GIBINENIMIDIZOMIN: OWNING OURSELVES.
CRITICAL INCIDENT STUDY OF ABORIGINAL IDENTITY ATTAINMENT

by

ALANAISE ONISCHIN GOODWILL

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Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology & Special Education

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the facilitation and hindrance of Aboriginal identity attainment. The purpose of this study is to develop a reasonable comprehensive scheme of categories that will describe what facilitates and hinders Aboriginal identity attainment.

The research method involved conducting interviews with twelve individual participants, which revealed 138 critical incidents. The 114 critical incidents that helped participants in their Aboriginal identity attainment were placed into twelve categories. The 24 critical incidents that hindered participants in their Aboriginal identity attainment were placed into three categories. The helping categories are: participating in a cultural event/gathering, participating within a group of Aboriginal people, changing self perception, connecting with family, attending a cultural event/gathering, helping other Aboriginal people, being influenced by a grandparent, spiritual experience, verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal person, obtaining support from parents, experiencing positive images of Aboriginal people. The hindering categories are: living with separation from Aboriginal people/culture, experiencing racism/prejudice, experiencing negative images of Aboriginal people.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The field of multicultural counselling and therapy supplements current theories of counselling and psychotherapy in areas dealing with the cultural diversity in North America. Counselling services in North America are noted to be culturally biased or inappropriate for the diverse life experiences of ethnic clients (Sue, Ivey & Pedersen, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1990). Aboriginal people as a cultural group live in a society where the group and its culture are at best poorly represented and are at worst discriminated against or even attacked verbally and physically (Anderson, 2000; Lawrence, 1999; Trimble, 1995). Contemporary Aboriginal people are direct and intergenerational survivors of Residential Schools, where physical, sexual, mental, emotional and cultural abuse was practiced upon a century of generations (Ing, 2000; Ing, 1991; Chrisjohn & Young, 1991; Knockwood, 1992). The direct result of this legacy is of acculturation, assimilation, shame and suppression of Aboriginal culture and identity (Ing, 2000; Chrisjohn et al, 1991). Culturally diverse clients such as Aboriginal people face several realities in their life experiences based on level of acculturation, Indian status, residential school issues, level of education and demographics (Anderson, 2000; Lawrence, 1999).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and meaning of what events help or hinder the attainment of Aboriginal identity for individuals living in British Columbia. Categories of events obtained from this research will inform counsellors and mental health providers of culturally and socially defined-concepts of attainment of Aboriginal identity. Incidents deemed helpful or hindering by self-
identified Aboriginal people will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of identity attainment.

Rationale for the Study

Mental health and social pathologies amongst Aboriginal populations has been studied by Aboriginal scholars focusing on suicide, alcohol and drug addictions (McCormick, 1994; Herbert, 1994; Anderson, 1993).

In the 1994 suicide report made by the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, suicide rates across all age groups in Canada were on average three times higher than in the non-Aboriginal population. Among Aboriginal youth aged 10-19, the suicide rate was five to six times higher than among their non-Aboriginal peers. It is the age group 20-29 that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people showed the highest suicide rates (Chenier, 1995).

Suicide associated mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and schizophrenia are less documented among Aboriginal people. Community health providers suggest that unresolved grief may be a widespread psycho-biological problem (Chenier, 1995). The 1994 RCAP suicide report included identity issues among the important factors leading to higher rates of suicide in Aboriginal populations. Community groups involved in the RCAP reports advocated programs strengthening cultural identity in suicide prevention strategies. Addressing the problem of suicide plaguing Aboriginal communities with research on Aboriginal cultural identity can contribute to program development and counselling interventions.
Culture stress amongst Aboriginal peoples refers to the loss of confidence in the ways of understanding life/living that have been passed on through traditional teachings. Traditional knowledge, language, social institutions, beliefs, values and ethical rules associated with a collective sense of identity are relational. For example, social policies which suppress spiritual practices and belief systems in addition to racial discrimination socially and within institutions are found to predispose Aboriginal people to suicide, self-harm/destructive behaviors (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995).

This study focuses on an overlooked aspect of Aboriginal experience in contemporary society; The Incidents Facilitating Attainment of Aboriginal Identity in the face of ongoing assimilation. Attainment of Aboriginal identity is important to the psychological functioning of individuals belonging to an ethnic group during this time of rebuilding of indigenous nations (Anderson, 2000; Boldt, 1998; Weinrich, 1983).

Previous research in Counselling Psychology and Aboriginal people has revealed the importance of culture and spirituality in healing (Christopher, 1998; McCormick, 1994). In Bonita Lawrence’s 1999 dissertation examining mixed-race urban Native identity, she informed the literature about the importance of cultural expression for those in the process of recovering their Aboriginal identity. Ing’s 1999 dissertation informs literature about Aboriginal people with respect to the impacts of shame and unresolved trauma inherited by intergenerational survivors of residential schools. Major findings of her case study are denial of First Nations identity, belief in myths/lie about First Nations people, shame and poor self-esteem amongst the participants. More information is required in the area of understanding Aboriginal identity attainment following the legacy of residential schools and during on going colonization.
Mental health providers and counsellors have been alerted to the necessity of understanding the culture of clients in multicultural counselling settings (Sue, Ivey & Pedersen, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1990). Data providing information of events constituting Aboriginal identity attainment introduces an additional sensitivity to individuals’ lived experiences and worldview.

Operationalization of Constructs

**Aboriginal:** Several terms are utilized in the literature to refer to indigenous North Americans. In this study, I have elected to use Aboriginal because it is inclusive of status, non-status, Metis and Inuit individuals. First Nations, Native and Indian are terms used commonly in the literature.

**Aboriginal Identity:** A changing, relational issue contingent on how individuals see themselves and other Aboriginal people.

**Acculturation:** Process of changing cultural attitudes, values, and behaviors that result from contact between two distinct cultures.

**Attainment of Identity:** To recognize, claim, appreciate and assert one’s Aboriginal identity with the end result of being a self-identified Aboriginal person.

**Self-Identification:** Refers to the ethnic label that one uses for oneself.

Delimitations/Limitations

A phenomenological approach focusing on the recovery process of Aboriginal identity would render rich, dense information about this construct. The information base would be broad, however not as specific and potentially relevant for implementation by
helping professionals. This research is interested in concrete, observable behaviors that contribute to the attainment of identity. A phenomenological study would generate large quantities of data that after analysis, makes detailed comments about individual situations and do not lend themselves to direct utilization. Focusing on specific, observable incidents facilitating individual attainment of identity after processing this changing, relational issue is the research question. The consequence of identity attainment is individuals seeing themselves and other Aboriginal people appreciatively.

Redundancy of reported incidents is anticipated at twelve participants. Anticipating that the study requires approximately twelve participants with a broad range of backgrounds will enhance rigor and information based on a diverse culture and social group attaining a cultural identity. Studying specifics, such as gender, age and acculturative status is worthy of consideration for this research to provide more specific information. For this study design, the researcher will implement the former, to reflect the diverse culture base of Aboriginal people.

In the Critical Incident Technique, the number of incidents reported determines the sample size. Purposive sampling will be used in to obtain participants, both male and female adults, based on the researcher’s contacts in the Aboriginal community. These contacts are in Vancouver based Aboriginal counselling centers, post-secondary institutions, and within local First Nations communities.

The researcher is Aboriginal which can contribute to amelioration of cross-cultural stress, increase rapport to gain trust from participants and enhance the disclosure process. The researcher’s lived experience of Aboriginal identity attainment is considered a delimitation of this study, and can affect the interpretation and presentation of results.
With similar social experiences, human and cultural rights issues, and a common history with the Canadian government, the researcher/participant relationship will benefit from having a set of shared assumptions. Previous research with ethnic peoples by researchers of different ethnic background has been interpreted as an attempt to appropriate culture and knowledge (Sue et al., 1996). Much of the reviewed literature will be based on research conducted by Aboriginal scholars on Aboriginal populations to reduce the impact of the aforementioned bias present in researcher interpretation.
CHAPTER II: Review of the Literature

Aboriginal identity is influenced by colonial regulation under the Indian Act and by Native heritage and Indigenous land connections (Lawrence, 1999; Ing, 1999). Aboriginal identity in this thesis is viewed as a changing, relational issue contingent on how individuals see themselves and other Aboriginal people (Trimble, 1995; Berry, Trimble & Olmedo, 1986). It is an internal symbolic state made up of cognitive, affective and motivational components, and external behavioral expression of being an Aboriginal person and a member of an Aboriginal community (Berry, 1999).

Ethnic identity is complex and approached many ways in the reviewed literature. The following theories inform the research question and definition of Aboriginal identity: Social Identity Theory, Ethnic Identity & Identity Theory, Acculturation and Culture Conflict, Identity Formation, and Positive/Negative Attitudes towards culture. Published studies relevant to Aboriginal identity are based on each of these theoretical orientations.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner’s 1979 social identity theory states that being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging contributing the positive self-concept. In Dr. Martin Brokenleg’s writings on basic needs of American Indian youth, belonging, in addition to generosity, mastery and independence are required for holistic health within traditional teachings of the Lakota Nation. Obtaining help/support from others, anchoring self in tradition and expressing oneself are some prevalent ways Aboriginal people in BC achieve healing (McCormick, 1994). Interconnectedness is
essential to Aboriginal worldview, wherein the individual is considered in the context of the community (Berry et al., 1986; McCormick & France, 1997). Utilizing group membership as a means to establish connections needed for successful healing shows some consistencies with social identity theory of increasing personal self concept.

Tajfel (1978) asserted that members of low-status groups seek to improve their status in various ways. Individuals may seek to leave their group by passing as majority group members at the risk of experiencing negative psychological consequences. In Berry’s 1999 study of Aboriginal cultural identity, participants related that in less secure environments, particularly where prejudice or cultural prohibition dominated their lives, many hid their cultural identity to the point where it became confused and denied by them.

Social identity theory also addresses the issue of potential problems resulting from participation in two cultures. Both Lewin (1948) and Tajfel (1978) discussed the likelihood that identification with two distinct cultures is problematic for identity formation because of conflicts in attitudes, values, and behaviors between cultures. In Lawrence’s study of mixed-race urban Aboriginal identity, the phenomena of having to choose identities was reported in addition to the struggle her participants faced with integrating this choice while living in a multicultural city. Systemic and familial pressures are factored into decision making between two identities, and bicultural integration was reported to be an ongoing effort for those who identify with both races. The following excerpt from Lawrence’s dissertation summarizes:

“For the most part, the decision to adopt the Native aspect of their heritage as a primary identifier is a result of the relentlessly colonialist nature of Canadian
society, where Native realities are distorted everywhere but in all-Native contexts. This apartheid situation, where no “middle-ground” exists, creates a strong pressure on individuals of Native heritage to disavow their Nativeness, as a buried and meaningless part of white identity or to “come out” as Native and adopt Native perspectives on the world”.

In agreement with social identity theory, this is an example of socially subordinated peoples with histories stolen and suppressed, finding new ways of self-identifying through intense struggles to recover one’s existence.

Cultural and social identities are distinct constructs, and confounding the two constructs is not the intent of this study. Having a shared language group, geographical proximal location, shared norms, and values are some examples of what comprises a cultural identity. Some components of cultural identity may be consistent with the components of social identity; however categorizing oneself into a social group presents broader commonalities shared by a larger group or category of people (Hinkley, March & McInerney, 2002). For example, participants in this study will be self identified Aboriginal people living in the province of BC, sharing broad commonalities, but will have distinct cultural backgrounds. The term “Aboriginal” is used as an ethnic identifier for the purposes of this study. The way participants experience being Aboriginal in terms of their identities is expected to be impacted by both social and cultural associations.
Ethnic Identity & Identity Theory

According to identity theory, the self is composed of a series of identities. Identity corresponds to the role the individual plays in his/her own life. Gender and ethnicity are referred to as "master statuses" because they are important determinants of others' responses to the individual. The impact of ethnic identity on the self depends on the weight an individual gives importance to their ethnic identity. This can influence the individuals' conception and perception of their other life roles (Stephan & Stephan, p.240 In Spickard & Burroughs, 2000). For example, Aboriginal people belong to several cultural groups with a variety of phenotypic expressions. In Canadian society, Aboriginal people are commonly classified as one ethnic group. The degree to which participants use their own tribal identifiers will be at their discretion.

Aboriginal people may be biological members of a group without identifying themselves as members due to lack of cultural exposure. Varieties of reasons for not identifying with a group are lack of information due to low levels of contact with family members from the group, minimal cultural presence of the group in the community, a desire to assimilate, and perceptions of a group as relatively low in status (Stephan & Stephan In Spickard & Burroughs, 2000).

All widely used monoracial identity models are linear stage models that suggest one should progress toward appreciating one's racial status and growing in political consciousness about race relations. Examples of these models are presented later in this literature review. Each model is theoretically correlated with positive self-esteem and positive general well being. For Aboriginal people in Canada, most members of this group have more than one race or tribal affiliation. Monoracial identity models may miss
some important underlying general processes of identity development, for instance how is
the bicultural existence of Aboriginal people accommodated by these models? The
unspoken reality faced by Aboriginal communities across BC and Canada is that of the
558,180 registered status Indians, many are of mixed race, and Metis people comprise
30% of the Aboriginal Canadian population (2001 Census results, Statistics Canada).

Participants in this study will have a variety of ways to interpret their Aboriginal
identities, and it is the attainment of their own unique, subjective identities that is of
importance to this study. According to Ethnic Identity Theory, Aboriginal identity and
its impact on the self for each of the participants will depend on how important it is to the
individual to self identify as Aboriginal.

Acculturation and Culture Conflict

In an ethnically or racially homogenous society, ethnic identity is a virtually
meaningless concept (Phinney, 1990). Acculturation deals with changes in cultural
attitudes, values and behaviors that result from contact between two distinct cultures
(Phinney, 1990). Concern is emphasized on the group rather than the individual in this
case. Ethnic identity may be thought of as an aspect of acculturation, in which the
concern is with individuals, emphasizing how they relate to their own group as a
subgroup of larger society (Berry, Trimble & Olmedo, 1986).

Self-concept and psychological functioning of ethnic group members is crucial to
the group’s overall functioning within larger society. An example of the effects of
acculturation at the individual level is reported in Ing’s 1999 dissertation on
intergenerational impacts of Residential School.
First and second intergenerational residential school survivors reported denial of First Nations identity, belief in myths/lies about First Nations people, shame, poor self-esteem, silence on past, communication difficulties and expectations to be judged negatively. Additional categories are found in these two generations, with several being carried over into the third and fourth generations in addition to new social pathologies. What facilitates recovery from intergenerational impacts of this assimilation tactic was education, healing to overcome shame and anger, reclamation of culture through traditional healing techniques, reclaiming of identity through education, returning to First Nations environment, and having a family to enrich the sense of pride in identity and self-esteem.

In Lawrence’s 1999 phenomenological study, for mixed-race urban Aboriginals, the family is found to be the locus of identity for her participants. If the family endorses cultural expression, the individual is able to express themselves culturally – which is the leading way her participants learned to define their identities. The urban setting introduces a level of separation for Aboriginal people, as a consequence of being dislocated from cultural customs and traditions. Cultural expression behavior leads to cognitive and emotional changes emerging in positive perception of cultural self. This finding is the main tenet for designing this study on what facilitates the attainment of Aboriginal identity.

In Berry’s 1999 study on Aboriginal cultural identity, he organized a number of learning circles where Aboriginal participants could discuss their participation in and identification with Aboriginal culture as a part of their identity. He found that Aboriginal identity has two parts, an internal state and external state. Cognitive, affective and
motivational components make up the internal, symbolic state, while external behavioral expression makes up the external state. Behavioral expression of Aboriginal identity was found to be both individual and social, including being a member of an Aboriginal community. This analysis is framed by a perspective of competing worlds, acculturative contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. The results of this study include an assumption that a consolidated positive Aboriginal identity arises from the two worlds working together for this common interest.

According to this literature review, mental health problems affecting Aboriginal people are attributed to rapid culture loss (Waldrum, 1997; York, 1990). Loss of culture and language throughout the history of colonialism in British Columbia and the rest of Canada precipitates this study's question of how Aboriginal identity is attained. Because assimilation and colonialism processes are ongoing, Aboriginal identity attainment is critical to psychological functioning and mental health (Waldrum, 1997; Lawrence, 1999, Ing, 1999, Anderson, 2000).

Identity Formation

This theoretical orientation is predicted to agree with findings from the proposed study. This theory states that the formation of ethnic identity may be similar to the process of ego identity formation that takes place over time. Several models of this process are purported by Cross (1978), Kim (1981) and Atkinson (1983). In a 1989 article, Phinney examined the commonalities across various models and proposed a three-stage progression from an unexamined ethnic identity throughout a period of exploration followed by an achieved/committed ethnic identity.
The first stage, early adolescents and perhaps adults not exposed to ethnic identity issues are at the unexamined stage of ethnic identity. This can be reflected in many ways; minorities express preference for dominant culture, or are disinterested in ethnicity (diffuse identity). Conversely, individuals may have absorbed positive ethnic attitudes from parents/role models and do not show any preference for majority group without exploring issues for themselves (foreclosed identity).

The second and third stages involve exploration of one’s own ethnicity resulting from a significant experience forcing awareness of one’s ethnicity (encounter according to Cross, 1978 or awakening according to Kim, 1981). Immersion into one’s own culture through activities such as reading, talking to people, going to cultural events and participating in customs characterize this stage. Some individuals may alternatively be rejecting values of the dominant culture. This describes the status of many Aboriginal people in Canada today (Anderson, 2000; Ing, 1999; Lawrence, 1999).

“Along this journey, Aboriginal people have gone from trying hard NOT to be Native, to trying hard TO be Native, even though this is just two sides of the same cultural genocide coin”. (p. 27. Anderson, 2000).

The fourth and final stage is characterized by Internalization (Cross, 1978) or Incorporation (Kim, 1981) of values from both cultures. The stage model assumption is that the result of this process is deeper understanding and appreciation of individual ethnic identity. The meaning of Aboriginal identity is unique in the attainment and maintenance of this achievement. Previous research reports that ethnic individuals can be
presumably clear and confident in one's ethnicity without wanting to maintain one's ethnic language or customs (Phinney, Lochner & Murphy, 1990). This notion conflicts with conceptualization of ethnic identity within Aboriginal collectivist culture, where the individual is considered as a relational being; connected to family, community and culture/language (Berry et al., 1988; McCormick & France, 1997). This study purports to address this gap in ethnic identity literature, whereby arrivals at self-identification embrace Aboriginal collectivist worldview instead of the notion of developing individuality and autonomy. Aboriginal Worldview is further discussed in the “Contribution to the Counselling Field” component of this literature review.

In Kim Andersons book, "A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood" she documents the identity formation process based on her research with 40 Aboriginal women. The identity formation process she describes has four interrelated components: 1) Resisting negative definitions of being; 2) Reclaiming Aboriginal tradition; 3) Constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; 4) Acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well being of our communities. What is distinctly Aboriginal is the way in which past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected. Anderson writes about the reconstruction of Native womanhood by walking through a model provided by Sylvia Maracle, Mohawk traditional teacher and executive director of the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres for twenty years. This model is represented as a diagram resembling a medicine wheel. Beginning in the eastern part of this wheel is Resist: Who I am not. Reclaim: Where I have come from. Construct: Where am I going? Act: What are my responsibilities? This model takes into consideration the unique circumstances of
detaching from negative stereotypes and negotiating a meaningful existence as a community member as an integral part of Aboriginal culture.

Identity formation theories render information about predicting the path taken throughout an individual’s life towards internalized (Cross, 1978) or incorporated (Kim, 1981) identity. These theories imply that an integration of majority and minority cultures, or bi-cultural orientation, is favorable for psychological health and decreased culture stress.

The results of Waldram’s 1997 study on Aboriginal cultural orientations conducted in prisons in the prairie region of Canada revealed three cultural orientations: Euro-Canadian, Bicultural and Traditional. 249 male inmates were interviewed and their cultural orientations were empirically found through statistical analysis. For Euro-Canadian oriented men, issues of identity were important, as they were most likely to view their identities problematically. Most importantly, there were most likely to admit to having been embarrassed or ashamed of their Nativeness at some time in their life. Traditional men did not appear to experience significant problems with their Aboriginal identities. They were most likely to describe themselves as completely Native, and least likely to suggest they have ever felt ashamed or embarrassed at being Native. They were also most likely to say that they had a good knowledge of Native history and spirituality. Bicultural men also express comfort with their Native identities, and occupied the middle of the continuum with respect to reporting shame about being Native, knowledge of Native history and spirituality.
Generating empirical evidence of what facilitates Aboriginal identity attainment, a deeper appreciation of one’s cultural identity, can complement existing literature on Aboriginal cultural identity.

Positive and Negative Attitudes toward Aboriginal Identification

In addition to self-identification and belonging, positive and negative attitudes must be considered. The term acceptance is commonly used in the literature examining positive attitudes towards culture. Acceptance of culture is often phrased in contrast to White culture (Phinney, 1990). Negative attitudes towards culture are interpreted as denial of identity. Feelings of inferiority or the desire to hide one’s cultural identity accompany this state (Berry, 1999; Ing, 1999; Phinney, 1990). Studies attempting to tap these areas phrase negative attitudes as denial of culture and preference of majority culture (Phinney, 1989; Morten & Atkinson, 1983).

The Minority Identity Development Model (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1993) informs this study with regards to the role of positive and negative attitudes towards minority/majority culture. In the first stage according to this model, the minority individual gives preference for values of the dominant culture over those of their own cultural group. Attitudes towards their own cultural group are self depreciating, whereas attitudes towards the dominant culture are appreciating. The second stage (dissonance) is characterized by confusion and conflict with oscillating attitudes toward dominant and the individual’s own culture. The third stage (resistance) is the active rejection of the dominant culture and the immersion of the individual’s own cultural customs and traditions. Minority individual’s attitudes towards their own culture are self appreciating,
and attitudes towards the dominant culture are depreciating. The fourth stage (Introspection) is when the individual questions the values of both cultures. The last stage (Synergetic Articulation and Awareness) is when the person develops a cultural identity that is premised upon both the dominant and minority cultural group values.

This study aims to involve participants in their own understanding of positive and negative attitudes towards their Aboriginal identity. The aforementioned model informs the study of how attitudes can impact identity formation. It is not the intention of this study to implement the MID to assess the participants’ stage of identity. Engaging participants in time frames where they felt by their own definitions positive about their identities as Aboriginal people and attaching an observable behavior to these feelings will contribute to understanding of the role of attitudes.

**Contribution to the Counselling Field**

The field of counselling can benefit from more knowledge about Aboriginal people and their successes in counselling and healing. Approximately 50% of Aboriginal people who seek counselling do not return for a second visit (McCormick, 1994; Sue & Sue, 1981; Thomason, 1991). This high attrition rate is attributed to mainstream values emergent in counselling procedures (McCormick & France, 1997). Working with Aboriginal people without the context of a family and community is portrayed as ineffective by experts in Aboriginal counselling (McCormick, 1994).

The manner in which healing is achieved by Aboriginal people is reported as having roots in cultural healing practices (Anderson, 1993; Herbert, 1994; McCormick, 1994). Research addressing the readiness of Aboriginal clients for these healing
interventions is not evident in the literature. In many cases, Aboriginal people do not feel comfortable expressing their cultural selves (Ing, 1999; Lawrence, 1999; Waldram, 1997). Therefore, clarity is required for counsellors who intend to facilitate cultural healing methods.

The aim of this study is to empirically generate categories of incidents that lead to the attainment of Aboriginal identity to support previous findings. It is the intention that category formation of incidents will give counsellors reliable and valid information about how this particular group of Aboriginal people attains their cultural identities.

Identity issues are central to the overall rehabilitation process of Aboriginal offenders (Waldram, 1997). Identity issues are entrenched in the colonial experience of assimilation and oppression, and are therefore best handled in an Aboriginal framework. For instance, much of the work by Aboriginal Elders and spiritual leaders in prison is directed towards identity conflict resolution and establishing positive, proud Aboriginal identity within troubled inmates.

Research initiatives in counselling for Aboriginal people is increasing but still under represented in counselling literature. The number of empirical research articles related to ethnic minorities has been steadily decreasing over the past two decades (Lafromboise, Foster & James, 1996). Previous research emphasizes the cultural uniqueness and collectivistic nature of Aboriginal people, with the assumption that most Aboriginal clients embrace traditional culture and worldview (Lafromboise, Trimble & Mohatt, 1990; McCormick, 1996). This study aims to address another component of Aboriginal counselling issues which acknowledges acculturation, the separation of
individuals from traditional culture and the ongoing efforts of contemporary people recovering a meaningful existence.

Because Aboriginal people have suffered multiple levels of loss in traditional knowledge, acculturative status may impact the readiness of clients to participate in culture-based interventions. Assessing acculturative status is a highly subjective and unknown construct for many helping professionals, particularly in cross-cultural settings. Illuminating the role of personal experiences, cultural knowledge and appreciation in the attainment of Aboriginal cultural identity is the focus of this study.
CHAPTER III: Methodology

This study is designed using the Critical Incident Technique. This research methodology was introduced in the 1950’s by Flanagan (1954) and was developed from studies in the U.S. Army Aviation Psychology Program. Flanagan’s methodology successfully found effective and ineffective factors related to learning to fly, being a good leader and task completion.

The Critical Incident Technique is the methodology of choice for this study because it focuses on concrete, observable incidents describing events leading up to a specific outcome. The participants in this study provide descriptive accounts of incidents that facilitate or hinder Aboriginal identity attainment. This technique reflects participants’ voices with personal descriptions of identity attainment experiences, the events leading up to the reported outcome, and what happened as a result. The questions attached to using this methodology allow the researcher to illuminate categories of events helpful and hindering in the attainment of Aboriginal identity. Stephen Cornell, Sociologist and co-author of We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity writes:

“When people take on, create, or assign an ethnic identity, partly of what they do - intentionally or not - is take on, create, or assign a story, a narrative of some sort that captures central understandings about what it means to be a member of the group. The story has a subject (the group in question) it has action (what happened or what will happen), and it has value: it attaches a value to its subject.
The data reporting process of this study relies on the extracted incidents from transcribed interviews. This provides a means to directly convey the participants' reported experiences within the framework of thematic analysis.

The Critical Incident Technique allows for the generated categories of incidents to serve as a resource guide of what facilitates attainment of Aboriginal identity. Basic principles of the Critical Incident Technique will be presented; Sampling Procedure, Participant Composition, Interview Format, Data Analysis Procedures, and Validation Procedures.

**Basic Principles of the Critical Incident Technique**

Flanagan (1954) offers a five step approach to using the Critical Incident Technique.

1. Determine the aim of the study.
2. Set plans and the criteria for the information to be observed.
3. Data collection.
4. Theme analysis from the data.
5. Report the findings.

The aim of this study was determined previous to approaching participants in the study. The criteria for this is that participants directly observe, in other words, share their own lived experiences of critical events helping or hindering to their Aboriginal identity attainment.

Data is collected by taped interview. These interviews are transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis in order to extract the helping or hindering actions that fit the criteria necessary to make it critical.
A set of categories including all reported events are subjected to inter rater reliability tests and interpreted as a map of what facilitates or hinders the given aim. This map can be used to create thematic outlines for theory development and interventions, test construction, practical programs, and for extended research. (Flanagan, 1954).

Sampling Procedure

In the Critical Incident Technique, the number of incidents reported determines the sample size. The participant pool is comprised of twelve Aboriginal adults living in British Columbia. The researcher will use purposive selection of participants through word of mouth contacts and personal contacts within known Aboriginal communities. These contacts are based in Aboriginal counselling centres, post-secondary institutions, and all-Native athlete associations.

The sampling process is initiated by providing potential participants with an informational letter describing the intentions and purpose of the study. The participants in this study are a self selected group that approached the researcher following the receipt of the informational letter. The first twelve individuals that agreed to meet for interviews provided the sample pool of 138 critical incidents. Each was given the following informational statement:

Thank-you for your interest in reading about the details of this study. It is my intention to connect with anyone interested in informing counselling research about the importance of Aboriginal Identity. The purpose of my study is to find out what helps self-identified Aboriginal people in BC attain their identity. This information is confidential, and will be presented anonymously. Participants
contribute information stemming from their own experiences about how positive Aboriginal identity can be attained. This information will add depth to the knowledge helping professionals require when facilitating culturally specific interventions. The following questions will be asked:

"Think back to a time in your life when you felt a sense of acceptance of your Aboriginal heritage and meaning in your identity as an Aboriginal person. At this time, you may have felt glad about being a member of your nation, or proud of your culture. What helped the process of appreciating who you are? What were the events involved in appreciating who you are? What were your behaviors and what was the outcome?"

If these are question you would like to answer as a participant in this study, I would like to interview you. I will give you details of my research purpose before you consent to participating in this study.

It was the intention of the researcher to have a gender balance in the participant pool, and therefore six men and six women provide the sample of 138 incidents in this study. In accordance with research ethics, all participants are assured of their anonymity and strict confidentiality of interview data, tapes and transcripts. No names of participants or any other individuals mentioned in the interview process are recorded or reported. All data, recordings and evidence of correspondence is retained for five years in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the researcher. All participants are aware that research data will be held in this manner for five years, and then destroyed.
Participant Composition

All participants were informed orally and in writing about this study. They were all informed of the researcher’s background directly and through a variety of personal network contacts within the Aboriginal community in Vancouver. Participants are all permanent members of British Columbia and represent numerous First Nations and tribes, similar to the melting pot client base in urban Aboriginal counselling centers. The participants were all adults ranging from age 25 to 67. Both the mean and median age was 46. Geographically, the twelve participants originally came from communities in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and New Mexico, USA. All but three participants have post-secondary training, five with university degrees, four with employment specific training. In occupation they range from counsellors, youth workers, laborers, public service worker and artist. This atypically high level of education amongst participants is attributed to the self-selection aspect to participant sampling. Many participants were solicited by the researcher, however those that responded with higher frequency were individuals familiar and interested in academic research.

Critical Incident Interview

The interview for elicitation of events will be preceded by an unrecorded rapport building pre-interview conducted by the researcher. The purpose of the pre-interview is to clarify the objective of the study and describe the criteria of a critical incident in addition to addressing participant concerns. Participants were presented with a consent form (Appendix A) which explains the study purpose, the interview questions,
confidentiality of the interview and their option to withdraw from the study at any given time. After all concerns were addressed, the consent forms were signed by all participants, and witnessed by the researcher.

The elicitation of events interview entails researcher encouragement of participants to describe events to ensure completeness and accuracy. The interviewer's objective was to obtain all essential components for complete incidents within the interview as accorded by Flanagan's criteria for what makes an incident critical.

Essential components for complete incidents are knowledge of what happened leading up to the event, what actually happened, and what the outcome was. The following list conveys Flanagan's criteria of what makes an incident critical in the context of this study:

1. An actual and complete behavior is reported
2. The participant directly observes the helping behaviors.
3. Relevant factors are given regarding the context of the behavior.
4. The participant makes a definite judgment whether the behavior is helping or hindering to their attainment of identity.
5. The participant makes it clear why the behavior was critical to their identity attainment.

All interviews are audio taped and conducted by the researcher in a private office in Vancouver or in the territory of the participant when accessible to the researcher.
Elicitation of Events

The role of the interviewer was to use active listening throughout the interview, occasionally paraphrase, request clarification, help participants talk about one incident at a time, and make perception checking statements. For example:

Participant: Watching the canoe races at the Seabird Festival. I used to always really enjoy watching the war canoe races. I even gave it a shot once.

Interviewer: Which time would you like to talk about?

Participant: Let's start from when I was a kid, and I was there. I remember always really liking the canoe races and not really caring about the soccer and everything else.

Interviewer: What was it about the canoe races that you liked?

Participant: It was Indians, Indian race, Indian boats. It was all Native. I admired the physicality of the people who paddled. I seen how exhausted they were when they came off their canoes. And I remember when I was younger there were probably more Indians in good shape back then, most of those paddlers were stocky, in shape guys. I knew that they were healthy, healthy living physically active native people. That's what I saw. To know it was an Indian sport...the soccer players were all the drunks. I remember when they used to lie drinking there with tons of beer bottles and crap all around the soccer field. And I remember going around with a garbage bag picking up all the empties. (laughing).

Interviewer: But at the boat races?

Participant: But at the boat races you never seen none of the people sitting around drinking.

Interviewer: Would you say that was an important part of this critical incident? What would you say would be the most important part of this incident?

Participant: Um, the absence of alcohol was nothing I thought of before, it's just that it was an Indian thing.

Interviewer: And how did you feel about yourself as an Indian?

Participant: I felt like I wanted to do that too. I wanted to be a part of what was going on, I wanted to try and experience... canoeing was something that Indians did all over the continent, not just here. And just to be part of the local scene where we lived was, was a nice idea.
Interviewer: How did this affect your Aboriginal identity?

Participant: It helped me.

Twelve elicitation interviews were given, each one hour in length approximately. Five of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, seven were conducted in the researcher’s office. Each interview began with the following statement and question:

Think back to a time when you felt a sense of appreciation for your culture, and meaning in your identity as an Aboriginal person. At the time you may have felt good about being a member of your nation, or proud of your culture. What was happening for you at this time?

Sometimes participants responded immediately, others paused for considerable amounts of time before speaking. The researcher encouraged participants to take their time, and ask questions as we went along. Once the initial incident was given, most participants were able to provide ten distinct critical incidents.

Clarifying questions would be asked in order to ensure the given incidents were complete. Outcomes arising from the helping action/event needed to be articulated. The interviewer listened to the participants’ entire account of an event before asking clarifying questions in order to avoid leading participants and biasing the data. When a participant appeared to be finished giving their account of a critical incident, the researcher would ask any of the following questions when appropriate:
What was the helping part of this action? What was the most critical part?

How did this affect your Aboriginal identity? Did it help or hinder you?

What was the outcome of what you did? How did this contribute to your Aboriginal identity? Can you say how this was helping/hindering?

When the participant was finished recounting an event, the process was repeated until the participant could not think of any more critical incidents. The researcher would ask each participant if they felt finished, and the participants could confirm or offer additional events in response. Participants were asked to share events that were both helping and hindering to their Aboriginal identity attainment. Participants would offer events determined in their own particular order of understanding. Often, they would follow a linear timeline of their lives, and report events in chronological order than were both helping and hindering.

The interviews were conducted between February and May, 2003. Three pilot interviews were conducted in order to determine the effectiveness of the question wording. The outcome of these pilot interviews was the statement “feeling proud to be Aboriginal” invoked powerful memories reported to be meaningful to participants’ understanding of their Aboriginal identity attainment. Many phrased their process in terms of coming to a greater appreciation of their culture in contrast to a limited or biased knowledge of their cultural identities. Events were extracted and sorted according to the
specified criteria provided in the next portion of this chapter. Category formation and validation was completed in a number of ways.

**Analysis of the Incidents**

The analysis of the incidents happened in three stages. The interviewer transcribed the audio tapes verbatim, and single events were extracted and typed onto a card. Next, the incident cards were grouped according to similarity of helping/hindering actions to form categories. Finally, these categories were subjected to five tests to ensure reliability and validity.

**Incident Extraction**

The twelve interviews were transcribed and assigned a code number for confidentiality reasons. The incidents were typed out onto cards based on the spoken words of the participant only. After studying each transcript carefully, complete incidents were typed onto cards, and incomplete ones were not reported until the principle investigator analyzed the transcripts.

The transcript analysis process was completed in two stages; first by the interviewing researcher, and then second by the collaboration of interviewing researcher and principle investigator. In this co-examination, the interviewing researcher highlighted within the transcribed text of each interview: (1) The source of each event. (2) The story stated with reasonable completeness relevant to the helping/hindering action. (3) The outcome bearing on the aim of each extracted event. The co-examination of all extracted incidents ensured that all incidents used followed the aforementioned
criteria. Those that didn’t were either deleted, or scrutinized for which aspects were missing. Those incidents that had incomplete outcomes to clearly defined actions were revisited by the interviewing researcher.

After analysis was complete, specific questions that needed to be addressed to complete the incidents were composed, and then emailed to participants by the interviewer. Participants were able to see the verbatim text of the interview portion in question, and then able to write their answers to the interviewer’s questions within an email response. An example of the type of questioning used when there is an incomplete outcome to a helping/hindering action:

(text from transcript)
Participant: I went to the First Nations students room and talked to other people, even being surrounded by native people where I didn’t really feel like I saw eye to eye with the other people, at least I was surrounded by other native people.

(question from interviewer)
In one sentence, how does this action contribute to your Aboriginal identity?

(Email response from participant)
It made me realize that all First Nations people are all so different (different Nations, different backgrounds, different experiences etc.) but underneath all that there is an underlying respect for each other despite, or because of those differences. It gave me a greater, deeper understanding of myself and my place in
society—that I am not alone and that ultimately I belong to my community and I am representative of my community. It makes me proud to be Shuswap and want to share that with others.

The interviewer emailed three out of the twelve participants for this style of clarifying questioning. Only three participants were selected to respond to email questioning based on their reports of incomplete outcomes in the elicitation of events interview. All other participants reported complete, usable incidents that did not require clarification beyond the first interview.

**Formation of Categories**

The incidents were extracted and placed onto cards. Prior to this, each of the incidents were divided into the three component parts necessary for an incident to be deemed critical: Source, action taken, and outcome. This process was helpful to the sorting of incidents into categories.

The classification of incidents into categories based on emergent patterns considers three methodological issues:

1. An appropriate and useful time frame of reference is selected. The advisor to this research facilitated this decision.

2. The researcher sorts through a small sample of critical incidents, and defines tentative categories. Additional incidents were classified to the tentative categories to be refined, and new categories created for incidents that could not fit until all incidents were classified.
3. The researcher selected how specific the classification of incidents should be based on the knowledge that greater specificity renders more information, whereas more general classification results in greater reliability.

Some participants were clearer than others when reporting their helping/hindering actions, and therefore the researchers had to exercise judgment when sorting events into categories. Returning to the transcripts, emailing the participants, collaborating with the principal investigator helped the interviewer confirm accuracy and the intent of the participant's message. Sometimes, the words within the statement were deleted for the sake of brevity, but each participant's message was preserved and wherever possible the words were left unchanged. The following example demonstrates the sorting of the incident into three parts.

(Source)

Sundance ceremony

(Action)

My family, we all went to the Sundance in my home community. That's probably the strongest, powerful influence in my spiritual and emotional identity. As well as physical. But spiritually that was probably the most moving.
(Outcome)

It reinforced so many things that made me a strong native woman that I didn’t realize. The belief in spirit, the belief in community, the belief that you go there, you pray for the world, you’re not going there for yourself, so that really bonds you to the mother earth, because it reinforces the sacredness of the earth and the people.

(Source)

Political Rally

(Action)

My mom brought us, she took us out of school that day and there must have been a couple hundred of us there that walked from Coquileetza to the Chilliwack Mall, and took over the Chilliwack Mall for an hour or two, that’s when they started the keynote speeches, talking about Aboriginal rights and title, and they were singing, they were singing right from Coquileetza to the mall, and we stopped traffic and we raised the Union of BC Indian Chiefs flag we had, they had a Canadian flag with a Native on it.

(Outcome)

We were telling them this is who we are. I really didn’t clue in to that until later on in my life, when I was 21 or 22. Whenever I would hear a drum at a powwow
I remembered that feeling I had then…it would send tingles on the back of my neck and my eyes would water and I felt powerful.

Having the incidents presented in this form helped divide incidents into groups which seemed similar. The focus of the sorting was on the action, and fifteen categories were developed by the interviewing researcher. The categorization was then subjected to the principle investigator's review, and titles for the categories refined and revised to fifteen. Validation procedures followed this collaborative process of categorization.

Validation Procedures

Objectivity, soundness and trustworthiness are three criteria to evaluate the worth of this study. The researcher and participants established objectivity by mutually agreeing that a certain behavior is helping. Soundness is established by the first-hand direct observation made by the participant of a specific behavior within a context. Trustworthiness of the observation is ensured from the knowledge that the observer is qualified and gives descriptions that other observers can corroborate.

Reliability and validity are addressed in a specific format using the Critical Incident Technique. Objectivity will be maintained when incidents are placed in appropriate categories by two independent judges from the Counselling Psychology Program at UBC. These judges are trained in the method of categorization, and were given instructions to sort incidents into appropriate categories. Andersson & Nilsson (1964) provide research on the reliability and validity of the Critical Incident technique. They found that acceptable rank correlation between category sizes was .85, with
explainable inter-rater inconsistencies. Eighty-percent agreement among judges and the researcher's categories is an acceptable level of reliability for this many Critical Incident Studies. For the purposes of this study, ninety-percent agreement or greater is favorable.

In this study, both independent judges were asked to participate in verifying that two different people can use the categories in a consistent manner. Both judges were members of BC First Nations and Master's students in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. On separate occasions, the judges were provided with brief written descriptions of each category as presented in this thesis, and then asked to place a sample of 16 incidents under the appropriate categories. The percentage agreement between the placement of incidents by the researcher and the two independent judges indicates that different persons can utilize the categories to sort incidents in a reliable manner. For this study, the average agreement between two judges and the researcher was 96%.

Another approach to ensuring validity is found in Andersson & Nilsson (1964) and McCormick (1995). Both studies suggest withholding 10% of data and then categorizing these incidents in previously determined categories to check for category reliability. In this study, 14 (10%) incidents were withheld and not examined until the interviewing researcher and principle researcher collaboratively scrutinized the formed categories. This ensured that the incidents can be easily placed in the existing category system. If incidents could not be place in the categories, then new categories would have had to be formed. In this investigation, the 14 incidents were logically placed into the existing category system.
Evidence for soundness of the categories is evident in the purpose of this study and the questions asked of the participants. Furthermore, soundness is demonstrated by the aforementioned fact that participants are qualified observers, reporting only incidents relevant to the purpose of the study.

Another technique for assessing trustworthiness of the categorizations is by examining the participation rate for each category. McCormick (1995) suggests that a relatively high participation rate for each category (number of participants reporting a category of event divided by the total number of participants) is another measure of soundness. Borgen and Amundson’s research on unemployment suggests that a 25% participation rate can be considered sufficient in establishing soundness of categories.

Soundness of findings is increased when participants are representative of the relevant group. This issue is addressed in the participant selection process. The researcher gathered participants from contacts within Vancouver Aboriginal counselling agencies, post-secondary institutions, all-Native sports leagues, and surrounding First Nations communities. It is the belief that the cultural composition of participants in this study is reflective of the Aboriginal cultural composition in the Vancouver area.

The usefulness of the categories was assessed by First Nations people with Master’s level education in Counselling or Social Work. Based on their extensive experiences in working with First Nations people in British Columbia, they were regarded as good candidates for endorsing or rejecting the fifteen categories. Additionally, an independent judge who has attained Aboriginal self-identification was recruited by the researcher to decide if the categories resonate with his/her own experiences. This provides additional evidence of soundness of the categories.
McCormick (1995) and Woolsey (1986) both state that accessing related research literature will reveal agreement or disagreement between previous findings and the research results. For instance if a category disagrees with previous literature, it is sufficient rationale to question the validity of this category. This does not discount the category from the data, but detracts from confidence of its soundness. If a category of event was unique and neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by previous research, then it is considered a research finding subject to confirmation or dispute by future research. (McCormick, 1995). Comparisons of this study’s findings to previous research follow in the Results chapter of this thesis.

Using different interviewing mediums provides different sources of data collection, therefore enhancing the rigor of this study. In addition to conducting twelve in person audio taped and transcribed interviews, three of the participants responded to clarifying questions in written form through email messages. Both forms of interviewing ensures what is called descriptive validity. (Alfonso, 1997). Participants own words were maintained as much as possible, without the need for researcher interpretation. Clarifying questions ensured interpretive validity. (Alfonso, 1997). Finally, theoretical validity was assessed by checking with the previous research in the area of Aboriginal identity, and with informed opinion. Theoretical validity refers to the explanation of Aboriginal identity attainment and its relationship to the validity of the study itself, which is based on theory and previous research.

The significance of this study to the field of counselling is the exploration of an area where counselling can have utility. Counselling research for Aboriginal people dominates in the areas of addictions, sexual and physical abuse. Installing resources as
part of the counselling process can include accessing the strength of cultural identities in individuals. This study attempts to add depth to existing literature about how culture based healing is achieved in Aboriginal people, and the role of counselling can have in enhancing the attainment of cultural identity as a healing resource. Information about the facilitation of identity attainment is useful in the counselling setting in terms of preparing individuals for the benefits of cultural intervention, and processing their experiences.

The Critical Incident Technique is appropriate for the study of Aboriginal identity attainment, because category creation is useful in terms of understanding the construct of Aboriginal identity. Category creation is also limited however, because the categories developed are subject to the orientation of the investigator. Having independent judges to check the trustworthiness of the categories is especially important.

The wording of the research questions being asked proved to have significant importance to the data collected. Inconsistencies in questioning can tap into different areas and compromise the integrity of the construct being studied and reported. Accuracy of the research questions is important because they are meant to tap into a specific construct, the attainment of Aboriginal identity. The pilot interviews revealed that participants responded well to the description of attaining an appreciation for their Aboriginal culture, in terms of being proud of being Aboriginal. On the other hand, reliability and validity of the results can be questioned because of people’s subjective understanding of their Aboriginal identities.
CHAPTER IV: Results

In total, 138 critical incidents were provided by the twelve participants. These participants represent the Coastal Salish, Cree, Navajo, Nisga’a, Ojibway, Shuswap, Sioux and Sto:lo First Nations. All are permanent residents of British Columbia. Each participant spoke of what facilitates and hinders their Aboriginal identity attainment.

The 138 critical incidents were sorted into 15 categories. These categories will be described, and each category will have three examples of representative incidents.

Validation procedures of the categories will follow.

Description of the Categories

The 15 categories will be presented in order of decreasing participation rate. The 12 helping categories will be discussed first, and the 3 hindering categories will be discussed last. The participation rate is calculated by the number of participants reporting an incident(s) within a particular category divided by total number of participants x 100.

The frequency represents the total number of incidents reported in the given category.

Instead of ranking the categories by decreasing frequency rate, this table presents the proportion of participants reporting incidents as the determinant of most importance.

Table 1. Frequency and Participation Rate in Each Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helping Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Participation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participating in a cultural gathering</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating within a group of Aboriginal people.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Examples of Helping Categories

#### Category 1: Participating in a Cultural Event/Gathering (20 incidents-83% participation rate)

This category is comprised of all reported events involving participation at Aboriginal gatherings, both social and ceremonial. Participation in ceremony, powwows, traditional coastal gatherings, contemporary gatherings promoting cultural awareness,
learning ones language/culture, or going home, all promote cultural expression and learning for individuals.

Reaffirmation of cultural identity, enclosing tradition, culture and language within contemporary living, feeling visible as a cultural group to larger society, healing, belonging, and a pride in being Aboriginal are all reported outcomes.

Example 1
My identity coming from the ceremonies, when you had to be seriously holy all of the time, there had to be a cultural way to have fun without being really religious about it. I needed to unwind and stop being so strict and mindful of rules, and kind of let go. When in a ceremony you have to be real strict about setting things up and knowing what to do. I need to have fun in a cultural context, through the participation in powwow.

Example 2
In the work that I do now, the ceremonies, the cultural gatherings, I promote cultural awareness. This kind of work creates awareness about who we are and where we come from. It helps build an understanding of how each of our communities are connected and related to each other through songs, through prayer, through some of the strong leadership that we get from our elders and speakers, teachers and families.
Example 3

Participating in native events, like the Wednesday night at the Friendship Centre. As a First Nations person I am invariably drawn to other Native people and events to see what they are doing, thinking, saying, to hear their songs and share their stories. Cultural events are special because the elders are there and it reaffirms for me what I always knew but had sometimes turned my back on, myself and my heritage.

Category 2: Participating within a group of Aboriginal people (15 incidents-58% participation rate)

The incidents within this category are characterized by a group experience of some type. The helping aspect of each of these incidents is enclosed in either a healing circle experience, being around one’s Aboriginal peers, collaborating as a group in a sport, activity or in a workplace. This category is different from the first category because the helping aspect of the action is enclosed within the group experience, not a cultural ceremony. Experiences being with a peer group in University or post-secondary were the most prevalent, followed by talking circles, sports/recreation, political activism, and peer group support at the larger community level.

Outcomes of actions falling within this category are increased cohesion between individuals and their peers, pride in one’s nation, cultural exposure and group solidarity when working towards a goal.
Example 1
The first place that I felt a sense of who I was, or pride in who I was, was when I was around large groups of native students. And just being involved in different aspects of student life that, just getting to know different people and I think that would be the first time that it began for me.

Example 2
I make it a point to be with other First Nations people here to just talk about things that, you know, we all go through as native people. The camaraderie experienced among other First Nations people, the laughter, the jokes, the underlying political and social tensions that we are all aware of contribute to a sense of cohesion and solidarity—especially for me.

Example 3
We started having talking circles. The first time it was explained to me was that you had a rock that you passed around, and that rock signified us being able to speak our truth and to talk about whatever we wanted to talk about, that no one would stop us, we could talk as long as we want. And for me, I was really surprised to hear that because the residential school teaching was very strict about letting us talk about anything unless you had something really important to say. In this talking circle, I was feeling really good, and happy to be who I was.
Category 3: Changing Perceptions (14 incidents-50% participation rate)

Incidents in this category are all initiated by a thinking activity that leads to a change in how individuals view themselves in the world, as Aboriginal people. This category is titled, "changing perceptions" because the helping action goes beyond a shift in thinking into an experiential change in how they see themselves, their parents' influence, and their culture.

The role of the individual’s cultural and personal identity is personalized within their experience. What is revealed in this category is that no two participants internalize their cultural identities in the same way.

Example 1

I had this kind of sense that I was a better person than other people were implying, I attributed that to the fact that I was Indian. That helped me a lot. Once I started to realize the fact that was contributing to it, I always went back to that in order to take the next step.

Example 2

I used to think, "Oh, I’m not really Native because I don’t know what to do at powwows" and that type of thing. So, it’s recently I’ve thought, that’s part of being Native nowadays. Like, it’s not my fault that I don’t have a culture to identify with. That, I accept, that’s not my fault. And I’ve always tried.
Example 3

My mom's experience, I feel there was a lot lacking in cultural teachings. I see it as a result of the Residential School. Both my parents are products of the Residential School System. My action at first was anger and resentment, but later became understanding and empathic towards the experiences they had and how it must have hurt them. At first my actions hindered my personal growth and had a negative effect on me overall, but once I accepted things for the way they were, a real understanding grew and along with it pride. Now I realize they are not the only teachers, but they learn just as much from us also as their children.

Category 4: Connecting with family (11 incidents-58% participation rate)

The helping actions of learning about, identifying with, and feeling proud of his/her family are represented in this category. Participants reported that this connection validated and enhanced their cultural identity, and passing on cultural knowledge to their children invoked a sense of preserving the culture. It is important to note that experiences of mentorship and getting support from parents and grandparents were not included in this category. The outcomes of these actions are distinct from each other and reveal important knowledge when reported in separate categories.

Example 1

When we moved back from Lynn Valley, and took a train and a boat up to Prince Rupert, I could have dropped dead on the spot. My aunts and uncles and grandparents met us down at the ferry docks, all these dark skinned people that
looked like us, they looked so beautiful! Just looking at their old, wrinkled faces and they were so brown! We thought we entered this world, like... you mean this place has always been here? So what a cultural shock we went through.

Example 2
I found out through a cousin of mine that my ancestors were... their bloodline came from Sitting Bull's sister. That felt really good, I felt proud of being part of a highly recognized person. Just the thought of coming from a strong leader of the Sioux; proud, confident, respectful.

Example 3
I think what bringing my family to the Sundance did for me, in retrospect, was looking at being with my own family. When I was a young child we went to Sundance, with my parents. What I tried to think of is that I was trying to parent what my parents did. But I was doing it a much older age, bringing my children back to the culture.

Category 5: Attending a Cultural Event/Gathering (11 incidents-58% participation rate)
This category represents incidents when individuals have become exposed to culture, and experience it as a witness. This is different from the first category because participants are not involved in any of the activities involved in organizing or conducting
the cultural event/gathering. Each participant reported that the work happening around them was the helping aspect of the event.

Participants report outcomes of witnessing cultural events/gatherings which are sacred, social or recreational; cultural learning, preparing one self to participate in cultural events, validating the importance of language, and connection to your people.

Example 1
When I started attending the smokehouse. I saw how they conducted their ceremonies or their gatherings, I knew that it was a very important event. It was a very important part of their life. There were elders, there were new dancers in their regalia, people had paint on their faces and it felt like I was on the outside, but they didn’t kick me out, you know, and I sat there and listened and I didn’t move, I didn’t get up and walk around and smoke or anything like that. I just went there and listened to the songs and watched them dance on the floor. This experience at the smokehouse changed my life. The gathering spoke to me, to my spirit, with my people, again this is our teachings...the teachings speak to who you are.

Example 2
Going around to all the little powwows....I felt strong in my identity, and I also knew there was much more to learn. Much more to do. And previously, my identity, I didn’t involve myself in the powwow circuit as I am now. It took going around to spectate.
Example 3
When I go home and we go to a gathering. Usually it’s Navajo that’s spoken, mostly Navajo. And so, even though I can’t get up and speak all the Navajo words, anything in Navajo, I can sit there and listen and hear what they are saying. That gives me connection, because it’s imprinted in me, it could never go away.

Category 6: Helping other Aboriginal People (8 incidents-50% participation rate)
The events in this category are embedded in the participants’ experiences within their Aboriginal communities. These communities are on reserve, rural and urban. The action of helping other Aboriginal people facilitates Aboriginal identity attainment by increasing the transmission of cultural knowledge to oneself, others, and combating prejudice.

Example 1
I got side tracked from being a clinical psychotherapist into administrative management kind of positions that were related to and geared towards improving a lot of Aboriginal people. So I suppose that change was a big event for me. It gave me back the culture with the community learning what it is and how it got to be, and what it was and how come it’s not anymore.
Example 2
I take it upon myself to teach youth Halkohmalem words that I learned, teach them the way I would like to teach young ones, so that they can learn to connect in a way that isn’t white. Teaching nieces and nephews ensures that our language and culture will survive. When people see how we raise our kids and how we are as a community they will see our language and they will see our culture.

Example 3
I strictly work with native youth, because I feel proud to be native. I want to let the youth know that there’s ways better than alcohol and they can be proud of the persons they are, Aboriginals, that they don’t have to listen to the stereotyping about Aboriginals.

Category 7: Being influenced by a Grandparent (7 incidents-33% participation rate)
This category is distinct from connecting with family because of the importance each participant places on the role of their grandparent in their identity attainment. Participants reported that their grandparents formed the foundation of their cultural knowledge, feelings of belonging and safety during their formative years. It is also important to reflect that each participant reported these incidents as occurring during childhood and adolescence, and as adults still feeling influenced by their grandparents’ role in their early Aboriginal identity attainment.
Example 1

Probably if I didn’t have my grandfather behind me growing up, to teach me the ways that my people lived, I’d probably be like one of these young kids today. I wouldn’t even care about my culture, you know? I would just know that I’m Aboriginal and just leave it at that.

Example 2

I remember one time grandma, she was singing, she was singing these songs, I don’t know if she was singing these songs to paralyze me as if we were corn husking forever, but that’s what I felt like doing. It was the weirdest thing. It made me feel like this is where I’ve always belonged, in my home community.

Example 3

I got to spend more time with my grandfather on reserve. He taught me about the ways of the Shuswap people, the hunting and the trapping and what he’s done to survive, that he was born in the early nineteen hundreds.

Category 8: Spiritual Experience (6 incidents-42% participation rate)

Setting up the conditions and experiencing one’s unique spirituality within and outside of ceremony describe incidents found in this category. Each participant reports an activity done purposefully in their personal approach to spirituality. It is important to mention that the presence of ceremony is talked about very intimately, as is their innate abilities to access this aspect of their lives. Several incidents sorted into other categories
make reference to the role of spirituality. However, this category is comprised of incidents when participants purposefully set out to have spiritual experiences within their own personal ways of accessing this.

Example 1
For me, that was the most important moment...it's not just the moment for reconnecting, you pretty much felt that, it's me sitting on the earth and reconnecting myself with it. It's the feeling that happened that all had to do with the ceremony.

Example 2
My family, we all went to the Sundance in my home community. That's probably the strongest, powerful influence in my spiritual and emotional identity. As well as physical. But spiritually that was probably the most moving. It reinforced so many things that made me a strong native woman.

Example 3
When I'm involved in something, like with my art, I feel like I'm most connected with who I am. And it's kind of a self centered sort of action that I find myself in, in making my art. I'm connecting with my own identity and approach spirituality in that way.
Category 9: Verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal Person (6 incidents-50% participation rate)

This category encompasses all incidents of verbalizing one’s experiences as an Aboriginal person. Talking about personal experiences and what it is like being a member of their cultural group helped participants in their Aboriginal identity attainment. The participants verbalize their experiences which occur at personal, family, cultural and societal levels in a variety of ways; in public speaking, therapeutic enactment, and classroom discussion.

The outcomes of verbalizing one’s experiences lead to increased personal awareness, personal reinforcement of cultural identity, standing up to stereotypes and asserting personal truth. Each individual who reported this action taps into self-ownership and puts it into action through the use of their words.

Example 1

I could get up and speak and actually say that I had a dream, why I was going to school and what I wanted to do as a woman. You get up and say what you want to do, and you’re only in grade 10, and this is what you want to do when you graduate from high school. To be able to verbalize that was really important because it reinforces the reason why you go to school and why you know you live with the separation from your family, separation from your community.
Example 2

The interview gave me a chance to verbalize what it was that we thought was important about being First Nations. And what the University was providing, and not providing. And why University, in terms of high school, was more of an awakening, and a great awareness of who you are.

Example 3

My little cousin and I and my family were in Uclulet, a little Native town, and we have friends there and my little cousin said something negative about Native kids. And I was so upset with him! I totally went off, I was like, “How dare you talk like that. I’m brown and how do you think I’d feel if you said that to about me? You just pretend you said that to me! That made me realize how much I identify with being Aboriginal.

Category 10: Obtaining Support from Parents (6 incidents-42% participation rate)

This category of actions is distinct from actions involving connection with family, as participants get support, cultural validation and teachings unique to a parent-child relationship. These unique aspects are protection and traditional parenting, with mothers and fathers providing validation of participants’ cultural and personal identities. The helping action in this category is receiving help from parents, which is delivered in order to protect individuals from prejudice, or to enrich cultural identities. Outcomes of these incidents are increased cultural knowledge and resiliency to prejudice and stereotypes.
Example 1

Even though my parents didn’t have a lot to offer culturally, they did in other ways. They have knowledge about culture that came through anyways, even though they didn’t directly express it. And even now my mom has really recaptured the teachings and she’s trying to teach them, the language and the work she does. I’m learning a lot from her. My mother has always been one of my greatest influences. My mom was reluctant to share cultural teachings because she was taught to be ashamed of her knowledge, but when they did slip out or I learned something new it was exciting! I gathered these little bits of information and started creating and piecing together my own cultural quilt of knowledge in my mind.

Example 2

We were hanging out at my uncle’s, me and my brother, because my brother’s friend’s uncle was there. And they were jealous that we were there. And the kids said to us, “go home you little Indian kids”. So we went home and told, and my mom blew through the roof. But because we were kids, my brother’s younger than me, we just went home and told our mom. I was really proud, because my mom’s always been there. I was like, “We’re not putting up with that!”

Example 3

My mom used to work for the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, and part of her work was to travel to different communities. I guess my earliest experience would be
traveling to these gatherings with her, and I remember being a young person, I have a twin brother and I have a sister, just one year older than me, and we were running around at this meeting. And she pulled us aside, and gave us a teaching. The teaching that I received from my mom on this day was that the people were gathered for a purpose, to listen to the leadership, and it wasn’t my or my mom’s place to prevent this work from its true intent. There is a time to play and there is a time to work and this was a time of work. We were my mom’s responsibility, if we did wrong, it was a reflection on her ability as a parent. Good parents can take care of their kids, and if they can’t then elders and extended family step in and discipline and teach.

Category 11: Experiencing Positive Representations of Aboriginal People (5 Incidents-25% participation rate)

This category is comprised of five experiences which place high importance on how Aboriginal people experience their own people as depicted in literature, media, or present as role models. In terms of attaining a positive Aboriginal identity, participants reported being able to understand how they as members of their cultural group can fit in with the world around them in a meaningful way. Participants spoke admiringly of their people when they experienced them positively, often phrasing these experiences in contrast to the presence of negative stereotypes and oppressive social circumstances. Having role models, known visually or personally, are included in this category because of the culturally supportive influence of this experience. Events in this category differ from those in the “Experiencing Cultural Event/Gathering” in the sense that the
importance is placed on experiencing other Aboriginal people, rather than the cultural event/gathering.

Example 1
It was Indians, Indian race, Indian boats. It was all Native. I admired the physicality of the people who paddled. I seen how exhausted they were when they came off their canoes. And I remember when I was younger there were probably more Indians in good shape back then, most of those paddlers were stocky, in shape guys. I knew they were healthy, healthy living physically active native people. That’s what I saw.

Example 2
I think reading like in University, really piqued my curiosity and created this ravenous hunger for First Nations authors and reading books and works and journals. It helps me to see that other First Nations people have had similar experiences to mine, the struggle of trying to survive in both worlds, Native and White, and draws parallels, often humorously and often painfully to real circumstances. I feel like some of the stories I read could be me or any one of my family members and it makes me want to share my stories with others also.

Example 3
What helped me was becoming friends with a beautiful First Nations woman who was so proud of her culture, and so driven and focused educationally, spiritually,
emotionally. That was a really momentous time in my life. It had a really big impact on me.

Category 12: Personal accomplishment (5 incidents-participation rate 33%)

This category contains five incidents characterized by accomplishing something alone based in the contemporary realities of being Aboriginal. For instance, overcoming addiction, talking about interracial relationships, completing a really challenging project and graduating high school are all events reported in this category. The outcome of these actions is increased confidence in personal abilities to navigate situations outside of all-Aboriginal contexts. This contributes to personal identity attainment.

Example 1
I went to an all girls school, and at the graduation I was the only Aboriginal graduate. I can visualize the actual graduation. There was nothing Aboriginal about it, other than I was an Aboriginal girl with long black hair. You couldn’t pick me out, because I didn’t dress traditionally. You probably could if you could see inside, how proud I was. Going up, and getting my diploma in front of all those people.

Example 2
I think my grad piece helped me. Not necessarily something that looks like Ojibway Art, or anything like that, but when I was making that I knew immediately that it was taking me somewhere. With my art at that point I was completely letting whatever forces or ideas take me to that place where I finally
completed a large painting. I found my own sense of centering or truth within every aspect of creating that.

**Example 3**

I was supposed to deliver a speech addressing interracial relationships. When I was preparing for it I was really scared, because I had never done that before. But I was determined to do it, because I knew if I didn’t do it, nobody would do it. And after I finished it, I couldn’t believe that I had done it.

**Examples of Hindering Categories**

**Category 13: Living with separation from Aboriginal People/Teachings (12 incidents-50% participation rate)**

This category is composed of incidents that reference the loss or separation from culture, language, families and communities. The hindering action of voluntarily or involuntarily separating from one or more of these aspects of the culture is described as “living with levels of separation” (Lawrence, 1999).

Outcomes reported from this hindering action was self-loss, decreased claim to belonging in the cultural group, missing parts of Aboriginal identity, divisions between Aboriginal people and a lack of information about where you come from.
Example 1
I was married to a white man too. And I lost my status at that time so, when they were talking about the women who were going to fight for their rights, to get their status back, I didn’t like the idea that I had lost my status. That I was not an Indian anymore.

Example 2
We had the language with us all the time. It wasn’t like we spoke English, we spoke Navajo. Until my dad did something about it, because my dad went to the Second World War and when he came back he told my mother he didn’t want her speaking Navajo to us. Because there was a big world out there and each of us where going to go out there, and do different things with our life and Navajo would be, not what we need to do. That was not very good, what my dad did. I feel sad about my own self loss and my own language.

Example 3
The fact being next to the reserve, you know, everyone knows who was on the reserve, and then we come into town, and you know we’re native, but we’re not, we don’t live on the reserve, but we live next to it. Everyone knew we were half-breeds, they didn’t know what to make of us. That hindered because after that I thought you know what, I don’t want to have anymore of this. Maybe I’m native, maybe I’m not.
Category 14: Experiencing Racism/Prejudice (8 incidents-42% participation rate)

The eight incidents in this category share the common root of experiencing prejudice in the forms of apartheid, peer teasing, violence between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, exploitation, stereotype labeling and intertribal tensions. The outcomes of these incidents lead to shame, instability and confusion of cultural identity, exclusion from cultural activities and taking on a stereotypical self-image.

Example 1
As we started to get older, it started to become more obvious that kids were being racist toward us. And we had to fight everyday. If they weren’t doing that to me or my brother, they were doing that to my sister, or somebody else. You know us Indians were bussed into school. It happened everyday. I was ashamed because we were a household of ten and we looked poor compared to those white kids who only had two or three kids in their family.

Example 2
Years later, I gave war canoe paddling a shot, but I didn’t feel too welcome by the people who were involved with it during that time. That’s when I went to the canoe people. They really kind of hinted around a lot that they didn’t like easterners coming around doing their thing.
Example 3

The bus to school, we had to drive through the reserve to pick up all the natives and they made the white people and the natives sit separately. We had to get on the bus, we lived right at the edge of the reserve, but we’re not from the reserve, were natives, but we’re not like the natives that everyone knows, and we didn’t know where to sit! Because we’re half native too! We had no idea what to do! I was feeling torn.

Category 15: Experiencing Negative Images of Aboriginal People (4 incidents-33% participation rate)

This category includes four incidents that share a common occurrence of negative images of Aboriginal people. This means negative self-image and a negative experience of ones own people. The hindering action of experiencing negative images of Aboriginal people leads to faulty thinking that ones culture is a liability, and deviation into maladaptive behaviors to compensate for this thinking.

Example 1

I had the worst image of myself, it was like I was native, a native woman, a native drunken woman that could not take care of her own family. I became very defensive because I believed everybody felt that way about me, that I was a native drunken woman.
Example 2

When I was four years old, my mom came into the bathroom, I was washing my face, and I couldn’t get enough soap and water on my face, and she’s like, “What are you doing?” And I said, “I’m trying to wash the brown off.” So, even at four years old, I had it in my mind that white skin was better.

Example 3

My mom worked in Vancouver, BC and across Canada. My siblings would have to fend for us. They were working, so they’d come home, party on the weekends, but in between that, there was a lot of outbursts, a lot of violent outbursts, there were fights. We were scared out of our minds. There was too much violence. The hindering action here was a single parent; my mom worked away from home most of the time and that left the duty of parenting on my older siblings who were too young to bear the burden of looking after young children, a household, and go to school. We were exposed to alcohol and drug abuse. And I remember, after I grew up, in my early twenties, I got out of high school, started drinking and partying and that.

Validation of Categories

The categories developed were tested to see if others could use them with confidence. The validity of the categories is determined by affirmations of the following question: Are the categories sound and are they trustworthy? Absolute certainty of the trustworthiness and soundness of the categories cannot be achieved, however can be
proven to be reasonably stable. The following reliability and validity checks are discussed in the next four sections of this paper.

**Reliability of Categorizing Incidents**

The extent of the agreement of the two independent judges using the category scheme was successfully demonstrated in the following manner: Fifteen incidents were selected by the researcher and presented to two graduate students from the UBC Counselling Psychology Masters program. Each was a member of a BC First Nation, and demonstrated willingness to participate in this stage of the research process. A sample size of fifteen was used because it accommodates one incident from each category, and surpasses 10% of total incidents required for this reliability check technique.

Both judges were provided with the same description of the categories as written in this thesis. They were read out loud by the researcher, and printed underneath the titles of each of the fifteen categories. The researcher encouraged the judges to ask questions for clarification when necessary. The judges were instructed to place the incidents in the category thought to be most appropriate. Both judges took approximately one hour to place all 15 incidents in the categories. Table 2 represents the percentage of agreement between the researcher’s and the judges’ placements of incidents in the category scheme.

The near perfect agreement between the researcher and the judges’ categorization of the sample of incidents demonstrates trustworthiness based on this reliability check. Percentage agreement for the first judge was 93%. One incident was incorrectly placed in a category. After discussion with this judge, it was clear that the judge was confident that the action alluded to in the subtext of the incident was more helping than the directly
reported action. Upon email correspondence, the researcher and judge was able to agree that the more directly stated action was the viable part of the data used.

The percentage agreement for the second judge was 100%, after specific queries were made about the title of category 5, formerly titled: “Witnessing a Cultural Event/Gathering”. This judge, an elder and cultural informant stated that the significance of the word “witness” was a culturally modified verb to describe a role taken during a cultural gathering. The definition of the actions in this category conflicted with this terminology, as participants reported taking a non-participative role in watching and experiencing a cultural event/gathering. This trigger word was modified and changed from “witnessing” to “attending”. Upon the change in title of this category, this judge was able to fit the appropriate incident into this scheme.

The change of title of category 5 was the only modification warranted in this category scheme. The understanding of the distinctness of each of the categories of incidents was agreed between both judges and researcher.

Table 2: Reliability of Category Schemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judges</th>
<th>Percentage agreement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judge #1</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge #2</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average agreement</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comprehensiveness of Categories

Comprehensiveness or, reasonable completeness of the categories is ascertained by a test suggested by Andersson & Nilsson’s 1964 report. This test involves
withholding 10% (14 events) of the extracted incidents until the categories are formed. After the co-examination of the categories by the interviewing researcher and principle investigator, the 14 incidents were able to be placed into 12 of the 15 categories. What this demonstrates is that the existing category description was comprehensive enough to pass this validity test, therefore no additional interviews needed to be conducted, and no new categories needed to be created.

**Participation Rate for Categories**

The participation rate, or level of agreement among participants is quantified by a percentage. This percentage reflects the percentage of the participants that reported event(s) within a similar group of incidents. These incidents must have a significant similarity as reported by different people, and therefore are grouped within the same category. For instance, if only one or two persons report a category of event, then it might be dismissed, in case the event may be distorted by the participant(s). However, if many participants report the same kind of event, this reduces the possibility of event distortion.

For this study, the participation rate did not exceed 83%, or fall beneath 25%. Within the category of the highest level of agreement, participating in a cultural gathering, ten out of twelve participants reported events defined by this grouping. Experiencing positive images of Aboriginal people was an event reported by 3 independent participants, establishing a participation rate of 25%. In accordance with Borgen & Amundson's 1984 study, the minimum participation rate of 25% is achieved
and exceeded in this study, therefore the possibility of event distortion is minimized. (See Table 1).

Expert Commentary

Validation checks by experts is another test for soundness in this study. The Counselling context of this research is included in this step by recruiting Aboriginal magisterial level counsellors to assess the soundness of the categories. These experts were asked to comment on how useful these categories would be to them based on their own findings with their own experiences in counselling with Aboriginal people. Their commentaries are an important test for soundness because experts have more extensive and specified experiences with the reported events than would non-Aboriginal people.

The researcher approached two First Nations Counsellors with Masters Degrees in Counselling Psychology. These two individuals were considered specialists in the area of helping Aboriginal people with identity attainment issues, and their comments on the usefulness of the fifteen categories in their professional practice went as follows: Both experts reported that the categories exemplified soundness and were consistent with their experiences counselling Aboriginal people.

The researcher approached a First Nations person with the fifteen categories and inquired about their relevancy to his experiences with his own cultural identity. This individual deliberated over the fifteen categories, reporting that they appeared sound, and were presented in a manner easy to interpret and understand within his own lived experience.
Support of Related Literature & Research Findings

The final stage of validating the research data is to verify agreement with previous research and informed opinion about Aboriginal identity. Cross checking the data of this research with existing literature and research is another approach to check for the soundness of categories. If a category disagrees with previous research in the area, then it is subject to scrutiny because of the contradiction. If a category agrees with prior research, then there is additional evidence towards regarding the category as sound. If a category is unique, and not reported in any previous research in the area of Aboriginal identity, then it is considered a possibility. This unique data is subject to verification or disputation by future research in this area. This analysis revealed no significant disagreements with the reviewed theory, research and literature. Very little documentation of two of the fifteen categories could be found beyond the theoretical and research reviews, however informed opinion and literary discussion by Aboriginal authors corroborated these categories. The two categories are: Being influenced by a grandparent, obtaining support from parents. These two categories may represent areas to be confirmed or disconfirmed by research. The culturally defined role that parents and grandparents play in the attainment of Aboriginal identity stands out as two significantly different categories endorsed by a high proportion of the participants. Relevant research, informed opinion and literature which support the categories are examined in the following sections of this chapter.
Participating in gatherings which allow individuals to express their cultures is the most highly endorsed action by participants in the attainment of their Aboriginal identities. The helping action of expressing the cultural side of oneself, in ceremony, social, and community gatherings is the beating heart of Aboriginal cultural identity. This confirms the initial hypothesis of the researcher, which was based on previous literature and informed opinion.

Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory (1979) states that socially subordinated peoples with histories stolen and suppressed find new ways of self-identifying though intense struggles to recover one’s existence. The reports of various contemporary versions of cultural gatherings which promote cultural expression, learning and cohesion between peoples of this group confirms this.

In Lawrence’s 1999 phenomenological study of mixed-race urban Aboriginal identity, cultural expression was the leading way her participants learned to define their identities. Cultural expression behaviors leads to cognitive and emotional changes emerging in positive perceptions of the cultural self.

Berry’s 1999 study on Aboriginal cultural identity found that Aboriginal identity has two parts, an internal state and external state. Cognitive, affective and motivational components make up the internal symbolic state, while behavioral expression makes up the external state. Behavioral expression of Aboriginal identity was found to be both individual and social, including being a member of an Aboriginal community. Most actions reported in this category invoked a sense of belonging and solidarity for participants within their respective communities.
Participating Within a Group of Aboriginal People

The definition of group in this category is an informal gathering of Aboriginal people including healing circles, social, academic and recreational groups. These groups are characterized by the presence of Aboriginal people gathered together, and the reported helping component being the interpersonal dynamics that results from a group experience. This type of group experience is distinct from participating in a cultural gathering because interpersonal experiences and cultural expression are two different actions, although both occur in groups. The other aspect of this action, is that participants reported that the group members were all Aboriginal. This finding fits with Lawrence’s findings from her 1999 study, where participants reported that Native realities felt distorted everywhere but in all-Native contexts. In agreement with social identity theory, participating in all-Aboriginal groups is an example of socially subordinated peoples with histories stolen and suppressed, finding new ways of self-identifying.

Cultural and social identities are written as two distinct constructs in identity literature. It was not the researcher’s intention to confound the two constructs, however participants often spoke of their Aboriginal identities with reference to their cultural and social experiences. With reference to the group experience, both cultural and social identities were helped.

Ethnic identity formation is written about by Cross (1978), Kim (1981) and Atkinson (1983). The second and third stages of exploring one’s own ethnicity results from significant experiences forcing awareness of one’s ethnicity, and fits in with the findings reported in this category. This stage is called “Encounter” by Cross, and
“Awakening” by Kim. Immersion into one’s own culture includes talking to and relating with other members of one’s culture.

The Minority Identity Development Model (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1993) states that as one develops his/her identity as a member of the minority culture, positive attitudes towards one’s culture develop, and the individual becomes appreciative of that culture. Part of the process of developing a cultural identity, premised upon both the dominant and minority cultural group values, is to go through a stage of resisting dominant culture and immersing oneself into his or her own. Although participants did not reflect feelings of rejection towards dominant culture within the given incidents, they did reflect that the all-Aboriginal group experiences helped their Aboriginal identities.

Changing Perception

The action of changing perception involves a change in the way one experiences something with an outcome bearing influence on how the individuals experience their world. For instance, the way one experiences being Aboriginal may change within different contexts, so that they are able to view themselves and/or other Aboriginal people in a more meaningful way. Making meaning out of what is previously experienced as negative, counterproductive or even painful and finding a greater understanding of one’s Aboriginal identity are the helping actions contained within this category. These actions are precipitated by a crisis in the participants’ lives, and trigger the internal helping reactions of the participants.

Identity formation theories (Cross, 1978, Kim, 1981 & Atkinson, 1983) all state in their linear stage models that the second and third stages involve exploration of one’s
own ethnicity resulting from a significant experience forcing awareness of one's ethnicity. The findings of this category fit within these ethnic identity formation stage models.

In Berry's 1999 study on Aboriginal cultural identity, the internal state of Aboriginal identity is made up of cognitive, affective and motivational components. This means, how individual’s think and feel about themselves as Aboriginal people, and how this drives them to self-identify. The outcome of changing perception is helping in the sense that participants have a greater value for their life experiences as Aboriginal people, and a greater strength in their identification and claim to their Aboriginal culture.

Connecting with Family

The action of connecting emotionally, physically, mentally and in some cases spiritually with family members and ancestors are the helping actions of this category. Connecting with parent and grandparent family members is not included in this category because of the distinct nature of these relationships. The action of significance for participants is finding out about and relating with one’s family.

In the literature review section of this thesis, a significant study that this research is based on stated that family is the locus of mixed-race urban Aboriginal identity (Lawrence, 1999). In Lawrence’s phenomenological study, participants state that if their families supported cultural expression, then it was easier for them to express themselves within their culture. This was the leading way Lawrence’s study’s participants learned to define their identities. Lawrence also states that as a cultural definition of being Aboriginal, one must be connected with their Aboriginal family. Participants in this
study reported that knowing who their families were, where they came from and
expressing themselves culturally with family members were significant helping actions.
With or without the presence of cultural expression, the families of participant
represented linkages to their Aboriginal identities.

The role of family is not highlighted in minority identity development models
reviewed in this study. The emphasis of the role of family in Aboriginal culture and
identity is an area requiring more research and attention with respect to Aboriginal
identity.

Attending a Cultural Event/Gathering

The events in this category involve exposures to culture through ceremony,
recreational gatherings and language. The exposure to culture and language is the
helping aspect of these events, and distinct from participating in cultural
events/gatherings.

This similarly agrees with Minority Identity Development models discussed with
reference to the first two categories; Participating in a Cultural Event/Gathering and
Participating Within a Group of Aboriginal People. The reported incidents of all three
categories are reflective of the active exploration and cultural immersion stage of ethnic
identity development. What is also important to note is that the role participants play in
this stage of ethnic identity development can vary from actively participating, to just
becoming exposed to culture. Reclaiming culture through education and returning to
First Nations environment are two of several ways of recovering from intergenerational
assimilation tactics. (Ing, 1999; Anderson, 2000). This supports the finding that attending a cultural event/gathering is a helpful way to attain Aboriginal identity.

**Helping Other Aboriginal People**

The action of helping other Aboriginal people is important to Aboriginal identity attainment because it establishes a reciprocal relationship with the individual and the cultural group. Participants reveal that helping other Aboriginal people help their own Aboriginal identities because they in turn become part of a community, find meaning in their own experiences by helping their own people, and contribute to cultural transmission between people. This particular finding also emerged in McCormick’s 1994 dissertation on the facilitation of healing in BC Aboriginal people. The significance of this category was that at the time of McCormick’s study, Helping Others was a category that facilitated healing and was not yet reported in the review of literature in this area.

Having a shared language group, geographical proximal location, shared norms and values are components of cultural identity. (Hinkley, March & McInerney, 2002) Helping other people seen as similar in one or more of these ways introduces the conditions for connecting with one’s Aboriginal identity.

**Being Influenced by a Grandparent**

Having meaningful connections and relationships with grandparents is reported by participants to have helped their Aboriginal identities during childhood and adolescent stages of development. It is of interest to the researcher that each participant that talked about his/her grandparent was the same gender. Five female participants cited events
shared by themselves and their grandmothers, and one male participant cited three events shared with his grandfather. Again, the importance of this kind of family connection is emphasized for Aboriginal identity attainment.

The importance of elders and grandparents is well documented in literary works of Aboriginal authors. (Gunn Allen, 1986; Sams, 1994; Wiebe & Johnson, 1998). In Kim Anderson’s interviews with Aboriginal women from across Canada, several reported that their grandmothers were heads of the extended family. At the community level, Aboriginal girls witness the social and economic decision making power of older women. Grandmothers’ words were reported by several women as essential components in the foundation of their Aboriginal identities. The guidance that women in Anderson’s study received from their grandmothers shaped the way they understand themselves and their positions in the world. For participants in this study, all reported teachings given to them by their grandparents, and how they promoted safety, belonging and appreciation for their Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal identity research in terms of the role of grandparents, like the role of family, could use further investigation. Existing identity development theory does not exclude this finding, however the cultural significance of grandparents and extended family members may deepen our understanding of Aboriginal identity attainment.

Spiritual Experience

Accessing spirituality through a variety of ways is significant to Aboriginal culture. (Christopher, 1998; LaFromboise, Timble & Mohatt, 1990; McCormick, 1996). Setting up the conditions for and accessing a spiritual experience is personally defined.
Nevertheless, participants reveal how they enclose these experiences within their culture and attach this activity to their identity attainment.

Spiritual activity is integral to oral tradition, and published literary works by Aboriginal authors and researchers. As a shared understanding amongst many Aboriginal people, having a spiritual experience is a culturally appropriate and celebrated experience. (Anderson, 2000; Lawrence, McCormick, 1996; 1999; Ross, 1992; Ross, 1996).

Verbalizing Your Experiences as an Aboriginal Person

Verbalizing, or speaking your truth about your experiences as an Aboriginal person contributes to personal and cultural identity. Participants stated that this validated their experiences, and therefore validated themselves by making what is implicitly known explicitly known.

According to ethnic identity and identity theory reviewed in this paper, the impact of ethnic identity on the self depends on the weight the individual gives to the importance of their ethnic identity. The importance placed on ethnic identity can influence the individual’s conception and perception of their other life roles. (Stephan & Stephan, In Spickard & Burroughs, 2000). When participants verbalize their experiences in a public speaking, therapeutic, or occupational setting, they report having a greater knowledge of themselves and place a high importance on being Aboriginal.

The Minority Identity Development Model (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1993) suggests that the last stage of development is reached when individuals develops a cultural identity that is premised upon the dominant and minority cultural group values.
Although this study has not explored the values of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian values, the participants’ action of verbalizing their experiences reflects how it is to live in two worlds; Aboriginal and Canadian.

Aboriginal identity formation process has been proposed to happen by resisting negative definitions of being; reclaiming Aboriginal tradition; constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; and acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well being of Aboriginal communities. (Anderson, 2000). Verbalizing one’s experiences as an Aboriginal person engages one or several aspects of this identity formation process.

**Obtaining Support from Parents**

The action of obtaining the support of parents during crucial times of identity development is helpful in Aboriginal identity attainment. When parents support children in their cultural development and resiliency to stereotypes, a positive and appreciative attitude about their own culture develops. Participants reported incidents when they obtained the support as children from their parent(s) to stand up to racism, internalize traditional teachings, and achieve personal goals in mainstream society. These actions speak to resisting negative definition of being Aboriginal, reclaiming Aboriginal tradition, constructing a positive Aboriginal identity by translating tradition into their own present day contexts and acting on their identities in a healthy way (Anderson, 2000).
Experiencing Positive Representations of Aboriginal People

Visual or other sensory experiences which positively impact the individuals’ perception of Aboriginal people, including themselves helps Aboriginal identity attainment. Experiencing Aboriginal people positively represented in literature, media and within communities so that others can identify with them helps Aboriginal identity attainment. Participants reported wanting to be like or being able to identify with the people they were seeing or reading about. This connects with Anderson’s proposed identity formation model by resisting negative stereotypes and constructing a positive Aboriginal identity. Additionally, this represents development of positive attitudes towards one’s minority identity and culture (Atkinson et al., 1993).

Personal Accomplishment

When achieving something previously thought to be an extraordinary challenge, a new learning and self awareness accompanies this action. Participants talked about being able to deliver speeches, graduating from high school, creating large works of art, playing on a sports team and getting an education. All of these actions invoked feelings of empowerment and competency.

The participants reported that this action helped them, although their responses indicate that they were talking about their successes outside their cultural world. The challenges of navigating in a multicultural society as an Aboriginal person, and the achievements made in this setting helps individuals in their Aboriginal identity attainment. This reflects the later stages of minority identity and ethnic identity
development models defined by the incorporation of different values from minority and majority cultures, and upholding an appreciation for both.

Living Separation from Aboriginal People/Culture (Hindering)

Experiences rooted in loss of culture, language, family and community hinders Aboriginal identity attainment in many ways. Individuals may not identify with being Aboriginal because of lack of information due to low levels of contact with family members, minimal cultural presence, a desire to assimilate, and perceptions that Aboriginal people have relatively low status. (Stephan & Stephan In Spickard & Burroughs, 2000).

Acculturation and culture conflict plays an integral in role in separating Aboriginal people from their culture, family, communities, and land base. Residential Schools affects generations of Aboriginal people directly and indirectly impacted by this assimilation regime. (Chrisjohn, 1994; Ing, 1991; Ing, 1999; McCormick, 1994). In Ing’s 1999 dissertation, first and second generation survivors reported denial of First Nations identity, belief in myths/lies about First Nations people, shame, poor self-esteem, silence on past, communication difficulties and expectations to be judged negatively.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) states that individuals of low-status groups seek to improve their status in various ways. Individuals may seek to leave their group by passing as majority group members at the risk of experiencing negative psychological consequences. Participants in this study state that when they are separated from their culture, community, language and/ or family, voluntarily or involuntarily, their Aboriginal identity attainment is hindered.
Experiencing Racism/Prejudice

Suffering the trauma of racism and prejudice hinders Aboriginal identity attainment in a variety of ways. Racial segregation and apartheid, discrimination, vilification and exploitation enacted towards Aboriginal people invokes a sense of confusion, powerlessness, anger, and shame about oneself and one’s culture and people. In Berry’s 1999 study of Aboriginal cultural identity, participants related that in less secure environments, particularly where prejudice or cultural prohibition dominated their lives, many hid their cultural identity to the point where it became confused and denied by them. Several participants in this current study reported the exact same phenomena in response to experiences of racism and prejudice.

Experiencing Negative Images of Aboriginal People

Experiencing Aboriginal people negatively, including themselves, jeopardizes the positive attainment of Aboriginal identity by participants in this study. Participants report that having and taking on a negative self-image based on information being given to them about Aboriginal people hindered their Aboriginal identity attainment. This action is akin to experiencing racism and prejudice, but differs in the sense that individuals talk about how experiencing these negative social ills within their communities become associated with being Aboriginal. The maladaptive behaviors that arise from experiencing these negative images represent the insidious effects of the social illnesses plaguing Aboriginal communities. Associating being Aboriginal with images of
pain, poverty and illness hinders people from identifying as Aboriginal, and being able to appreciate their cultures (Berry, 1999; Ing, 1999; Lawrence, 1999).
CHAPTER V: Discussion

Summary of Results

Conducting interviews with 12 individual participants revealed 138 critical incidents. The 114 critical incidents that helped participants in their Aboriginal identity attainment were placed into 12 categories which were found to be reasonably reliable. The 24 critical incidents that hindered participants in their Aboriginal identity attainment were placed into three categories which were also found to be reasonably reliable. The helping categories are: participating in a cultural event/gathering, participating in a group of Aboriginal people, changing self perception, connecting with family, attending a cultural event/gathering, helping other Aboriginal people, being influenced by a grandparent, spiritual experience, verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal person, getting support from parents, experiencing positive images of Aboriginal people. The hindering categories are: living with level(s) of separation from Aboriginal people/culture, experiencing racism/prejudice, experiencing negative images of Aboriginal people.

Limitations

There are factors that limit this investigation on several levels; participant selection, data collection procedures, data generalizability, and construct specificity. Participants were all permanent residents of British Columbia, five from BC First Nations, six from other parts of Canada and one from the United States. A high percentage of participants had some university education (50%), 25% were residential
school/government boarding school alumni, and the remaining 75% are children of residential school alumni. The participant composition may not reflect the composition of Aboriginal people in British Columbia. Additionally, only 12 participants were interviewed, therefore the results cannot be easily generalized. By gathering information in the critical incident interview format, there is a strong possibility that participants reported only segments of information that they could recall within a 60 minute interview. Another limitation is that participants could only render information they could express verbally, for reasons of articulation style and feelings of protection towards incidents deemed culturally sacred. The researcher respected the wishes of participants who chose to talk about sacred and solemn events outside of the critical incident interview, and not mention details within the scope of this study. This also elicits questions about construct specificity, which was talked about in varying detail by participants. Each participant seemed to understand their Aboriginal identities differently, however this may not be a limitation as this was an expectation from the outset of the study.

**Delimitations**

This study was conducted for the purposes of developing a set of categories indicative of what helps and hinders Aboriginal identity attainment. The interviews were given by participants after the researcher coached them about the critical incident interviewing technique. Consequently, participants demonstrated an understanding of the interview questions and technique of the researcher, and were able to relate aspects of their cultures and experiences within the structured questioning. Additionally, the
researcher-participant relationship was not entirely cross-cultural. Therefore, the risks of researcher appropriation and/or misinterpretation of Aboriginal culture in a cross cultural research/participant relationship are significantly diminished.

This critical incident interview used to collect the study's data was reported as a personally gratifying experience for participants. Many stated that they appreciated being able to talk about their Aboriginal identities, otherwise they would not have such an opportunity to do so. Several participants thanked the researcher for seeking out their help and selecting them to participate in this study. The researcher was approached by two participants in person and over the phone following the interviews and made reference to additional incidents that occurred to them following the first interview. The researcher accommodated these incidents by encouraging them to write them down in their email replies. Although not all participants responded or made contact after their interview, the opportunity was provided by the researcher to add more detail to their responses if new information arose after the first interview.

Presenting descriptions of Aboriginal peoples' life experiences leading up to the attainment of a positive Aboriginal identity is important in generating exploration of what Aboriginal identity is, and the importance of the activities promoting Aboriginal identity attainment. The activities listed are rooted in cultural understanding and exposure, which has implications for counselling theory.

Implications for Theory

Ethnic identity development theories and minority identity development models espouse a familiar message. All widely used monoracial identity models are linear stage
models that suggest one should progress toward appreciating one’s racial status and growing in political consciousness about race relations. Examples of these models are presented in the previous literature review. Each model is theoretically correlated with positive self-esteem and positive general well being.

The results of this study are consistent with these models based on the categories formed. However, certain categories are accommodated by the linear identity development models, but are specific to individual people talking about their respective context. These contexts are cultural, social, family, professional and educational. For example, Morten, Atkinson and Sue’s Minority Identity Development model emphasizes attitudes towards race, and the categories formed by this study incorporate the attitudes towards family and self in the attainment of “minority” identity.

The assumption that two worlds, minority culture and the majority culture, have to work together to come to the fostering of positive Aboriginal cultural identities poses problems to understanding Aboriginal identity attainment. The perspective that two competing dichotomous worlds exists promotes the assumption that Aboriginal cultural identity is static, and fixed in the past as a reference point of authenticity, and in opposition to Euro-Canadian cultural identity. It is the belief of the researcher that the categories formed by this study can be accommodated by existing models, but do not strengthen any assumptions that Aboriginal cultural identity is static, or in opposition to Euro-Canadian culture.

The categories developed by this study are determined by interview responses by several different Aboriginal people with several different cultural backgrounds coming from a variety of different Indigenous nations. They are, however, united by a socially
constructed view of a singular group as Aboriginal peoples of Canada. For the purposes of this study, the assumption was made that when individuals shared incidents helping/hindering in the attainment of their Aboriginal identities, that there would be enough similarity between different Aboriginal cultures to study them at the same time. Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory is useful for understanding the categories developed by this study.

Social identity theory states that being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging contributing to positive self concept. Many of the incidents gathered from participants resulted in outcomes of feeling belonging and connection to others. This theory is most relevant when reviewing the results of this study in spite of investigating people’s identities at the cultural level; Contemporary Aboriginal people are a group of people who have been socially subordinated with histories stolen and suppressed, finding new ways to self-identify within their respective cultures.

The following helping categories: participating in a cultural gathering, participating in a group of Aboriginal people, changing self-perception, attending a cultural event/gathering, helping other Aboriginal people, verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal person, experiencing positive images of Aboriginal people, personal accomplishment, connecting with family, being influenced by a grandparent, spiritual experience, getting support from parents – all support one or more of the theories reviewed in this study. Three of the twelve categories make direct reference to the importance of family, including parents, grandparents and extended family members. Combined, they represent 24 incidents which exceeds the number of incidents involving participation in cultural gatherings. With nearly one fifth of the incidents referencing
family connections, it may be reasonable to explore the role of cultural identity from a collectivist orientation. Minority identity development model, ethnic identity theory, identity theory and social identity theory emphasize the processes individuals experience during the identity formation process. The role of family and how families influence the identity formation process may be a useful while considering minority identity development.

Implications for Research

The results of this study are consistent with many other studies' findings. Studies in the area of counselling with Aboriginal people conclude similar results to this study, and strengthen the theory that counselling strategies with Aboriginal populations are best accompanied with cultural interventions, exposure and learning. (Anderson, 2000; Anderson, 1993; Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1998; Berry, 1999; Chrisjohn, 1994; Christopher, 1998; Ing, 1999; Lawrence, 1999; McCormick, 1995; Nechi Institute, 2002.) The twelve categories which help Aboriginal identity attainment and the implications for research will be discussed first, followed by the three hindering categories and their implications for research.

An important implication of this research provides is an empirical basis for results similarly reported in anecdotal and qualitative reports. Berry's 1999 study on Aboriginal cultural identity found that the internal state of Aboriginal identity is made up of cognitive, affective and motivational components. This means, how individual's think and feel about themselves as Aboriginal people, and how this drives them to self identify.
External and internal dimensions of Aboriginal identity are found in the literature to be attained and expressed by the following: resisting negative definitions of being, reclaiming Aboriginal tradition, constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context, acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well being of community, knowledge of culture, cultural beliefs, speaking your language, ceremonies and religious experiences, knowledge of what it means to be of your Aboriginal tribe/nation, dressing and eating, engaging in culturally appropriate social relations with adults and children. The aforementioned categories can accommodate the following twelve helping categories developed by this study: Participating in a cultural gathering, participating in a group of Aboriginal people, changing self perception, connecting with family, attending a cultural event/gathering, helping other Aboriginal people, being influenced by a grandparent, spiritual experience, verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal person, getting support from parents, experiencing positive images of Aboriginal people, personal accomplishment. This research has gone beyond existing knowledge by the creation of more specific, concrete, observable categories of actions facilitating Aboriginal identity attainment: connecting with family, being influenced by a grandparent, verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal person, getting support from parents, and personal accomplishment. Three of these categories involve relationships with different kinds of family members, and represent nearly one-fifth of the total incidents collected in this study.

The results of this study extends research relating to what helps Aboriginal people attain positive Aboriginal identities by incorporating the value of family attachments. Additionally, the inclusion of family members in several incidents across all categories
shows that many helping actions are accompanied by a family member. Previously reported in other studies, knowing where you come from has been found helpful in Aboriginal identity development, which accommodates findings of connecting with different family members. In Lawrence’s study on mixed-race urban Aboriginal identity, she found that if the individual’s family endorsed Aboriginal cultural identity, then it became appropriate for the mixed-race individual to claim and express an Aboriginal identity. In this study, participants represented a variety of Aboriginal cultural backgrounds, and the actions of connecting with family, being influenced by a grandparent, and getting support from parents was helpful in the attainment of Aboriginal identity.

In conclusion of reviewing the incidents helping Aboriginal identity attainment, all findings support a current theory accepted and used in an identity formation publication. This theory of identity formation is published in Kim Anderson’s “A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood” (2000) based on the work of Sylvia Maracle, Mohawk traditional teacher and executive director of Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres. This is published as follows: 1) Resisting negative definitions of being; 2) Reclaiming Aboriginal tradition; 3) Constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; 4) Acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well being of our communities. What is distinctly Aboriginal is the way in which past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected. This model is represented as a diagram resembling a medicine wheel. Beginning in the eastern part of this wheel is Resist: Who I am not. Reclaim: Where I have come from. Construct: Where am I going? Act: What are my responsibilities?
This model is not linear, and does not pose the same misinterpretations as other linear ethnic identity models. The actions involved in getting in touch with your own people, culture, family and self summarizes this study's results. For many of the participants involved in this study, and like many Aboriginal people today, they report that learning about culture and Aboriginal identity is an ongoing process in terms of understanding what their culture was, and what it means to them today.

Dimensions associated with hindering Aboriginal identity attainment, as reported in Berry's 1999 study for the RCAP are stated as follows: "in less secure environments, particularly those where prejudice or cultural prohibition have dominated their lives, many participants spoke of hiding their cultural identity, to the point where it became confused, and even denied by them" (p. 28). This research provides empirical basis for confirming Berry's findings, anecdotal reports and other qualitative findings. (Anderson, 2000; Berry et al., 1986; Berry, 1990; Boldt, 1998; Ing, 1999; Weinrich, 1988). Living with separation for Aboriginal people/culture, experiencing racism/prejudice, and experiencing negative images of Aboriginal people all hinder Aboriginal identity attainment for the participants involved in this study. These findings do not add new information to knowledge of what hinders Aboriginal identity attainment, but does provide meaningful empirical evidence to corroborate previous findings.

**Implications for Practice**

The research that has been conducted in the areas of counselling Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal peoples' healing processes conclude that there is great relevance in cultural healing, cultural expression and adherence to traditional values (Anderson,
The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples findings suggests that identity issues are a primary concern when addressing the high rate of suicide in Aboriginal youth. Also, identity issues as a counselling concern are central to the overall rehabilitation process of Aboriginal offenders (Waldram, 1997). With the empirically validated categories generated by this study, counsellors can use these as reliable and valid information about Aboriginal identity attainment. The researcher is not attempting to generalize these findings, however the information is useful in terms of beginning to understand or facilitate cultural healing methods.

Counsellors could utilize the findings of this study to develop techniques or interventions to help Aboriginal clients. For instance, the critical incident interview itself could provide a means to discuss identity issues and concerns when not otherwise available to the client. For many Aboriginal people, revealing vulnerability about one’s cultural identity, competency or exposing fears of disentitlement is not a safe means for exploring one’s identity in all-Aboriginal contexts. By enabling the client to explore their own Aboriginal identity attainment, counsellors may have more sensitivity to efficient and appropriate use of cultural interventions, such as smudging, using the medicine wheel or implementing talking circles.

Client can benefit from the findings of this study by becoming exposed to the results of this study. What may be previously understood implicitly by shared assumptions, the results of this study exemplifies concrete, observable actions empirically cited as helpful in Aboriginal identity attainment. An exercise can be developed based on
the twelve helping categories developed in terms of promoting greater self-awareness and knowledge of their cultural self. For instance, clients may rate each action between "Very likely to do" and "Not at all likely to do" and rate them from first to last. Why do they choose certain activities over another? What is it that would motivate them to do this action? What is it that holds them back from doing this action? This type of activity would be complementary to many Aboriginal counselling interventions, such as the medicine wheel or even Maracle's identity formation wheel, "Who Am I?" based on the four directions teachings.

This research suggests some potential approaches to individual cultural identity attainment that might be facilitated by family members. Parents, grandparents and extended family members might, for example, contribute and encourage various paths to cultural identity development. Including family members in the exploration, recognition and assertion of a client's Aboriginal identity can be achieved by factoring family values, roles, and cultural support persons into the counselling process.

**Implications for Further Research**

Additional research needs to be done in the area of Aboriginal identity attainment for a variety of reasons. This study makes a contribution to verifying existing knowledge of this area, and suggests some new areas worthy of further consideration. What has been discovered by the researcher during the undertaking of this study is that Aboriginal cultural identity has been studied in a variety of qualitative ways by non-Aboriginal researchers. What is not included in these studies is the importance First Nations politics premise on sustaining languages, culture and traditions, and what is being preserved and
revitalized. This political movement hinges on the existence of Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal self-government or self-determination is meant for the future of distinct cultures and identities. (Mercredi & Turpel, 1993). Therefore, there is risk associated with revealing the loss of these distinct cultures and identities.

A limitation of this study is that the results are not generalizable, similar to many other studies conducted in the same area. Future studies need to be conducted to determine generalizability by incorporating representatives from all across Canada, not just in British Columbia. A quantitative study involving statistical analysis based on a survey instrument could be helpful in this initiative. The results of this study could be used to inform the development of such a quantitative study.

Future qualitative research of Aboriginal identity attainment can contribute to generalizability of results as well. For instance, this study’s design could be replicated to determine if new information arises to refine, revise or extend these categories.

Another study involving an examination of the transcripts generated by participants’ interviews could be initiated to render more information about the paths individuals have taken in their Aboriginal identity attainment. Each participant shared the chronology of each incident given, upon regaining informed consent for a new study, the event outcomes could be examined in a separate study by the same researcher. The results of this hypothetical study design would reveal information useful for counselling intervention development, designed to invoke the outcomes of the gathered events.
Summary

This study explored the attainment of Aboriginal identity for individuals living in the province of British Columbia. The purpose of the study was to develop a comprehensive category scheme that would describe what helps and what hinders Aboriginal identity attainment. This category scheme was intended to contribute empirically determined information about what is known allegorically and from other qualitative studies.

The research method involved interviews with self-identified Aboriginal adults who were willing and able to articulate observations of what facilitated and hindered their attainment of Aboriginal identity. The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was utilized to elicit 138 incidents from twelve participants. Fifteen categories emerged from an analysis of incidents reported. Several procedures were used to examine the soundness and trustworthiness of the categories. The results signify that Aboriginal identity can be attained in the following ways: Participating in a cultural gathering, participating within a group of Aboriginal people, changing self-perception, connecting with family, attending a cultural event/gathering, helping other Aboriginal people, being influenced by a grandparent, spiritual experience, verbalizing your experiences as an Aboriginal person, obtaining support from parents, experiencing positive images of Aboriginal people, personal accomplishment. Aboriginal identity attainment can be hindered in the following three ways: Living with separation from Aboriginal people/culture, experiencing racism/prejudice, experiencing negative images of Aboriginal people.
The findings of this study contribute to the field of counselling psychology by the provision of the category scheme which is determined as sound and trustworthy. This study suggests potential developments in counselling with Aboriginal people and the relevancy and importance of including family members when navigating identity issues and concerns. The greatest implication for future directions in research is understanding and utilizing the role of the family as a context for the attainment, development and maintenance of Aboriginal identity.
References


Nechi Institute, 2002: Report on the Research Project exploring: The facilitation of healing for survivors of sexual and physical abuse in residential schools, including the intergenerational impacts and the cycle of abuse that began in residential schools.


Appendix A

Letter to Research Participants

Informed Consent

Researcher Background
INFORMATION FORM


This is a notice to inform you of the possibility of participating in my Masters research. This research is being conducted to determine what helps and what hinders aboriginal identity attainment amongst aboriginal BC residents. I am researching the stories of aboriginal adults during their processes of attaining aboriginal identity. Adults living in British Columbia who have, over their years of life, attained by their own definition an aboriginal identity which is based on positive incidents.

A 60 minute interview is required for participation in this research. During this interview, you will be asked to recall a time in which you felt a sense of acceptance of your aboriginal heritage and meaning in your identity as an aboriginal person. At this time, you may have felt glad about being a member of your nation, or proud of your ancestral culture. What helped the process of appreciating who you are? What were the events involved in appreciating who you are? What were you behaviors and what was the outcome? These questions are asked to help identify the factors that either helped or hindered your aboriginal identity attainment. Interviews will be tape recorded, transcribed and given a number code to ensure confidentiality. The tapes will be erased upon completion of the study and any information on computers will be password protected.

The purpose of these interviews is to develop a categorical framework of what facilitates and hinders aboriginal identity attainment. The knowledge of factors contributing to this will inform helping professionals to develop culturally and socially appropriate counselling strategies to service aboriginal people.

Your involvement would be entirely voluntary and you could withdraw from the study at any time. All responses are kept strictly confidential. A code number will be the only means of identification once the interview is completed.

In Good Relations,
Alanaise O. Ferguson
RESEARCHER'S BACKGROUND

Dear Participant:

My name is Alanaise Goodwill (nee Ferguson) and I am investigating what helps and what hinders Aboriginal identity attainment for individuals living in British Columbia. This research is part of my Master's work in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. I acknowledge the traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Burrard and Sto:lo First Nations, lands which I have occupied my entire life. I am Anishnaabe of Sandy Bay, Manitoba and appreciate the numerous ways our people from across Canada assert and express their Aboriginal identities. I am conducting this study in order to establish some criteria regarding Aboriginal identity attainment to provide culturally sensitive and relevant counselling approaches for our Aboriginal brothers and sisters living in British Columbia.

In Good Relations,

Alanaise Goodwill