems, to mental disorders and social organization

**Figure 4. Model of Contributing Factors to Suicide Amongst Aboriginal Peoples (Kirmayer, 1994)**



appears to be, as Kirmayer shows us in Figure 4, intricately woven together. No one of these factors appears to provide an unequivocal means of comprehending the high rate of suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Perhaps something is missing? This research has achieved acceptance as the “official word” on Aboriginal suicide. In the search for an “objective truth”, the researchers have determined “Aboriginal problems” without the input of Aboriginal people. In all of the past research, has any but Cooper et al. (1992) solicited the opinions of the Aboriginal people? Have any considered the effect of having individuals from the dominant culture “passing judgment” on the Aboriginal culture? The next section offers a critique of this past research and offers up issues that need to be (and will be) addressed in the present study.

### Critique of Past Research

Current, traditional research and models on suicide have their foundation in the positivist, quantitative, scientific paradigm from which modern psychology developed. The theories and research outlined above are embedded within this paradigm, and are thereby limited to its confines. While this form of research can be invaluable in many respects, it unfortunately does not always allow for topics that do not fit the “mold” outlined by the research. There are several examples where this is indeed the case regarding research on suicide amongst Aboriginal people.

First, the majority of the research on Aboriginal suicide uses the dominant (Western) culture as the standard for evaluation, through comparisons or the use of diagnostic tests. As a result, the data provided by these studies are invariably ethnocentric: the result of

evaluating the Aboriginal culture by criteria of the dominant culture. Such data are premised on the unlikely notion that psychologically, we are all alike, and that cultural, historical and contextual factors do not influence the manner in which we think, view or react to the world (Much, 1995). Differences related to cultural-historical facts, and difficulties related to acculturation may be frequently *mentioned* as possibilities, but little more is done to explore the Aboriginal perspective.

Second, although an attempt to incorporate Canadian research has been made in this paper, Canadian researchers such as Gototwiec & Beiser (1994) and Leenaars, Wenckstern, Sakinofsky, Dyck, Kral & Bland (1998) remind us that most of the literature produced on this topic derives from American data. Therefore generalizability to the Canadian situation is problematic. This erroneously lumps all Aboriginal people into the same homogeneous category. Not only do Canada and the United States have different cultures and histories, the Aboriginal people identify more than 300 distinct tribal groups across North America (Gotowiec & Beiser, 1994). It may well be a better research practice to assume that the sum of these socio-cultural aspects do result in differences in their respective psychological features (Leenaars et al. 1998).

Third, (and related to the previous two criticisms) assumptions of universality have led the dominant culture to attempt to work **for** the Aboriginal culture rather than **with** them. Sinclair (1998) and EchoHawk (1997), two Aboriginal academics who have written on the tragedy of suicide among Aboriginal people have both mentioned that Aboriginal and Western cultures should work together to diminish the prevalence of suicide among

Aboriginal people. Differences in culture and communication often result in misunderstandings when in fact they could be telling us more about each other. This is of particular relevance when two or more cultures are attempting to work together to solve difficult, apparently culturally related problems such as suicide. Furthermore, Canada's Aboriginal and dominant cultures have altered, co-constructed and defined themselves in relation to one another and are in fact still doing so. This ongoing process is a constant in all of their interactions and resulting actions such as suicide and therefore must be taken into consideration when conducting research.

Fifth, the majority of past research does not include qualitative factors. If researchers were to solicit discussions, respondents would be able to express their attitudes and concerns in their own words (Range & Leach, 1998). Qualitative research would allow the researcher to examine unanticipated factors that the respondents felt significant, rather than merely what the researcher deemed of import (Stauble, 1999). Furthermore, qualitative research focuses on the context of the data collection which may allow for a fuller understanding of participant discussions.

Sixth, "power differentials" must be considered (Range & Leach, 1998 p. 30). The fact that differences in power exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, between researcher and respondent, between gender and between occupation (and many other factors as well) is not foregrounded in traditional research. These differences may have important implications not only in how respondents respond to questions in the experiment, but also to their demeanor and ideations as a whole. Exploring this aspect

would allow the researcher previously unattainable insight into the lives of the participants.

### A New View

It may now be obvious to the reader that past research has searched for causal factors of Aboriginal suicide, and defined the problems and solutions available to the Aboriginal people. Suicidologists have done so without realizing that their research has been grounded within their own culture. By excluding the voice of the Aboriginal people, the dominant society, influenced by the public consciousness regarding Aboriginal people and suicide, has had the power to define how suicide amongst Aboriginal people has come to be understood in its present form. What is this definition? How has it been constructed? What does this mean for the research? For the Aboriginal people? For non-Aboriginal people? If we wish to have answers to these questions then we must set aside the search for a **cause** and a **solution** to Aboriginal suicide. We must instead begin to explore the **construction** of Aboriginal suicide.

This argument, and those outlined in the critique above suggest the need for alternative approaches in order to conduct more informed studies on suicide amongst Aboriginal people (Range & Leach, 1998). Many disciplines, such as linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology and recently, psychology, have attempted to find new ways in their research to conduct research with other cultures while accounting for these concerns. This new form of cultural research in psychology should not be confused with cross-cultural psychology, in which other cultures are often compared to a universal

psychological norm. The new cultural psychology does not presume that a norm exists nor that cultures are created within vacuums, but suggests that our psychological features are, at least in part, buried within and contingent upon our personal (psychological and biological), cultural and social surroundings (Stigler, Shweder & Herdt, 1990, in Much, 1995, p. 98). Hence, actions such as suicide are influenced by, and integrated within, personal, social and cultural features and therefore must be studied in ways that amplify, rather than mute these differences and their interaction. Therefore, in order to attempt to learn about a culturally related issue such as suicide, researchers must find a way in which to tap into all of these features in a given context.

One possible avenue would be to examine suicide through qualitative, discursive means. By soliciting the opinion of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people through fairly unstructured interviews, and using their discourse as data, we may address some of the concerns listed above. This approach would involve Aboriginal people in the research, enabling them to work with the researcher. It would be uniquely Canadian, because the discourse, the data, would derive from Canadian people, and therefore, given that the interview is unstructured rather than structured, it would privilege what the participants (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) felt were important topics for discussion. This might reveal the manner in which the participants understand and construct Aboriginal suicide amongst themselves.

### Language and Culture: A Postmodern Approach

Studies involving language and culture are by no means new. For well over a century, ethnographers in a variety of disciplines have been interested in the use of language across cultures, with several approaches to the study of discourse and culture being developed. However, most of these approaches have had a cognitive emphasis, stressing language as a tool to express meaning, such as feelings, emotions and thoughts on a particular subject, and have ignored the context and manner in which language is used (Billig, 1997).

Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997) outline four past approaches to the study of cultures and language, all of which fall under the afore mentioned (traditional) definition of cross-cultural psychology. These are: 1) the ethnography of communication, which concentrated on the structure of language, and not on it's use (popular during the time when Chomsky's work was paramount); 2) contrastive pragmatics, focusing on the comprehension of differences in cultures through examination of patterns in discourse 3) culture studies, of which there are two types. firstly, the linguistic anthropology approach focusing on understanding how the use of language makes up, and is a part of, culture; secondly, the intercultural study approach which compares other cultures to western culture, and 4) the cultural scripts approach, which is the creation of culture specific rules for discourse.

The approach that forms the basis of the proposed study differs from those outlined by Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997). This new manner of looking at culture has its origin in ethnomethodology, which is concerned with viewing the social events of culture as



continuously achieved through the mutually contrived actions of everyday life (Garfinkle, 1967). From this grew an amalgamation of ethnography, and its consideration for context and history, with discursive analyses, which place importance on locating culture in the discourse (Moerman, 1988). This approach involves a move from the standard view of language, as a tool for communication and description, what some refer to as a transparent view of language, to language as a social practice (Wood & Kroger, in press). The discursive approach uses tools such as discursive, rhetorical, and conversation analysis, which are concerned with the understanding of how particular social actions are accomplished through discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Language frames what many have called a "new paradigm" (Shotter, Harré, Van Langenhove, 1995) a post-positivist, post modern psychology, under which the new approach to cultural psychology falls. Many researchers in disciplines attempting to understand cultural biases in their research regarding other cultures agree that language (discourse) is responsible for the construction, alteration and portrayal of personal, social and cultural features of the world ( see Billig, 1997; Miller, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Sherzer, 1987). The interdisciplinary "turn to discourse" (Wood & Kroger, 1998) in culture studies holds that discourse is the instrument **within** which we create and sustain knowledge about our own culture, our society and ourselves. Spoken or written, it is a medium through which social actions are accomplished, events and accounts are described or explained, and cognitive states are attributed (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). Without it, our world and knowledge could

not exist as they do.

Therefore, if discourse is an expression of culture, it then follows that a discursive analysis of the structure and function of the language surrounding a given topic such as suicide would shift the focus “from hypothetical psychological events, supposedly taking place within the isolated individual psyche, to historically situated and socially created psychological states” (Billig, 1997, p. 217). In essence, the psyche will reflect the shape of historical and social factors (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Since discourse analysis is grounded within these data, which occur within one given context, this form of research will be based on, rather than eliminate, the historical, cultural and social constructions and co-constructions which occur amongst speakers. Examining discursive traditions from within makes it possible to gain insights unavailable from tactics of the standard paradigm.

However, to date there has been no record of discursively examining the issue of suicide among Aboriginal people. In fact, the entirety of the discursive research on suicide has been conducted on dominant, Western society. The next section will provide a background on previous discursive work involving suicide.

### Discourse and Suicide

The majority of research relating suicide and language has concentrated on the analyses of suicide notes. As early as 1957 researchers have conducted analyses on notes in order to uncover patterns of the manner in which suicidal people write. Shneidman & Farberow (1957) examined 700 suicide notes and determined that the suicidal individual is

vulnerable to “holes” in their logic process, meaning that they do not logically construct their arguments when writing about grievances and reasons to kill themselves. Osgood & Walker (1959) compared 69 genuine to 72 fabricated suicide notes. They found that, in comparison to the writers of fabricated notes, individuals who wrote genuine notes used simple, short words, and were more likely to use repetition and simple wording, rather than complex descriptions. They also displayed greater disorganization and more self-oriented and conflicting statements. Several related studies followed, each adding to the pile of patterns or characteristics in which suicidal individuals wrote about suicide. For example, Gottschalk & Gleser, (1960) found that the genuine notes contained more references to people, things and places while in a similar study, Ogilvie, Stone & Shneidman also found increased frequency of certain words, specifically, “love” and “woman”. Edelman and Renshaw (1982), further examined suicide notes and developed a language profile of a suicidal person. Along with similar findings to the earlier studies, they found less reference to the future, and more concrete statements. More recently, Leenaars (1988) has taken what might be viewed as a grounded theory approach and organized the findings from research on suicide notes into five groups or themes. These are: 1) a situation (such as the writer’s grief or pain) is communicated in the suicide note for the survivors; 2) relationship problems are emphasized; 3) strong emotional states such as love and hate (often both present) are observed in the notes; 4) the language used in the note is indicative of an unusual cognitive state, evidenced by disorganized thoughts; and 5) age and other demographics appear to be important. As can be seen, these studies

concentrated on the structure of the account and cognitive aspects of the suicidal individual.

In contrast, several studies examining differences in social or personal aspects of the individual have been conducted. In an examination of 948 suicide notes, Schneindman and Farberow (1960) found that people claimed to be committing suicide for various reasons, and that these reasons were moderated by their socio-economic status. For example, people of low status claimed to want to commit suicide because of the stresses of everyday life, whereas individuals of high status considered suicide because they were tired of living (in Leenaars, 1988, p. 218). In a later paper, Shneidman (1976) determined that for a more accurate study of suicide notes, the context of the suicidal individual's life must be considered. Darbonne (1969), looked at whether or not stated reasons for committing suicide varied with age. It was found that individuals aged 20 to 39 were more likely to indicate troubles in romantic relationships as a reason; individuals aged 40 to 49 were more likely to state their reason as an inability to cope, or being tired with life; individuals aged 50-59 were more likely to leave messages void of emotion, for the purposes of instruction or information; and individuals aged 60 and over often indicated that pain or illness were their reasons for committing suicide. In a study that examined the suicide notes of individuals aged 18 to 74, Leenaars and Balance (1984) found that individuals below the age of 42 were more likely than the older individuals to write statements indicating that they felt worthless, and were more likely to be hard on themselves.

### Critique of Past Discursive Research on Suicide

While these studies do indicate that social and personal factors appear to influence the manner in which an individual talks about suicide related factors, they do not examine the data in terms of **how** the speakers are using their language. Nor do they take culture into account. They appear to look only at the superficial, transparent view of language. In addition, the vast majority of these studies appear to look only at notes written by members of Western society's dominant culture. In fact, many of the studies were conducted on the same genuine and fabricated suicide notes from Shneidman and Farberow's 1957 study.

Furthermore, these studies were conducted on notes, rather than conversation. While both written and spoken discourse can reveal a great deal of information about an individual's cultural, social and personal construction of a given topic, spoken discourse has more to offer in terms of "how" the individual uses his or her language. In addition, we tend to write discourse so that it is grammatically clear and succinct on the page, when in fact very few people actually speak according to the rules of written grammar. We can re-think and re-write our statements, and we can create our writing in private, without the influencing factor of having others around. All of this alters the manner in which we use language on the page. By studying spoken discourse, we are free to examine the manner in which we construct and sustain cultural, social and personal features amongst ourselves. This suggests that the analysis of actual conversations surrounding suicide could provide insight into the manner in which different cultures construct, alter and

sustain their mindset in regards to suicide.

### Tradition and Power

If this thesis is going to utilize a post modern view of language to examine Aboriginal suicide, then there is one factor that still needs to be addressed. Simply, Aboriginal people are members of a colonized culture. Although many of the European colonists tried to integrate the Aboriginal people into a Euro-Canadian “civilization” and eradicate what was left of Aboriginal culture, they failed. The Aboriginal people carry with them the vestiges of their culture and the scars of assaults inflicted from colonization onwards. If all discourse is truly socially and historically constructed, then these factors will be reflected in the discourse of Aboriginal people, and therefore, they must be addressed. Two factors are especially relevant here, firstly orality and secondly power. The next section will consider these historical/social factors.

### Traditional Discursive Patterns

This outline of historically discursive differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture must begin with a disclaimer. As mentioned in the introduction, the Aboriginal people of Canada come from a vast variety of historical and cultural backgrounds. To treat all Aboriginal groups as the same is not only inappropriate, but also inaccurate. The same applies for those who fit under the broad categorization of “non-Aboriginal” or “dominant culture.” This outline is constructed merely to give a general sense of the discursive differences that may affect an understanding of the two

cultures. It is derived from the work of Ong in his 1982 study of the discourse of oral and literate cultures, and Ross's 1992 work exploring traditional Canadian Aboriginal ways of talking.

Orality. Present day Western culture owes much of its constitution to the fact that it is a literate one. This is of special consideration here, because Aboriginal people are a transitional oral culture. The discovery that literate cultures differ from primary oral cultures (cultures where writing is unknown) in the management of knowledge and spoken word, has revealed that the way in which members think and express themselves is in part governed by our ability to write (Ong, 1982). European culture is in essence a product of its own technology, which has influenced how we talk, think and act out our culture and suicide.

The Aboriginal people of today are a transitional oral culture, in the process of changing from an oral culture to a literate one. A primary oral culture is described by Ong (1982) as a culture with "no knowledge at all of writing." Thus, an oral culture is one in which people communicate solely through talk and expression. It is little wonder research has revealed that oral cultures differ from literate cultures in their management of knowledge and the spoken word. In "Orality and Literacy," Ong (1982) outlines several characteristics of oral cultures and their discourse. Three are particularly pertinent to this study.

1) The first characteristic is what Ong (1982) calls "additive rather than subordinate" (p.37). Literate cultures tend to 'smooth' discourse down, to make it flow using

grammatical rules, and so words such as ‘and’ ‘with’ ‘they’ and ‘when’ become subordinate to the text. Oral cultures tend to add more words like these because they lean toward a more basic discourse, one that is more convenient for the speaker. For example, consider the following passage from Kiowa Native American literature (Ruoff, 1990).

“They carried dreams in their voices; they were the elders, the old ones. They told us the old stories, and they sang the spirit songs” (p.1).

This example is meant to be spoken and so it contains a rhythmic pattern that seems odd when written down, but aids in recall when spoken. Hence, the way in which this example is structured would seem awkward to an individual from western culture, who would likely rewrite it to remove the frequent use of ‘they’, conforming to the rules of grammar and elimination of repetition. This results in a much shorter sentence, but does little to alter the content. - The elders carried dreams in their voices. They told us stories and sang the spirit songs.

This version seems more natural to individuals from western culture, because it is meant to be read. It is important to realize that to an individual from an oral culture, the former version is the normal one.

2) A second characteristic of oral cultures as described by Ong (1982) is termed “Aggregative rather than analytic” where adjectives and adverbs are placed in front of nouns with a frequency seldom seen in literate cultures (p.38). The mad scientist, the wise chief, the beautiful maiden and the brave warrior are all examples of this characteristic. Ong’s (1982) theory is that oral cultures prefer to use extra words because



the extra-descriptive element aids in the recall of material. Literate cultures would call these adjective/adverb noun combinations clichés, which we are taught to avoid because the extra descriptor is often seen as superfluous and tedious. However, for the oral culture, these combinations have taken years to develop and are a way of organizing and describing information.

3) “Redundancy or copious” (p.39) is another feature of oral cultures as described by Ong (1982). Any University student from western culture has at one time or another had their knuckles metaphorically rapped for redundancy in their written work. We find repetitiveness tedious. We don’t need to be constantly reminded, because if we forget something important, we can just scan the text over again. A person from a literate culture, such as western culture, can go to the library to look up virtually any story in our shared history (with the exception of personal stories). However, an individual from an oral culture cannot, which presents a problem when material must be recalled. So, in order to facilitate recall of long stories, redundancy becomes a standard feature of storytelling. Indeed, according to Ong (1982), redundancy is most prevalent when a story is being told to an audience. An example can be found in this excerpt from a Pawnee Hako ceremony song (Ruoff, 1990).

Look down, West gods, look upon us! We gaze afar on your dwelling.  
 Look down, while here we are standing, look down upon us ye mighty!  
 Ye thunder gods, now behold us!  
 Ye lightening gods, now behold us!  
 Ye that bring life, now behold us!  
 Ye that bring death, now behold us!  
 Look down, South gods, look upon us! We gaze afar on your dwelling .

Look down while here we are standing, look down upon us, ye mighty!  
Ye daylight gods, now behold us! (p.30-31)

A song geared towards a ceremony is of course meant to be told to an audience. The theory is that the redundancy is used in order to make sure that the important elements of the song, that the Gods become aware of their presence, are made obvious, and are repeated enough times so that if someone were to miss a line, they could infer the missed part from the rest of the song/story. According to Ong (1982), this need to repeat things over and over again has resulted in an uninterrupted link between past and present, which results in a fourth characteristic of oral cultures, a “highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation” (p.41). Myths, stories and proverbs may be changed around, but more often than not, the content remains the same. Although this characteristic is not evidence of a physical difference between the discourse of oral and literate cultures, it does evidence itself physically through the similarity of myths across time.

Traditional discourse. Little has been written on Canadian Aboriginal traditional rules or ethics. One exception is a book written by Ross (1992), a lawyer working in conjunction with Ojibwa and Cree peoples in Canada. The following is based primarily upon his findings. It should go without saying, that the explanation of traditional beliefs and actions listed below are merely shadows of the intricate culturally created ‘rules’ that only one raised within the culture may fully understand. Four are relevant here.

1) Non- Interference. For Aboriginal people, interference in another person’s actions

is forbidden and considered rude. According to Ross (1992), to give direct advice, to make suggestions, might be to imply that you are in some way superior to the person to whom you are giving advice. This might embarrass them or hurt their feelings. He states that this tradition is so deeply rooted that an Aboriginal individual will stand by and watch someone do something detrimental to themselves, rather than give them advice on what to do. What is permissible, is to indirectly give suggestions by telling a story that applies to the situation, in the hopes that the point will be received.

2) No Anger. For an individual to talk with emotion, or anger about traumatic or violent events that have occurred to them is not permissible, unless in a situation like a healing circle (Deana Franssen, personal communication, April 20, 1999). To burden another individual with their emotions is viewed as inappropriate. This has lead some non-Aboriginal people to interpret Aboriginal people's lack of emotion as indifference, or uncooperative behaviour. Ross (1992) speculates that the expression of anger was not appropriate because it was required that everyone in the tribe concentrate their energies on working together for the benefit of the group.

3) No Praise. Similar to the rule of non-interference, it is also viewed as impolite to offer praise or gratitude to someone who has contributed beneficially in some way. Ross (1992) states that the proper means of communicating appreciation would be to ask people to continue doing what they are doing. For example, regarding the participants who agreed to be interviewed for this thesis, considering the traditional ethic, it would have been inappropriate for me to thank them for coming, and tell them what a help they

had been. The appropriate means of thanking them, according to Ross (1992), would have been to let them know that I looked forward to their continued help.

4) The Right Time. A final traditional aspect that Ross (1992) describes, is related to the previous one. In this case, an Aboriginal person might not act, do, or say something, because the time is not right. This means keeping an eye on things, and acting only when it will be most beneficial. It may be that the time is never “ripe”, and therefore recognizing the right time given the situation is imperative.

Both Ong (1982) and Ross (1992) provide us with an interpretive base in dealing with the discourse of Aboriginal people. Differentiating factors such as these must be kept in mind when analyzing the discourse of other cultures, for fear that they could be misinterpreted from under the lens of Western culture.

### Power

This brings us to the second major concern, power. When I talk about power I am not referring to it in the sense of physical oppression, although this certainly was (and sadly still is) a part of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal interaction. Instead, I am talking about power in the sense that it is control over the knowledge that molds our comprehension of one another (Foucault, 1980). The expression of racism and the creation of racist beliefs and knowledge is of course, an exertion of power over the group to whom the remarks are directed. However, power is the function of a *multitude* of discursive actions that construct and co-construct a society. It does not come from a single entity, indeed all discourses jockey for power. Our society and our history are constructed and lived out

from power, through discourse. The area of interest then becomes an examination of the interplay between dominance and subjection and the acts of subjection imposed by the dominant culture (Burman, Kottler, Levett & Parker, 1997). In terms of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, our colonial history and the discourses emanating from it has played an important role in creating the knowledge that is the foundation of non-Aboriginal power. In regard to the issue at hand, we may begin to uncover this power regime through a look at both colonial and post-colonial discourses surrounding Aboriginal rights.

Consider the Royal Proclamation of 1763, a policy which required recognition of Aboriginal claims to land, but was not reinforced by the local governments of the time (Allain, 1996). An excerpt from the proclamation stated:

Essential to our interest, and the security of our colonies, that the several Nations or tribes of Indians (sic) with whom we are connected, and who live under our protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the possession of such parts of our Dominion and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by us, are reserved to them or any of them as their hunting ground. (from Allain, 1996, p. 2).

This document frozen in time, contains several exemplars of power in discourse. Let's begin with the first line describing the Aboriginal people. Here, the Aboriginal people are lumped into one group, as "the several Nations or tribes" that have their identity in being connected and protected by the Dominion of Canada. In describing them as a group of people needing protection, and security, this statement gives them the quality of a child, someone who cannot protect themselves, and who is seen not as an individual person, but as a subordinate part of a larger family. A child by definition is an immature human being,

one that in Western society, cannot survive without caregivers. The statement further establishes that the Aboriginal people should not be “disturbed in the possession of such parts of **our** Dominion and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by **us**, are reserved to them or any of **them** as their hunting ground”. The latter part of this statement firmly establishes the Aboriginal people as “them” and the Europeans as “us”, demonstrating a dichotomy that has arguably stayed within the Canadian discourse ever since. The fact that the Dominion is actually referred to as “our” Dominion, implies that all of the land does in fact belong to the Europeans but that they will “allow” the Aboriginal people use the parts that they have not yet officially claimed. This further places the European colonists in the position of power, as the parental caregivers, doling out the land and its use as they see fit. At its time, this statement was likely considered humanitarian, however, the power regime is seen as firmly in place, with the European colonists at the top. This is further supported by the fact that the local governments did not enforce the proclamation at the time. This discourse of power has been produced and reproduced over time, and may also be found in the government documents of today.

Consider an excerpt from section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982;

“the existing aboriginal (sic) and treaty rights of the aboriginal (sic) peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed” (Allain, 1996, p. 6).

Although more “politically correct”, this document further constructs the Aboriginal people as “children” or individuals needing protection. Here, empiricist accounting, a discursive device which removes the human element from the situation, is taking place

(Edwards & Potter, 1992). The government of Canada is granting by recognizing and affirming, the rights of the Aboriginal people. This removes from view the people behind the government and establishes it as one force, a power that has the ability to determine whether or not the Aboriginal people may have their land. This implies that without the Government, the Aboriginal people would have no rights. Once again this places the dominant society in a position of power, and the Aboriginal people in the position of the protected. It is interesting to note, that as with the proclamation before it, this act is also not adhered to. The Act has been considered in several court cases dealing with Aboriginal rights to factors such as fishing, and practicing customs. The Crown found that the Aboriginal rights outlined in section 35 are 'not absolute and...the Crown may justify legislation that infringes on Aboriginal rights' (Allain, 1996, p.1).

This brief analyses of governmental discourses spanning the centuries establishes how the Canadian government has contributed to the construction of an identity for the Aboriginal people. This construction has established Aboriginal people as weaker, and the Europeans as stronger, thus illustrating power through the control the Canadian Government has had over the description of Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people have been subjugated through a discourse that has embedded itself within Canadian discourse. Does this discourse illustrate a common understanding of Aboriginal people that was established in colonial times and continues today? Do the Canadian people continue to repress the Aboriginal population through the production and reproduction of this identity in everyday discourse? Similar questions have been asked by other

researchers examining discourses of racism.

Power is evidenced in the everyday talk that discourse analysts call discourses of racism. A current trend in discourse and culture studies is work examining the talk of everyday people for racism (see Levett, Kottler, Burman & Parker, 1997; vanDijk 1997; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Several studies have revealed that quite often, discourses between or about other cultures display divisions and differences. Termed the “rhetoric of othering” (Riggins, 1997 p.1) most of these studies examine the manner in which a majority culture demonstrates the repression of people by establishing them as different or as “other”. Frequently these discourses are constructed as truthful and unbiased. For example, vanDijk (1997) found several patterns of racism embedded in the discourse of western parliaments, such as referring to people of other cultures in a negative fashion, while maintaining a positive view of the speaker's own culture. Consider the following example:

[these] ‘people have their own way of life and I have absolutely nothing against that, but it is a fact that if their way of life begins to differ from mine to the extent that’ ... (from vanDijk, Ting-Toomey, Smitherman & Troutman, 1997; p. 170)

This example contains what is referred to as a simple disclaimer in which the first statement denies any prejudice, and is followed by a “but” statement which implies something negative about the group under discussion. The speaker explains that it is a “fact” that “these people” have a different way of life, which infers that her statement is indisputable. These types of studies demonstrate how the use of discourse analysis



allows researchers to uncover the manner in which this creation of knowledge is formulated and dispersed throughout a given culture.

Wetherell and Potter (1992) also conducted work on the discourse of racism, examining the talk of well off, non-Maori New Zealanders in the context of New Zealand's colonial past. They found, among many other things, that the dominant group came to define the culture of minority groups as idealized. Culture was defined as heritage, making it unchanging and nostalgic, something to be preserved. In so doing, the present day minority group to whom the culture belongs is pushed aside, marginalized by the need to solidify what is defined as their heritage. Culture is also discussed by the dominant group as therapy, in that a loss of the minority group's culture implies that they too are lost, deprived of meaning, a shadow of who they used to be. These discourses imply that culture is a means for them to understand themselves and become "real people" again, which robs them of a present day identity. Wetherell and Potter (1992) note that even the minority groups themselves may begin to speak in such a manner. Several studies in Levett, Kottler, Burman and Parker's (1997) edited book Culture, Power and Difference: Discourse Analysis in South Africa contain examples of the way racial divisions are carried out by the minority group as their 'real' identities, in essence, further constructing their own marginalization. These discourses of racism exemplify the power of the non-minority group in how they produce and reproduce knowledge about those they have determined "other". In so doing, the non-minority people have been allowed to define the identity of the minority people as lesser, hence marginalizing them.

However, in all of these cases and explanations of power, the researchers have concentrated on the discourses of the dominant groups. We have not looked at how the minority group co-constructs, or contests the construction put forth by the dominant culture. If researchers do not include the minority groups in their own studies are they not making the same mistake they criticize? Just as with the research on suicide, aren't we giving ourselves the power to create knowledge to the exclusion of the people we are conducting the research on? I am unaware of any Canadian study which has looked at the discourses of suicide and suicide prevention in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals, and as such, this study will attempt to remedy this situation, and hopefully will begin to answer some of the many questions posed in this introduction.

#### The Present Study: Addressing the Concerns

The present study will use a discourse analytic approach in order to address some of the concerns expressed in the foregoing passage. This study will involve the analysis of discourse derived from three, three hour group interviews involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal caregivers (many of whom were RCMP). The topic of the interviews was suicide and suicide prevention in the home communities of the participants.

This particular research approach responds to a number of the concerns outlined earlier. The first concern was that the previous research uses the dominant culture as the standard for evaluation. By using discourse analysis this research will not be using diagnostic tests and other quantitative means of examining suicide in Aboriginal cultures.

The discursive approach does not evaluate other cultures by the standards of the researcher's culture, simply because it is embedded in their discourse and must be understood within the context in which it is created. Discourse analysis is not concerned with "what" is happening in the language of other cultures. In examining the relationship between culture and language, discursive analyses are interested in "how" other cultures use language to accomplish certain actions, discursive or otherwise. This approach holds that talk is *action*, it is doing something, and therefore in order to understand what it is doing, it can only be examined in its contextual form. While ethnocentricity can never be fully removed from any form of research involving cultures other than the researcher's (we can never fully remove ourselves from our culture because we are embedded within it) one can be aware and reflexive of it. This in turn could lead to understandings between the two cultures which might not have been possible otherwise.

The second concern, that most of the literature used in Aboriginal suicide studies derives from American literature, may also be addressed. As most of the research derives from American scholars, then research by Canadian scholars is required. The present study is conducted by Canadians, looking at discourse of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from three locations in Canada. It attempts to draw on Canadian history and knowledge of the Canadian situation.

The third concern of the literature review was that previous studies involved the researcher working **for** rather than **with** Aboriginal people. One of the boons of discourse analysis is that it gives the participants a voice. By soliciting their discourse on suicide

and suicide prevention, and examining their discursive traditions from within, miscommunications and misunderstandings can be rendered visible. More importantly, the present study does not silence the Aboriginal people, but augments and concentrates on what they have to say, thus giving privilege to their words. Furthermore, the present study includes discourse from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, who are talking amongst one another on the topic of suicide and suicide prevention. This permits for an examination of their interactions, co-constructions, and contesting discourses. Since discourse analysis takes the historical and societal factors into account when examining the discourse of any group, this important contextual factor will be addressed.

The fifth concern was that the majority of past research does not include qualitative factors. The present study solicits discussions from the respondents, and allows them to express their attitudes and concerns in their own words. Unanticipated factors that would have gone unnoticed in traditional suicide research amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, will be addressed through the participants' discussions.

The sixth concern, of ignorance to power differentials, has been partially addressed in the previous section on power. By including rather than excluding the Aboriginal people from the research, this study has attempted to incorporate all peoples involved in this interpretation of the construction of suicide. With any luck, the power differentials between the dominant and non-dominant cultures will hopefully be illuminated, and the power differentials between the researcher and the participants will hopefully be lessened, relative to what has been done in the past.

Finally, in response to concerns raised in the review of discursive research conducted on suicide, the concern that past discursive research on suicide has been conducted only on written discourse will be addressed. This research will be conducted on spoken discourse which is spontaneous and cannot be written and re-written to convey the “proper” message. It is constructed with a specific audience present, and is influenced by that context.

### The Purpose

The purpose of the proposed study is to apply discursive analysis to identify cultural constructions in talk surrounding suicide and suicide prevention in Aboriginal communities. It is hoped that studying the discourse of two cultures in this manner will help to reveal the manner in which Canadians (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) “know” suicide amongst Aboriginal people. This will be achieved through an examination of the structure and function of discursive accounts from individuals belonging to the two different cultures (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) discussing suicide and suicide prevention. The overarching purpose is to look at how suicide is constructed and co-constructed within and by both cultures. The following queries will aid in the achievement of this goal.

1. Are there differences in the manner in which Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal people use language when discussing suicide and suicide prevention? If yes, what are these differences?

3. Do either or both cultures display "rhetoric of othering" i.e.: discourses of racism?
4. How is Aboriginal suicide constructed in the discourses of the participants?
5. How is power an important factor in the discourse of the participants?

This chapter has established several problematic areas in previous research on Aboriginal suicide, and has offered several approaches to remedying the situation. This study will endeavor to address all of the concerns, and hopefully offer an alternative. The next section will give a detailed description of the methodology used in the collection of the data.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

### Background

#### The Workshop

The data used in the current study were obtained from a program evaluation of a national suicide prevention workshop. The evaluation was conducted by Rogers & Holton (1999), for Suicide Prevention Training Programs (SPTP), a program of the Canadian Mental Health Association (Alberta division), in Calgary. Full details of the evaluation can be found in Rogers & Holton (1999). This background section will provide information on the original workshop and the evaluation from which these data were obtained.

The original suicide prevention workshop was developed by the RCMP and SPTP, and has been in effect on a national level since June 1994. It consists of a five day curriculum and is outlined as follows:

Day 1: Suicide Intervention

Day 2: Suicide Intervention

Day 3: Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

Day 3: Aboriginal and RCMP cultural awareness

Day 4: Talking Circle- A discussion of the personal impact trauma

Day 5: Community response to suicide

Day 5: Resource development

This prevention workshop was designed for Aboriginal Caregivers and RCMP Members working in Aboriginal communities with two goals in mind. 1) To produce an effective

caregiver population to assist individuals at risk within the community. 2) To advance relations between the RCMP and the Aboriginal community through communication about shared concerns regarding suicide within the community. It was hoped that the achievement of these goals would result in the improvement of suicide prevention and intervention tactics within the community (Holton & Franssen, 1998). The workshop has been viewed as a success, having received a great deal of positive feedback from both trainers, participants and the communities. However, it had never been formally evaluated for long term efficiency, such as community change, or for outcome validity and reliability. As a result, the authors were commissioned by the RCMP and SPTP to conduct an evaluation of the workshop.

### Evaluation: Data Collection

#### Background

There were five stakeholder groups involved in the evaluation. These were: 1) The Caregivers of the community; 2) RCMP members; 3) SPTP program staff who created and implemented the program; 4) the community in which the workshop took place; and 5) the Government (RCMP head office). Each of these stakeholder groups contained individuals who were Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, who had attended the original workshop or not attended the original workshop. As determined by the stakeholders, the initial goals of the program evaluation were to find out 1) Does the program have a significant impact on Aboriginal communities?; 2) Does the program have a significant impact on the individual participant?; 3) What factors (content) of the workshop were valuable, useful and effective?;



4) What factors of were not valuable, useful and effective?; and 5) Were there actions taken in the community that were attributable to the original workshop?

The evaluations took place in the morning sessions of three follow-up workshops conducted on groups of participants who had participated in the original workshop. As the original workshop was a national endeavor, the desired evaluation locations were also to have national representation, in order to provide an accurate evaluation. The locations in which the evaluations took place were: Yellowknife, North West Territories (April 20th 1998); Rocky Mountain House, Alberta (March 29th, 1999) and Lennox Island, Prince Edward Island (April 14th, 1999). These evaluations will henceforth be known by the name of their respective locations. Please see Appendix A for a list of the criteria according to which the locations were chosen.

The evaluation consisted of two forms of audio recorded group interviews, both of which outlined and explored the goals as determined by the original workshop's stakeholders. The data to be used in the current study are in the form of transcriptions of the audio recorded group interviews. Although the evaluation was conducted in part by Rogers & Holton (1999), it was conducted for SPTP, independent of the University of Calgary, with which the authors are affiliated. Therefore, in order to use the data collected for the primary author's thesis, they had to be treated as archival data, and obtained from SPTP through formal procedures. For procedural and ethical purposes, the transcripts were obtained for use in this thesis from SPTP with a letter of permission from the program coordinator, Deana Franssen (a copy of this letter is available upon

request). The remainder of this methodology chapter will concentrate on a description of the participants, instrument and procedure surrounding the collection and transcription of the audio recorded interviews.

### Participants

The participants consist of two broad groups of people- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It should be noted that I recognize I am talking about cultural membership here and in no way are homogeneous categories assumed. There are cultural variations within and between these groups. The word Aboriginal is a broad term accepted by Canada's indigenous people as representative of all Native, Métis and Inuit groups. This study recognizes that Canada's indigenous people identify more than 300 distinct tribal groups across North America, encompassing different cultural and economic factors, and does not wish to imply that these differences are unimportant. However, for the sake of simplicity, when not specifically examining differences between the tribal groups (for example, Cree, Mi'kmaq, etc.), all will be referred to as Aboriginal. Furthermore, the term non-Aboriginal encompasses an equally extensive group of individuals, whose cultural background is, broadly speaking, of Canada's dominant culture. These individuals may have derived from very different cultural, ethnic (including Aboriginal) and economic groups, but they were not raised in Aboriginal communities and culture. For the sake of simplicity, when not examining differences between these groups (for example: RCMP and Social Worker) they will be referred to as non-Aboriginal.

Therefore in general terms, the participants for the present study consisted of forty-five individuals from five backgrounds: 1) non-Aboriginal RCMP officers working in Aboriginal communities; 2) Aboriginal RCMP officers working in Aboriginal communities; 3) Non Aboriginal caregivers working in Aboriginal communities; 4) Aboriginal caregivers working in Aboriginal communities; and 5) Interview facilitators, responsible for the design and teaching of the program.

More specifically, the makeup of the participants differed according to the location of the evaluation workshop. The Yellowknife, NWT transcript consisted of twenty- one participants, eight of whom were non-Aboriginal (including the Interviewer) and eleven of whom were Aboriginal. More precisely, the Aboriginal participants were Inuit (Dene Nation) and spoke Inuktitut as first language. Two participants were of undetermined cultural background. With the exception of two participants who spoke in Inuktitut, all of the talk was in English.

The Rocky Mountain House, Alberta transcript consisted initially of seventeen participants, five of whom were non-Aboriginal (including the interviewer) and twelve of whom were Aboriginal. More specifically, the Aboriginal participants were “Plains Aboriginal” (O’Chiese and Sunchild Nations) who spoke Cree as their first language. This evaluation had a lot of Aboriginal individuals arriving and leaving throughout the workshop, and so the number of Aboriginal participants fluctuated as participants left and arrived. The number is uncertain, as newcomers and those who left were not always identified on the tapes. With the exception of one participant, who spoke Cree, all of the talk was in English.

Finally, the Lennox Island transcript consisted of seven participants, four of whom were non-Aboriginal (including the interviewer) and three of whom were Aboriginal. The Aboriginal participants spoke Mi'kmaq as their first language. In this case, all of the talk was in English.

### Materials

Instrument. In light of the fact that there were two different cultures involved, it became apparent that a form of data collection that recognized the “value pluralism” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) of the two groups was required. Discussions with the evaluation stakeholders revealed that the participants (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike) preferred modes of communication such as talking circles and AV material.

Therefore in recognition that facts are dependent on values, and are therefore only relevant in context, (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) SPTP, and Rogers and Holton (1999) determined that a group oral question/answer session, in the form of a talking circle would be an effective manner of collecting information from all members of the original workshop. Please see Appendix B for a description of a talking circle. This form of data collection would allow for an analysis of these data that would be contextually grounded in the words of the participants. Thus, contingent upon budget approval from SPTP, an oral question/answer session involving a few general questions was created for the Aboriginal/ non-Aboriginal group. This session occurs as an informal talking circle, with the issues for discussion presented to the group through a video of Tom Jackson, a prominent and respected Aboriginal musician. See Appendix C for a copy of the Tom

Jackson Script. As talking circles often involve long discussions and freedom to speak as much and whenever desired, it was decided that the most effective manner of recording information would be an audio recording conducted by professionals, on the site of the interviews. Audio recording was chosen as it was the least intrusive, and most complete method of recording the data.

Language. Prior to the Yellowknife interview two Aboriginal participants indicated to the SPTP coordinator that they preferred to communicate in their native language of Inuktitut. In this case, a translator was provided for the participants. The translator would translate for the participant into a microphone which was hooked into earphones which were provided for all participants. When English was being spoken, the non-English speaking participants could hear the translation through the earphones. When the non-English speaking participants spoke, the translator would in turn translate for the English speaking participants. The translation equipment consisted of earphones for all participants, a mixer and microphones available to all participants. Regrettably, a translator was also required for the Rocky Mountain House evaluation, however, the coordinator was not informed of this in time. The non-English speaking participant could understand English, but preferred to speak in Cree. Therefore, the only translation required was for the non-Cree speaking participants. The non-English speaking participant's daughter was able to translate from Cree into English for the rest of the participants.

Recording equipment. Although conducted by different professionals, generally the same recording equipment was used for each location. This included: a mixer, wires to connect all the equipment, 3 to 5 pzm microphones, three audio cassette tapes, and headphones for the individual recording the information.

### Procedure

After the locations were determined, RCMP coordinators, residing in the chosen locations, contacted all participants from the original workshops in order to determine their availability for the evaluation and follow up workshop. Once it had been determined that a large enough number of the participants were interested, SPTP organized the evaluation workshop, booking the trainers, hotel rooms and hall where the evaluation was held. It should be noted, that due to evaluation questions about the trainers, the evaluation portion of the workshop was always conducted by a trainer who was not present at the original workshop.

Once workshop arrangements were made, the participants were contacted again by the coordinator to advise them about the location, date and time of the evaluation. On the day of the evaluation, participants arrived and were asked to sit in talking circle fashion. The trainer then asked verbal permission to record the evaluation, explaining the need for the data collection. After everyone had agreed, introductions were instigated by the coordinator and the trainer gave a description of the Tom Jackson tape. The first portion of the video tape was played. Once the first round of questions has been addressed on tape, the video was stopped, and the trainer reviewed the questions and began the first round of the interview.

There was no time limit on the amount of time given to discuss the questions, but each section generally lasted 45 minutes. Once every participant had discussed what they wished to in regards to the questions, the next section of the video was played, and the questions were discussed in same manner. The same procedure was used for the third portion of the video. Then, following the third portion of the video, the trainer implemented what came to be known as a “forced circle,” in which every participant was asked to speak about positive and negative factors of the original workshop. This was included so that those members who were shy or did not feel comfortable volunteering had a chance at speaking. Once the “forced circle” was complete, the trainer played the last portion of the video, in which Tom Jackson thanked the participants for their participation. The trainer also thanked the participants before breaking for lunch. Each interview lasted approximately three hours.

In terms of the recording portion of the procedure, the technicians arrived early to each evaluation session, and set up the equipment, so that they could test it before the evaluation began. The recording began as soon as the introductions started. With the exception of a few minutes lost due to flipping the tapes, the recording continued until the end of the forced circle. The technicians and their equipment remained as non-intrusive as possible, usually set up in a corner of the room.

The tapes were passed on the evaluation consultants who arranged for their transcription. The tapes were transcribed verbatim by the author and several research assistants. The speakers were identified as either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. A distinction was also made between RCMP and civilian participants. In the case of this study, none of the RCMP

officers were identified as Aboriginal (by their own determination). This made the identification of speakers easier on the transcript. For example, RCMP were identified as R; Aboriginal people as A; and non-Aboriginal, non-RCMP as NA. Awkward phrasings, false starts, repetitions, redundancies, fillers such as “um” and “ah” and any other characteristics of natural talk were included in the transcription. Pauses, laughter, loud noises were also included. Sometimes a certain word or phrase was unintelligible to the transcriber despite several attempts to comprehend it. In these cases, brackets were put around an approximation of what was being said. These brackets indicated that the transcriber was unsure of what exactly was said. Each transcript was approximately 40 single spaced pages in length, taking approximately an hour a page to transcribe. This resulted in a total of 61,792 words to analyze. For the purposes of confidentiality and saving trees, the transcripts are not present in this document. A copy is available from the author. However, please see Appendix D for a copy of the key available at the top of each transcript. Within the transcripts, each new speaker was noted with a space, a new paragraph, and line number. If a speaker was talking for a long time (i.e. more than a paragraph worth), then their talk was sectioned into paragraphs with new line numbers, but without spaces between them.



## CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS

“....there has been a great improvement, people has gained confidence or knowledge...”

Aboriginal Elder, Yellowknife NWT

### Data Organization

#### Discourse Analysis

The goal of this discourse analysis is to reveal the discursive practices in which suicide is culturally constructed amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The focus of discourse analysis is on understanding how particular social actions are accomplished in language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). This involves a move from the standard view of language: that language is a tool for describing and communicating, to a view of language as a social practice (Wood & Kroger, in press). Discourse analysis involves a change from three conventional viewpoints in traditional research.

The first involves a move from talk and action as separate things, to a view of talk as action. Utterances have a certain meaning, they do something. There are two factors involved here, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. The illocutionary aspect concerns what an individual is doing with his or her words. For example, asking permission, or giving advice. The perlocutionary aspect refers to the effect a statement has, such as being given permission, or someone taking the advice and using it. Discourse analysis looks at what is being done with language and not what it refers to (although the latter may be relevant to the consideration of what is being done).

The second change moves from a view of talk as a path to internal or external issues, to an emphasis on talk as the issue of interest. A conventional approach would be concerned with what an individual is signifying with a statement: the statement could be used as a path to a person's ideas, feelings and intentions. The discourse analytic approach is only concerned with what the talk is doing.

The third change involves a move from a focus on the removal of variability through statistical or qualitative data reduction techniques, to a search for variability as a means for understanding and as an issue of interest in itself (Wood & Kroger, 1998). The goal is to understand variability and use it for analytical purposes, not eliminate it.

The next section will look at coding, the primary step in the actual analysis of the transcribed discourse.

Coding. Once the transcripts were completed, I began the coding process (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Coding in discourse analysis differs from coding in grounded theory or content analysis. For the latter, coding functions as the analyses proper. In discourse analysis the coding takes the form of data organization. In the case of the present study, I began by identifying recurring discursive patterns in the transcripts. These patterns sometimes occurred in only one transcript, and at times, were found throughout all three. Once recurring patterns were identified, I developed hypotheses regarding their function, and searched for discursive evidence to support these hypotheses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). At times, this process was a reflective one, in which there was circular movement between the coding and analyses. The analysis involves systematic reading and re-reading of the

discourse. As the analysis became more polished, a different understanding of what needed to be coded in the transcripts developed. The coding itself was conducted using colored pens to identify the recurring patterns. Each pattern was given its own colour. As the interrelatedness of patterns became evident, they became identified through groups of colours. For example, blue could represent a pattern which contained two subsets identified through green and purple. Therefore, blue and green or blue and purple would be used together to identify the grouping of a given pattern. Once the analyses concluded, Q.S.R. NUD\*IST 4.0, a qualitative research package, was used to organize, count and confirm the patterns, and the evidence supporting the hypotheses about them.

The devices. In what follows, the quotes given are representative of frequent patterns (some occurring more than 50 times in one transcript alone). These were linguistically supported throughout each transcript. This chapter takes you through a collection of the best examples of each pattern which explain and develop support for the overall construction.

The first two devices establish the construction of suicide as a taboo, and of suicidal people as “other” with supporting evidence of their “undesirable” qualities. Having established this construction of suicide and suicidal individuals, the analysis then leads into devices which place the ownership of suicide upon the Aboriginal person, and distances the non-Aboriginal person from association with suicide. Participant discussions regarding the loss of culture among Aboriginal people construct Aboriginal people as ‘lacking’, and suicide as a logical result of this deficiency. Suicide is then constructed as a ‘normal’ reaction for

Aboriginal people faced with so many hardships. This is further supported by the construction of non-Aboriginal culture as normal and RCMP as superior, a people to whom suicide is foreign. Each device presented here is rooted within the discourse, upheld through a variety of supporting patterns, and presented here with excerpts that have been taken verbatim from the transcripts. The background of the speaker (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) and the transcript from which the excerpt came are included at the end of each passage.

### The Cultural Construction of Suicide

#### Preview

In general terms, I found that the discourse of the participants constructed the Aboriginal people as deficient; and suicide amongst Aboriginal people is characterized as symptom of that deficiency. While an unexpected and unpleasant finding, the evidence could not be ignored.

#### Suicide as Taboo

The first thing that bears mention about the discourse is that the historical notion of suicide as “taboo” permeates the discourse of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers.

I think one positive you can usually see is you even though suicide is a, I guess it was at one point and it still is in some points very taboo. But I think in every crisis there's a learning point, and from this, the communities have learned how strong they are. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 220)

...The negative is ... the elders are kinda hush on that and the community itself, it's kinda hard to, hard for them to, start talking about , suicide... (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 469)

...I work with the youth in my community. Um there's one little boy at the um community tried and um like uh other people like other parents in the community by the way we had this kid, we had this kid on our list, play hockey and then, everybody was thinking that like he was a troubled kid. Um and they kept telling me, w-we should get rid of him. And I um, I took it upon myself I said well, I don't want to let this kid go because I've heard his problem was, his problem is, he tried to commit suicide. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 286)

I think, um, what. Coming back to the schools again, the kids know that its ok to talk about suicide, where it used to be really hush hush and ah, you know, didn't even want to say the word suicide. And it was really hidden? (non-Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 415)

I think we need to talk it over more with our youths, not just with the adults because it's, it's a taboo subject but them they don't discuss it with anybody, and they only talk it with, maybe one person until it's almost too late. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 190)

I just voiced suicide we just talked about it and I know its hush hush, its something that people don't want to talk about. Its scary just to even say the word suicide because of all I guess of of everything that it brings, so I think its really important to have that, that awareness and those that teaching out there. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 101)

Uh, after taking that um (course) in Inuvik it's helped me to be more. In my community like we think I feel that it's a hush hush thing, you know, I don't think that it should be anything like that and um, unfortunately it's that way and, um, I feel that my community, it's like working with it's, it's, we're not working together the resource people. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 493)

Um, a positive that I I've seen come from it, ah (+++) just a kinda reiterate, I guess i-it was a kinda taboo an s-suicide really was something that wasn't discussed an and especially for the RCMP. Ah, um. Dealing with situations, ah, of course you-you're talking about a do or die situation. (RCMP, Yellowknife, 463)

Now, for myself, I feel that ah, it's ah been helpful (to between) people and talk more openly about it. Uh, like one time, ah, suicide like was ah a kinda taboo, (+++) don't talk about it issue. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 461)

Although this view of suicide is changing across North America, the notion that it is an embarrassment, something to be feared and kept quiet is still alive and well within the discourses of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. This is the “mise en scene” for all of the discussions surrounding suicide in the transcripts. Although the reader will recall from the introduction that some Aboriginal cultures did not always view suicide as a “taboo,” this view, if it still exists, appears to have been eradicated from this context and this discourse. The intended goal of these meetings is to prevent suicide and suicidal ideation. What these excerpts do is reinforce the notion that suicide is an unacceptable action, something evil, while at the same time expresses the need to talk about it, and not leave it under wraps. Suicide in this context is still constructed as the villain, but it is no longer unmentionable.

### These People

The first pattern that becomes obvious in the discourse surrounding suicide in Aboriginal communities, is that people who attempt or consider suicide are thought of as different from the rest of the population at large. Suicidal individuals are often grouped in a category of their own, referred to by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants as “these people”.

I find it gives them the, the uh, the belonging, at least they belong 'cause some of **these people** don't think they belong anywhere and half of some of **these people** are lost, um, so giving them a place where they can share what, share what their, about their feelings. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 95)

I think since that last ah workshop that we had last May, I've had two situations where I've had to go and and do an assessment and I was just happy that I had a

clue as to where I was going with **these people**. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 41)

And ah I found that I ended up talking to a lot of students that ah that had those feelings of suicide, um not not all severe, but there was a couple that I did deal with that needed the help um of medical professionals um and ah I guess I just didn't realize the problem um , and ah where it was in the community until I was actually in the schools and ah seeing that a lot of the youth are looking at um suicide as an out. And I had a hard time coming to grips with that and and I still have um my own personal feelings about uh suicide that I have to put behind me before I can help **these people** and uh and uh, I-I still have to deal with those myself. (RCMP, Yellowknife, 90)

This terminology is not unique to suicidal people, but does serve to separate them from the general public. The term “these people” is frequently used in discourses with the simple purpose of denoting a category, or a specific group of people with certain characteristics. For example, there are portions of text in which experts in suicide prevention are also categorized as “**these people** who are experts in suicide prevention”. In the context of suicidal individuals, the importance of the phrase is not to whom it is referring, but rather the purpose it has in the discourse. By utilizing “these people”, the purpose is to imply uniqueness- a person who differs from the rest of the population because of their unique mindset, ability, or skills. This terminology subtly constructs the suicidal individual as not just anyone, but a certain “type” of person, as somehow different from the speaker, who is effectively distancing themselves from suicidal individuals.

This construction of suicidal people as separate and different from the general public is supported by further constructions of suicidal individuals as possessing a variety of

undesirable characteristics. Here, individuals who are suicidal are seen as deceptive, dangerous and ignorant.

Suicidal people as deceptive. In this sub-pattern, the suicidal individual is constructed as someone who lies about whether they are serious in regards to killing themselves.

And we actually have um, there's an example that was just recent. A young recruit that's just out of depot was working was working with a member that has 20 years and has had the suicide prevention training on a couple different occasions and they were dealing with a suicidal individual. And the guy talked a good talk. Yeah I'm ok, I'm ok, I'm ok. Young member was ready to just let him go, and the the older member said no, this guy needs help. And the guy was held in the hospital on observation, so there was definitely. (non-Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 232)

This participant, a victims services civilian coordinator for the RCMP in Rocky Mountain House tells a story of a suicidal individual who lied about the fact that he was “OK” . As it turns out, he was not “OK,” as he was kept in the hospital under observation -which of course constructs the doctors as absolute in their knowledge of suicidal people, and their affirmation functions as a category entitlement (Edwards & Potter, 1992) which constructs the individual as suicidal whether he was or not. Regardless of this, the individual apparently “talked a good talk” implying that he was good at lying about his state of mind. This passage, mentioned in passing while telling another account, implies that this deceptive quality is understood, and constructs it as a common occurrence.

Suicidal people as dangerous. Another familiar pattern throughout the transcripts was the description of suicidal people in possession of guns and other weapons. The following



excerpt of a conversation involves a police officer expressing the importance of prevention training.

Like seriously, if you can deal with it and and when you're talking suicide you're talking sometimes knives and firearms and things like this and if you can't talk to a person in that situation uh and you think you're going to go in there and and strong arm them, then you're going to get yourself killed. As a police officer, so yeah, I think its its an important yeah important thing to learn. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 235)

Connie Jacobs as an example. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 236)

Yeah. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 237)

The first portion of this exchange constructs the suicidal person as someone who is rash, and dangerous, someone who will kill someone else if they try to stop them from committing suicide. The next statement is spoken by an Aboriginal participant. He suggests that the police officer's example resembles the Connie Jacobs case, a recent situation at the Tsuu T'ina reserve near Calgary, Alberta, in which an Aboriginal woman who, with a shotgun, had barricaded herself and her children in her home. According to the media, she was intoxicated, and refused to give up her children to social services. After she fired at the police officers, they apparently returned fire, killing Connie and, unintentionally, her nine year old son, Ty. Even though Connie Jacobs was not suicidal, this comment aids in the construction of a suicidal person as dangerous if provoked and not handled properly. It does so by mentioning similar instances in which violence rather than reasoning have occurred, resulting

in tragic consequences. This implies that it is the intervenor who must remain level headed, as the only one who is in the “right mind” to eliminate violence from the equation.

Suicidal people as ignorant. In this final sub-pattern, the discourse is used to describe suicidal individuals as unaware of what they are doing.

Often like I say, you never really encounter someone that just about to, it's usually done. I think that's about the only time I really, lately encountered anybody that we had to talk to, sort of talk them down, you know, you got to talk to them about their kids and family life and you know tomorrow is another day and the sun will shine and. (+++++) I think he was glad that we showed up at the end. [Laughs] (RCMP, Lennox Island, 97)

This excerpt involves a description of the suicidal individual as someone who can be talked out of suicide through simple admonition. It constructs the anguish of the suicidal individual as trivial by portraying them as unaware of the obvious, and easily talked down by reminders that “tomorrow is another day”. In the end, the speaker portrays the suicidal individual as glad the speaker arrived to talk him out of his “foolish” notion, suggesting that he didn’t “really” want to kill himself.

The construction of suicidal individuals as people with a unique mindset is further supported by the difficulty the Aboriginal participants have in dealing with suicidal family members.

Shock when a family member attempts. This device serves to support the findings that indicate that a suicidal person is often seen as unique, abnormal, and possessing undesirable characteristics.

Yeah (clears throat) um since the workshop I (intervented) two incidents, one was a immediate family member and the other one was ah um person who wasn't in the family but um there was a big difference on how we handled immediate family? I I found I had to be really professional and straight forward um with the other person I was more at ease working with the other person? A- It was very scary working with a family member. Um, it was very good that we had some resource people that we're able to use, that when they called me I thought what am I going to do, no he's going to attack me, (and everything) but I had to be professional. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 131)

The Aboriginal participants frequently reported difficulty in dealing with family members who attempted suicide. They repeatedly requested more information on helping family members who were suicidal, implying that a family member who attempted suicide was somehow different than someone who was not family. This excerpt describes how one caregiver was not frightened by the suicide attempts of someone outside the family, but was scared by a family member attempting suicide, and worried that he might attack her. This further constructs the suicidal individual as someone with unique characteristics, because the speaker's discourse does not lump family members in to the same category as the other suicidal individuals. They describe familial situations as ones in which they are aware of the reality of the situation. These are people they know and the speakers describe themselves as shocked or scared by a family member's attempts. The notion that suicide is an affliction shines through, as the intervenor has known the person as "normal" at one point, and, because of the construction that suicidal ideation makes them somehow different, express an increase in fear of dealing with a family member.

By isolating the suicidal individual from “normal” people, and suggesting that they possess several undesirable characteristics, the construction of suicidal tendency and suicide as a symptom of deficiency is introduced, as the suicidal ideation is portrayed as a characteristic of individuals who are foolish, rash and deceptive. The suicidal person becomes someone irrational. This sets the stage for attribution of this behaviour to a variety of sources, in this case, and as shall soon be described, the construction of suicide as a symptom of deficiency within the Aboriginal community.

### Ownership of Suicide

This pattern constructs suicide as the responsibility of the Aboriginal people by implying that the suicide is not a normal part of the non-Aboriginal psyche. It does so in two distinct manners, depending on the speakers. The non-Aboriginal speakers employ several patterns which demonstrate distancing- a manner of removing the self from an uncomfortable situation, and to be seen as objective as possible. This contrasts with the patterns employed by the Aboriginal speakers, that of ownership- a manner of becoming acquainted with and accepting an uncomfortable situation. Although these patterns do stand on their own, it is when they are contrasted that their striking difference and function become apparent. In order to best illustrate this, the patterns will be displayed in matched pairs. The first pair addresses how the participants identify with the suicidal individual.

Pair 1a: Personification of suicide. The first pattern of this pair is one found in the discourse of the Aboriginal participants. There are numerous excerpts of discourse in which

the Aboriginal participants personify suicide, by referring to the suicidal individual as a person or telling the story of someone who committed suicide.

You know I often wonder, (clears throat), how in the past twenty years, how many people committed suicide? And nobody did anything about it eh? (Clears throat). So sad. (Clears throat). The last time I got a call somebody committed suicide and ah () was over there eh, and we found this note he left behind and, it really hurt me, then I figured well I'm one of the band leaders here I bet I can do something about this. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 192)

My first cousin committed suicide, so that was kind of hard like. I I didn't really grow up with him because I, because he, his parents divorced so he went on and I went on and stuff like that. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 45)

When we met here, in '95, I wasn't sure what kind of topic I would talk about to a suicidal person. (+++++). The workshop was very helpful, (+) because I was unable to speak to the person who was suicidal (+++++) because uh, when you're talking to a person who is suicidal you can not just say, "Why do you want to commit suicide?" That's not the first thing you open with. That's what I learned. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 479)

In these excerpts the participants refer to suicidal individuals as people, personifying suicide. In the first excerpt, the speaker talks about a person in his community that committed suicide and tells how he left a note, and how the speaker felt he had to do something about the situation. In the second excerpt, the speaker refers to a family member that committed suicide. In the final excerpt the speaker refers to a suicidal individual as a person. With the exception of noting that the speakers appear to make a point of making the situation seem "real" by including the person when they talk about suicides, there is nothing extraordinary about these excerpts. However, when contrasted with the discourse of the non-Aboriginal participants, their uniqueness becomes apparent.

Pair 1b: Removal of individual from suicide. In these excerpts, the speakers do not refer to the suicidal individuals as people, but as “suicides” or “potential suicide victims”.

Yeah, ( ) three suicides last year that I can think of , one very public suicide and right after the training in June the community got together for a large, community awareness about coming in and helping and um sort of prevention and intervention and through that I went on to the intervention team along with Sally who had been to the June workshop as well and we’ve got in the community. (non-Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 139).

And I had, I had one from either or both reserves that I had to deal with. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 41)

....I got transferred to Fort Smith I had um, I was faced with um two, two situations where I had to negotiate, ummm, potential suicide victims, and they were both successful, and I feel that , ah, like um, like Jack said, tha.. that that the skits did prepare you for it.... (RCMP, Yellowknife, 466)

As the reader can see, these excerpts are in stark contrast to the previous three. In the first excerpt, individuals who killed themselves are referred to as “suicides” which effectively removes the person from the situation. In the second excerpt, the speaker does not even refer to the people who committed suicide as suicides, but rather, as “one that they had to deal with.” In the final excerpt, suicidal individuals are referred to as “potential suicide victims”.

Discussion of the first pair. There are several factors to which these differences in speech could be attributed. First, there is fact that RCMP members are trained to be very factual when preparing reports. However, this pattern is also displayed by non-Aboriginal people who are not RCMP members. It could be the result of being unfamiliar with the people who committed suicide. However, this pattern is present when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

people are talking in generalized terms about suicidal individuals; and many of the non-Aboriginal speakers know and are friends with the people they work with, serve and police. Despite these speculations, the focus always remains on the function of the discourse. What are these patterns doing? Why the contrasting constructions? In terms of the Aboriginal participants, the problem of suicide is personified, constructed into a personal issue, implying that it belongs to the speaker. In contrast, the discourse of the non-Aboriginal participants distances from the uncomfortable topic of suicide. In removing the person from the situation, the speakers in these excerpts do not take ownership of deaths occurring amongst the people with whom they live and work. They objectify suicide, turning it into a work problem, a project that they have to work on, but that does not belong to them. Suicide in this context is institutionalized. Putting this first pair of patterns together, suicide is constructed as a problem that belongs to the Aboriginal people, (rather than something that we all worked together to create, and must all work together to solve) while the non-Aboriginal people can refer to suicide in a clinical sense, thus removing themselves from familiarity with and ownership of the problem.

As supporting evidence for this device, the following excerpts demonstrate the difficulty with which Aboriginal individuals have in attempting to remove the person from the situation.

Yeah, so I'm really, like I'm really glad for these workshops. Because before then if I got a call about a pers suicide person or (++). You know I don't want to go there. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 384)

I know that RCMP's too, they have a or a job to do, and I also got a job to do. But working together like that people coming together is what helps and I find that the last suicide we had um couple s- couple, one year ago, the uh, guy we lost?  
(Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 43 )

These excerpts show Aboriginal individuals having difficulty referring to a person who has committed suicide as a “suicide”. In both excerpts, the speaker attempts to use the term “suicide” but stumbles and ends up personifying it anyway. This is not to say that the Aboriginal participants never refer to suicidal people as “suicides,” there are exceptions to the pattern, but they tend to occur when the participant is talking about a lot of people, or when the suicide is not the topic at hand and is generalized in another narrative. However, the overwhelming majority of their discourse surrounding suicide follows the personification pattern.

We move on to the second pair in the Ownership device, which involves differences in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal construction of emotions.

Pair 2a: Understanding emotions. The first pattern of this pair is found in the discourse of Aboriginal participants. Here, the speakers construct talking about suicide as a means of understanding emotions.

Um, um, back home when we used the circle we um, I I like the circle because it gives me an opportunity to see how other people are feeling, and how they're reacting to it.  
(Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 277).

Everybody start, all the students started talking and some of them cried, and it was really good. So, I think that's, for me that's () because it gives a chance for people to see how other people are feeling and knowing that they're not alone?  
(Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 281)



Um over there we had some we had one leader anyways, sharing like this in a group, and he really enjoyed it. The he he said that he he enjoyed that, hearing what everybody has to say, and he himself shared and he admitted he really enjoyed that. I think if we can get them you know get the something like that this, work at that, especially our new leader here that they should ah learn to understand that there's help, there's help available. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 280)

Um when I say open eyes, I'm also saying open ears to listen and um and also I think it opens your heart a little bit because you're allowing like you're you're you're seeing and you're and you're listening and you're feeling so you're you're kind of like sharing um your ideas and and your thoughts with everybody in the group. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 256)

These excerpts construct talking about suicide as a useful and helpful course of action.

The first two excerpts are about how sharing in the talking circle gave them the opportunity to understand how others feel about suicide and suicidal ideation. The third excerpt explains how sharing in regards to suicide and suicide prevention is an enjoyable action that helps promote well being. The final paragraph, spoken by an elder, encourages the other participants to share and listen to others when talking about ideation, prevention and intervention. These paragraphs construct talking about suicide as a positive and beneficial task, a tool that can be used towards an understanding of the problem at hand. Again, this construction becomes particularly interesting in contrast to the non-Aboriginal discourse surrounding talking about suicide.

Pair 2b: Removing emotions. The second pattern in this pair constructs talking about suicide as a means of removing emotion- to examine it and move on.

I think since that last ah workshop that we had last May, I've had two situations where I've had to go and and to an assessment and I was just happy that I had a clue

as to where I was going with these people. Uh, having to dig for uh, certain responses out of them so that they could get further into what was going on in their minds uh, being able to further into what what was going on uh, in their minds, u, being able to associate with them a little bit more, uh during that conversation that you had with them, the short time whether it was an hour, or an hour and a half. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 41)

At the school we have a suicide, its not a a formal circle that's formed or anything, but often its one or two over coffee that are that are sharing () how their emotions are so that we can you know, get our, get wh-what's going on inside of us out. And I think that's, that's j-just as valuable as as having a formal kind of model that you go on. (non-Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 215)

And uhm, when the worker left, um we, the teachers and a lot of the community were, were saddled with these emotions that were left in the air again. And it dragged up a lot of the stuff from underneath? And um I think I, I I'm not sure I would use the circle again in that way, immediately after a suicide with the classmates in a school setting. I think it may be good for um uh maybe prevention talking, um maybe after the fact? But a-as a direct response to some of the feelings, I'm not sure if a a large, you know, thirty kids around the circle was a good idea? (non-Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 257)

Like I mean, I've been, not just on Lennox Island but like, like all all around where, like two years ago, we went where a young kid, probably 14 or 15 shoved it, a shotgun right up through his mouth. I mean its you know, he's mush basically, brain matter all over the the barn but left a note, you know, to his parents, his brother. I mean he even mentioned his goldfish, like it's, it's often, uh you know, it's always too late when the police get there but, you know, you never know what people are thinking, what's going through their minds but (++) (RCMP, Lennox Island, 88)

In these excerpts, suicide and the feelings that go with it are seen as something foreign, something that the speaker cannot comprehend without extracting it from the individual.

The first two excerpts describe sharing about suicide as a means of digging inside the other person's mind and "getting what's going on inside of them out." As opposed to "opening your heart," like the Elder in the previous pattern suggests, talking about suicide becomes a means of "dragging up stuff from underneath." The final excerpt in this group appears at

first to be sharing, in a discussion of a young boy who killed himself, but it de-personifies the child by turning him into “mush, and brain matter” and ends by exemplifying the construction that feelings surrounding suicide are untouchable and unknowable, and suicidal individuals are abnormal, as you can never know what suicidal individuals are thinking.

Discussion of second pair. What this pair of devices do, is construct suicide as something that the non-Aboriginal participants cannot comprehend, making it something that does not apply to them. It distances them from suicidal issues and from individuals who would consider suicide. Suicide is again an Aboriginal issue- one that the non-Aboriginals have to discuss to “get what’s going on inside of them out,” because it is not something that belongs within them. Suicide becomes something strange, because it is incomprehensible, and is therefore something only an abnormal person would do. When combined with the pattern expressed by the Aboriginal individuals, it is easy to see that suicide is again constructed as something that belongs to the Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal participants want to comprehend it, suggesting that they have a vested interest in understanding suicide and suicide ideation. At the same time the non-Aboriginal participants imply that it is something removed from them, and because they construct it as something only abnormal individuals would attempt. Aboriginal individuals become again the keepers of suicide, which the non-Aboriginal participants construct as something unnatural and foreign.

The third pair of the Ownership device explains the different means in which the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants discuss suicide in the community.

Pair 3a: Narrative. As with the previous two, the first pattern of this pair is one used by the Aboriginal participants. This one is Narrative, the story telling fashion in which the Aboriginal participants discussed their experiences in suicide intervention.

Well, there was, I am just trying to remember back since the um, the workshop, but there was one incident where I received phone call, um, from this person and this was like, um, it was close to midnight and I can't remember which month this happened but it was awhile ago. Um, this person confided into me, uh, in me, to um, to say like he wanted to um talk to someone, so he chose me and um, and he said that he was going to kill himself, and uh, and uh he said that. And I asked him, I, I let him do all the talking, I didn't persuade him, I didn't say to him, well don't do this and don't do that, because I figured that this is not what he wanted to hear. So I let him do all the talking and um, and I kind of kept remembering about this workshop of what, what I can do to help this person, so I, I just let- I just allowed him to talk and then finally he, like he wouldn't tell me what he was going to do for the longest time. And I guess he was kind of testing me out to see what I would do and what he kept telling me like I, I don't want you , I don't want you to tell anyone and I don't want you to, you know, to um call the police and stuff like that right, and then I said OK. I said I cannot promise you anything, but um, but if, but if you, you-you're going to endanger your life, then I have every right to act. And he kind of got offended with me and I just let him air out what he, how he felt towards me and then I kind of said OK, do aren't you going to ask me why I am concerned? Don't you think I am concerned..? And he says, no, no one cares about me and all this stuff and I said well, you don't know that. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 28)

I sure learned a lot with the first(++++) and,(++) like I said last night, I'm very blunt, and I had to deal with a family member, which is pretty hard to deal with especially when I start talking suicide, I'm very blunt, and, and, I find the hardest person to deal with is family members, especially when you, when they're, when you're very close to them. And, with me being very blunt I, I just, said, "Okay, if you did this and this and this and you know where is your family gonna be?" And I said "You know if you're, if you're hurting that much, it's, you're, if you kill yourself you're, you're not only getting rid of your pain, but you're, you're adding to pain to a lot of other people that do love you." And it really made him think(++) and he came back and said, "Ya, now I know the pain is there but time will heal". (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 488).

These paragraphs are chunks removed from even larger texts, some of which continued on for three single spaced pages. Each excerpt involves a detailed, in some cases, sentence by sentence report of how the participant talked a suicidal person out of killing themselves.

This form of discourse makes the account very vivid to any listeners, making it easy to recall, and also serves to construct the talk as factual and because it is so realistic, it implies that the account actually happened. What this does is construct the situation as an approachable one, something many people have had to deal with. By constructing intervention tales so that the listener could almost “see it” the Aboriginal people make the account real, tangible- a part of their lives. It further aids in the constructions that suicide is a “natural” part of the Aboriginal community. This is very different from the non-Aboriginal manner of discussion surrounding suicide and suicide intervention.

Pair 3b: Facts and stats (RCMP Device). In the following excerpts, the RCMP members discuss intervention experiences in a very factual sense.

I think there's only one incident where I can actually recall anything closely remote. Uh, working one night in Summerside and uh, had a call up to Lennox Island where um, someone was alleged to have drank bleach, (++) which (++) is fatal and uh there are a lot of things going through your mind when you are driving from Summerside up here. Like it's a, you know it's not a, it is a half an hour's drive but uh, what to do, like its, we finally got to the house and you walked inside and all you can smell is bleach but you couldn't find the person. So we, uh, (++) we looked around the neighbours everywhere, we had people looking everywhere, and uh, it ended up that he didn't take the bleach but I think it was like a call for help like you know. Like it was uh, I mean, nobody can actually say what a person is thinking but that's what we believe, the person was asking for help in a certain way. (RCMP, Lennox Island, 34).

I think before the workshop a lot of us were ah were really uncomfortable with

the topic and and and like (Joe) said, being with the mounted police we're we're usually called first, you know "my husband's suicidal, he's drinking" or or whatever and and for myself personally after the workshop, I just became a lot more comfortable um in assessing and and talking to somebody about it because before, it was you didn't want to hear it, you didn't want to and you hoped it would go away. But ah, but just the skills I know for myself ah just in the assessment portion were were greatly ah improved. (RCMP, Yellowknife, 87)

I think one comment I I want to make on this, what I've noticed through through memory on on suicide as well as stats and from the way things were maybe a year ago previous to the way they are now, is I think I think there's been a shift on the age group we're talking prior to that I think that we're looking at older, the older the older an older group of people, um maybe twenties thirties and and maybe beyond and I think in my experience and recollection within the last year we're looking at more teenagers and in maybe in some cases even preteens. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 106)

The RCMP tales of intervention are an interesting comparison to those of the Aboriginal.

Here, the speakers say very little about their personal experiences in intervening. Instead their accounts are factual, or statistical. Consider the first excerpt- the officer tells you that "someone" was alleged to have drunk bleach, that bleach is fatal, that it is an hour and a half drive to where he was going, and that the house smelled of bleach. He tells the listener little about his actual contact with the suicidal person. The second excerpt simply tells the listener that assessment skills were greatly improved, and in the third the speaker says that from experience, he believes that statistically there are more teenagers attempting suicide.

Discussion of third pair. The three examples in the non-Aboriginal excerpts imply that there have been several intervention experiences, however the speakers generally melt them down into factual experience (s). This echoes of the first pair of patterns, because again, the people have been removed from the situation. Intervention becomes not a commonplace

experience, but an intangible collection of facts. What this does is construct a picture of suicide amongst Aboriginal people as something very dry and factual. By not constructing intervention narratives, the RCMP officers effectively distance themselves from instances of suicide attempts, making their accounts seem institutional and untouchable. This further alienates the Aboriginal society by making their actions appear strange, and unknowable, not something a “normal person” would do. With the two patterns working in conjunction, suicide has again been branded an abnormal act, which has been eluded to as “normal” within the Aboriginal community, and constructed by the Aboriginal people as something approachable and familiar.

The next section moves away from the pairs and comparisons between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, to joint constructions of suicide as a symptom of deficiency within the Aboriginal people. The first of these devices is the construction of suicide as a logical step for the Aboriginal people to take, given the misfortunes and burdens they face.

#### Suicide as Natural, Logical

Throughout the transcripts, suicide was frequently portrayed as a common, at times inevitable result of hardships and difficulties faced by Aboriginal people.

I think that ah I'd like to add to that I think um I think its really important at the college (as well um there's), most people that go to the college are not from Yellowknife, they're from the smaller communities um they've moved here from smaller communities to try to make a better life for themselves and then they end up going to school um there's and **suicide is just a natural thought for them.** Its just a **natural thought process** for them, its not foreign for them, its not abnormal its just right there. They just they just, when they come into my office um they've been thinking about suicide for a long time before they come to see me, you know. (?, Yellowknife, 99)

In this excerpt, the speaker describes suicide as the natural thought process for Aboriginal individuals having trouble adjusting to living in the city and going to college in Yellowknife. This implies that suicide in this case is not an abnormal, unhealthy thing for an Aboriginal person in turmoil, but something so common that it becomes an obvious part of the psyche, the next logical step. Interestingly, this discourse constructs the Aboriginal person as someone with a fragile mental state. Suicide becomes a symptom of their deficiency, something that they cannot help because they are someone who is easily distraught to the point of ending their lives. This construction is furthered by discussions surrounding drugs and alcohol.

Substance abuse as precursor. Substance abuse is a common topic of discussion in all three of the transcripts. As the reader will recall from the introduction, statistically, Aboriginal individuals are more likely to die by their own hand when intoxicated than non-Aboriginal individuals are. They are also more likely to commit the act impulsively, while non-Aboriginal individuals are more likely to plan it. In the following excerpt, the speaker describes drugs and alcohol as connected to suicide, and portrays suicide as the end result of a larger community problem.

Um, well, in ah '94 and and ah and ah in between '94 and '97 I lost two of my uncles, my auntie and my best friend. Um to suicide. And and they're all pills and alcohol related. And uh I don't know what uh like like we have people from our community around here. Just thinking um, I feel like trying to get everyone involved. We had a we had a workshop at at at the school in Sunchild and ah it was it was it was only based on suicide but like it it should be everything and ah um everyone



should be involved and I'm I'm just really glad I'm here too. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 283).

In this excerpt the speaker describes pills and alcohol as a contributing factor to the suicide of several of her family members and a friend. This exemplifies the frequency with which suicide takes place in her community, and establishes her as an authority on the relatedness of drugs to suicide. She goes on to explain that a workshop she took part in only discussed suicide, but suggested that it should discuss "everything," and that everyone should be involved. Her discourse constructs a picture of the Aboriginal community in which suicide is just one part of the problem, and that there are numerous other difficulties, such as substance abuse, to be addressed. By suggesting that all the suicides close to her have been pill and drug related, she constructs suicide as the result of these difficulties, a symptom of underlying issues. By wishing that everyone would be involved she further implies that these flaws permeate the community level and she therefore constructs suicide as the result of problems within the group as a whole, echoing the previous device and taking ownership.

There are several substance abuse excerpts in the transcripts which support and further the construction of suicide as the result of underlying problems. Consider the following excerpts:

More of the youth here in Lennox Island and now approaching, wanting to go on programs ok? And they're approaching on their own. More of the the ah the young adults are leaving the bottle, leaving the drugs because of the fact that they see Lennox Island is changing, its slow, its a very, they've seen a minor minor change in the direction that, and its generational, but its a minor change but its changed? And they see which direction its going in and they like that direction.

They don't like this whole rut, they're out of it now, they're coming out of it.  
(Lennox Island, RCMP, 235)

Yeah, they're getting their self esteem back and self confidence.

(Lennox Island, Aboriginal, 236)

Its the biggest thing, respect. If you can't respect yourself, who can you respect?

(Lennox Island, RCMP, 237)

I have to agree with uh George, um having the leaders get more involved, community workshops like this that are very important and agreeing with Emma and () it is frustrating with um parents that don't show they care or love for their children. Like the youth coming from a dysfunctional community that's a real (). Their uh, self esteem is so low, they uh, they think they uh, 'why should I care, when my Mom or Dad doesn't care? And that's why they turn to alcohol and drugs and drugs like pills and suicide later on they turn to. Thinking suicide. And I agree with Veronica saying we need to focus on the youth 'cause the youth are, are our future. And with this workshop, again I'll say I learned a lot from there and I use the tools that I learned from there. And I will continue using them as long as I don't have to. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 322)

Both of these of these excerpts suggest that self esteem, and self respect are a real problem amongst youth in the Aboriginal communities. The latter refers to the lack of self esteem as linked to dysfunctional families, filled with uncaring parents, and both link it to drugs and alcohol. In both excerpts, the youth are constructed as the "hapless" victims of community deficiency. Again, we see the problems within the community constructed in "snowball" fashion. Community and familial problems are linked to self esteem issues, which are linked to substance abuse which leads to suicidal ideation and finally, suicide. It is simply constructed as the order of things, something the community members cannot help but be dragged into. As the first excerpt suggests, if the community situation improves, so too does the substance abuse problem, allowing the youth to regain their direction, and hence their self

esteem. This discourse constructs Aboriginal people as lost, a people without direction or a sense of self worth, and it further accepts suicide as an inevitable result of this emptiness.

Abuse as precursor. This pattern supports the construction of Aboriginal people as victims, and of suicide as a logical reaction to hardship.

The one thing that I (brought) the last ah, workshop and then we (brought) the other workshops on ah, or (+) suicide was uh, mentioned quite a bit was ah, the residential schools? And it really wasn't (brought) in ah, the last workshop we had. Ah, the effects of the residential school on a lot of the students? It was just ah, I went to a workshop as a support of survivors of residential schools? And I was just shocked to learn that the the one school alone was ah, sixty suicides in one school alone. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 339)

Yes, now, here at Lennox Island because of um the age of Lennox Island, its a very young reserve, extremely, extremely young um its its a approximately 60-40 split here at Lennox Island, 60 below the age of thirty, and uh and so its a very very young reserve and unfortunately and maybe fortunately that uh that hurt that maybe some of the Elders uh experienced in that in those institutions um they won't have to experience. Ok. And its because of that learning process and everything. The healing has to start at the elder level. Ok. Because it was their pain, their trails and tribulations. But at the same time uh here at Lennox Island they're not heaping that pain and trials and tribulations on to the next generation. They're stopping it. They're saying enough. Because the young people of Lennox Island and anywhere at Prince Edward Island that age group have got enough on their plate now. They don't need these, these old memories ok. They don't need those, because that just drives them in another direction. And this is when you get confusion and hurt, and they're and they're saying boy oh boy I got it so good, and all of a sudden they're saying ah oh, to hell with it, I'm going to have a toke, or I'm going to have a drink. And then all of a sudden, this is when we find them swinging, this is when we find them uh uh overdosing, this is when we find them shooting themselves and stuff, uh the suicide issue. I mean this is so the elders is where it started, and and its got to stop. We can't drag this thing on forever. (Lennox Island, RCMP, 239)

And I find too, a lot of people that have um, I mean the Aboriginal people that have a lot of anger still is the ones that were in (Shubanageny) school where they experienced a lot of um abuse. (Lennox Island, Aboriginal, 238)

In these excerpts, the speakers suggest that many community problems are attributable to the hardships faced by individuals in residential schools. This device is different from the “Substance abuse as precursor” device which establishes substance abuse as “logical” action given the hardships faced by the Aboriginal people. In this case, the abuse was one of the hardships the Aboriginal people were exposed to. Residential schools were a hateful part of Canada’s history. Aboriginal people were taken away from their families, homes and cultures, and many children suffered abuse while imprisoned there. These excerpts attribute the horrors of Residential schools to the state of the Aboriginal communities today. The first excerpt talks about how there were sixty suicides amongst the survivors of only one residential school. The second excerpt discusses how the pain older individuals faced in the residential schools has seeped into the community and caused detrimental effects such as substance abuse and suicide. The final excerpt explains that the anger generated from being exposed to the residential schools is still around today.

What becomes obvious is that Aboriginal people have been constructed as victims, as someone weak, who cannot help but be involved in detrimental acts such as substance abuse and suicide, because the residential schools tore away their strength. This discourse normalizes suicide into something logical, because Aboriginal people are portrayed as wounded and deficient. We see again the “hapless” victim, for whom suicide is an inevitable, logical action.

As suggested by Levett, Kottler, Burman & Parker (1997) and seen in part above, the construction of the Aboriginal people as deficient, and therefore of suicide as “normal” may

filter into the discourse of the marginalized group. The construction of suicide as a symptom is particularly strong in the discourse of Aboriginal participants when they talk about their loss of culture.

### Culture as Cure

The pattern of culture defined as “cure” is similar to “Culture defined as therapy” which Wetherell and Potter (1992) found in their work on discourses of post-colonial New Zealanders when talking about the Maori, New Zealand’s indigenous people. In Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) study, culture is linked to a people’s identity, pride and health. The “culture as cure” device is used primarily by Aboriginal participants, and was found in all three transcripts.

... Um because I think most of the reasons why people are having trouble and difficulty in their life is because of the lack of um cultural knowledge um cultural identity, as a person um and of all the um the different things that have happened to to mostly indigenous Aboriginal people. Um when you look at history um there’s a cultural starvation and there’s there’s a lot of um healing to need to take place. So when you incorporate traditional knowledge and healing like, traditional healing circles um going out on the land, doing a sweat um teaching cultural practices, healing always comes with that . Um I think people begin to, um they’re able to look at themselves, and they’re able to look at their culture, they’re able to look at themselves um look at what needs to work, what kinds of things that they can work on with themselves so that they don’t have to look at suicide as a means to an end. They can look at um, getting more, getting stronger through their culture, and a lot of times that’s what they want. More times than not they’re begging for cultural um practices, teachings, more healing, they’re practically on their knees begging for that. (Yellowknife, Aboriginal, 174)

This participant constructs a psychological description of her own people explaining that lack of culture means a loss of identity and of strength, (Potter & Wetherell, 1992) which is described as the reason for “difficulty in their lives” and ultimately for suicide. Her

statement implies that in order to be healthy, and to have strength and identity again, the Aboriginal people must recover their culture through any means possible, even begging. Interestingly this discourse turns the Aboriginal people into desperate, un-whole people, implying that they are shadows of their former selves, a once strong people. It constructs them as people who are deficient because they have lost their culture and in turn are suffering health-wise. They are portrayed as people who beg to be cured. Suicide is turned into a symptom of this deficiency, the result of what happens when a people are empty of culture and therefore of identity and purpose.

Um, I believe that culture is very important for ah each individual in the community because of identity? And ah, like I was raised many missions ago and I like I I felt like I'm caught between two cultures. And when you look at it in a positive way, it- its good to know both sides, but ah it it was very important to me to find out where I came from, and have an identity? And have knowledge about my culture and get rooted. You know, to get ah to get ah rooted where I could stand up and say this is me and be proud of it. And you find a lot of students, I'm I'm I'm a school counselor at home, but so I dealt with a lot of ah people, a lot of teens and students. Um identity's a big problem and culture, and now that we're having cut backs, you know what do we have to fall back on? You know culture's very important. There's cutbacks in ah medication, in schooling in about every area that the students are feeling right now. And I think, I really do believe that ah culture is very important for them to make a stand and have an identity. And that what help with suicide to know who you are and not be mixed or in between something where you can't find your own balance. (Yellowknife, Aboriginal, 192)

Here again, culture is described as identity and a source of strength- that which grounds a person in times of need. As outlined in the introduction, the deterioration of the mental health of Aboriginal people is often attributed to colonization (Leenaars et al., 1998). This Aboriginal participant explains how a lack of culture is the result of being caught in between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, which she says could be seen as positive, but which

she constructs as resulting in ignorance to origins, and hence identity. One must choose a side in order to be a whole person. Suicide then, is constructed as the obvious result of someone who does not know themselves, who is stuck in between cultures and is therefore no one at all.

Aboriginal participants suggest that the way of becoming whole again is to retrieve their culture. There are several stories of Aboriginal people regaining their mental health through cultural involvement, such as drum groups.

Yeah, another thing is that about ten years ago, we were put down in high school and stuff. Like I was, for the longest time, I wasn't even proud to be native. I just wanted to be someone just like everybody else and that means put out there and be really ridiculed, but now that peap- natives are being asking to ah, like the younger groups, the youths and stuff that are in the drum groups. They are asked to be going everywhere and they're proud and it's nice to see a gleam in their eyes. And that they are proud of doing something that's nothing to do with drugs or alcohol.  
(Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 200)

This excerpt describes culture as responsible for instilling pride and preventing involvement with drugs and alcohol, often seen as a precursor to suicide. However, the speaker constructs this in reference to what the dominant culture thinks. This participant states that she was put down in High School for being Native, that she just wanted to be “like everybody else” and that the younger children are being asked to go places and perform in their traditional drum groups. Here, her statement implies that the approval of “everybody else” (the dominant culture) is needed, and that involvement in culture has won this approval, and made the younger groups proud, and therefore healthy. Again, this suggests

that identification with culture will make a person whole and prevent mental health problems such as substance abuse and suicide.

Further supporting this device is the frequent mention of sending youth with mental health problems to practice traditional rituals and spend time with elders who are seen as the “keepers” of the culture. Elders practice the cultural rituals and traditionally hold a place of esteem within the community.

It's hard for me because um we see a lot of young people suffer after like with their close friend there after doing suicide and I think a lot of people were shocked like uh a lot of young people and then a few months after uh my oldest son there, he started drinking and he attempt suicide too, like that's the scariest part is when your kid is trying to do that and and like I I didn't know who to turn to at that time because everybody was so () the whole community was so, what I did was uh I send my son away to Saskatchewan to go see elders over there and he went straight over there for a month I think and he came back home and like I didn't know what to turn to at that time. Now he's still doing the like drinking and stuff, but not as much though. Its really scary that uh, 'cause you get worried about your your kids, and uh even though you talk with them and stuff like that its like I can really relate to a family an when their kids go through that, so sad.(Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 73)

You uh, you know so anyways so like, they're telling me now, but I don't know how, but out of the fourteen, the four of them has been off drugs and alcohol, for last uh, four months. They've been on sweats, they've been doing till 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning here, doing sweats only like the over at Junie's? Junie? Judy?  
(Jody.)

Jody and Betty's , like the two couples there, they've been doing sweats and stuff with them, which is good like you know, a couple like elder people, elder people like helping the younger ....So anyways, so that's the four of them told me that they've been doing the sweats and they've been praying for people and stuff which is good, like these are 18 and 19 year olds and they've been pray praying for um a couple of children that are sick and stuff and they've been doing all that. And there's this 19-year old who pray for a little kid, a little four-month old that has asthma and they have been like praying hard to 4 o'clock for this child and I was like really impressed, and I was thinking, wow. (Lennox Island, Aboriginal, 53)



In these excerpts, the speakers talk of how involvement in sweat lodges and healing rituals with elders have helped youth who were suicidal or involved in drugs and alcohol. Again, culture is seen and enacted as a means of healing the self. This supports the construction that involvement in culture makes the Aboriginal person whole again which implies that the Aboriginal person without culture is not whole. In fact, an Aboriginal person who leaves the reserve, who becomes involved in non-Aboriginal culture, or obtains a University education, is often considered a non “real” Aboriginal person by other Aboriginal people (Sinclair, 1998).

Interestingly, the non-Aboriginal people construct Aboriginal culture quite differently, and yet still contribute to the construction of the Aboriginal people as abnormal.

#### Culture as Recreational, Romanticized, Exotic

This device demonstrates how Aboriginal culture is viewed as a romanticized, recreational activity for non-Aboriginal people. It was used entirely by non-Aboriginal participants and was found in all three transcripts.

I think its self healing when you help people, you're healing yourself, you're you're helping yourself. Um that goes for everyone has their own personal issues. Whatever goal you're in, you have your own personal issues that have affected you in life growing up or whatever and uh I think even with Rocky (the town of Rocky Mountain House) um including them more, making them more aware of the culture out on the reserves. Um I'm still surprised at the I guess the fact that there hasn't been more of that with uh the interesting culture and stuff and who learning more about it but um, I'm really glad that the round dance is in town. I'm gonna take my son there and I think that'll be a really neat experience for him (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 174).

I have to say that uh, the past course uh, like I say has been very informative I guess and I think that they should continue with different cultural things where I guess you

have a better understanding of, you know, different aspects like the healing circle and the the smudging I guess. But uh, yeah, I think its helped a lot, just to understand the Aboriginal people a little bit moreso than before and I think maybe uh like I said they should have programs like this maybe uh at depot, when you're there. You're there 22 weeks. What's a half a day type of thing. Where, you know if you got the whole force out there, training, what's a what's a half a day? (RCMP, Lennox Island, 259)

Um, probably the most positive thing about the workshop was the um the communication and understanding that came from within the group itself. The um, we had mentioned the the cultural aspect, and the the um speaking circle. It was (+++) The whole week was a very honest, umm, experience, with everybody speaking. And no matter who you were you came away with a better appreciation from where the other person was coming from. (+) And um (++) ah that in turn just made the whole experience that much better. And it it was able, you were able to take the skills that you learned and um (+) no matter what community you went back to, or what job you were doing, um (++) just the positive nature of the whole experience was, um what I would say was the best thing that came out of it. (RCMP, Yellowknife, 503)

All three of these excerpts construct the Aboriginal culture as something exotic and unique.

Culture becomes something recreational and romanticized by the non-Aboriginal people.

The officer in the first excerpt describes culture as a good educational and recreational activity for her son, and explains how the rest of Rocky Mountain House should be made aware of the culture on the reserves. The Lennox Island RCMP officer from the second excerpt recommends including different cultural “things” in depot training, and recommends a half a day on culture in depot training. The final excerpt romanticizes culture, by describing the week-long workshop, as a very “honest” experience, involving communication and understanding. The common thread amongst these excerpts is the tendency to describe the Aboriginal culture as something unique and exotic. Culture becomes a romanticized educational and recreational experience that enriches the speakers’ lives. As Wetherell and

Potter (1992) suggest, current discourses about culture are very gentle and supportive, and suggest appreciation and a need for acceptance. But what this does this discourse do? By suggesting that Aboriginal culture is a wonderful educational, recreational experience, it is constructed as something out of the ordinary- an idyllic experience that could be crammed into half a day, bring honesty to previously conflicted people, and enrich a child's education and appreciation of "others." Through this construction, non-Aboriginal people are not seen as possessing a culture but seen as living in the "normal" world which can be enriched through the teachings of Aboriginal people. Thus, the Aboriginal culture and hence Aboriginal people are seen as belonging to something other than the normal world. This view furthers the ever growing construction that there is some flaw within Aboriginal society, something that makes them different and hence susceptible to suicide.

Controlling the traditions. A related pattern that supports the construction of culture as recreational is the frequent reference to controlling and altering Aboriginal tradition.

Consider the following two examples:

This talking circle, does it always, I mean we-we passed around a a stone or something but but I find that if if say someone from across the circles has it and says something and I want to react to it I have to wait until this (laughs) the rock gets to me and by that time we've talked about something different and so I think in a way its kind of limiting, when you have such a large group that you-you don't get this webbing effect going on, bouncing around the circle, but it gives everyone a chance... So I wonder if there's a way you can modify it. (non-Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 308)

Subsequently what's going on at the Atlantic Police Academy is that the squads themselves are now utilizing talking circle among themselves, but they prefer to have someone from Lennox Island to come and uh and facilitate it. Ah, Chief Sark and I went in ah two weeks ago and a lot of the stuff that's being uh peeled away, the layers uh of hurt and uh whatnot are being peeled away and its uh its a very very

positive thing between, um not only the RCMP, in that sense because I'm here and t- the truth be known it was it was uh it was something that I got started, it was something that was needed not only for the police but for the Aboriginal people of uh Lennox Island. (RCMP, Lennox Island, 229)

In these examples, the RCMP and non-Aboriginal participants express desire or action to alter Aboriginal customs to use for their own purposes. While the intention of the participants is as ever, well meaning, these excerpts express a desire to make changes to centuries old traditions. In the first excerpt, the speaker wonders if there is a way to modify the talking circle to better suit their needs, while in the second excerpt the circle has already been altered by the Atlantic Police Academy who are using it in their training. This discourse is less gentle than those of the previous excerpts. While Aboriginal tradition is still discussed in terms of being educational, it is also suggested and explained that it needs to be altered in order to function properly for the non-Aboriginal participants. The Aboriginal culture becomes constructed as something malleable within the hands of the non-Aboriginal people. Utilizing the tradition for their own purposes again turns it into something that enriches their education. The culture becomes something simplistic, easily understood and altered, a tool that non-Aboriginal participants can take responsibility for and guide.

#### Prevention Tools as "Cure Alls"

The view of Aboriginal culture as something that non-Aboriginals may dabble in recreationally is in sharp contrast to the Aboriginal view of learning about European culture,

which is constructed by the Aboriginal participants as required to ameliorate the apparent lack of moral and social standards which lead to suicide.

Despite the expressed desire to renew a relationship with their culture and become rooted within Aboriginal traditional values rather than be trapped between two cultures, they also express a hope to learn about beneficial factors derived from the non-Aboriginal culture.

He's alright and like the training we took last year uh, kinda wish they they informed us better on when suicides are most likely to occur. Like for me my experience that like su- when the people attempt suicide, its not some big incident. Or something that you can't handle, its, its a little thing, um, but when somebody's suicidal, it doesn't look like a small thing? Its like its like a snowball to them, and to us we look at it like its a small its a small incident and um I guess I wasn't, they didn't prepare me for that. And that's what scares me is that is that, um, that I don't know when like one of my family might attempt or something like that because, might be might be over nothing and its just I guess that's have a hard time trying to feel that knowing that its something that doesn't have to necessarily be a big thing? (++++++) Um, I just thought the group should know that maybe you do or maybe you don't, but something I learned. Kind of the hard way I guess. That's all I got to say. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 336)

Ah for me um, I wish that I coulda took this training like, like before, and uh, I disagree with some people what they said in here about now faking it and that. Somebody says they're they're gonna do it. Its in their head. They'll do it. That's what happened with my brother Paul.(++++++) I just wish I could have knew the signs (crying). (++++) But I didn't know the signs, all the signs were there. We coulda helped if we knew. Just wish we coulda had this a long time ago. Coulda saved a lot of people from both reserves. That's all I got to say ah. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 354)

And (++) like I'm not the God, like I cannot see other people what they do and I cannot, ah no, assume such a person has a problem in our community, especially in those days when we did not know about the drug awareness. And I really appreciate her comment on (+) nowadays, we need us a community people, for example our facilitator here, and and it will be good to have facilitator in Coral Harbour and we'll have someone like her to come come to our community. And I think we have lots of work together, for example, there's only three of us in our

community. I think we should have better communication by, ah have a facilitator, someone like her. And people coming to our community would a lot, would really help too, as an outsider to give us a better messages like this. Thank you. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 188)

The afore mentioned view of Aboriginal people “begging” for more knowledge is revisited, only this time in relation to information from the non-Aboriginal culture. Here the participants express a desire to know more in terms of being able to identify suicide, and non-Aboriginal people are constructed as the keepers of this knowledge. In the first excerpt, the speaker expresses discontent over the fact that in the first workshop, he was not informed about when a suicide is most likely to occur. He goes on to explain to the rest of the participants that suicide does not always happen following a traumatic event. It can be something that the caregiver sees as minimal, but the suicidal person sees as “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” In the second excerpt, another speaker expresses upset that he did not know “the signs” when his brother committed suicide, and that if he had known them, perhaps he could have helped. The final excerpt is spoken by an Elder, who explains that while he is not a God and cannot tell when a person has a problem, that if a facilitator like the one in the room (a non-Aboriginal woman) could come to the community and give “better messages” it might help them become more aware of the problems. The implications of these discourses are obvious. Each constructs the non-Aboriginal as having power and knowledge that the Aboriginal community does not have. While on the surface this seems like an innocent desire to share more and learn more, it puts the non-Aboriginal in a position of power, for while the Elder cannot act like a God, the non-Aboriginal person can. The

Aboriginal person is put in a position of sorrow and upset, because if they had only been told about this knowledge, they could have done something. Instead they further the construction of the Aboriginal culture as lacking- this time of the knowledge it takes to prevent suicides from happening.

#### RCMP/non-Aboriginal Superiority

The following patterns demonstrate how RCMP and other Non- Aboriginal participants have been constructed as superior to Aboriginal participants. This furthers the construction of the Aboriginal participant as inferior, and establishes how difference in power is reflected in the discourse.

Acceptance of RCMP. The first pattern to be discussed in this device is repeated talk of how RCMP members are now accepted on the reserves. Consider the following conversation.

I remember use'n use use to having drive up to Mary's house and her three little three year old little boy Johnny, and he would go running into the house (yelling) "cops". And now, I come up to the driveway and little Johnny's looking out the window and he runs up to come and see me now. And that's that's a big change in in three yea, in three years. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 350)

And even as far as as uh and I guess I I keep stressing that, as far as us being accepted more, us being accepted more, so much more out there and I know our latest member out there is uh, we just call her Vicki, and for a year I been telling her how good we got it out there and so she's volunteered to come out there and is now working out there. Uh because she wants to and and is enjoying it. So much so that uh, I've had two other members from town, that have asked to go out to reserve also. So basically got like a waiting list (Laughter from group) for people to go out there. You know and at one time, at one time, oh and I and I kid you not, at one time going to work on reserve, you were assigned there. You worked the reserve. You and you. And uh, you were assigned there. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 343)

I they based I thought they based it on ah, how tough you were. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 344)

I'm not very tough. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 345)

Oh, I'm tough don't- (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 346)

In these excerpts, the speaker discusses how the RCMP have become more accepted by the Aboriginal people on the reserve, and how desirable a place the reserve is to work now. In the second excerpt, the speaker explains that at one time, RCMP members were assigned to the reserve. An Aboriginal participant jokingly suggests that they based it on how "tough" you were, to which one RCMP member responds that he is not very tough, and another that she is. By emphasizing the acceptance of the RCMP on reserve, by adults and children alike, attention is drawn to the fact that this was once not the case. The laughter from the group following mention of a waiting list to work the reserve suggests that the desirability of working there is still drawn into question. Of course, this discourse quite obviously implies that there is something "wrong" with the reserve, and hence the people living in it. Interestingly one of the RCMP reminds us why the RCMP/Aboriginal relationship might have been rocky in the past, when she is quick to reinforce that she is "tough" once the Aboriginal participant jokingly draws her "toughness" into question.

Human after all. This device is perhaps one of the most prominent patterns in the three transcripts. It involves both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants discussing how the



RCMP are human after all. This will first be addressed in the discourse of the Aboriginal participants.

I've listened to some of the concerns (+) with respect to (+) some RCMP. Sometimes um the RCMP is a person. I realize, we all realize they're, that they are people too. They're persons, they have feelings. I mentioned earlier, (++++) when we met (++) in Yellowknife for the first time during the workshop I was saying that when we go back to our communities the social workers, the RCMP, we shouldn't just um rely on them, and (+) and just think that they're going to do the job. We shouldn't, I had mentioned this as a concern before, we shouldn't um, (++) put the onness on the RCMP and um the social worker. The ordinary people in the community have to um (+) take part and help (+) um with the RCMP and the social worker (+) position. (+++++) And because of these reasons,(+++++) I think w-as um (+) an ordinary person in the community, we have to assist the local RCMP and the social workers and work with them side by side. I wanted to say this as a, as a comment. (++) Thank you. (Aboriginal Elder, Yellowknife, 514)

But there wasn't that ah you know you were accepted on the reserve and all but the working relationship wasn't all that great but now I can you know go to both communities and uh you know with the RCMP you know I don't look at Leon as Constable Benton, you know I look at him as you know Leon and the same with David. This is better, we visit and have some coffee and there's no intimidation there. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 175).

It was really weird the first day we were here. The cops were on that side, in all the chairs and the natives were on this side. [Laughs] They had it the last day, like everybody was sitting everywhere and I'm like, yeah, it did it's job. People were, I think, all the masks were removed or whatever and they got to know the person behind the uniform and stuff like that. It was a big change and we parted [Laughs] Time to go.(Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 114)

In these excerpts, the Aboriginal participants express how because of the suicide prevention workshop, they now see the RCMP as human beings, not as police officers. In the first excerpt, the speaker explains that "sometimes, the RCMP is a person" and that ordinary people in the community have to assist the RCMP and social workers. The second speaker describes seeing an RCMP member as someone he has coffee with, rather than a Constable;

and the speaker in the third excerpt explains how because of the workshop, they got to know the “person behind the uniform.” By suggesting that the workshop helped them to realize that the RCMP are human beings after all, the opposite is implied. This discourse draws the ‘human quality’ of the RCMP members into question, and constructs them as something more than an ordinary person. In order to find the human being, you have to dig under titles, uniforms and masks. At the same time as bolstering the RCMP, the Aboriginal participants are placing themselves in a position of subservience, as the first excerpt suggests they are there to “help the RCMP and social workers and work with them side by side”. This discourse places the Mounties and social workers in the best light possible by suggesting that while they are “more than human” they are not like the “others” who are intimidating.

This construction of “more than human” is supported by similar reminders made by the RCMP. Consider this conversation between an Aboriginal participant and RCMP member.

Yeah. it gave them the um, the attitude, Oh Oh these RCMP, are human after all, sort of thing it is after them seeing them doing the uh the smudging? and stuff like that, so it gave them a a different perspective of the RCMP and which I found that was, that was happening. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 111)

It felt like you were part of the circle like us? (RCMP, Lennox Island, 112)

Yeah. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 113)

Here again, we see the same construction put forth by the Aboriginal participant, which is further bolstered by the RCMP member jumping in saying “it felt like you were part of the circle like us?” By suggesting that having the RCMP participate in the smudging

made Aboriginal participants feel like they were part of the circle, he constructs being “like us” as belonging to the group, a goal to reach. This implies that being considered an equal by the non-Aboriginal members is something they strive for, and suggests that they are still striving, and therefore, are not there yet. Interestingly, it only “felt” like they were part of the circle- suggesting that while it may have seemed that way for a while, there are still differences that are made obvious. This pattern is evident in further RCMP assertions of their human qualities.

That's that's exactly right and we need the, police work isn't although the image, like the movies all kids think we eat doughnuts, and some of us don't. The image is is uh projected as something that we're not. Violent, mean, we like to beat people, shoot people. Its not true, we're human, on the same level doing a job that we're doing so we can put food on the table for our families. And we like to help people... (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 227)

But uh, you know there, there's a single change right there. You know I can't stress enough, and just coming from a policeman's perspective. To go out there and not to have all these hostile faces looking at you, you know when you drive by, and people are going like this and giving you the finger or or whatever you know to to to drive out there and and to see friendly faces, and to go to people that you can talk, excuse me (clears throat), talk to. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 347)

Here again the RCMP are constructed as something other than normal people. The speakers suggest that there is cause to hate the RCMP because of an image that has been portrayed over the years. What this mention of the image does is construct the RCMP not as someone on the same level as the rest of the participants, as the speaker in the first excerpt suggests, but as someone for whom there is a reason to be treated differently. The action of attempting to explain to the rest of the participants that they are “just like them” constructs

the RCMP as something else, which constructs the rest of the participants as inferior-ordinary people.

Even RCMP. In the following conversation, the RCMP member explains that sometimes even RCMP find dealing with suicide difficult.

It seems scary but that's because (tape flip) and you're dealing with it more? Probably? And even, even for me as a police officer I mean its its difficult. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 80)

Puts you on the same level, like whether you're an RCMP or whether you're not. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House)

Yeah whether you're white or (non-Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House)

You you're colour- whatever (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House)

Male, female... (non-Aboriginal Rocky Mountain House, 150)

Everybody has problems and everybody has emotions and and that healing circle it all comes out and everybody's like wow. I mean Mounties sometimes are seen as iron people who have no feelings, well its just, its just not true. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 154)

In this pattern, the RCMP member explains to the group that **even** the RCMP find dealing with suicides difficult, following which another RCMP and a non-Aboriginal participant explain how it puts everyone on the same level, regardless of colour or gender. The original RCMP member then explains that everyone has emotions, and Mounties are not iron people. By saying that “even” the RCMP find dealing with suicide difficult, the speaker implies that there is some reason why the RCMP might not find it difficult. This implication is further supported by the reinforcement that dealing with suicide puts everyone on the same level, regardless of colour or gender. Again, this suggests that there is some reason why people of different colours and genders might not be on the same level. In

an attempt to say “I’m just like you,” these speakers re-enforcing the fabrication that non-Aboriginal people and or Mounties are in some way different. In this case, since it is drawn into question whether they would even be bothered by “petty emotional issues” they are once again illustrated as superior.

Praise, agreement and advice. Another common pattern which supports this construction is the RCMP’s repeated use of praise, agreement and advice when talking to and about Aboriginal participants.

Yeah, I’ve heard that word quite a quite a bit. Awareness. And and I I completely agree with that because. I guess sometimes we look at it from a different perspective being policemen is we get a suicide call and and under law, we’re obligated. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 71).

You know, like, I mean for the last, I think, three years had summer students from up here working and most recently (John Smith), he’s over as a regular member in Nova Scotia. Like, good for him. (RCMP, Lennox Island, 143).

And I think if you don’t live out there or work out there, maybe you don’t appreciate that uh how how far these two communities have come in regards to awareness of of suicide and working together. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 72).

I was just going to say , the uh talk about how scary it is. I think um, even though it seems scarier, you’ve come a long way? And in fact further. Awareness will uh take you a long way. (RCMP, Rocky Mountain House, 80)

Here again we see what on the surface is supportive, enthusiastic discussion of the Aboriginal people. In the first excerpt, the speaker “completely agrees” with the Aboriginal participant who spoke before him, supporting his statement. In the second

excerpt, the RCMP member explains how they've had summer students and other members who are Aboriginal; and in the last two excerpts, the speakers praise the Aboriginal communities by indicating that they've come a long way. This action of agreeing with and praising the Aboriginal participants functions as a verbal "pat on the head" which suggests a guardian position on behalf of the RCMP. They imply that it is their duty to parentally lead the Aboriginal people into a healthier existence, suggesting that they require and seek the praise of the dominant culture, just as a child would of a parent. Also important to note is that if the need for a healthier existence is implied, it reinforces the notion that the Aboriginal people are presently unhealthy.

RCMP as all knowing. Another statement which helps support the construction of RCMP members as more than normal is the admonishment that the RCMP should have been provided with suicide prevention training.

But all this time I thought all that was included in the police training 'cause you would think that you're working with people you need to know how these and stuff like that its funny that government overlooked something like that.  
(Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 239)

This statement, spoken by an Aboriginal participant mentions that it is surprising that the RCMP did not have suicide prevention training, that it is strange the government overlooked such a thing. This suggests that finding a flaw in the system, and indeed in the RCMP training, is a surprise to the speaker. The RCMP officer is constructed as someone who unquestionably should have this knowledge.

Some jockeying for power in this statement further supports the construction of RCMP and Aboriginal participants as “more than human”. By referring to this as an unusual occurrence, the speaker accomplishes both an admonishment of the government, while at the same time constructing it as a group that is seldom wrong. This careful construction preserves the positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1978), of the government (and hence the RCMP) by bolstering it to a high position, and gets the desired scolding point across- thus allowing the Aboriginal participant a bit of power. Of course following this excerpt, the Aboriginal participant does a great deal of backpedalling- he suggests that the government is “sure changing with the times now”, and that it was an “age old force” which implies the government of today is doing much better, again re-instating non-Aboriginal power. This diffusion of a grievance, due to the power of the dominant discourse (that of RCMP as superior) is typical in discussions between marginalized and dominant groups (see Miller, 1993). It further reinforces the subservient position of the Aboriginal participant, even through the effort to make a claim. Interestingly, this pattern is also characteristic of the Aboriginal tradition to not say anything negative (Ross, 1992). This issue leads nicely into our next device, marginalization, as it further explores the discourse employed by the group who has less power.

### Marginalized Discourse

The interesting thing about this device, is that it could be attributable to two (or possibly more) different factors. First, the discourse that follows here is characteristic of people who have been silenced or marginalized by the dominant culture. Second, this discourse is also

characteristic of what many have called the traditional Aboriginal manner of speaking. While I do not pretend to have the answer to this dilemma, its function in terms of positioning is interesting to explore. The interpretation of this device will be further explored in the discussion.

No advice (But that's just my opinion). This is a device in which the Aboriginal participants express that their statements are simply their own opinion or experience.

And we gotta understand that if a teenager's going to commit suicide, they're gonna go talk to another teenager, chances are, so I think it needs to be more open for the younger ones 'cause they're the ones that are living it. And you look at it, it is that one, teens are the highest risk for a suicide. So, that's just my opinion.  
(Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 190)

Um and I find that ah, the pipe ceremony slash healing circle, talking circle is, is ah much more um, a lot of the people feel more safe, ah they, they a lot of more feelings come out. Um maybe because there's prayer involved, more prayer involved, an-and that helps people. (+) You know, I-I don't know but that's just been my experience. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 326)

He's all right and like the training we took last year uh, kinda wish they they informed us better on when suicides are most likely to occur. Like for me my experience that like su- when the people attempt suicide, its not some big incident. Or something that you can't handle, its, its a little thing, um, but when somebody's suicidal, it doesn't look like a small thing? (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 336)

As can be seen, the participants repeatedly state that the suggestions and findings they discuss are "in their opinion." In the first excerpt, the speaker suggests that more attention needs to be paid to youth suicides; the speaker in the second excerpt expresses the importance of the talking circle; and the third speaker explains that he should have been



informed about when suicides are most likely to occur. All of these excerpts are qualified with statements suggesting that these opinions are merely those of the speaker. What this does in the talk is downplay the statement, making it appear as if it were a non-hostile or non-accusatory offer, while still getting the opinion across. Similar to the afore mentioned jockeying for power, this claim is made as to not upset the power differentials in place between the two groups. This supports the idea that the Aboriginal society is constructed as inferior within both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal discourse, as their chosen mode of communication is from the group in position of lesser power.

Indirect praise. Another interesting pattern utilized by the Aboriginal participants is their understated use of praise.

Um like this what what the sui the first suicide training um what I what I find effective was both the communities are working together. I think it is our first group the Sunchild and O'Chiese are working together? That's effective. Before that there was no group had both communities involved. We had all our own little. You know O'Chiese had their own little group, Sunchild had their own group but after this workshop or actually we have these meetings every month both Sunchild and O'Chiese. I like that. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 161)

Like, um, like you were saying that you um, have done the talking circle and the smudging? and um, you know it's, i-it's kind of like, uh, because it was, it was happening but it was good to see. It was good for the Aboriginals to see this because they, they kind of want to see more of the, more interaction between the RCMP with the aboriginal people. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 109)

Rather than coming out and praising themselves or the others around them, the Aboriginal participants repeatedly displayed mild, indirect, forms of praise. In order to comprehend what is meant by this, have a look at the excerpts. The first one shows a participant

talking about how the two communities on his reserve have come together and formed a group which has suicide prevention meetings. His statement about this newfound group is "I like that." In the second excerpt, the first speaker talks about how the RCMP and Aboriginal people have begun sharing in the Aboriginal traditions, and interacting with the Aboriginal people. Her statement about this is "it was good to see." This differs strongly from the non-Aboriginal/RCMP forms of praise seen earlier, in which direct phrases such as "good for him" and "you've come a long way" were used. The patronizing parental characteristic of the praise is not present in this discourse because the praise is directed towards the action, or the feeling it caused, not the person themselves. Again, this means of claims making (Miller, 1993) comes from the non-dominant position, reinforcing the afore mentioned positioning of the Aboriginal culture. It does not make a run for the dominant position, but subtly gets the point across without overstepping the constructed boundaries.

No negative. One of the most prominent patterns displayed by the Aboriginal participants was the refusal to say anything negative.

Thank you. (++++++) I haven't ah, really seen any negative ah impact during the workshops I have been (+) involved in. (+++) So I can not say I've ah found anything negative. But I can say that I found very exciting and helpful ah with respect to the workshop that I was in. (Aboriginal Elder, Yellowknife, 443)

I been to workshops. Lot of them. And when you start looking for negative things I recommend don't do it. I just finished saying that each and every one of us are different. What is negative to somebody might be good for this one. You know, take them all use them all. I just can't help but say this because you know I've been to a lot of workshop, and I took them all you know I never looked for anything negative. (Aboriginal Elder, Rocky Mountain House, 166)

In both excerpts, these elders explain that that they do not wish to say anything negative about the workshops or anyone in them. This is a device that is again characteristic of marginalized discourse. By not saying anything negative, the non-dominant participants are never in an accusatory position towards those in power. Their discourse is constructed as agreeable. Whenever something needs to be addressed, such as the fact that there is little attention paid to youth suicides, or the residential school issue has not been brought up in the workshop, they can call upon indirect advice to get the point across. This allows for grievances to be addressed while preserving the receiver's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1978). This concern with that preservation re-iterates the positioning of the dominant and non-dominant groups.

### Chapter Summary

This analysis of discourse yielded 30 different devices and sub devices utilized in the social construction of suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Table 1 displays these devices and their sub-devices. A summary of these findings follows in the next chapter.

Summary of Findings
Suicide as Taboo
<p>These People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suicidal people as deceptive.</li> <li>• Suicidal people as dangerous.</li> <li>• Suicidal people as ignorant.</li> <li>• Shock when a family member attempts.</li> </ul>
<p>Ownership of Suicide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pair 1a: Personification of suicide.</li> <li>• Pair 1b: Removal of individual from suicide.</li> <li>• Discussion of first pair.</li> <li>• Pair 2a: Understanding emotions.</li> <li>• Pair 2b: Removing emotions.</li> <li>• Discussion of second pair.</li> <li>• Pair 3a: Narrative.</li> <li>• Pair 3b: Facts and Stats (RCMP device).</li> <li>• Discussion of third pair.</li> </ul>
<p>Suicide as Natural, Logical.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substance abuse as precursor.</li> <li>• Abuse as precursor.</li> </ul>
Culture as Cure
<p>Culture as Recreational, Romanticized, Exotic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Controlling the traditions.</li> </ul>
Prevention Tools as “Cure Alls”
<p>RCMP/non-Aboriginal Superiority</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance of RCMP</li> <li>• Human after all.</li> <li>• Even RCMP.</li> <li>• Praise agreement and advice.</li> <li>• RCMP as all knowing.</li> </ul>
<p>Marginalized Discourse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No advice (But that's just my opinion).</li> <li>• Indirect praise.</li> <li>• No negative.</li> </ul>

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISCUSSION

The original purpose of this thesis was to uncover whether there were different constructions of suicide amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Somewhat contradictory to this original intention was the finding of one construction, built in two different ways, coming from two different positions. This single view constructed suicide as a symptom of deficiency in the Aboriginal people. This has permeated the discourse of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants throughout this project. A summary of this construction begins with the established foundation of suicide as a “taboo” act- evil and forbidden- something all of the participants disapproved of. Both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants construct it in this way. However, it is no longer seen by these participants as something untouchable or unmentionable. For the most part the participants talk freely about suicide and its implications.

The constructed foundation of suicide as inappropriate is furthered by a disapproving construction of the suicidal individual. Both groups of participants utilize this discourse. The suicidal individual is marginalized into a certain type of person- someone out of the ordinary who bears undesirable characteristics, such as tendency towards deception, violence and stupidity. Evidence supporting this construction can be found in the concurrent Aboriginal construction of suicidal family members as somehow different from suicidal non-

family members. Since the caregiver has known the family member as “normal” the afflictions caused by suicide are described as more tangible, and therefore more of a cause for concern.

The separation of suicidal individuals from the rest of society sets the stage for the attribution of suicidal behaviour to a deficiency in the Aboriginal community. The previous two devices constructed suicide as inappropriate behaviour, and suicidal individuals as lacking qualities such as honesty and ability to control their violent tendencies, suggesting that they lack moral fiber. In terms of media stories, when you hear about a suicide or suicide cluster in a non-Aboriginal community, questions surface about “why” the person/people killed themselves. This question is asked less frequently when the suicidal individual is Aboriginal. Why is this? Why does it appear to be understood that they killed themselves simply because they are Aboriginal? The answer may lie in the continued construction of suicide as the responsibility of Aboriginal people. Both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in this study constructed suicide as “belonging” to the Aboriginal people. It is here that the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people part ways in how they construct suicide as a symptom of deficiency. The Aboriginal participants take ownership of suicide. They personify the people who had killed themselves, making them “real” to the speaker and the listeners; they construct emotional discourse as a positive means of understanding suicide; and they give vivid narrative accounts of suicide interventions. In contrast, the non-Aboriginal participants distance themselves from suicide, implying that it is something unknowable to them, that it is an Aboriginal problem. They

remove the person from the situation, institutionalizing suicide and distancing familiarity with it or the suicidal individuals; they construct emotional discourse as a means of removing unnatural or foreign feelings caused by association with a suicide or a suicide attempt ; and they use statistics and facticity to disassociate from the intervention situation, thus constructing it as alien to themselves.

Through these different manners of situating the blame, suicide is set up as a logical, “normal” reaction from an Aboriginal person, something they cannot help. This is supported by the description of substance and physical abuse as precursors to suicide, further indication that community deficiency exists and that it creates victims out of its members, thus normalizing suicide in Aboriginal people as the “next logical step”. This construction is supported by the Aboriginal participants who describe themselves as empty, lesser people without culture, and by the non-Aboriginal participants’ description of the Aboriginal culture as “exotic” and the inference that non-Aboriginal culture is “normal”.

The Aboriginal participants also describe clinical knowledge, which is primarily a non-Aboriginal creation, as superior to their own knowledge and the RCMP as “more than human,” which the RCMP excerpts support. Finally, the marginalized discourse of the Aboriginal participants serves to validate and further the construction of Aboriginal people in a position of subservience.

Taken in total, these devices reveal an unfavourable construction of the Aboriginal people and their communities. A recent masters thesis by an Aboriginal sociology student from Simon Fraiser University in British Columbia supports this construction. Narcisse (1998)

examined previous North American research and newspaper articles on suicide amongst Aboriginal people. She found that the Aboriginal people were constructed in much the same way I found, as deficient, and unable to take care of themselves.

The present thesis found that suicide is constructed as an act committed by people lacking in morals or intelligence, and the Aboriginal people are constructed as “lesser” because of the hardships they have faced. Suicide becomes something normal, natural for Aboriginal people, a symptom of deficiency within the Aboriginal community. Or does it?

### An Important Interpretive Caveat

Now that we have analyzed the data, the reader may recognize some patterns similar to Ong (1982) and Ross' (1992) work on Oral and Canadian Aboriginal cultures. Are there alternate explanations for any of the discourses described in the analyses? Have we missed the mark on some of our interpretations?

Anyone conducting research involving other cultures should take note of the fact that certain discourse used by participants could be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, a glance at the transcripts from this project reveals a variety of patterns which fit the mold of the devices Ong (1982) and Ross (1992) attribute to cultural factors. The oral and traditional factors of Aboriginal discourse, present in these excerpts, may in fact be contributing to the non-Aboriginal interpretation of the Aboriginal people as deficient. Due to the cultural differences in communication, non-Aboriginal people may be interpreting an Aboriginal person's discursive patterns, such as repetition, or narrative, as an indication that



the Aboriginal person is not capable of succinct discussion. This hegemonic move might result in Aboriginal people being perceived by non-Aboriginals as less articulate and therefore less intelligent. Consider first the three related tenants of orality as outlined by Ong (1982). The descriptive, repetition and redundancy devices described by Ong as characteristics of an oral culture were found within the discourse of the Aboriginal participants in each transcript. Interestingly, all of these patterns involve discussing something, in what a non-Aboriginal or literate culture individual might think of as, in excess.

The following is an example of a descriptive excerpt:

Anyway he told me how he was going to do it and, and then I kept talking to him and then I said um, can you hold off for a second. I said just keep talking to me. I'll talk to you as long as you want to talk to me and all that stuff, and that's what I did with him, and I said I'll be, I am going to put you on hold and I did, and I put him on hold and as soon as I put him on hold. I had a phone with 3-way call, so I phoned the police and I told them quickly what was going on as I have this gentleman on the phone and what not, what not. And so they, then as I said, I just don't want to take any chances with this person because if he is talking, maybe he won't do it but then I don't want uh, you know, and I don't want not to be part of this because maybe he might, and then I will feel responsible. So in a way they act upon it and and then I got back on the phone because I didn't want them to lose him. So I made sure I didn't, didn't uh, stay too long on the phone because I I told the RCMP, look I have him on the phone and I don't want him to think that I put him on hold for God knows when. So anyway quickly I said I'll be right back, and I tapped into him again, and I said , well, are you still here? and he said yes and I said OK, I'll be right back, just give me one more second, and I'll be right back, I promise and all this stuff and he says, I said are you going to be still here? And he said yes. I said OK, I just gotta get a cup of coffee. So and then he says OK and then I get back to the police and finish my, what I was telling them and then I get back on the phone and and I kept talking to him. And he just, he was like moody. (Aboriginal, Lennox Island, 36).

In this example, the participant is so descriptive that she tells the listener how she said "I am going to put you on hold and I did and I put him on hold as soon as I put him on

hold.” This sentence is characteristic of her discourse, in which she explains, action by action how she intervened in the caller’s suicide attempt.

A non-Aboriginal person listening to this description would likely consider it excessive, and wonder at the purpose of such a long explanation. Many students in the non-Aboriginal world have been reprimanded for using these “inappropriate” writing tactics. In the eyes of an individual from a literate culture, extra and redundant information appears unnecessary and foreign. To use these characteristics in literate culture, goes against our way of understanding and knowing the world. In fact, some of the people I have known who work with Aboriginal people have been heard to say “I wish he’d just get to the point!” in reference to a discussion they’d had with an Aboriginal person. This interpretation constructs the Aboriginal person as someone who rambles on to excess, someone who could have said what they needed to in less time and therefore isn’t saying anything important in their long discussion. Therefore, to a non-Aboriginal person, narrative might give the impression of someone unintelligent, who cannot use language efficiently. There exists within Western society the notion that narrative is second class form of knowledge in comparison to prepositional, abstract knowledge (Rogers, 1995).

The repetition device outlined by Ong (1982), also found in the transcript is similar in function to the narrative device. Again, we see characteristics in the discourse which could be differently interpreted, depending on the listener’s culture :

Thank you for giving me a chance to say, although I’m not full of any solutions or

answers. Ah for some time ago, maybe twenty years ago, my son, my dear son, my wife and I, I (don't) think I mentioned his name last time when I was here, my son, our dear son. Uh he's mind was re-totally confused and we didn't know how to help him, this is twenty years ago I'm talking about. It's a big gap. Many things have changed. And he was using drugs and in those days we're not aware of the drug abuse, and he used to go to school out of our community. We didn't realize the fact that he was ah using drugs ah the kind that you smoke. Ah my wife were not aware of those such things then, we didn't know the fact that ah he was using those substances, we didn't know what was wrong with him, he was acting weird, although he was living with us then. And when he was living alone and he, and but thing is something happened and we were too late. And I guess he's he was burnt out and because he used this substance abuse so much, ah we did not know such a things in those days, things that y- that can deteriorate your mind. And he became totally different person, we didn't know what was wrong with him. And, now adays, I think we should have better knowledge as elders ah so we can be aware of ah such a things (as a) drugs. And (+) ah we felt that we were too late to face the facts. Although, ah he was (+) facing the problems and legal and he was to appear in court and and also his case was kept delayed, the charges were delayed. And, and we still didn't know what was behind it. (Aboriginal, Yellowknife, 186)

Here, the participant employs repetition while he is talking about his son, repeatedly referring to how he and his wife were unaware of substance abuse and how drugs had changed his son. Again, a non-Aboriginal person listening to this excerpt might interpret this participant's discourse as unnecessarily repetitious. Repeating something in a non-oral culture is viewed as verbose, and the speaker seen as unsure of what they are saying. For a non-Aboriginal audience, he could have gotten the same point across in a few sentences, by not repeating information. It is a possibility that a non-Aboriginal person listening to this participant, might misinterpret his discursive pattern as an indicator of incompetence, rather than as a discursive pattern.

Redundancy, the final device from Ong's (1982) oral culture discourse to show up in the transcripts of the present study, is also viewed as unnecessary elaboration.

I guess what help me about taking the training last year made me realize um that um when to turn when to go for help and I knew how to assess myself. Some some some days seems like I be real low and I'd be pretty close to attempting too and I () try to go get help and uh I guess um uh help me to in a way that when they brought up the the um caregivers and the workers like they're pretty high high risk too once in a while 'cause there's nowhere they can go. And you're expected to help an and uh I guess it just made me realize that that's well there are people that help uh and uh um try not to be a statistic I guess. And ( ) from me where I where I've known that like I could get help and where I could bring myself back up is going to sweats or go see elders like for me that's my healing and that's how I know I heal and um I just ah it just taught me how to heal myself and know where my boundaries are and my limits. And uh my deal with my family is try to tell them that that try to try to be strong and stuff like. (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House, 157)

In this excerpt, the participant utilizes redundancy when he describes sentence after sentence that he knows that there are people he can go to for help when he starts feeling suicidal. He also discusses his 'boundaries and limits' which essentially mean the same thing, a minor redundancy. A non-Aboriginal person listening to the participant's discourse might interpret his redundancy as ignorance to the fact that he is essentially saying the same thing over in each new sentence, and might extrapolate to infer the ignorance of the participant.

However, as we know from Ong (1982) and Ross (1992), all three of these devices have alternate explanations when the culture of the participant is considered. Ong would explain each of these patterns in terms of the Aboriginal people as members of a transitional oral culture, in which their discourse functions as a means of aiding recall and

memory. The description, repetition and redundancy may all be vestiges of oral tradition in which the only means of passing on history was through stories. These stories had to be recalled, so that the history of the group could be preserved, and therefore features that aided recall and memory, such as those described here, were included.

Ross (1992), on the other hand, would attribute these discourses of description, repetition and redundancy to be representative of the ethic of non-interference, a traditional cultural feature of Aboriginal people in Canada. As the reader will recall from the introduction, Ross explains that giving advice or interfering in someone else's actions is seen as inappropriate, rude behaviour in Aboriginal culture. Ross speculates that this may derive from a need for everyone in a band to "get along" in order to ensure the survival of the group. The telling of a story would sometimes function as a means of indirectly dispensing advice, without embarrassing the person to whom the advice was directed. In this case, the description, redundancy and repetition all work together in telling a story to the listener, describing it to make it interesting and vivid; repeating things, to make sure the listener is aware of an important point; and using redundancy in order to provide many instances to grasp the meaning of an important point.

Interestingly, there is a similar instance of this discursive pattern which deserves mention. Although found primarily in the discourse of the Aboriginal participants, it is also found in the discourse non-Aboriginal participants throughout the transcripts. The device is the use of the term "you know," which crops up in an astounding 10% of the discourse in the three transcripts:

**You know**, it its so scary and and all that and its really hard and to try and approach the family to say that **you know**, we're there for you but **you know** just, its hard (Aboriginal, Rocky Mountain House).

Again, this pattern, the frequent and repeated use of “you know” could and does have a multiplicity of interpretations. It could act as filler; as a means of procuring solidarity; or it might be interpreted by non-Aboriginal listeners as inappropriate repetition, implying a lack of expressive ability. However, contextually speaking, it may work in support of Ong (1982) and Ross’s (1992) interpretations. It could serve as an invitation to acknowledge the speaker’s point of view and to imply closeness or shared purpose amongst the participants (Professor Gary Prideaux, personal communication, July 13, 1999).

Repeating a couple words over and over is slightly different from Ong and Ross’s devices, in which whole ideas are repeated, however it does appear to function as a signpost for listeners, to make certain that they are following the important points of the discussion. Although not acceptable in written discourse, this pattern appears in the non-Aboriginal participants discourse in similar function (although not frequency) to that of the Aboriginal participants. It is possible that this device may also serve as a condensed version of the narrative device, in which rather than explain word for word what happened in a given situation, the listener is invited to “fill the blanks in” with the “you know” device. The repetition would then serve two purposes: to make certain the listener is following, and to invite the reader to envision the whole story. This device

may therefore be a helpful crossover between oral and literate cultures, a means of condensing the information, but still serving the purpose of keeping the listener aware and implying solidarity between individuals who work in suicide prevention.

What becomes apparent when looking at these patterns in conjunction with Ong (1982) and Ross' (1992) interpretations, is that anyone analyzing this discourse could attribute them to a variety of things. For example, the average listener coming from a literate culture, for whom succinctness in language is representative of intelligence, might erroneously classify the Aboriginal people as unintelligent. Could this difference in language use have been a contributing factor to the treatment of Aboriginal people since colonization? Perhaps the literate Europeans saw a group of people who had no written culture and who spoke in redundancies, and labeled them as lesser than themselves. The important factor is that these patterns could be given a variety of interpretations, depending on the listener's historical and cultural background. Without sensitivity to this factor, inappropriate attributions could be made in analyzing and interpreting the discourse of the participants.

### In This Thesis

Therefore, the reader may be wondering, what do these patterns represent in the context of this thesis? Are Ong (1982) or Ross (1992) correct? As the reader will recall, the final section of the analysis outlined three devices which bear striking similarities to Ong (1982) and Ross's (1992) patterns. These devices were categorized as marginalizing discourse and were entitled: "No advice," "Indirect praise," and "No negative." Is this

discourse representative of marginalized groups, as the analysis indicated, or is it representative of Ong (1982) or Ross's (1992) interpretations? Perhaps it is representative of something else entirely?

Consider the first marginalized device, "No advice." This resembles both Ross's (1992) ethic of non-interference and Ong's (1982) descriptive device. The participant tells a story rather than give direct advice to another participant. The second of the three marginalized devices, "Indirect praise," also has as an alternate explanation. To not give praise resembles the ethic regarding praise and gratitude described by Ross (1992). The proper means of communicating appreciation would be to ask the person to continue doing what (s)he is doing. Finally, there is also the ethic that anger cannot be displayed. This relates to the final device of "No negative," in which the participants went out of their way to avoid saying anything negative. Ross (1992) suggests that this ethic was in place during traditional times in order to avoid conflict between band members. Ross (1992) further explains that these devices are in place because the Aboriginal people are a collective people. Actions were done for the group, not the self and therefore, praise had little place. As every group member's skills were needed in order for the band to survive, conflict between band members was discouraged.

Now, this is not to say that these traditional ethics are still solidly in place, or that they necessarily apply to every Aboriginal band in Canada, or even to this study. However, looking at the discourse of the Aboriginal participants in this study, the devices which underline these ethics are apparent. Is it possible that what Ross (1992) and Ong



(1982) have deemed cultural characteristics are in fact or in part, characteristics resulting from the suppression of the Aboriginal people? Or perhaps the Aboriginal people were suppressed in part because their discourse presented itself to non-Aboriginals as representative of lesser people, or people who could easily be “conquered?” The discourse of marginalized individuals constructs the self as someone in a position of lesser power, someone who cannot directly question or make claims, and therefore does so indirectly. If the characteristics in question are in fact representative of cultural ethics present before colonial times, then how does this discourse construct the Aboriginal people in terms of this analyses? What may be seen as politeness from the Aboriginal point of view is instead interpreted as a means of making claims from a position of lesser power. Perhaps the Aboriginal people were historically labeled as lesser because they spoke in a cultural pattern that resembled the discourse of marginalized groups. Or, perhaps their discourse is not cultural, but marginalized discourse that has been labeled as cultural over the years.

What makes these questions so interesting, is that these patterns could function in a multitude of ways which do not have to be mutually exclusive. They could be seen as marginalized discourse; cultural discourse; both marginalized and cultural discourse or something else entirely. As mentioned earlier, the Aboriginal and European cultures have been interacting with one another in Canada since 1535, and so their current discourse is a product of over 400 years of interaction. The fact remains that colonization and the relationships and discourses that developed and are ongoing are a complex set of

interactions, evolving, constructing and reconstructing who Canadians have become, and indeed who we are becoming. The questions that I ask here are likely far too simple, and the ongoing evolution far too complex for there to be any answers.

Contextually speaking, there could be several factors at play. For example, the workshop from which the interviews were obtained was an RCMP funded, non-Aboriginal run and designed project. With the exception of non-Aboriginal community members present, all other non-Aboriginal people were in positions of power. 1) The RCMP- Canadian law enforcement officers are given power by the government, which they may use on reserves, and at their own discretion. 2) The interviewer, (who in the case of the Rocky Mountain House and Lennox Island interviews was in fact part Aboriginal, but this was unknown to the participants) who ran the meetings, had Western education and training and therefore knowledge of suicide prevention tactics. 3) The creators of the program, who fashioned it from the position of their own background and culture, may have unwittingly constructed it to place the Aboriginal people in a position of less power by creating it in terms unfamiliar to the Aboriginal people. 4) Finally, the consulting group, who sat in the back, took notes, and recorded the interviews, may have given them the aura of the objective “scientist” a position over the “participant.” Therefore, since all positions of power were taken up by non-Aboriginal individuals, it is possible that the discourse of the Aboriginal participants came from a “subservient” position and therefore the marginalized characteristics were reflective of this positioning.

However, there is also the consideration that these meetings took place in the form of a modified healing circle, with Elders present in two cases. Therefore it is also possible that the discourse of the participants is representative of traditional behaviour, utilized out of respect for the circle and/or the Elder.

There is no absolute answer to these queries, but the multiple possibilities must be kept in mind when analyzing data involving interacting cultures. In fact, these questions spur on more questions. How did the characteristics described above affect how the Aboriginal people were perceived? What was their discourse doing if it mimicked that of a marginalized people, or of someone less intelligent or immature? Indeed, referring back to colonial times, did this manner of discourse affect the Canada and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations that we know today? Or, if the traditional ethics, such as dispensing indirect advice, or avoiding praise and gratitude were in fact by products of marginalizing the Aboriginal people, what has this done to the Aboriginal people's perception and treatment of their own culture and themselves, to say nothing of the manner in which other people treat them? Furthermore, consider that Ross (1992) and Ong's (1982) interpretations are based upon historically and culturally constructed knowledge. Perhaps the Aboriginal people are seen as a "collective" people, only because they have been constructed as such by Europeans over time. This may be another marginalizing factor that has emerged over the centuries. The individualist European society implies power, in which an individual is free to pursue their own desires, usually in materialistic form. They have the power of personal motivation, and therefore, power over the

collectivist society. By constructing the Aboriginal people as collectivist, Europeans automatically established dominance. If indeed the influence of European society caused Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to construct themselves as collectivist, what else have they been constructed as? Our cultures appear to have historically and socially constructed the Aboriginal people as lesser and as more prone to suicide. What has North America created? The next section explores this possibility.

### Imperialism and Aboriginalism

The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* that is submitted to being- *made* Oriental. (p.6)

For any European during the nineteenth century- and I think one can say this almost without qualification- Orientalism was such a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche's sense of the word. (p.204)

Edward Said, from Orientalism, 1978.

How can we come to understand the findings of this study, or the discourse and its variants? It was, as I indicated, somewhat of an unwelcome surprise. On the surface, the participants spoke with admiration respect and care. Anyone coming away from the initial interviews would have been uplifted to find such a glowing example of mutual respect across cultures, especially ones that until recently, have been in conflict. It was not until the analysis, indeed, perhaps a month into it, that a deeper level of understanding became evident. This apparently respectful discourse carried racist constructions. But why? What

was happening here? What the discourse **appears** to be doing, what I hypothesize it to be doing, is contributing to a vicious circle that promotes a view of Aboriginal deficiency that is woven into Western culture's fabric of "knowing" the Aboriginal people. How did this fabric come into being? One possible interpretive lens may be the current inquiry into colonial discourse.

Beginning with Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, post colonial theory and discourse analysis has been exploring and deconstructing a multitude of issues related to colonialism, such as the character of colonized cultures and post colonial identity and discourse. Said's (1978) work has its source in a Foucauldian view of power and subjection<sup>5</sup>, which is applied to issues surrounding the colonizer and the colonized (Brantlinger, 1985). Said (1978) suggests that the Orient is not a naturally occurring place and people, but that the Orient (and the Occident) are constructed. The Orient has been "Orientalized" by the western culture for a multitude of reasons including the notion that the Orient was different from the Occident; because the West was physically stronger; and simply because (as the above quote suggests) it submitted to being Oriental. For the Occident, there could be only one civilization, one God and one "culture," and all other traditions, customs and superstitions were the product of a people who had not yet found the "right" path (Said, 1978). Therefore, if other civilizations were conceived to be on a different path, or even farther back on the "right" path, behind the Occident, then they were automatically perceived as less advanced. This discourse still exists today, in the form of some researchers who claim to

study “primitive” cultures in order to better understand where “we” - the Western “true” culture- came from.

There is contention as to whether Canada and other dominions may be included in the broad category of post colonial, because a dominions’ historical development is different from that of a non-dominion due to a different political relationship with Britain (Williams & Chrisman, 1994). The idea is that “subsequent history and economic development, and current location within global capitalist relations have been very much in a metropolitan mode, rather than a post-colonial one” (Williams & Chrisman, 1994, p. 4). Be that as it may, there is a strong history of oppression of Aboriginal people in Canada. Aboriginal people had their land and rights signed away in return for minimal payment, such as a medicine chest and restricted “tribal homelands” now known as reserves<sup>6</sup> (Allain, 1989; Sinclair, 1998). The government used these homelands to control the movement and prosperity of the Aboriginal people. They were forbidden to use their lands for economic growth, and could only hunt and farm for personal subsistence (Sinclair, 1998). As discussed in the introduction, their traditions, traditional dress, education, and other ways of life were made illegal. Many botched attempts were made to replace these factors with Christianity and other European ways of life, under the guise of “saving the primitives” (Sinclair, 1998). Therefore, even though Canada was a dominion, and its development differed from that of a “non-dominion,” the historical treatment and construction of the Aboriginal people make it reasonable to draw on post colonial theory to provide some insight into the

Canadian situation.

If the current discourse amongst and about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada does, as we have hypothesized, promote the construction of deficiency amongst the Aboriginal people, then perhaps the current understanding of the Aboriginal people is as Said (1978) describes “Oriental” people Orientalism. The Aboriginal people as a group are a system of truths in Nietzsche’s sense- “illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are” (in Said, p.203). Instead of Orientalism, we have Aboriginalism. In other words, one might argue that the actions and discourse utilized between and amongst the Aboriginal people and the colonists from 1535 onwards has resulted in the constructed “truths” of the Aboriginal person as deficient. This occurs to a point that the discourse is so invisible, that even when a conscious effort is made to remove the more obvious racism from our language, the colonial language is still the medium of the discussion. It is such an embedded medium, that the Aboriginal people utilize it themselves, because it has become a part of the dominant culture “truths”- the illusion is lifelike -or is it life?- (Levett, Kottler, Burman, & Parker, 1997). Therefore, in accordance with Said’s (1978) instructions for those exploring Orientalism, we have to examine the discourses of Aboriginalism in order to begin to comprehend how we as Canadians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, have produced the Aboriginal people in a social, historical, cultural and scientific sense. We have to illuminate **what** Aboriginalism is. I believe that this is how we may come to understand the discourses unveiled in this thesis- as demonstrative of the construction of Canadian Aboriginal people. In this thesis, discourse analysis appears to have tapped into

Aboriginalism by revealing that Canada has historically, culturally and scientifically produced the Aboriginal people as deficient. However, what has not yet been discussed, and is of utmost importance, is **how** the discourse has produced the Aboriginal people in such a manner. The answer lies within a notion which has, as of yet, only been eluded to. This is that the discourse itself is hegemonic. Aboriginalism, and all the discursive moves that incorporate it, is a power move. What I would like to do now is attempt to “contribute to a better understanding of the way cultural domination has operated” (Said, 1978. p. 28).

#### Power: Aboriginalism

In their 1994 colonial discourse and post colonial theory reader, Williams and Chrisman (1994) contend that:

If texts exist in what- to be deliberately unfashionable- one would call a dialectical relationship with their social and historical context-produced by but also productive of, particular forms of knowledge, ideologies, power relations, institutions and practices- then an analysis of the texts of imperialism has particular urgency, given their implication in far reaching and continuing systems of domination and economic exploitation (p. 4).

I would argue that the same urgency should be taken with current discourse that relates to what was once colonial and/or imperial issues, for this is what the texts (and everyday discourse) of imperialism have spawned. The findings of this study, although a surprise, are the postcolonial discourses which reflect changes brought on by years of colonialism. The analysis conducted for this thesis appears to reveal that Canadian Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations are in a sense, embedded in a “continuing system of domination,” of which



Williams and Chrisman speak, and what this system has wrought is the construction of the Aboriginal people as deficient.

Since 1535, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal discourses have been reproducing culture, power and suicide in our country. However, the upper hand has always belonged to the European colonizers who initially had the physical power and technology to repress the Aboriginal people and, more importantly, who had writing, and thus could document, define and confine the Aboriginal people and their “problems” through treaties, policies and everyday talk. My interpretation, my contention is this- the repression of the Aboriginal people was primarily done not with physical force, despite its presence, nor even with laws and treaties, but with the everyday language that both cultures constructed together to define the Aboriginal people as “other” and as “weaker”. This construction and all discourses emanating and continuing from it, have reproduced who Canadians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are and have been furthered and solidified in time through imperialist writings, such as were written in the 1700’s (see page 45), such as Fenton wrote in 1935 (see page 14), and such as the Canadian government wrote in section 35 of the Constitution Act in 1982 (see page 46).

Canada has essentially attempted what may now be seen as a subtle cultural genocide, as revealed in the historical and present day discourses which function to repress, “civilize” and “fix” the Aboriginal people. This is further supported by the notion that the British colonization of Canada, as a dominion, was subtle, and conducted with the “best of intentions” (in comparison to the American colonization). Those who tried to integrate the

Aboriginal people into European society felt that they were saving them from a life of savageness (Sinclair, 1998). Similarly, and as mentioned in the introduction and analysis, those conducting research on suicide and creating programs for suicide prevention amongst Aboriginal people believe that they are “helping to fix the problem” when in fact they are constructing the Aboriginal people as deficient. Sinclair (1998) explains that although cultural genocide is no longer a part of modern **thinking**, our past is still with us today, in the form of elders who faced residential schools; government policies; and most importantly, our discourses. We may now see that our discourses have had an overarching perlocutionary effect. We have slowly but consistently constructed the Aboriginal people as deficient and implicated suicide as a symptom of this deficiency, so much so, that this construction has almost invisibly embedded itself within Canadian culture and understanding of Aboriginal people. However, this construction, this “discourse of racism” should not be misconstrued as something the speakers are necessarily aware of. Thus far, I have discussed discourse in two manners. First, I have discussed discourse in terms of a transparent view of language, in which language is a form of communication, a route to cognitive intentions. Second, I have referred to it as social action, as something embedded within the language which creates who we are, not something of which we are necessarily cognizant. It is within this latter form of discourse that the devices uncovered in this thesis reside. What must be emphasized is that this construction of Aboriginal people was not done **intentionally** by the participants. It is a reflection of the discourse regarding Aboriginal people which has been producing and reproducing itself since colonialism, and in some cases is simply the only discourse available

to our society in discussions of Aboriginal people and culture. It is, rather unfortunately, Canada's way of "knowing" Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations.

What becomes clear is that it is the power of the colonial discourse, not the actual interaction between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants that has repressed the Aboriginal people in these particular interviews (Miller, 1993). This power, this repression and marginalization, is present in several of the devices outlined in the analysis section of this thesis. The most clear example is the romanticizing of the Aboriginal culture.

Consider the two devices in which the participants romanticize Aboriginal culture, constructing it as something exotic and unique; something the Aboriginal people need in order to survive. Here, Aboriginal culture is something "different," described as a good learning experience for the non-Aboriginal participants, something recreational, and out of the ordinary. This is clearly a power move on behalf of the non-Aboriginal people. In constructing the Aboriginal culture as something "exotic" the non-Aboriginal people have constructed the Aboriginal people as abnormal, and inferred upon themselves a normal existence (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Said, 1978). The non-Aboriginal way of life and all of the mundane privileges that go with it is constructed as "simple common sense" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p.135) rather than a product of culture. By positioning themselves as normal, and as not possessing or in need of culture, the non-Aboriginal people become stable, and healthy. They are representative of the way things should be. The non-Aboriginal people become in contrast, unstable, and unhealthy thus giving the non-Aboriginal people the "upper hand". If Aboriginal people are not normal, stable or healthy, then there must be

something wrong with them. In the face of this facticity, how can anyone dispute the superiority of the non-Aboriginal people? As with the government documents discussed in the introduction, this also emphasizes the difference between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and draws a firm line between **us** and **them**. They are once again constructed as a weaker people, needing the protection of non-Aboriginal people.

Furthermore, by referring to the Aboriginal culture as a good recreational activity, the non-Aboriginal people trivialize the Aboriginal culture, and further keep the Aboriginal people underfoot. Their culture becomes something marginal that you could dabble in, like karate or birdwatching, rather than a way of life and a way of “knowing.” The interests and concerns of the Aboriginal people are made into something that is “nice to have around” but not important. Once again, this makes it difficult to contest the superiority of the non-Aboriginal people, who don’t need the Aboriginal culture, but could “take it up” if they wanted to.

Another rather obvious example of a power move on behalf of the non-Aboriginal people is the device in which the Mounties are described as “human after all.” This infers that their human quality is questionable, and that they may actually be something else. This something else is someone seen by the dominant culture as superior, one who normally does not show feelings, who is “tough” and who has to tell the rest of the participants that she is “just like them” because “common sense” dictates that she is above that. Her discourse establishes her superiority and functions to keep the rest of the participants on a level below.

These power moves, reflective of the colonial discourse produced and reproduced over the generations of Canadian history may be found in any of the devices outlined in the analysis section of this thesis. By constructing the Aboriginal people as inferior, and the non-Aboriginal people as superior, European Canadians have achieved “historical ascendancy” through Aboriginalism (Said, 1978, p. 328).

Now that I have somewhat illuminated the manner in which the discursive power move has functioned to repress the Aboriginal people, (Said, 1978), what hope can be offered to improve the situation? If the post modern view of power is indeed that of a struggle, then these studies have neglected to give the minority group their say. Just as with the previous research on Aboriginal suicide, the Aboriginal people have been left out, making the constant struggle for power one sided. Is there any way we can make small advances towards “unlearning” these constructions? The answer may lie in the notion that there is more at work in this context than first meets the eye.

#### Power : Contesting the Constructions

In most of the discourses analyzed, the Aboriginal participants did not, or were not, able to make audible counter-claims to the construction of Aboriginal suicide and Aboriginal people. In fact, they described themselves in the marginalized terms because they had no other way of doing so, the colonial discourse was all that was available. As Miller (1993) states, dominant discourses (in this case colonial discourse) make constructions such as the “deficient Aboriginal” construction seem unchallengeable. However, this does not mean that the dominant discourses cannot be contested--quite the contrary. Discourse can function

both as a mechanism of power, and of opposition (Harraway, 1989). One example of this is feminism, which “resists, destabilizes, contradicts, and restructures” the dominant patriarchal discourses from within<sup>7</sup> (Harraway, 1989, p.287).

In their feminist critique of theories and research surrounding suicide, Range and Leach (1998) explain that feminist research recognizes how meaning is “actively constituted through language” (p.33) and recommend that attention be paid to the power of language. They suggest that effort should be made in research to be aware of and avoid problematic terms such as “failed suicide attempt” or “manipulative suicidal behaviour” which infer negative qualities on suicidal individuals. They further recommend avoidance of sexist language and heterosexual bias in research. This is reflective of the feminist move to reduce patriarchal discourse in society by making society aware of and providing alternatives to these discourses. Perhaps one manner of reducing the repressive discourse in the context of Aboriginal suicide, and indeed the people as a whole, would be to provide greater discursive space for the alternatives. If power does involve a negotiation over meaning, then we should be able to see how each device discussed in this analysis is functioning on several levels in a given moment. To date, this thesis has only acknowledged two of those levels. First, there is the transparent level, in which we take face value what the participants are saying- how they are working together and forming networks and friendships across the cultures (see Rogers & Holton, 1999, for a full elaboration). Second there is the level that we have analyzed here, in which the participants have constructed suicide as a symptom of deficiency within the Aboriginal community. This construction is reflective of the historical

and cultural hegemonic construction of Aboriginal people, or as I have adapted from Said (1978) : Aboriginalism.

To this point the results of this study seem bleak, of unintended racism embedded within an almost invisible discourse. However, this construction, indeed any construction, is not unipolar. There is a third interpretation, the notion that hegemonic discourses carve out oppositional discourses. As with any discourse, there are contesting interpretations of the “deficiency” construction, a means of creating meaning from the marginalized, Aboriginal viewpoint. This, while not negating the original construction, does allow us to see discursive spaces being opened up for new understandings. By putting a microphone to these contesting constructions, we may be able to see the changes that are slowly emerging between these two cultures, as both groups struggle for power over historical repression and the invisible strength of suicide. At the very least, this may offer another way of understanding, interpreting and speaking about Aboriginal people.

Suicide as taboo. Consider first, the construction of suicide as taboo. This discourse established suicide as something evil, something that is “hush hush”. However, as was mentioned in the analysis, in this context, each of the participants is violating this rule by discussing suicide, and are therefore defying this construction. This occurred amongst both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, which implies a joint struggle over the historical construction of suicide. Willingness to discuss suicide contests the notion that it is taboo and opens up the possibility that suicide is something other than a deplorable act committed by someone abnormal or deficient.

These people. We move on to the section where the discourse constructs people who commit suicide as marginalized from the rest of society, as base individuals who are ignorant, deceptive and violent. While again, this discourse establishes the suicidal individual as less intelligent and deceptive, the Aboriginal people repeatedly display shock, and an inability to function as a caregiver when a family member or friend (someone they know well), attempts suicide. This implies that the Aboriginal participants, while contributing to the construction of suicide as a symptom of deficiency, do not consider those close to them to be vulnerable to suicide. This suggests that when a “real” person attempts (i.e.: not this “fictional” suicidal person), they are shocked and therefore do not construct suicide as something that could happen to them or their loved ones, even though they are within the high risk group. By constructing family members as “normal” the Aboriginal participants effectively contest the construction of Aboriginal people as lesser.

Ownership of suicide. In the next device, the Aboriginal participants take ownership of suicide, by personifying the suicidal individual while the non-Aboriginal participants distance themselves from the incident and the people involved. The Aboriginal approach may suggest that suicide is constructed as belonging to them, however, by taking ownership of suicide, the Aboriginal participants also place themselves in the position to “deal” with it. This contrasts heavily with the non-Aboriginal construction of suicide in which suicide is “not their problem”. They take themselves off the hook by not allowing for any kind of attachment, emotional or otherwise to suicide. The non-Aboriginal participants are still overpowered by suicide, as they do not fully acknowledge it. The Aboriginal participants



instead acknowledge the problem and attempt to work with it. This contests Aboriginalism by suggesting that the Aboriginal people are capable of helping themselves.

Suicide as normal, logical. Next, both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants construct suicide as something normal for the Aboriginal people, given the hardships they have faced. Again, both sets of participants, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, contribute to this construction. Interestingly, by constructing suicide as “normal” given the hardships, the participants suggest an “out” from this situation. If the substance abuse, horrid living conditions, histories of abuse in residential schools and other “causes” of suicide are removed or dealt with, then the Aboriginal people may begin to heal. Several participants within each transcript suggested that prevention of substance abuse was imperative. This suggests that while the Aboriginal people are still constructed as damaged and weak, the possibility of “getting well” is there. This construction jockeyes for power with the historical construction of Aboriginal people as deficient. This contests Aboriginalism, because if Aboriginal people are able to heal, then there is nothing “inherently wrong” with them, they may be reconstructed as “normal” individuals who have faced difficulty.

Culture as cure. The previous device is quite similar to the Culture as Cure (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) device, utilized by the Aboriginal people. This device constructed the Aboriginal people as lacking in culture, and therefore as un-whole people who have no identity or purpose. However, this device also leaves the door open to possibilities. It does not imply that things have to stay this way, that change is impossible. Indeed, by suggesting that culture is the answer, the Aboriginal people have constructed themselves as

possessing the ability to heal, and that this ability comes from something that was a part of them before colonialism, before the first European set foot in Canada. This may function to empower the Aboriginal people, by constructing the “void” as ephemeral.

This is perhaps the strongest contest so far. Indeed there is even an Aboriginal prophecy which speaks to this time of emptiness and strife, and explains how they will once again become whole. Connors (1998), an author featured in Suicide in Canada, explains that:

Most tribal people of North America have prophecies that foretold the coming of the European to North America and the suffering, ill health, and death that would occur amongst the tribal people as a consequence of this contact. However, almost all of these prophecies also tell of a time of healing that will mark the re-establishment of a state of health amongst tribal people as they rediscover the powerful healing knowledge of their pasts. Many of these prophecies also indicate that a true time of healing will follow for all races on this planet as the tribal people help all other races to reconnect with the wisdom of their tribal roots in order to re-establish balance between all life forms. It is believed that this healing will be necessary if we are to survive on this planet (Connors, 1998, p.5).

This prophecy exemplifies the counter construction to the “culture as cure” device, where, even though the Aboriginal people may be un-whole at present, things are not going to stay that way. It gives them power over the construction.

Culture as exotic. The non-Aboriginal construction of culture as romanticized may serve to reveal that the non-Aboriginal view of Aboriginal culture is Orientalized, or exotic. However, it may also serve as a means of empowering the Aboriginal people. As was mentioned, the non-Aboriginal participants did not intend to be racist, and the tone of this workshop was one of respect. This discourse may be racist only because racist discourse is the only resource non-Aboriginal people have with which to discuss the Aboriginal people.

By constructing the Aboriginal culture as something exotic, romanticized, the Aboriginal participants also construct it as something that can help them get in touch with their feelings, and better understand and deal with suicide and themselves. Aboriginal culture thus becomes the answer to many problems, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. It may still be constructed as “other” and “abnormal” but it is also constructed as “superior.” Consider this excerpt :

Its um, wh-what I find at ah at work in Charlottetown and and I think this is probabl- this is this is, its definitely cultural. Within the European community, your everyday life and your feelings are totally separate. Its not appropriate very often to talk about how you feel or what's in your heart when it comes to dealing with the day to day stuff. And I think we have a real lesson to learn in terms of you know bringing those parts of us together, you know the head and the heart together and um because the way we deal with problems is very often not to, not to look at them, not to think about them, and not to deal with them until they're right there in our face, and um so just sitting and um um listening to um you know some of the things that the workshop had to offer and to the way it it helped people deal with that I ca- you know when, when people were talking around the table I was thinking well, I've been in that situation, I wish I knew that. Or you know, I I know somebody who did that, I would have liked to have had that information and and it reminded me too about how fearful I am to sort of get involved in something as serious as ah as suicide and I had a, had an acquaintance who had mental health problems who was was threatening suicide and I absolutely didn't know where to do, I mean, we ended up going to the hospital and there was nothing there for him either. So I, you know I felt that not only had I failed him, that I hadn't been able to put him in touch with anybody else who could help him either. Because it just seemed that until he actually cut his wrist, or he took an overdose, there were no services available to him and he was known at the hospital, I guess he was a difficult patient, and their answer, you know I take him there and they'd send him home. And I kind of, so I felt I wasn't doing anything. It would have been good to have had the workshop. (non-Aboriginal, Lennox Island)

Here, this non-Aboriginal participant explains how her culture does not have the resources that the Aboriginal one does, and that had she only learned about Aboriginal ways before, then she might have been able to help someone the hospital and “western” ways could not. Aboriginal culture is often viewed by non-Aboriginal people as something wonderful, and the “right” way to understand the world (Deana Franssen, personal communication, July 16th, 1999; e.g. Suzuki, 1998). Therefore, while constructing the non-Aboriginal culture as normal, and the Aboriginal culture as abnormal, this discourse may actually empower the Aboriginal people because “abnormal” could also denote superior.

Tools as “cure alls”. Contesting the construction of Western academic tools as “cure alls” in the eyes of the Aboriginal people is a bit more difficult to explain. In this case, the Aboriginal participants construct the prevention tools as the necessary knowledge to begin prevention of suicide within the Aboriginal community. At first it appears that they have completely “bought in” to the notion that non-Aboriginal knowledge is superior, and Aboriginal knowledge then by definition becomes inferior. However, this may also be explained in terms of taking ownership. While Western culture is still seen as superior, it is also constructed as something that the Aboriginal people may take, use for themselves, and adapt for their own needs ( see Rogers & Holton, 1999). Therefore, the Aboriginal people become those who can master the knowledge, and apply it to improve the situation. By expressing an interest in learning about and mastering these tools, the construction of Aboriginal people as deficient, and lacking in moral or social standards is contested. If

Aboriginal people were lacking in moral and social standards then they wouldn't want to find a way they could to prevent what they perceived to be a problem in their community.

RCMP/non-Aboriginal superiority. In the next device, both the RCMP and the Aboriginal people construct the RCMP as superior to Aboriginal people. However, contesting this device could also serve to raise the construction of the Aboriginal person from inferior. In regards to the Aboriginal description of the RCMP as human, it is expressed in several instances that the RCMP are friends, with whom they work and have coffee, amongst other things. By describing the RCMP as friends, they are "bringing them down a notch" from something superior. At the same time this contests the construction of Aboriginal people as "lesser" because they are seen as a friend, and colleague, someone who might be (or have the potential to be) on a level playing field.

In regards to the RCMP who says that "even the RCMP find the topic of suicide difficult" the construction of superiority remains, but this discourse also makes a Western attempt at reconciling the differences between the two cultures. Yes, the RCMP construct themselves as above those around them, however, they also construct themselves as a people who are attempting to understand the sorrows faced by the Aboriginal people- to acknowledge that suicide is difficult for an RCMP officer is quite an effort for a group and culture that appears to distance itself from suicide. The "tough" image of the RCMP is not one that they can let go of easily, however, their Western style of encouragement and praise do at least make attempts to bridge the gap.

Marginalized discourse. Finally, we reach the marginalized discourse, in which the Aboriginal participants exhibit discursive characteristics of individuals who are in a position of lesser power than those they are speaking with. We have already established in our interpretive caveat, that what was interpreted as marginalized discourse could have been attributed to a variety of cultural issues. Regardless of the source, this discourse may serve as an empowering factor for the Aboriginal participants. By giving indirect advice and praise and not making negative statements, the Aboriginal participants are still able to make claims and jockey for power, even if it is less obvious. They may be speaking in what non-Aboriginal people perceive to be a position of lesser power, however they still get their point across, in the form of indirect advice. That this is an empowering move, could be further supported by the notion that these devices represent their traditional ethics. Their refusal to say anything negative or to give advice and praise could also demonstrate adherence to traditional values, and refusal to conform to European traditions.

#### What About Suicide Today?

Returning to the main theme of this thesis, a question arises: What are the implications of the contesting discourses for making an impact on understanding and preventing suicide amongst Aboriginal people in Canada?

If I may, for a minute, extrapolate from the context of these three interviews, this study has shown that in the discourse of our society, Aboriginal people appear to have been constructed as lesser or deficient, and suicide is constructed as a symptom of that weakness. This constructs the Aboriginal people on a level below the rest of Canadian society, and

promotes the understanding that they cannot help but be susceptible to suicide, for it is a “normal” action, given their “circumstances.” Suicide amongst Aboriginal people has been constructed as an “Aboriginal problem,” something that logically happens to “those deficient Aboriginal people.” If this is indeed the construction of Aboriginal people in Canada, it is easy to see how discourse such as this may work to disempower the Aboriginal people, by contributing to their self construction as “lesser” and more prone to suicide than non-Aboriginal people, which may in itself contribute to the high rate of suicide, substance abuse and other self destructive behaviour amongst Aboriginal people in Canada.

In the past, psychology has unwittingly played an important role in promoting the construction of Aboriginal people as lesser. It has furthered their disempowerment, by concentrating on finding out and discussing what is “wrong” with them. Past research on Aboriginal suicide has lumped the Aboriginal people, Native, Inuit and Métis alike, into a whole group, rather than acknowledge and incorporate their many differences; it has concentrated on finding a cure for suicide, rather than understanding the underlying factors; it has held on to the societal construction that there is something wrong with the Aboriginal people, rather than seeing that it contributes to that construction; and it has spoken for Aboriginal people, rather than letting them speak for themselves (Chartrand, 1995). While this research has typically been in good faith, it has effectively disempowered the Aboriginal people. It has premised itself on the cultural construction of suicide (as described in the analysis section of this thesis), which interestingly, has not resulted in any marked improvement in preventing suicide amongst Aboriginal people. Instead, the rates are

predicted to increase over the next few years (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). Furthermore, this research, conducted primarily by non-Aboriginal professionals contains the implication that the Aboriginal people are incapable of looking after themselves, thus reconstructing and justifying the status-quo.

This thesis suggests an alternative, fostered by an attempt to understand the cultural construction of suicide and power differentials as exhibited by the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In so doing the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups open the door in negotiation of a new identity for the Aboriginal people, relinquishing to them their rightful ability to define their own problems and solutions (Stauble, 1999). I hope this will, in some small way, allow all research initiatives the opportunity to better understand suicide amongst Aboriginal communities, whether the research be conducted by Aboriginal researchers, non-Aboriginal researchers or, most beneficially, both.

However, this thesis is by no means perfect, and power, as ever, has played an important part here as well.

Power and this thesis. The evaluation from which these data derive is based on a non-Aboriginal view of how things need to be improved. In fact, every issue of concern, from the reserves, housing, food, and schooling, is grace to a non-Aboriginal way of constructing and determining “what is best” for the Aboriginal person. By discussing the construction of suicide as a symptom of deficiency within the Aboriginal people, this project itself has contributed to a specific position. By not being critical of this finding, how can we be sure that we are contributing anything of value? Have I not, like Said accuses in Orientalism



(1978), furthered the negative social construction of the Aboriginal people and their culture-- furthered the dichotomy?

How can Canadians work towards improving the construction of Aboriginal people when it is so deeply embedded within society's way of "knowing" ? Perhaps the best answer is to be reflexive about what we do and what we find. Perhaps by listening for alternatives, such as those touched on in this discussion, and by using the rhetorical contests suggested, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can arrive on a more equal playing field than what currently informs research and prevention tactics.

Quite obviously there are several limitations that must be confronted if we are to continue down the road of reconciliation and more informed research. The next section will explore some of these limitations before continuing on to future research suggestions open to those adhering to a new alternative.

### Limitations of The Present Study

With all of the questions posed throughout this discussion, it must be apparent to the reader that there is much room for improvement in this and any study involving research on Aboriginal suicide. The present study has opened the door for a few new thoughts on how to approach and understand the problem of suicide amongst Aboriginal people, which has in turn revealed some of its own limitations.

The first limitation that must be mentioned is something the reader is probably already aware of. This is the notion that there are several interpretive possibilities available in this

analysis. There is little way of knowing if some of the discursive patterns are attributable to cultural factors, power factors, or something else. This is certainly the case for most discourse analyses involving cultures other than that of the researcher, however, it is especially interesting here, because the Aboriginal people themselves may not know whether these patterns were present pre-1535, or if they developed as a result of the encounter with the Europeans. This limits the interpretation of the discourse, and the conclusions of the study.

The second, and perhaps most poignant limitation of this paper is that there was a paltry amount of Aboriginal involvement on the academic side. Although Aboriginal participants were involved in the study itself, the person involved in interpreting the discourses of the Aboriginal people was, in fact non-Aboriginal. While this study does give Aboriginal people a voice, something that has been ignored in past traditional studies, non-Aboriginal people are still “in charge” and in a position of power. Therefore, the usefulness, and more importantly the fairness of research interpretations that do not include input from Aboriginal people is drawn into question. What kind of construction are we contributing to if we do not involve the Aboriginal people? What could stem from this construction? Does this simply further a racist discourse? Unfortunately, because this was a Master’s thesis, only one researcher could be involved in this project. To have a group of researchers, representing the key “stakeholders” of this project, such as Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people, RCMP officers, theoretical psychologists and suicidologists, co-authoring the interpretations

would have been ideal to increase representativeness in creating a paper that incorporated and was sensitive to all pertinent views.

Third, this study was also limited by the fact that these data were derived with two purposes in mind. The first- as a program evaluation (see Rogers & Holton, 1999), and the second for this thesis. The program from which this evaluation derived was created and run by non-Aboriginal people. Although effort was made to incorporate the concerns of Aboriginal participants, by using the healing circle, the video presentation, Tom Jackson, and the Elders, this was still a very “westernized” version of Aboriginal factors. Like many other factors, the circles were not “true” talking circles, but were a format adopted to make the Aboriginal participants more comfortable. By providing such a context, the data derived from the Aboriginal participants were likely altered by preconceived factors of the program and evaluation format. For example, the questions that were asked, the amount of time allotted, the format used, the presence of recording equipment, the personnel running it and numerous other intangible “Western” aspects all likely had an effect on the Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) participants’ responses. The means in which the methodology could be constructed was limited because the data collection had to adhere to both purposes.

Fourth, the fact that a majority of the non-Aboriginal participants present were RCMP officers also limits the study. The RCMP are a culture unto themselves, and therefore, some constructions which cropped up frequently amongst the RCMP may not have been as common amongst other non-Aboriginal participants. The non- RCMP, non-Aboriginal

participants may have patterns that were not detected because the RCMP were fairly aggressive in doing the talking for the non-Aboriginal group.

Fifth, the participants in this study were highly specialized. These were caregivers, social workers, and RCMP who have worked with suicidal individuals for a large part of their careers. Their ease in talking about suicide must have, in part, derived from their familiarity with the situation. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, these individuals have been trained in a non-Aboriginal setting, which again would have informed, and in the case of the Aboriginal participants, “westernized” their discourse. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants who were more representative of the “average” person might have an entirely different construction of suicide.

Sixth, the data collection for this study was only conducted in English. For several of the participants in the three locations, English was not their first language, and in two cases, the participants were not fluent in English. Unfortunately, we were not prepared for the non-English speaking participant at Rocky Mountain House, and did not have a translator available for her. Luckily, her daughter was able to fill in. This notwithstanding, the collection of the data in English only limits the study because of the assumption that the participants could express in English the same sorts of concerns they could express in their native languages. This again, asserts the dominant European culture over the Aboriginal cultures. Furthermore, a language created by those who have in the past oppressed the Aboriginal people, might not have the “tools” to provide the Aboriginal participants with a

means of speaking without contributing to the cultural construction of suicide and Aboriginal people revealed in this thesis.

Seventh, the interviews were conducted in audio only. This disembodies the speaker, and does not allow the transcriber or listener to fully document what was happening during the discussion. Therefore, the perlocutionary aspect of the speakers' discourse remains unknown to the researcher, and hence their interpretation of the talk could be limited.

Finally, the discourse was collected from only three locations, representing three Aboriginal groups in Canada. Although generalizability is not necessarily an important factor in postmodern research, the fact that only three Aboriginal groups have been included is an important limitation. I have repeatedly expressed throughout this thesis that the Aboriginal people of Canada belong to hundreds of different tribes, with different histories and cultures. While their discourse did reveal some general similarities both in terms of how the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal participants used their discourse, it cannot be assumed that all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people use language in the same manner. These participants all came from groups where a suicide prevention program had been conducted. Obviously these were communities in which suicide was an issue. As not all Aboriginal communities have rates of suicide that are higher than the national average, it is possible that their discourse differs from that of the communities included in this study.

### Suggestions for Future Research

There are several possibilities for future research stemming from a study such as this, where the ideological and methodological approaches are new and unexplored. This is especially true of an area such as Aboriginal suicide, in which there are many issues of concern to be addressed.

First, the most obvious suggestion would be for Aboriginal researchers to conduct work on Aboriginal suicide. Aboriginal researchers may help us to understand Aboriginal suicide in a way that someone who did not grow up in an Aboriginal culture could not begin to comprehend. This is further complicated by differences in Aboriginal communities across Canada. The Aboriginal people's way of understanding and of thinking is a part of their exposure to both European and Aboriginal traditional cultures, and could result in research that would not be possible without their input. Likewise, the same may be said for the Aboriginal participant. Previous studies on Aboriginal suicide do not often include the input of the Aboriginal people! Their contribution in understanding what they are going through is invaluable to the researcher, be they Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal.

Second, the research conducted here has looked only at Aboriginal individuals discussing suicide and suicide prevention. It is possible that discourse surrounding suicide has similar patterns across cultures that could be identified through the discourse analysis of a variety of cultural groups. This knowledge could aid in the understanding of any "universals" that may exist in suicide discourse, and the discovery of which patterns (if any) are generalizable

across cultures. Furthermore, it would also be of interest to take this notion in the other direction and explore Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's discourse when talking about something other than suicide. It is quite likely that some of the patterns surrounding deficiency are present when talking about issues other than suicide. This could help us understand which patterns are attributable to discussions of suicide, and allow us to explore these patterns in order to expand knowledge of Aboriginal suicide.

Third, an examination of Aboriginal people discussing suicide and suicide prevention without the dominant culture present could also reveal some interesting findings in terms of understanding suicide amongst Aboriginal people. It is possible that the discourse of Aboriginal people is vastly different when the dominant culture is present, and that new patterns relating to suicide reveal themselves when only Aboriginal people are discussing them. Conducting interviews one on one and in groups might also reveal different patterns, depending on the influence other people have on the speakers.

Fourth, Aboriginal communities across Canada have vastly different suicide rates, ranging from six times the national average, to below the national average. Discursive comparisons of these two groups could reveal interesting differences in how they construct themselves, and suicide.

Fifth, an analysis from the perspective of another culture (working in conjunction with Aboriginal people of course) would be interesting, in terms of looking at the data from a non-European lens. This is of course not entirely attainable- all cultures have influenced one another in this modern world, and the European lens is likely a part of every culture on the

planet to varying extents. However, a non-European perspective might be especially interesting, since the Aboriginal people have been immersed in the European culture for so long that much of their research might be influenced by it. The non-European perspective could open possibilities in the perception of the issue, and likely alert Canadians to issues that they had not considered, because they were outside of our culturally constructed understanding.

Despite the original “bleak” outlook, we have found five domains in which the research on Aboriginal suicide may be improved.

### **Towards the Beginning**

In this study, I have revealed an underlying current of discourse which constructs the Aboriginal people as lesser than the dominant culture and suicide as a symptom of this deficiency. I have also discussed several possibilities in terms of increasing awareness of this discourse, and conducting future research that will aid in understanding suicide amongst Aboriginal people. In an attempt to understand the problem of suicide in Aboriginal cultures, the traditional methods of research have left out the Aboriginal people. Studies which include and involve the Aboriginal people, from researcher to participant, will work towards an awareness of the power the dominant culture most of the time unwittingly imposes. These studies may also shed light on reasons for the high rate of Aboriginal suicide, and possibly even illuminate methods of reducing it.



Ironically, (in the true sense of irony) the devices employed by the participants in this thesis demonstrate how a negative construction has permeated a discussion of support and mutual respect between these two cultures. While this may be interpreted as repressive discourse and cannot be ignored, it does not seem to merit the label of racism, when neither of the groups involved appeared to take this away from the interview. The original workshop has resulted in a very positive set of improvements amongst the communities of which both the RCMP and Aboriginal caregivers are justifiably proud. Being as dedicated as they are to improving Aboriginal/RCMP relations and the prevention of suicide, I am certain that these participants would want to work towards bettering the current construction. I hope that I have done them justice in this thesis.

Working towards a new beginning will be difficult at first. Consider the SPTP staff and their program, which is constructed with Aboriginal people in mind, with an eye to their culture. This program still derives from an individualistic view of psychology, caregiving and culture. The program and evaluation may appear to be created for the Aboriginal people, but they are based on non-Aboriginal beliefs of how such a program should take place. For example, the SPTP program trained the participants as individual caregivers, people who act alone in the prevention and intervention of suicide. The Aboriginal participants resisted this notion and brought the training and education from the program to large groups in their communities. Several of the individuals who had taken the workshop held circles and group meetings together, both to impart the knowledge they had obtained during the workshop and to meet with groups of individuals who felt suicidal or at risk of

self destructive behaviour. Their approach to dealing with suicide was in helping the whole community, not just one person at a time (Rogers & Holton, 1999). It became obvious through the evaluation that the Aboriginal caregivers were not doing what was intended with the information. They were incorporating it into their own way of “knowing”. Although well intentioned, the SPTP program could not see past the culture from which it derived, despite the efforts to incorporate the culture of Aboriginal people. However, their efforts were not futile. Within each transcript, I found similar stories of Aboriginal participants picking up where the program left off and incorporating the workshop into uses within their own culture, altering, but benefiting from what the program had offered them.

I suggested in this thesis that opening up discursive space for alternative constructions of Aboriginal people was one way in which to begin the long road towards altering the constraints and power of our current discourses. Another imperative and complimentary move would simply be to begin working together, as SPTP has done, creating the programs, conducting the research on equal footing. The Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada have constructed, produced and reproduced themselves in relation to one another, and I believe that it is in working together that we can bring about a new beginning. In order to try and understand the high rate of suicide in Aboriginal people, we must work together to comprehend the effects of Aboriginalism, and the evolution of the environment Aboriginal people face today. Inevitably, there will be lapses in communication, as seen in the example above. However, if we do nothing but continue to investigate Aboriginal suicide in the same manner we have so far, functioning within a regime that silences the Aboriginal people, and

constructs them as deficient, then our actions may be interpreted as doing nothing but supporting that construction.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Please note, the term non-Aboriginal will be used hereafter to indicate the “dominant” culture in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> “Indian” people shall hereafter be referred to by their preferred term “Native”

<sup>3</sup> Suicide clusters is a common term in suicide research and refers to two or more suicides in the same location occurring within a few days or weeks of each other. This may involve imitation (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Although 1492 is the year Columbus discovered the Americas, 1535 was the year Jacques Cartier arrived in what is now Canada, and colonisation began.

<sup>5</sup> Said’s work also draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci, but for the purposes of this paper, Foucault is the more important influence.

<sup>6</sup> When signing treaties the Aboriginal people requested tribal homelands, a concept that the government perverted into reserves, a means of controlling the Aboriginal people (Sinclair, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there are some striking similarities between the construction of Aboriginal discourses and discourses of women. For example, both have marginalized means of discussing an issue, such as gossip amongst women, and narrative amongst Aboriginal people. Traditionally these forms of discourse have both been viewed by the dominant culture as “second class” means of communication.

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## Appendix A

- **Original workshop structure**

First, only original workshops that conformed (more or less) to that designed by SPTP were considered. Due to practical difficulties some workshop deviated from what might be called the “generic” version, and we felt these would not be appropriate for the evaluation. Therefore, workshops in which large portions of the material was omitted, added, or in which disrupting circumstances occurred, were not considered.

- **Number of Participants**

Another important aspect in the choice of location was the number of participants. The meant we had to reject workshops with relatively few participants because of the likelihood that such sites would not have enough participants to provide useful data. Although locations with a small number of participants (under 25) were not omitted immediately, they were given a lower priority in determining the final evaluations sites.

- **Representation of RCMP and Aboriginal Participants**

Ideally half of the participants should be Aboriginal and half RCMP. This is important because these are the original program's two target groups. It stands to reason that if there are more participants from one group than another, their viewpoint will be over represented, causing problems for the evaluation. Of course a 50-50 split is not always possible in practice, so only those with striking lack of one of the groups (e.g., a 70-30 or more extreme split) were immediately rejected.

- **Comments from Original Workshop**

The qualitative aspects of the answers given in the questionnaire provided immediately after the first workshop were also taken into account. The location is not considered if there is evidence that:

- the first workshop was poorly prepared and thus not representative of the program;
- the workshop was badly coordinated;
- the trainers were in some way offensive to the participants;
- if any disrupting circumstances that would detract from the program occurred.

- **Availability of Participants**

The availability of the participants was another important aspect to be considered. Even if the original workshop had the appropriate number of participants and acceptable Aboriginal/RCMP ratio, it could not be chosen if participants are unavailable during the projected time of the evaluation.

- **Availability of Coordinator**

The availability of an effective coordinator was also considered as best as we could from Calgary. The coordinator determines the availability of the participants, serves as contact between SPTP and the location for the workshop, and organizes all of the "domestic" aspects of the workshop such as housing, food, recording and other materials. If an effective coordinator is not available, then "the show can't go on".

- **Geographical/Cultural Representation**

The location itself was also considered. To enhance representativeness of the evaluation, it is preferable to have a wide geographic representation. Selection of workshops that occurred in one region (i.e., Western Canada) would risk gathering information that only relates to that area. We felt it was desirable to have as "national" representation as possible because this is a national program. Therefore it was determined to select sites from the north, west and east of Canada.

- **Time Between the Original Workshop and the Evaluation**

We anticipated that there would be a developmental or time-tied effect in program effectiveness. For example, it seemed reasonable to expect strong implementation impacts for relatively recent workshops, while some other effects (e.g., meaningful community change) would take longer to emerge: to maximize the opportunities to observe such changes we also tried to vary the workshop-to-evaluation interval systematically in our selection of evaluation sites.

- **Opinion of Trainers, Coordinators, and SPTP Staff**

Finally, the opinions of the trainers, coordinators and SPTP staff are also taken into account. There are many aspects of the workshop which may not be on paper, that should be considered when choosing the location, and so by eliciting the opinions of the trainers and coordinators, we are better able to see the whole picture.

## Appendix B

A talking or healing circle is an Aboriginal tradition in which a group of people get together to talk openly about their feelings. The goal of the circle is for people to share without concern of embarrassment and without anyone interrupting or questioning them. All issues discussed are kept within the circle.

Often a ritual (such as a prayer) is performed before the circle. This indicates to the participants that the circle is unique and separate from everyday discussion. Once the circle has begun, an object (such as a rock) is passed around to indicate whose turn it is to speak. Speaking is voluntary, and the individual holding the object is the only person permitted to talk. The object is passed around until everyone is done speaking.



## Appendix C

### Script for the Suicide Prevention Program Evaluation

Tom

Many of us have suffered the heartbreak of losing someone in our community who took their own life. The grief, the feeling that something could have been done to help prevent it and the fear that it will happen again are immense.

The grief, frustration and concern for our community is why we are here today. By sharing information and wisdom you have the opportunity to make a difference.

We are here to continue the conversation about suicide that started several years ago. The main part of the next few days will involve considering ideas related to the community response to suicide- hopefully giving you added wisdom and understanding that you can take home and use to make a difference.

I'd ask each of you to go back in your memories to the first suicide workshop. During that first workshop, you spent two days talking about suicide intervention. Then on the third day, you discussed critical incident stress debriefing and began the long journey toward developing cultural awareness between ourselves and the RCMP. The next day was spent in a talking circle discussing the way suicide sends shockwaves through the community. Finally, on the last day, you explored community response to suicide and the development of resources.

During these conversations you heard about a tremendous number of possibilities: setting up caregiving services, helping to gain confidence as caregivers, building bridges between the community and the RCMP, setting up crisis lines, creating networks of concerned people and much more.

We'd like you to focus on the things you feel happened to your community and to you because of that workshop. We want to hear your stories that are directly related to the workshop and the effects on your community.

We want to hear from all of you, so please be sure to share in the discussion. Here are some questions to help you.

1. What happened in your community following the workshop?
2. Are you better able to help suicidal people in your community because of the workshop? Are you more confident?

**Stop Video**

**Restart Video**

Tom:

The workshop covered the following areas.

- Suicide intervention training
- Discussions of Aboriginal society and traditions
- Critical incident stress training
- Talking circle

- Discussions of community suicide prevention strategies

We're interested in any ideas you might have about the various parts of the workshop and their usefulness to you in your work as a caregiver and in helping you in your community. Again, this knowledge will help us to design a better workshop for others.

We'd like to know:

1. Which workshop activities and skills that you learned in the workshop were useful and which were not?
2. Were the trainers effective?

**Stop Video**

**Start Video**

There's one last thing we'd like to talk about. We're particularly interested in your ideas about how your community has changed since the first workshop. We are interested in anything that happened since the first workshop that you think is important.

1. Has your community changed in important ways since the first workshop?
2. What are the most important changes regarding suicide that have happened in your community since the first workshop?

**Stop Video**

**Start Video**

Tom:

We'd like to thank you for your participation in this conversation. What we've been talking about is very important for our people, all across the country. Your words, your passion, your spirit will provide knowledge and wisdom upon which more effective workshops can be built. Thank you for helping save lives.

## Appendix D

### LEGEND

A: Aboriginal speaker

W: Non-Aboriginal speaker

R: RCMP speaker

I: Interviewer (Name)

?: Unsure of who was talking

S: Several speakers at once.

(+) = 1 second pause

NOTE: Brackets around a word or phrase, or brackets on their own indicate that the transcriber is either unsure of what was said, or could not hear it at all.

NOTE: Lack of spacing between paragraphs indicates that the same speaker is still talking. Spacing between paragraphs indicates that a new speaker is talking.

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