

**THE LIFE CYCLE EXPERIENCES AND INFLUENCES OF ADOPTION  
THROUGH ABORIGINAL ADULT'S STORIES**

**by**

**April Ann Arsenault**

**B.S.W., The University of Victoria, 2000**

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the life cycle experiences and influences of adoption of eight Aboriginal adults (six female and two male). The study was qualitative, used categorical content analysis, life cycle developmental theory, Aboriginal world-view and storytelling. The purposes of the study were to hear the voices of Aboriginal adoptees; to understand how adoption has influenced Aboriginal adoptees lives, and to gain knowledge that can make a difference in the practice of the adoption of Aboriginal children. Interviews were conducted, data was analyzed and the following developmental markers were extracted from the data: growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing. Themes emerged in each of the markers.

The results of this study indicate that how and when the adoption story is told is a very significant experience for an adoptee. Aboriginal culture was very much missing for these storytellers as all were placed in non-Aboriginal homes. For those who choose to search for birth family, they must first go back to a period of which they know little about (birth) before moving forward. Although each participant's story is unique, they also shared experiences such as being told of their adoption, searching and/or reconnecting with their birth families, gaining awareness of their Aboriginal culture, developing personal views on adoption and knowing who they are. Another finding was that their journey was impacted by their experience and that their experience with adoption will be a life long process of healing and resistance.

Implications of the study show that culture is a fundamental aspect in a system that aims to work in the best interests of the child. Governments, agencies and Aboriginal communities need to work together to create policy and practices that support Aboriginal adoptees, biological/adoptive families and Aboriginal communities. Systems and policies need to support the creation of more Aboriginal foster and adoptive homes and schools of social work and Aboriginal communities need to support the enrolment of Aboriginal students in pursuing social work. This study illustrates how storytelling, the traditional form of oral history is a powerful and effective method to conduct research with Aboriginal people and with individuals who have experienced colonization.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>ACC:</b>	<b>Adoption Council of Canada</b>
<b>AFABC:</b>	<b>Adoptive Families Association of British Columbia</b>
<b>BCMCFD:</b>	<b>Ministry of Children and Family Development</b>
<b>CFCSA:</b>	<b>Child Family and Community Services Act</b>
<b>CWLC:</b>	<b>Child Welfare League of Canada</b>
<b>DIAND:</b>	<b>Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Department</b>
<b>INAC:</b>	<b>Indian and Northern Affairs Canada</b>

## DEFINITIONS

Aboriginal:	Descendants of the original inhabitants of North America.
Adoption:	The legal transfer of all parental rights and obligations to another person or couple.
Adoption Circle:	All members influenced by adoption: adoptee, birth parent(s) and family, adoptive parent(s) and family, adoption agency, the Aboriginal community.
Adoption Order:	A legal document that results from the finalization of an adoption.
Birth Family:	Those who share a child's genetic heritage; blood relations; extended family members.
Birth Parent:	A child's biological mother or father.
Child Welfare:	Covers a multitude of services provided to children to ensure their health, safety, security, and development. The services are generally considered to be social services and include daycare, adoption, and child protection.
Custom adoption:	A form of adoption that is specific to Aboriginal peoples. This form of adoption takes place within the Aboriginal community and recognizes traditional customs. It is a privately arranged adoption between two Aboriginal families.
Dene:	A group of indigenous peoples that live in the Arctic regions of Canada.
First Nations:	Refers to Aboriginal people in Canada, Status and Non-Status, Inuit and Métis. The term may also be used to replace the word 'band'.
First Nations Community:	A community which has in common a mutual language, culture, religion, history, government, social structure and shared land base.

Foster care:	When children are placed in the government's legal custody because the children's birth parents may be deemed abusive, neglectful, or otherwise unable to care for the children.
Identifying Information:	Written information on the adoption order or original birth certificate such as full name, place of residence, that would allow an individual to be located and/or identified.
Indigenous:	People who have ancestry to the First People of North America.
Inuit:	The Indigenous peoples of Arctic Canada.
Kinship care:	This is a method of providing care to children by way of relatives and extended family. It could be informal, a formal foster care placement or a pre-adoption placement.
Métis:	One of the three groups of First Nations people living in Canada. Historically this term applied to children of French fur traders and Cree women in the Prairies and of English and Scottish traders and Dene women in the North. Today the term describes people with mixed First Nation and European ancestry who identify as Métis.
Non-identifying Information:	Information on the adoption papers that gives a general sense of what the person is like, but does not reveal specific details such as the person's name, address, phone number, etc.
Non-Status:	A person who is not registered as an Indian under the Indian Act. This could be because they never applied for Status or because they are unable to be registered under the terms of the Indian Act.

Open Adoption:	An adoption that involves some amount of direct contact between the birth and adoptive families, ranging from exchanging names to sending letters and scheduling visits.
Permanency planning:	Permanency planning strategies include a "whatever it takes" approach to family support, family reunification efforts, and adoption or permanent foster care for children who cannot return to live with their birth families.
Status or Registered:	A person who is listed in the Indian Register which is the official record that identifies all Status Indians in Canada.
Urban Aboriginal/ First Nations Community:	Used to refer to all people of Aboriginal/First Nations background which live and/or work in the urban area.

\*Note: In this study, I chose to use the terms Aboriginal and First Nations interchangeably, to describe First Nations or Indigenous peoples; however, the terms First Nations or Indigenous would have provided more insight and justice into the resistance of First Nations and Indigenous peoples. Initially, I assumed that the term Aboriginal would include all First Nations and Indigenous peoples; however, Aboriginal is a colonial term. Now I realize my error in judgement and apologize for my own ignorance and lack of thought with this issue.

The term First Nations refers to people who have ancestry to the First Peoples of North America as does the term Indigenous. A person who defines herself or himself in these terms may be a status Indian, non-status Indian, Inuit or Métis. Both terms are recognized in the Indigenous community as a political statement of resistance to colonial terms and definitions such as Aboriginal or Indian. The fact that the term Indian refers to a person who is registered in Canada under Indian Act policy is used to highlight colonial imposition (Frideres (1998) referenced in Meseyton, 2005, p. 2).

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*About a month ago I took an art course and I was quite touched by a painting a fellow did that he called "Seasons" as he explained what his drawing depicted. It was of a big old oak tree and on the left side was a branch with a small bud and as you looked up the left side and to the top, the buds became fuller blossoming, much greener and a full size tree developed; and as one looked down the right hand side, the green leaves became more coloured in hues of yellow, orange and fall colors and finally the last thing you studied on the right hand side was a leaf on the ground standing out in vibrant colors. He said his painting depicted life from infancy to when finally the leaf stood on its own and people finally saw its beauty standing alone but never saw it in its beauty or entirety when it was living. He said it's the same way in life – people more often than not immortalize the person when they have left life's tree; they often don't remember the colors of all the seasons of a person's life and he found that very sad.*

*Pat Christie (Aboriginal adoptee), April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000*

*(Used with permission of the author)*

## **CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION - THE SEEDS: THE FOUNDATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Adoption is the legal transfer of all parental rights and obligations to another person or couple, “The purpose of adoption is to provide a permanent home for a child whose biological parents are unable or unwilling to provide that home” (Crossen-Tower, 2001, p. 343). Adoption can occur in two ways, through related or unrelated ways. The child can be placed for adoption with family members or the child can be placed with people who are unknown to the biological family. Adoption is not a new practice and there is a well established body of research on this topic. In contrast, very little research has been done on how the experience of adoption influences the lives of Aboriginal adoptees.

I use in this thesis the analogy of a tree to take the reader through the life cycle experiences and influences of adoption through Aboriginal adult’s stories.

The tree presents an archetype of life, learning, and development that begins with the sprouting of a seedling from a seed embedded in fertile ground, and then moves to the various stages of growth and development through all seasons of life and its trials and tribulations until it begins to form seeds of its own. The tree is a natural analogy for a living philosophy (Cajete, 2000, p. 58).

In some Aboriginal culture, the tree, like the medicine wheel, symbolizes the life cycle; infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and elderhood.

The Tree of Life is reflected among Indigenous peoples of the Americas as a metaphor for life, healing, vision, and transformation. The tree is symbolically interwoven with another metaphor that orients its central teachings. Called the pecked cross, the life circle, or the medicine wheel, its roots are deep in the soil of Native American consciousness (Cajete, 2000, p. 263).

Like the life cycle of the tree, through the seed, roots, trunk, branches and leaves, this thesis takes the reader through the history of adoption and the participant’s life cycle

experiences with adoption. Here I examine what the participants undergo along their journey from infancy through adulthood and look at specific markers in this journey to determine how their experiences with adoption have impacted their lives. I ask through this exploration: What specific occurrences do Aboriginal adoptees experience in regards to adoption? How do these experiences influence their lives?

Aboriginal children have been highly overrepresented in adoption statistics. The Department of Indian Affairs indicates that from 1960 to 1990 over 11,000 Status Indian children were placed for adoption (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2004, p. 6). A review of statistics on the number of Aboriginal children in the care of the Ministry reveals a difficulty in getting the correct figures of the number of Aboriginal children in the care of the Ministry at one time. This appeared to be particularly inconclusive when discussing Aboriginal children because of the fact that the information that the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) maintains only applies to children living “on reserve” prior to coming into care. The information from INAC also does not cover the Northwest Territories or Nunavut (Farris-Manning, & Zandstra, 2003, p. 5) or the number of Métis children that are in the care of the ministry. This could be because of the Indian Act status requirements at one level, the social service organizations simply not asking or because social services only provides service to registered Indians as they are the only ones who have a responding status number or band.

According to Bennett & Blackstock (2002), in 2001, “22, 500 First Nations children were in the care of the Canadian Child Welfare authorities” (p. 30). This figure does not say how many were in permanent care or available for adoption. The British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development (BCMCFD) Annual Service Plan reports that the number of children in care dropped from a high of 10,775 in June 2001 to 9,071 in March 2005. Forty-eight per cent (48%) of all children in care were Aboriginal. On the BCMCFD adoption website on March 28, 2005, there were 240 children profiled for adoption (Government of British Columbia, 2005). Of the 240 children, 125 or 52% were Aboriginal children. The Adoptive Families Association of BC (AFABC) reports that during the 2004-2005 fiscal year, 297 waiting children joined families. Of the 297

children, 130 (roughly 44%) of children were Aboriginal and 53% joined Aboriginal families (roughly 69 of the 130). This still leaves 61 Aboriginal children placed in non-Aboriginal homes (Adoptive Families Association of BC, 2005 p.1). This is a very high number considering that Aboriginal people are only about 4.4 % of the population of British Columbia and 3.3 % of the population of Canada (Government of Canada, 2001).

Yet adoption is an alternative to spending a life in care. The Adoption Council of Canada (ACC) argues that there are alternatives for children, such as open, kinship, and subsidized/assisted-adoption (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). National statistics of the number of Aboriginal children in care is 40% with some of the Western provinces having 68% of the children in care being Aboriginal (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). What are the alternatives for the children that are in the care of the ministry?

The alternative for a child in the permanent care of the Ministry is a life in foster care or developing a plan of permanency. Permanency planning has been defined as,

The systematic process of carrying out, within a limited period, a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children and youths live in families that offer continuity and relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers, and the opportunity to offer life-time relationships (Maluccio et al, 1986, p. 5 quoted in Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003, p. 13).

Traditionally, permanency planning alternatives consisted of the reunification of the child with the biological family, or the placement for adoption of the child. The belief is that the ideal placement for the child should be with their parents but this can not always happen. The failure to plan for the child can leave the child in limbo. Adoption of the child, in many cases, is the only alternative for what appears to be in the "best interests of the child" (Crosson-Tower, 2001, p. 331; Aitken, 2002, p. 23-24 quoted in Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003, p. 13).

This thesis looks at the lifecycle experiences and influences of adoption in eight Aboriginal adults, through their stories. The storytellers ranged in age from 30 to 54. The study used categorical content analysis, a life cycle developmental approach

Aboriginal world-view and oral history methods. In my previous employment as an Adoption Advocate in an Aboriginal organization, I had the privilege of hearing many stories about adoption from those who have been involved in the process. Some adoptees had good life experiences within their adoptive homes, but many of the children, now adults, were lost trying to find out who they were. These stories need to be told. It is important for social workers to understand how adoption practices have impacted upon the lives of those in the system and how we, as social workers and policy makers, can improve this system by understanding the experiences of the clients. Stories need to be heard, experiences need to be examined, policies need to be reviewed, and recommendations for improvement need to be implemented. It is through the stories of the participant's that we can gain awareness of what their experiences have been like.

Like the flow of a tree's life cycle (seeds, roots, trunk, branches, leaves), this thesis will take the reader through the life cycle of the participant's lives. Chapter 1, The Seeds is the foundation of the study. This chapter provides an introduction and discusses the purpose for the study, the assumptions, position of the researcher and the significance of the study. Chapter 2, The Roots, reviews relevant literature. This section looks at the views of adoption historically, socially, politically, and from Aboriginal peoples view points by reviewing the history of adoption, the historical adoption practices amongst some Aboriginal peoples, past and current views of adoption, adoption in Canada, and legislation and policies that affect Aboriginal adoption practices. Literature relevant to the main themes of the study is reviewed in the conceptual framework and developmental markers and Aboriginal adoptees section of this chapter. Chapter 3, The Trunk, discusses the methodology used for the study. Chapters 4 and 5, The Branches discusses the findings of the study through a review of the main stories, categories and themes that appeared throughout the process of analysis. Chapter 6, The Leaves, provides a summary of the findings, implications for policy and practice, further research, recommendations and the conclusions of the study.

The aim of this thesis is to examine what the participants undergo along their journey from infancy through adulthood and determine how their experiences with adoption have impacted on their lives. I argue that there are specific adoption experiences and influences that Aboriginal children and adults undergo and that these experiences constitute significant markers in their development. These adoption related experiences for an Aboriginal adoptee, can have a dramatic influence on life choices throughout their lives. It is my belief that how and when an adoptee finds out about their adoption influences and how the adoptees manage and establish their choices in their life represents significant processes that provide the grounding for future life choices and views.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Aboriginal children continue to be overrepresented in the Canadian child welfare systems. According to the Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC) in 2003, there were about 76,000 children in Canada under the protection of Child and Family Services across the country with 30-40% of the children in care being Aboriginal (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003, p. 2). The majority of the Aboriginal children in the care of the state end up in non-Aboriginal homes (Fournier & Crey, 1997). If a child can not be cared for in their biological family and the hope is for permanence then adoption is a solution. Permanency planning must involve what is in the “best interests of the child” but what is “the best interests of the child”? The concept itself is controversial. Aboriginal children continue to be placed in non-Aboriginal homes due to the fact that there are not enough Aboriginal foster and adoptive homes. If the children are unable to live in their own families and communities, what are the alternatives for the child? Looking for alternatives that would create appropriate cultural, social, mental, emotional, spiritual and physical life for the child would ultimately be in “the best interests of the child”. But what is “the best interests of the child” in regards to the adoption of Aboriginal children?

The answers would vary depending on who you ask. Adoptive parents, biological mothers, policy makers and social workers may all view “the best interests of the child”

differently. However, the voices of Aboriginal adult adoptees, which have been through adoption, need to be considered. We, as the public, as social workers, as policy makers, need to hear the stories from those who have been involved in the adoption system because it is only through listening that we are able to understand and gain knowledge of what happened and understand how and what we can do to implement changes that would truly work in “the best interests of the child”.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to hear the stories and voices of Aboriginal children now as adults. Although there is a significant body of literature on adoption, there is very limited reference to the stories of Aboriginal adoptees. Another purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of adoption, how adoption has influenced Aboriginal adoptees lives and how this practice has changed from traditional times. It is expected that the study should increase knowledge and understanding that can make a difference in the adoption practices of Aboriginal children as it depicts the actual life stories and experiences of those involved in this process.

## **ASSUMPTIONS**

The study was based on the following assumptions: (1) Aboriginal children are over represented in the child welfare system; (2) Adoption is an alternative to a life being spent in transition between homes; (3) The stories of Aboriginal adoptees who were involved in the adoption system must be heard; (4) Aboriginal people can and should take care of their own children. Aboriginal self determination needs to be acknowledged; (5) Research on adoption in Canada has not properly considered Aboriginal people's experiences with the practice of adoption; (6) The results of the study can provide insight into the personal experiences of Aboriginal adoptees; (7) The use of developmental theory and Aboriginal perspectives will provide a more holistic and cultural approach to the research.

## POSITION OF RESEARCHER

Simpson (2000) outlines a respectful process for the conduct of research with Aboriginal communities,

Following indigenous culture protocol, before any formal academic preparation was done for the study, the researcher talked to various elders, community people... This process was performed to gain permission to conduct the research and access approval to record the research findings. This was compulsory as indigenous knowledge is traditionally transmitted orally (Crow (1993) quoted in Struthers, 2001, p. 129) through storytelling (Simpson quoted in Struthers, 2001, p. 129).

This appeared to be the most respectful approach to conducting the research and to acquire the knowledge and right to initiate the research and obtain permission to print the experiences of those involved in the study. With these guidelines in mind, I spoke with two Elders in the Aboriginal community, one birth mother, an adoptive mother and two adoptees to ask their views and beliefs about the project.

Research has had an exploitative influence on Aboriginal peoples and I feel that I must position myself in how I conducted the research. I am claiming a “genealogical, cultural and political set of experiences” (Smith, 2004, p. 12) as an Aboriginal (Cree, French & Ukrainian) woman, and a person who has both personal and political knowledge about the topic of adoption amongst Aboriginal peoples. As a sister to siblings who have been in the adoption and foster care systems, I am a birth family member, a member of the adoption circle and in a sense, an insider.

I am the youngest of ten siblings, nine living. I have three sisters who were adopted out, two siblings who grew up in foster care, one sibling who grew up in a school for nuns and two siblings who I grew up knowing and living with. I have been reconnected with one of my sisters who were adopted. Our relationship at times is good, but at other times, there is a great distance and regret between us. We are very different; however, she is one of the people who inspired me to search for some understanding of this issue. Another of my sisters was adopted into a home and grew up with a cousin.



This sister does not want to be reconnected with the family. My other sister who was adopted out has made contact with her natural siblings, the first five siblings of the family. She did not, until very recently, want to connect with the younger siblings. We have yet to connect, although I have made an effort to no avail.

I have also been reconnected with my two brothers who were fostered out. Here again, we know each other but we do not have a close relationship. There are often questions and resentment for the practices of the past. At times, we connect and at other times, there is a lot of disruption in our understanding of the family. I have always known my other brother and sister. Although we also were separated into different homes with my father's family, we have always maintained knowledge of where each other is. We know each other, but at times where past practices appear to come between us and we often disagree about irrelevant things. None of us grew up knowing our Aboriginal culture and traditions. Aboriginal identity is another area in which my siblings and I differ with some searching for the connection to this knowledge and others denying its very existence. My belief in the Creator, the teachings from my Elders, my families, my own personal experience with adoption and my hope for some answers guide me on this journey.

As a researcher and social worker I will relate to the experiences and stories of the participants from a perspective of compassion and understanding. As a mother, I found some of the stories hard to hear. As an individual, I am truly amazed at the resilience of those involved in this study. I am honoured and humbled to be able to listen to the stories. The storytellers are truly amazing people who I will hold dear to my heart forever. Their resistance and resilience is incredible. It is my belief that "creating and sharing knowledge that authentically represents who you are and how you understand the world is integral to the survival of a people's identity" (Castellano, 2004, p. 109) and since the focus of the study was to gain understanding of the experiences and influence of adoption on adult Aboriginal adoptees lives, it was important that the storytellers words and stories be authentic and come from their own perceptions and personal experiences.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

From an Aboriginal perspective, there are a variety of reasons for conducting this research. First, based on the literature that has been discussed so far, it is clear that Aboriginal children are still over represented on child welfare case loads. What is the long-term outcome for these children? If the children must be placed in alternative care and adoption is an alternative, what can we learn from those who have been involved in the adoption process?

Second, although Aboriginal peoples are taking over their own child welfare, the number of children being placed in non-Aboriginal homes is still high. Statistics show that up to 40% of the children in care are Aboriginal children and that in some provinces the amount of children in the care of the ministry can be as high as 68% (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003).

Third, to hear the stories from those involved in the experience of adoption will shed light on how this system can be improved. Hearing the participant's experiences will enable us to understand the complexity of their lived experiences, what works and what needs to be improved.

Fourth, social workers need to hear the stories of those who have been through the adoption process to understand the long-term effects of adoption on adoptees' lives.

Finally, to gain an understanding of how we can work toward social change in the area of Aboriginal children's adoption. Through the lessons learned and the voices of the participants we should gain a clearer picture of what is needed to initiate change within this system and promote adoption as a practice that truly works in "the best interests of the Aboriginal child".

## **SUMMARY**

This introductory chapter described the purpose and significance of this research study which are to document the storyteller's journey from infancy through adulthood and to gain an understanding of their experiences and influence of adoption on their lives. This chapter introduced the topic and discussed the rationale supporting the need to a study on this topic. It also presented the position of the researcher and discussed the importance of the topic to social work policy and practice.

The next chapter provides an in depth discussion on the history of adoption, both from an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspective, the past and current Aboriginal views of adoption, and reviews the colonialist policies and practices which have impacted Aboriginal peoples. This is followed by a general discussion on adoption legislation and legislation policy that affects Aboriginal peoples. The chapter presents my conceptual framework and discusses developmental theory, Aboriginal world view and a review of the literature pertaining to the adoption of Aboriginal children.

## **CHAPTER 2 – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **ROOTS: HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL VIEWS OF ADOPTION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter, the Roots builds on the previous chapter and provides a separation in all directions; a way of looking at adoption from all perspectives and a flow toward the eventual answers to the research questions. It reviews relevant literature on adoption and identifies significant factors that impact adult Aboriginal adoptees' life experiences. I first discuss some historical references on adoption, Aboriginal practices and views on adoption and the legislation and policies that affect Aboriginal peoples, for as previously shown, Aboriginal peoples have had a sordid history in regards to child welfare and adoption. Then, I review key theoretical ideas and concepts that inform the study and finally, I review previous studies and research on adoption.

#### **HISTORY OF ADOPTION**

Adoption represents a severing of the biological ties and transference of the rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parents (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1979 p. 8). Adoption has existed from ancient times although the practice may not have been as formalized with legislation and statutory provisions like it is today. According to Sorosky, Baran & Pannor (1979), the Code of Hammurabi, part of the Babylonian law was clear about adoption,

If a man takes a child in his name, adopts and rears him as a son, the grown-up son may not be demanded back. If a man adopts a child as his son, after he has taken him, he transgresses against his foster-father; that adopted son shall return to the house of his own father (p. 8-9).

Among the Egyptians and Hebrews, the story of Moses is well known. Moses as a baby was sent in a carrier on the Nile to avoid getting killed. The Queen who took

Moses in and raised him as her son picked him out of the water. What is interesting about this is that Moses was not related to the Queen, in fact, they were from very different religious beliefs and practices (Sorosky et al., 1979).

It was not until the Roman Empire with its organized institutions that adoption became known and referred to in society. Amongst the Romans, adoption was used as a means to secure an heir to extend the family line. Under Roman law, two kinds of adoption were recognized: “the adoption of children under the *patria potestas* control of parents; and *arrogation*, which applied to a person’s *suijuris* without a family or who were adults” (Sorosky et al., 1979 p. 9). The family was the basic unit during the Roman Empire times. By the Justinian time (500 years after Christ), “the individual was regarded much more clearly as a member of society than as a member of his/her family” (Sorosky et al., 1979, p. 10).

Although most laws in the United States are based on British Common Law, adoption is the exception. The adoption laws in the United States are parallel to the Roman Laws. In Britain, because of the importance of British blood lines adoption was not accepted as an Act in Britain until 1926, 75 years after the first law was passed in Massachusetts in 1851 (Kirk, 1985, p. xiv). In the United States, the Massachusetts law was passed because of the increase in illegitimate (children born out of wedlock) children from Great Britain who were used as apprenticeship and indentures. Children who were brought to America and offered training apprenticeship became the model for early adoption practices. The first legal regulations happened because of the “widespread need to control the wholesale distribution of children to homes where they were used as cheap labour” (Sorosky et al, 1979, p. 15). Although the initial idea of apprenticeship was to protect the children, it eventually turned into a practice that in fact exploited them. Until the legislation was in place, no one was taking care of “the best interests of the child” and children were mistreated and exploited by their apprenticeships that used them for extensive field work and hard labour.

There were similar practices in Canada. In Canada, the rush of industrialization and urbanization resulted in an increase in illegitimate births. As a result, changes in legislation were made to address “illegitimate births” and difficulties of some poor families to care for their children, “Ontario’s nineteenth-century legal framework for dealing with unwed mothers focused on preventing harm” (Murray, 2004, p. 255) and social resources were scarce for those who were in this dilemma. The rush of,

Urbanization and industrialization set the conditions for a growing concern with unwed mothers...The effects of sweeping socio-economic change impoverished unwed mothers who caused the most anxiety. Those higher up the economic ladder could afford to conceal their pregnancies and secure private adoptions, which were frequently facilitated by a doctor or lawyer. Poor unwed mothers, or those cast aside by their families and communities, had no such privilege (Murray, 2004, p. 257).

Along with urbanization and industrialization, many people were returning from the War and at this time there was an increase in “illegitimate births.”

In most provinces adoption laws were only enacted in the period during and after World War I, when a great increase in “illegitimacy” (children born to single mothers) gave rise to the need to find families to provide care for these children (Giesbrecht in Bala, Zapf, Williams, Vogl & Hornick, 2004, p. 155).

According to Murray (2004), adoptions were rare. In the early 1920s,

Social workers questioned the assumption that the unwed mother ‘problem’ should be dealt with exclusively by charitable organizations, and called for legislation to protect illegitimate children, to hold unwed parents (especially fathers) responsible for financial child support, and to strengthen the two-parent, heterosexual, patriarchal family (p. 266).

The year 1919 was a pivotal year for creating legislation in Canada. The new Premier of Ontario, Ernest Drury, was preparing to introduce legislation.

The Legitimation Act (1921) recognized out-of-wedlock children as legally legitimate upon their parents’ marriage, the Children of Unmarried Parents Act (CUPA) (1921) strengthened mechanisms for securing paternal financial support, and the Adoption Act (1921) legalized adoptions after a required two-year

probationary period; once solidified, they were difficult to dissolve. As well, the acts secured rights for adopted children, including inheritance rights (Murray, 2004, p. 267).

The purpose of these Acts, were to ensure proper care of children.

The growing middle class and the emergence of the “housewife” as an occupation meant that married women who were unable to biologically bear children wanted to adopt children to have “as their own.” Adoption was shrouded in secrecy; for the unwed mother there was the shame of having an illegitimate child, and for the adoptive parents there was the stigma of illegitimacy. Children were often not told that they were adopted until well into life, and sometimes did not find out until after the deaths of their adoptive parents (Giesbrecht in Bala et al, 2004, p. 155-156).

The ideology of this era surrounded adoption with secrecy. In 1927, secrecy was introduced into the new Adoption Act displaying the thoughts and ideology of the times. A key consequence was that access to information about adoption was denied (Jowett, 1998, p. 1).

## **TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL ADOPTION PRACTICES**

Several authors have examined how prior to contact with Europeans, Aboriginal children had a special place in Aboriginal society (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Little Bear quoted in Battiste, 2000). Children were seen as gifts and as such were taken care of by the community. Decisions were made with consideration of the consequences upon the child (National Native Association of Treatment Directors, 1989). Some Aboriginal communities believe that when decisions are made, we must think about how they will affect the next seven generations. In this respect, the children are the future and it is the children that society would depend on.

Traditional Aboriginal practices in the area of adoption were kinship care and custom adoption. Kinship care was the raising of children by members of the extended family (grandparents, aunts, and uncles). This form of care has been known to society for centuries (Connolly, 2003, p. 3). Custom adoption has existed in many Aboriginal

communities. It is based on the Aboriginal tradition of viewing the child as a member of a caring community, not just the sole responsibility of the parents. Traditionally, among some Aboriginal peoples, if it was needed, family members took in children. The children were considered a part of the family who had taken them in and there was no legal papers to show this transaction had taken place. The community knew that the child was a member of the family and in many cases the child took on the family name. Openness was a part of this custom allowing the biological parents to stay in touch with the children. Custom care was a common practice amongst many Aboriginal Nations (Sinclair, Bala, Lilles & Blackstock, quoted in Bala, Zapf, Williams, Vogl, & Hornick, 2004, p. 212).

Among the Blood people of Southern Canada, it was common for the grandparents to keep one of their grandchildren and raise them. Traditional closeness between Elders and grandchildren gave children an exposure to the same values their children were raised by. Grandparents gave the children significant attention. Old widows who were alone were often given an orphaned child by a relative. Any small child that lost his/her mother was taken over by a relative, usually the grandmother (Hungry Wolf, 1980).

In the Haida tradition, if a woman could not have any children then she could approach any of her sisters and take one or more of her children. When children were adopted into the new family there was usually a potlatch and in some cases a pole raising to honour and welcome the child into the family. The child became a member of the adoptive family with knowledge and access to their biological family. Full responsibility for the child was with the adoptive family (Personal Communication, M. Pryce, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005).

Amongst the Cree, families sometimes adopted unrelated orphans, old people without anyone to care for them, people who reminded them of a dead relative and people taken prisoner in raids. Adopting another as a brother was an accepted practice. Within this practice, "each will assume all the rights and responsibilities of a natural brother to



each other's wife, children and relatives" (Kimelman, 1985, p. 163). There was no formal process involved. The person just became a member of the family with the same rights and responsibilities (Cardinal, 1997).

Within the Nuu-chah-nulth tradition, a child was also adopted to fill a position or carry on a name. Parents were responsible for the welfare of their children. They had to ensure the care of children whose parents were unable to care for them. Parents and grandparents would take in children who had lost a parent or both parents within their family. If a child lost her/his mother, a decision was made right away about whom would care for him or her. It was a family responsibility. The adoption of children could occur in three ways. The first was if the child became an orphan. The adoption of the child was done the traditional way: the nearest relative took in the child. The second way was when a couple separated and if the "step parents" did not get along with the child, the child was turned over to the nearest relative. The final way was when a child was placed with another person due to the birth parent having an illness. In this case, the next of kin always took care of the child. Sometimes, a mother would make an agreement with somebody she respected about caring for her children if anything should happen to her or the father. When a child was taken over, the family gave a feast to give the child a name which would identify the child as belonging in that family (Nuu-chah-nulth Community Health Services, 1995).

The above review underscores adoption as a common practice regulated by kinship and community care amongst Aboriginal peoples. The taking in of another's child and his or her adoption as a member of a family was considered an active part of your role within the community.

## **PAST AND CURRENT ABORIGINAL VIEWS ON ADOPTION**

There have been many changes to traditional Aboriginal adoption practices. The most critical one is that since changes in legislation in Canada, (Indian Act 1876, Indian Act revisions of 1951), Aboriginal children are far more likely "to experience parental

separation and institutional care than are non-Aboriginal children” (McGillivray & Comaskey, 1999, p. 15). Much of the changes can be attributed to Aboriginal people’s experiences in the area of child welfare since European contact.

The first colonists arrived on the eastern shores of Canada in the 1400’s. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) report of 1996, the initial contact was beneficial for both parties but by the 1800’s, the reserve system had been implemented, the Indian Act had been enacted and Aboriginal peoples were seen as wards of the Federal Government. During this period, the Federal Government and the churches, initiated the residential school system for Aboriginal children (RCAP quoted in Blackstock & Trocmé, 2004).

The schools operated across Canada, continuously, with the last school closing on the Gordon Reserve in Saskatchewan in 1996 (MacLean’s Magazine, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000; Blackstock, 2004). Children were separated from their families and culture, many staying in the schools for ten months of the year. Children felt the impact strongly as “Generations of children attended these schools. Separated from family, cultural and traditional teachings, the impact was devastating at the personal, kinship and community levels” (Fournier & Crey, 1997 quoted in Blackstock & Trocmé, 2004, p. 5). This was devastating for the children, families, and the community. The effects of this separation are still felt today.

Prior to 1951, “Provincial Child Welfare departments and children’s aid societies did not operate to any extent on reserves, and the number of Native children in the care of child welfare officials was minimal” (Johnston, 1983, p. 2). This concept changed when the Canadian Welfare Council and the Canadian Association of Social Workers argued in a 1947 brief to the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons that “Indian Children who are neglected lack the protection afforded under social legislation available to white children in the community” (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 83). Changes were made to the Indian Act in 1951 and child welfare matters began to be handled by the provincial government with the federal government retaining fiscal

responsibility. Social workers had more “access” to Aboriginal children. Child welfare decisions were based on upper middle class standards that viewed the practices of Aboriginal people and the horrendous poverty conditions of Aboriginal peoples as “unsatisfactory.” Social workers, who tended to lack understanding of the Aboriginal concept of family and the communal standards of living played a crucial role in separating Aboriginal families and sending Aboriginal children to live with non-Aboriginal families. The number of Aboriginal children in the care of the Ministry increased. In 1959, 1 % of the children in care were Aboriginal but by the late 1960’s, 30 to 40 percent of the children in care were Aboriginal even though Aboriginal people were less than 4 percent of the population (Fournier & Crey, 1997).

Large numbers of Aboriginal children were removed from their communities and sent to adoptive or foster homes in Canada, the USA and other countries (Bagley, 1993; Locust, 1986). Many of the children were adopted into families of different ethnicity. This mass apprehension of children has become known as the “60s Scoop” (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Johnston, 1983). From the beginning, many of the Aboriginal children were sent out of their provinces, in many cases, out of the country. Most of the children were sent to non-Aboriginal adopted homes and grew up not knowing who they were as Aboriginal people (Lyons, 2000). It appears that none of the private, public or religious adoption agencies monitored or kept records so the children could retract their roots (Fournier & Crey, 1997) and there are many sad and desperate stories that have been heard about these children’s experiences.

Cameron Kerley was eight years old when he witnessed his father being beaten to death. Cameron and his three sisters were apprehended and placed in foster care. Cameron was placed for adoption with Dick Kerley, a bachelor who had previously adopted another Aboriginal boy. Cameron soon began to display social problems. When he was 19, he murdered his adoptive father with a baseball bat. He pleaded guilty to second degree murder and was sentenced to life in prison with no eligibility for parole for 15 years. Cameron alleged his adoptive father had sexually abused shortly after he was placed in his house (Native Child and Family Services of Toronto, 1999; York, 1990).

Not all the stories are as heinous as Cameron's is. Many children, now adults that were placed for adoption had good homes with loving adoptive parents. However, it is the stories of those who did not fair well that we tend to hear about. What many of the adoptees share is that within these homes, they lost their cultural identity, legal Indian status, knowledge of their own First Nation background and even their birth names. This loss is due to the secrecy and withholding of information that was characteristic of adoption policies and legislation since the 1920s.

## **ADOPTION LEGISLATION IN CANADA**

Adoption legislation has evolved over time. This section will review some of the changes in the provinces of Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. As stated previously, Canada, specifically, Ontario had its first adoption Act legislation in 1921. Adoption in Canada as in United States in that it is a matter of provincial or territorial control. The 1921 Ontario Adoption Act, "introduced restrictive and very strict guidelines for disclosing any information about the adoption in general" (Patterson, 2005, p. 1). Further changes in 1927, provided for sealed records.

The Ontario Adoption Act stayed intact until well into the 1970's when civil rights movements for adopted persons started emerging. In Canada, adoptees born after 1970 did not have their birth surnames on their adoption order instead they showed the first letter of their name followed by a serial number (Orphan Train Station, 2001, p. 1). This made it harder to enquire and receive information about birth names. In 1978, the first passive disclosure registry was formed (Orphan Train, 2001, p. 1). This allowed members of the adoption circle to register, obtain non-identifying or selected information on their birth history and register to search for family members, however, both parties had to be registered for a meeting to occur.

In 1980, the Ontario government promoted Bill 77 which would cut off access to 'non-identifying' information (Orphan Train, 2001, p. 1). During this time, Frank Drea, Minister of Community and Social Services, revised the Ontario "Child Welfare Act."

Between 1984 and 1985, the public pressured the government for open records. The Ontario government commissioned Dr. Ralph Garber to do a report on adoption.

Garber recommended far reaching reforms in the area of adoption disclosure, including giving the adult adoptee unqualified access to the original birth registration; giving birth family members access to identifying information about the adult adoptee, with consent; and creating a fully active Adoption Disclosure Register. All of these recommendations were to be accompanied by mandatory counselling, and all were retroactive (Bernstein & Allan, 2001, p. 3).

Garber suggested two principles: 1) the facts surrounding an individual's adoption belong to that person, no matter where the information is stored, and, 2) revealing those facts has not been shown to cause harm. Although many of his recommendations were written into the Adoption Disclosure Statute Law Amendment Act of 1987, the more progressive ideas were abandoned. In 1985, Alberta set up its post-adoption registry that linked registered family members for information exchange. In 1986 the Ontario Liberal government implemented some of Dr. Garber's recommendations. The adoptive parents veto power was rescinded, non-identifying information was defined and access codified, siblings were recognized and the provincial registrar was empowered to conduct searches.

The 1990's saw many new changes in the area of adoption. In 1993 there were more public protests demanding a release of adoption information. In 1994, the NDP presented a private member's Bill (Ontario Adoption Disclosure Bill 158) in the House. This Bill would allow adoptees access to their birth certificates. The Bill passed on 2<sup>nd</sup> reading and was sent for assessment to the Standing Committee. Members delayed the reading and the Bill was not brought to a vote on the last day of the fall session (Orphan Train, 2001 p. 2). In 1995 the Ontario Child Welfare Act was changed to allow licensed search agencies to help adoptees find their birth families for a fee. Birth parents could now use the services of licensed search agencies to find their children. Alberta began releasing the surnames of the birth parents to adoptees but would not give their parents full names (Orphan Train, 2001, p. 3).

In July 1995, the BC legislature passed a new Adoption Act. The Act took effect November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1996 and replaced a 40 year old legislation. In this Act, children would have greater say in their adoptions; all adoptions would be regulated; birth parents and adoptive parents would have more options for openness. This meant that Aboriginal birth parents, bands and communities would have greater opportunities to plan for their children; a registry would be established to assist birth fathers to become more involved in planning for their children; and, adults who were adopted in BC and their birth parents would be able to get identifying information about each other, except where a disclosure veto had been filed (British Columbia Ministry of Social Services, 1996).

In 2000 changes were made to the Alberta Adoption Act. All children adopted in Alberta after 2000 would have full access to all of their adoption records, including birth certificates (Orphan Train, 2001, p. 3). In 2001, the Ontario Bill 77 (Adoption Disclosure Statute Law Amendment Act) was tabled. The Ontario legislature continued to stop the passing of Bill 77 to open adoption records. Bill 77 would allow adult adopted people and birth parents to get birth registration and adoption records. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004, the Alberta government opened access to identifying information contained in adoption records. Adult adoptees and birth parents would now be able to access identifying information about each other (Alberta Children's Services, 2004).

## **LEGISLATION AND POLICIES THAT AFFECT ABORIGINAL ADOPTION PRACTICES**

Adoption is covered in the Adoption Act in each of the provinces and territories of Canada. However, when the child is an Aboriginal child, other legislation may be involved. This is particularly relevant if the child is considered a status (registered) child. Aboriginal peoples are governed by the Indian Act and fall under the British North American Act (1867) which was changed to the Constitution Act (1982) (Bell, C. 2002, p. 1). Within the Constitution Act (1982) is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which affects all Canadians. This section provides a brief overview of the Acts and how they are relevant to the adoption of the Aboriginal child.

## **British North American Act (1867)**

Under the British North American Act (1867), “there was a provision that allowed the administration of Indian Affairs to come under the control of the government of Canada” (Frideres & Gadacz, 2004, p. 18). This Act divided powers between the provincial and federal governments and child welfare evolved as the exclusive responsibility of provincial and territorial governments. There has been a continual argument between the federal and provincial governments about which level of government has the legislative responsibility to provide child welfare services to reserves and which government should pay. Although provincial governments have the legislative responsibility for child welfare, the federal government has responsibility for Aboriginal peoples.

The federal government believes that child welfare legislation is ‘laws of general application’ according to section 88 of the Indian Act. The provincial governments argue that child welfare legislation is a federal responsibility and refer to section 91 (24) of the British North America Act “Section 91 (24) of the Constitution Act gives the federal government legislative authority over ‘Indians and lands reserved for Indians’” (Bala, Zapf, Williams, Vogl, & Hornick, 2004, p. 2). According to this section, “Parliament has the jurisdiction to enact legislation in regard to Aboriginal child welfare” (Bala et al, 2004, p. 26), but it has chosen not to do so. The federal and provincial positions regarding child welfare legislation, however, have never been argued in court (Johnston, 1983).

## **Indian Act**

The Indian Act is federal legislation that dates back to 1876. It has been revised over the years with major revisions happening in 1951. The Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND) administer the Act. DIAND carries out the day to day administration of the Act with the Registrar maintaining the list of registered Indians. The Indian Act regulates the operation of reserves and bands and defines who is and who

is not recognized as an 'Indian'. The Act also, "does not allow for a loss of status by reason of adoption" (Government of Canada, 1993, p. 15). Whether an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal family adopts a child, the child remains a registered 'Indian'. When an adopted Aboriginal child reaches the age of 18, the Registrar provides the child with their registry number and the name of their band.

It is the federal government's function to protect the rights of adopted Indian children, and to co-operate with provincial and territorial adoption agencies to ensure confidentiality and that no harm or embarrassment is caused to the child, his or her parents or the adoptive family. The Registrar (Government of Canada, 1993) maintains files on information and documentation concerning adopted Indian children in strictest confidence (p. 15).

Accessing information is done only by request. The child, when they reach the age of 18, must write a letter to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and enclose a copy of their birth certificate and adoption order. The Registrar will review the information and issue a registry number and a Certificate-of-Indian-Status card if the child requests it.

### **Constitution Act (1982)**

According to Bell (2002), "Section 91 (24) of the Constitution Act, 1867, allocates jurisdiction to the Parliament of Canada to enact laws regarding 'Indians and lands reserved for Indians'. This section gives Parliament jurisdiction for 'Indians' and 'lands reserved for Indians' (p. 1). Once s. 91 (24) is defined, "provincial laws will not apply to Indians and lands reserved for Indians unless they are classified as provincial laws of general application or they are referentially incorporated under s. 88 of the Indian Act" (Bell, 2002, p. 2). Within the Constitution Act (1982) is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which discusses the rights of all Canadians. However, some advocates for adoptees have suggested that because of the withholding of personal birth information adoptees do not benefit from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms like other individuals do.



## **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**

According to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CCRF) all Canadians have the right to fundamental freedoms, democratic rights, mobility rights, legal rights and equality rights. Every citizen has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law. According to section 15 (1) of the CCRF,

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability (Canada Law Book Inc, 1998 p. 14).

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms also stipulates specific rights for Aboriginal peoples. Section 25 states that certain rights and freedoms shall not affect any Aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedoms that pertain to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada including the Royal Proclamation and, any rights or freedoms that may be acquired by the Aboriginal peoples of Canada by way of land claims settlement. Section 35 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms covers the ongoing issue of self determination for Aboriginal peoples in Canada and acknowledges the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in discussions about changes to section 91 of the Constitution Act.

Although these Sections of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms are not specific to the area of child welfare or adoption, they are important as they instil the inherent rights of Aboriginal peoples to self determination and self government. Some advocates suggest that by denying adoptees the right to access their own personal information, the adoptees are being discriminated against. The secrecy and withholding of information in fact, is violating adoptees rights according to the CCRF.

## **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which Canada signed on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Canada is “obligated to present periodic reports to the Committee on

how it is implementing the provisions of the treaty in the territories under its jurisdiction” (Ad Hoc Coalition on the Rights of the Aboriginal Child in Canada, 2003, p. 2).

Although the Canadian representatives presented a 270 page report on their activities from 1993-1997 to the Committee, Canada is still not measuring up to its full extent in assuring that the rights of the child are implemented. The Government of Canada, in fulfilment of its responsibilities under article 4 (legislative, administrative and other measures) of the Convention must take into account the provisions of article 30.

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language (Government of Canada, 1991, p. 16).

In particular, in assessing what measures are appropriate to implement the rights recognized in the Convention for Aboriginal children, regard must be paid to the right of the individual to live in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, practice their own religion and to use their own language.

Although Canada has taken positive steps, the Ad Hoc Coalition on the Rights of Aboriginal Children in Canada believes that Canada’s brief shows that, “Canada’s Aboriginal policy does not uphold the UN Convention’s basic principle that states signers must ‘ensure that all children within their jurisdiction enjoy their rights’” (KAIROS, 2003, p. 1). According to some advocates, along with article 30 articles 2, 7 and 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child may be in question when discussing an Aboriginal adopted child. Briefly these articles say that all children must be treated the same and shall be protected against discrimination. A child has the right to know and be cared for by their parents and that the state must ensure these rights in law. Children have a right to know their identity, nationality, name and relations and if a child is deprived of their identity, the State will provide assistance with re-establishing the child’s identity.

Canada admits that, “overall, Aboriginal people in Canada fare less well than other Canadians,” and “for some Aboriginal people the situation is dire” (Ad Hoc Coalition on the Rights of Aboriginal Children in Canada, 2003, p. 5). Although Canada signed the UN Convention on the Rights on the Rights of the Child, Canada reserved its right on Article 30.

The fundamental strengths of every Aboriginal child and youth are the traditional values, cultures, beliefs, and ways of their peoples. This strength and knowledge has sustained First Nations peoples throughout generations of colonial and other assimilation processes. The intergenerational consequences of this on past First Nations families, including adoptions and apprehensions, are a perpetual cycle in which traditional values of child rearing have been undermined, devalued and outlawed. This history has damaged the cohesion of indigenous peoples, the development of positive parenting models, and the general physical and mental health of First Nations children. It is ironic that Canada’s one reservation to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (related to ‘adoption’ and ‘family’) implicitly recognizes this (Ad Hoc Coalition on the Rights of Aboriginal Children in Canada, 2003, p. 11).

In Canada, the state has the obligation to care for children who cannot be cared for by their parents. This has been enshrined in legislation, specifically, the Adoption and Child, Family & Community Services Acts. Canada does not have a single system of child welfare instead it has a number of child welfare systems (Johnston, 1983). Each province and territory has its own legislation. When social workers are discussing Aboriginal children, depending on how the child is classified, they may fall into either Federal or Provincial divisions depending on their status. While this dispute continues, Aboriginal children in British Columbia still fall under the provincial Child, Family and Community Services Act and the Adoption Acts in which both ensure that decisions are made in the ‘best interests of the child’.

### **Best Interests of the Child**

The “best interests of the child” principle has evolved over time, through policy, social work practice and the courts, to become the primary consideration in planning for a child. While the principle seems self evident and culturally neutral it

is defined subjectively through a value knowledge and practice context that is decidedly Anglo European. The notion of the child and her best interests, as separate and distinct from her family, community and culture, is one that has roots in the individualist orientation of European Culture (Richard, 2004, p. 102).

The “best interests of the child” section is in both the Child Family and community Services Act and the Adoption Acts in BC. The Best Interests of Child sections are similar except for one addition in the Adoption Act.

The best interest considers the child’s safety, physical and emotional needs, continuity, quality of relationships the child has with the caretaker, the child’s cultural, racial, linguistic, and religious heritage, the child’s view and the effect delay in making a decision will have on the child (Government of British Columbia, Adoption Act of BC, CFCS Act). The only difference between the CFCSA and the Adoption Acts of BC is that subsection (d) has been added to the Adoption Act. This sub section looks at the importance of the child’s development and the security of the child as a member of a family. But whose best interests are being viewed?

This view stands in contrast to the world views of tribal societies, including First Nations in Canada. Within the tribal world view, individuals, while acknowledged and valued, are contextualized within families, communities and cultures. Here the best interests of a child are inexorably linked to the best interests of the community and vice versa. As the child is seen as the embodiment of her culture she is consequently required to be nurtured within it (Richard, 2004, p. 102).

Adoption has been practiced since time immemorial. Although adoption is practiced in all societies, it has evolved into a practice that is governed by many legal and political battles. The legalities of adoption are further confusing when adoption is applied to Aboriginal children. Aboriginal children, depending on how they are classified are further involved in legislation that suggests who they are and who is responsible for them. The ‘best interests’ of the child test is ultimately used as an argument for the permanency planning of Aboriginal children.

This historical review of policies and practices of adoption evidences that Aboriginal peoples have had a squalid past with the child welfare and adoption systems. It underscores the importance of examining the impact these policies and practices have on Aboriginal peoples. My study aimed to explore experiences of adoption among Aboriginal adoptees and discuss how such experiences influenced their lives. To examine these experiences, I first discuss developmental, attachment and Aboriginal world view theories that provide a framework for the study.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This section builds upon the life cycle stages of development to explain the process that adoptees must go through. It considers the work of theorists such as E. Erikson (1963, 1968) and J. Bowlby (1951, 1988) who have looked at the issues of adoption and attachment and discussed how an adoptee journeys through her/his life cycle. As the focus of this study is on Aboriginal adoptees, I consider culture as a central aspect to be reviewed. Culture is relevant to the developmental markers or categories of growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing for an Aboriginal person. Due to the importance of culture in the life of an Aboriginal person, this section reviews Aboriginal world view as a theoretical framework to make sense of the reality and look at experiences of adoption. Smith (2004) argues that,

Theory at its most simple level is important for indigenous people. At the very least it helps make sense of reality. It enables us to make assumptions and predictions about the world in which we live. It contains within it a method or methods for selecting and arranging, for prioritizing and legitimating what we see and do. Theory enables us to deal with contradictions and uncertainties. Perhaps control over our resistances. The language of theory can also be used as a way of organizing and determining action. It helps us to interpret what is being told to us, and to predict the consequences and what is being promised. Theory can also protect us because it contains within it a way of putting reality into perspective. If it is a good theory it also allows for new ideas and ways of looking at things to be incorporated constantly without the need to search constantly for new theories (p. 38).

The purpose for using life cycle developmental theory is to look at significant markers in the life cycle of the individual. My conceptual framework is rooted in the basic assumption that the significant markers for an adoptee are growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing. These markers correspond to the lifecycle stages of growth of an individual.

Life-span development theories review how people change over their lifetime. Developmental theory has traditionally been seen as an “ethnocentric one dominated by a Euro-American perspective” (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994, p. ix). Much of research has been based on studies that were done on European upper class people by Western researchers.

The sense of what the ideas of the West represents is important here because to a large extent theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conception of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race. Ideas about these things help determine what counts as real (Smith, 2004, p. 44).

Aboriginal peoples also have a very different world view as to what are appropriate experiences of a person during their life time. Aboriginal view is more holistic and encompasses the individual within the context of the family, community, nation and society, not as an individual but as a part of the collective while Western views sees the person as more individualistic, more concerned with the eventual separation of the person from the family or community.

### **The Works of Erikson**

Erikson’s developmental theory included eight stages with each of the stages involving a crisis or conflict that must be attended to before the person can move to the next stage (Berk, 2004; Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2005). Stage one basic trust versus mistrust, is from birth to 18 months. During this stage, the baby decides whether he can trust the world. The 2<sup>nd</sup> stage, autonomy versus shame and doubt is from 18 to 36 months. During this stage the child develops a balance between doubt and shame. The

3<sup>rd</sup> stage, initiative versus guilt is from 3-6 years and is the stage the child develops initiative when trying new things and is not overwhelmed by failure. The 4<sup>th</sup> stage, industry versus inferiority, is from 6 years to puberty. In this stage the child learns skills of the culture and confronts feelings of inferiority. The 5<sup>th</sup> stage, identity versus identity confusion, puberty to young adulthood, is the stage where the adolescent determines his own sense of self. The 6<sup>th</sup> stage, intimacy versus isolation, young adulthood is the stage when the person seeks to make commitments to others. The 7<sup>th</sup> stage, generativity versus stagnation, middle adulthood, is the time when adults are concerned with establishing and guiding the next generation. The final stage is integrity versus despair or old age. This is the time when a person achieves a sense of acceptance of their life, prepares for death or falls into despair.

There have been criticisms that Erikson's theory is cut and dry (hit a stage and complete a stage) and that is biased toward women (Papalia & Olds, 1995; Bliwise 1999). It follows linear stage process in which each person must fulfil an individual goal before they move to the next stage. Also the stages appear to have to be fulfilled during certain ages. Erikson also based most of his research on observations of males (Papalia & Olds, 1995, pp. 37-39). However, Erikson's theory has appropriately emphasized social and cultural influences and it covers the entire lifespan. As Carter and McGoldrick argue,

What Erickson's stages actually emphasize are not interdependence and the connectedness of the individual in relationships, but rather the development of individual characteristics (mostly traits of autonomy) in response to the demands of social interaction. Thus, trust, autonomy, industry, and the formulation of an identity separate from his family are supposed to carry a child to young adulthood, at which point he is suddenly supposed to know how to "love," go through middle age of "caring," and develop the "wisdom," of aging (Carter & McGoldrick 1999, p. 9).

Erikson's theory privileges an individualistic viewpoint but it recognizes the individual within her/his culture, family, community or nation.

## **Attachment Theory and the Lifecycle**

Another theme of life cycle development that has received significant attention is attachment. According to Levy & Orlans (1998),

Attachment is the deep and enduring connection established between a child and caregiver in the first several years of life. It profoundly influences every component of the human condition – mind, body, emotions, relationships, and values (p. 1).

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Waters & Cummings, 2000) have been instrumental in their work on attachment. Bowlby “introduced the term *attachment* to refer specifically to his secure base formulation of infant-adult and adult-adult ties and to distinguish it from psychodynamic and learning theory perspectives” (Ainsworth (1969) in Waters & Cummings, 2000, p. 2),

Attachment theory describes the importance of the bond that can develop between a child and his caregiver over time and space. If the caregiver is available and responds to the child when the child is in distress the child develops a working model, of his/her self as worthy (Gooden, Leung, & Hindman, 2000, p. 275).

There has been some controversy over the cultural oversights and middle-class White European roots of attachment theory. According to Yeo, (Vicary and Andrews, 2000), suggest “there is little information on how to perform culturally appropriate assessments of Aboriginal children and many psychological tests and theories are developed in the Western world and reflect the values of this particular culture ( Vicary & Andrews (2000) quoted in Yeo, 2003, p. 292). Yeo argues that “any assessment of bonding and attachment of Aboriginal children must take into account the historical, cultural and spiritual contexts. The impact of the socio-political history in Australia (and Canada) over the past 200 years continues and is still being experienced by the Aboriginal people” (Yeo, 2003, p. 293).

Bliwise (1999) indicates that one of the ironies of attachment theory is, “that attachment is defined as a behavioural system but is studied as a characteristic of



individuals” (p. 44). Attachment, she argues, changes over time as people go through the life cycle. This aspect is disregarded by most attachment researchers who “use categorical descriptions of attachment styles to identify different organizations of attachment behaviour in children or adult representations of interpersonal relations” (Bliwise, 1999, p. 47). Finally, Bliwise (1999) highlights that “absent from the research is recognition of how attachment behavioural systems are culturally informed” (p. 47). This is important as we behave toward our infants and others in ways that are consistent with social expectations and cultural values learned in our environments. We model what we have learned.

Although attachment theory has proven its relevance to describe behavioural systems, it is based on middle class ideals and disregards the cultural dimensions of safety and security for the child. Attachment is an important aspect of human development and children need safety and security. I apply some elements of attachment theory to highlight that what is important is that “children who begin their lives with the essential foundation of secure attachment fare better in all aspects of functioning as they develop” (Levy & Orlans, 1998, p. 3).

Like Erikson’s theory, attachment theory provides limited consideration of a person’s attachment to their culture, family, community or nation. An Aboriginal world view may provide a better understanding of this issue.

### **Development and Aboriginal Worldviews**

It is believed that development occurs in many areas such as physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive and social and provides markers within the life cycle, however; “recently, mainstream developmental psychology has begun to recognize that a key aspect of development is the acquisition of culture” (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994, p. x). When looking at the developmental life cycle from an Aboriginal world view, culture is very much a part of the whole. According to O’Neil (2005) “worldview is the complex motivations, perceptions, and beliefs that we internalize and that strongly affect how we

interact with other people and things in nature” (p. 1). From an “Elders way of thinking, it is not possible to understand the moccasin outside the context of the leather, which is not understandable outside the spiritual relationship of the caribou to the land” (Tharp, R. quoted in Greenfield & Cocking 1994, p. 90). In other words, everything is connected or a part of the whole.

Those who have an indigenous world-view believe that humans are not separate from nature and the supernatural. Living creatures and non-living objects in nature as well as supernatural beings are thought to be human-like in their motivations, feelings and interactions. They all are perceived as ‘thous’ rather than ‘its’. Animals, trees, rocks, spirits, and gods all possess human characteristics and can be involved with humans and their every day concerns much the same way as other people. In other words, there is not a separation of people, nature, and the spirit world. Rather there is an emotional involvement between them. Things in all three of these realms of existence can interact together just as humans do with each other (O’Neil, 2005, pp. 1-2).

According to the Aboriginal world view, there are three worlds: the physical world, the human world and the sacred world. World-views, however, involve more than just the relationship of humans to nature and the supernatural in society. Also values provide a basis for behaviour in society. In Aboriginal culture, the transmission of cultural knowledge, stories, traditions and practices are very much learned through observational learning.

For example, research on American Indian childrearing values and practices indicates that Indian children are socialized through the nurturance and teaching provided by the birth family and by the extended kinship network (Halverson, Puig, & Byers, 2002, p. 322).

Yet what happens when a child is adopted out of the community and away from his/her Elders and families?

For a society to rely on observational learning as the major mode for child socialization, adult behaviours and role performances must be available for prolonged and careful scrutiny by the children; the culture must be ‘within the direct reach of the sensory organs’ of the child (Pettit (1946) quoted in Greenfield & Cocking, 1994, p. 94).

Children are socialized to acquire skills that exist in their culture. If children do not have access to their culture are they able to learn and transmit what they should and could have learned about their culture?

In contrast to the development theories reviewed an Aboriginal perspective uses a holistic model (medicine wheel) where everything is connected. Although the medicine wheel is not used by all Aboriginal people, it is used by my ancestors the Cree. The medicine wheel provides a visual guide and displays life as a circle. All life is a circle and all is interconnected and related. Life is viewed holistically. The circle includes our intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects. From each direction there is something to learn. The East is the place of birth and new beginnings. The South is the place of time and youth. The West is the place of vision and adulthood. The North is the place of wholeness and Elder hood. Everything in the world is connected. The animals, plants, birds, insects, water, the sky, Mother Earth, we need everything to survive. There are four stages of development in this model: 1) understanding what our relationship has to do with our environment; 2) our relationship with others; 3) our relationship with ourselves and, 4) our relationship with the creator (Morrisette, McKenzie & Morrisette 1993). Within the Aboriginal world view the individual is one part and is connected to their environment, to others and to the Creator. Everything is interdependent as each component needs the others for survival. This model is holistic as it covers the whole life cycle. Cajete (2000) provides an analogy of the life cycle.

Through an understanding of “protection” (the shade of the tree), we come to see how the Earth provides for human life and well-being. In understanding the nature of “nourishment” (the fruit of the tree) we come to see what we need to grow, to live a good life. We come to understand how we are nourished through the relationships we have at all levels of our nature and from all other sources that share life with us. We also come to know that as we are nourished, so must we nourish others in turn. As a tree grows through different stages – from seed to sapling, to mature tree, and to old tree – we see that growth and change are the key dynamics of life. We also learn that growth and change reflect self-determination, movement toward our tree potential through the trials and tribulations, the “weather” of our lives. “Wholeness” is the finding and reflection of the face, heart, and foundation through which our lives become a conscious part of a greater whole,

or part of a life, process rooted to a larger past, present and future ecology of mind and spirit (p. 264).

To understand Aboriginal peoples we must understand that culture, family and tradition are important to Aboriginal people and to understand that children are seen as the future leaders.

Within the tribal world view, individuals, while acknowledged and valued, are contextualized within families, communities and cultures. Here the best interests of a child are inexorably linked to the best interests of the community and vice versa. As the child is seen as the embodiment of her culture she is therefore required to be nurtured within it (Richard, 2004, p. 102).

The children must be protected but they must be protected in a way that preserves their safety, birthright and culture. With the implementation of past practices of the residential school, child welfare and adoption Canadian society failed to understand the importance of maintaining the cultural ties. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report (1996) pointed out harmful and destructive practices that have been carried out toward and onto Aboriginal peoples, purposely genocide and assimilation. Among Aboriginal peoples of Canada there is an understanding of these historical wrongs, the cultural practices that have been forbidden are being reinitiated, the historical-political practices that have been denied and the recognition of Aboriginal peoples as unique.

In the Aboriginal World view, it is important to look at child-rearing practices, and the roles of grandparents, Elders, parents and children. Although values and practices have been altered since contact with European society (forced colonialist practices), some of the values are still present within modern Aboriginal families. Looking at the life cycle from an Aboriginal perspective, the life-span is divided into four stages: infancy/childhood, early/late youth, young/middle adulthood and adulthood/elderhood. Each of these stages is divided into two stages. Stage 1, infancy is from birth to 5 years old and childhood is from 6-12 years (National Native Association of Treatment Directors (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 82).

Traditionally, children were given the freedom to experience childhood. Infancy was considered the most important time in a person's life and parents were reminded about their roles as parents. "Many Indian people believed that infants were so close to the Creator that they still walked with one foot in the spirit world" (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 82). There was no such thing as an unwanted child as it was believed that parents were picked for the child by the grandfathers (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 83). Children were acknowledged and welcomed through ceremony. The primary task of the family during this stage was to ensure that the infant's basic needs for survival were met and that the primary task would influence all other family tasks as the child progressed through life,

If love and encouragement is present the child will usually respond out of the need to show and receive love from the family because he/she will learn that the end result of accomplishing tasks will be the love and approval of family members; in this way the infant creates love and balance within the family (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 85-86).

In the later childhood stage, this is where the learning began to escalate and gender roles became more pronounced. Parents began to teach their children the tasks associated with their roles. The adults and older children were responsible to act as teachers for the younger children. Elders acted as role models, teaching values, cultural and spiritual teachings. Survival skills were taught by role modelling through observation. Work and play were not separate. Children learned through play.

Stage 2 which is early/late youth, is divided into early youth, from 13-17 years and, later youth, from 18-21 years (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 91). Physical and emotional changes begin to happen to the child during this time. Teachings from parents, grandparents and the community prepared the young adult (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 91). The transition did not go unnoticed. There was usually a ritual and ceremony to mark the child's move to adulthood. This could have been done by a moon ceremony for the young women and a vision quest for the young men. The age of marriage varied but the adult was prepared through their previous teachings (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 91).

The later phase of youth was the time of forming relationships or when marriage most likely occurred or was arranged. Today there may be less preparation for the young adult's role because of less guidance and teaching (NNAOTD, 1989 p. 94).

Stage 3, adulthood, is divided into early phase from 21-30 years and middle years from 31-40 years (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 97). By this stage people were expected to marry and to begin their own family. Again, this event was marked through ceremony that required the joining of two families, "At this stage the young adult male/female was very familiar with the protocol of the community and knew what his/her role was within the family and community" (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 97). Adulthood was the most active time in a person's life. "It was the adults who were the workers and providers of the community. Their main task was to provide food, clothing and shelter for their community and to "ensure that the needs of Elders were met" (NNAOTD, 1989, p. 97). Marriage was viewed as the joining of two families.

The final stage which is adulthood/elderhood is divided into Grandparenthood that encompasses ages 41-60 and Elderhood that is 60 and over. This stage conveys a sign of wisdom that is acquired from a lifetime of experience and spiritual searching (NNAOTD, 1989 p. 102). The Elders pass down the traditional knowledge to the future generations. Elders had a special place within the family and community, "Elders had a very special relationship with children. In turn children learned from a very early age to love and respect old people and in a sense to have some understanding that they too would one day be the honoured and respected Elder" (NNAOTD, 1989 p. 102). Elders provided counselling and guidance to ensure good relationships. Traditionally much of the care of the children was the responsibility of the grandparent (s) or Elders. Movement through the life cycle provided challenges, learning, achievement and growth. Aboriginal children had tasks that they had to achieve before they moved on to the next stage of life. The child knew what was expected of them.

Although Erikson's eight stages of development, attachment theory and the Aboriginal developmental cycle provide diverse views of lifecycle development, they all see the individual as moving through developmental stages throughout her/his life.

Western inspired theories however tend to see bonding and the individual in isolation or within a restricted family/parent context. The concept of bonding and attachment are relevant in Aboriginal culture but the child's bond is seen not only with the caregiver, the bond is with the whole community. Within the Aboriginal view of development, a child is seen as a part of the whole. Sharing and caring for all others are important tasks that must be achieved for growth to happen. The tasks the child has to fulfil are seen as relevant to the collective. There is often acknowledgement and ceremony to mark the transitions. As the child matures, he or she takes on more responsibility as the child will ultimately have to teach others because in the Aboriginal way, experiential learning is important. We learn by observing, attempting and ultimately achieving the knowledge needed to teach others and for the traditions and practices to continue. The next generation must learn from the current one.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS AND ABORIGINAL ADOPTEES**

As the life cycle provides the basis for this study it is important to note the developmental markers that characterize the adoption experiences amongst Aboriginal adult adoptees. Based on the review of the literature and a first analysis of the life stories collected for my research work, I propose the following developmental markers: growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing. A review of relevant research in this field provides a basis for conceptualizing these developmental markers in the adoptees life.

### **Aboriginal Adoption Studies**

There is very little research conducted on the adoption of Aboriginal children who are now adults. Locust (1986) conducted a pilot study of Aboriginal adult adoptees. The study discussed the experiences of 20 Aboriginal adoptees, 9 males and 11 females who were removed from their Aboriginal families. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 72. According to Locust, Aboriginal children placed in non-Aboriginal homes are at risk for long-term psychological damage. As adults, the participants were suffering from loss

of Indian identity, loss of family, culture, heritage and tribal ceremony. They furthermore, have grown up feeling different, experiencing discrimination and showed a cognitive difference in the way the children received, processed, integrated and applied new information, in short a difference in learning style (Locust, 1998, p. 7). According to Locust, they became 'Split Feathers'.

According to Richard (2004), there is no consensus on what is in the best interests of Aboriginal children. Richard discusses his experience and practice working in the area of child welfare over a number of years. He argues against the adoption of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal families. He suggests that equal weight must be given to the cultural context of the Aboriginal child especially in the area of bonding and continuity of care. In Richards's opinion, the "best interests" perspective stands in contrast to the Aboriginal world view, as this view sees the child as separate from the family, community and culture. He suggests that the criteria used is tested on non-Aboriginal children and is based on non-scientific beliefs about an Aboriginal child's best interests. Within the framework used, the cultural context of the Aboriginal child bears little weight.

A study by the Correctional Service of Canada, Native Counselling Services of Alberta, Department of Justice Canada and the Assembly of First Nations (2001) examined the effect that childhood experiences have on criminal behaviour. The study was conducted to examine the living situations of Aboriginal offenders while growing up and considered participants experiences of adoption, foster care and group homes. The researchers interviewed 175 Aboriginal and 148 non-Aboriginal offenders in seven federal and prairie institutions and found that a significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders was involved in the child welfare system when they were children. 63% of the Aboriginal offenders said that they had been adopted or placed in foster or group homes at some point in their childhood. This was compared to 36% of non-Aboriginal offenders. The study indicated that involvement in the child welfare system is related to instability during childhood and adolescence (Trevethan, Auger, Moore, MacDonald & Sinclair, 2001).



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Bagley & Young (1991) conducted research with 93 families with 19 of the families having adopted a child of Native origin. Bagley also used a control group of children who grew up with their parents on rural reserves and eventually ended up with a pool of 37 Native and 20 inter country children aged 13 to 17 for the study. The authors found that by the age of 15, one-fifth of the Native adoptees had separated from their adoptive parents. A follow up two years later indicated that nearly one-half of the Native adoptees but none of the inter country adoptees had separated from their parents. Results of the study indicated that Native child adoptees are significantly more likely to be involved in problems and difficulties with their adoptive family. Overall, the Native adoptee had poorer self-esteem, suicidal ideas or committed acts of deliberate self harm. Bagley concluded that Native children do have poorer adjustment than white adoptees. The cause of the poorer adjustment is unknown but the authors suggest that conflicts over ethnicity might be a factor. In a later study, Bagley & Young (1996) concluded that it is not entirely clear why outcomes for Native adoptees should be much worse than those for white adopted children and for inter country adoptees. What was clear was that Native children adopted by white parents in the sample did have much lower levels of adjustment, more problems with depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideas, and much higher levels of acting-out behaviour (p. 68).

### **Age at Adoption**

Research has examined the age variations among adoptees when adopted in infancy (Amnesty International Canada, 2004), in childhood (Native Child & Family Services of Toronto, Stevenato & Associates & Janet Budgell, 1999; York, 1990) and in adolescence (York, 1990). Some theorists believe that the age of adoption does not significantly impact on the adoption experience but Levy & Orlans (1998) argue that the key factors in regard to severity of attachment disorder are the child's age at adoption and the number of prior placements.

Triseliotis (1973) study on adoption identified three areas which have important implications for adoption practice. The developing child's need for a warm and secure

family life; the adoptees vulnerability to experiences of loss, rejection or abandonment; and the adopted persons need to know as much as possible about the circumstances of their adoption and about their genealogical background.

Neil (2000) aimed to present an up to date picture of the reason why children are placed for adoption in Britain. She used questionnaires that social workers had completed on 168 recently adopted children. Neil suggested that the adoptees need to know why placement for adoption was necessary is often central to identity concerns. The study looked at three groups those relinquished as infants, those whose parents had requested adoption in complex circumstances and those children required to be adopted by social services or the courts. It was suggested that children have different and complex identity issues to deal with. Poor pre-placement care, changes of carers and late placement could have implication for the children's capacity to process issues that affect identity.

### **The Telling of the Adoption Story**

A controversial aspect of psychosocial practice is about the correct time to tell a child that they are adopted. Sorosky, Baran & Pannor (1979, p. 79) believe that "all adoption experts view the adoption revelation as a necessity and as a means of establishing an open, honest relationship devoid of any hidden deception" with the adoptee. Rosenberg (1992) states that, "more research has indicated that children under the age of 6 or 7 lack the capacity to understand the concepts of adoptive and biological parenthood" (p. 96).

Brodzinsky, Singer & Braff (1984) interviewed 200 adopted and non-adopted children regarding their understanding of adoption. The results indicated clear developmental trends in the children's knowledge and understanding of adoption. The authors suggest that one of the most difficult problems confronting adopted parents is dealing with the revelation process of adoption, particularly when and what to tell the children about their adoption stories. In a previous study conducted by Brodzinsky,

Pappas, Singer & Braff (1984) it was found that few 6-year olds understood the difference between adoption and birth as alternate paths to parenthood. However, that with increasing age, changes occur in children's understanding of the components of the adoption experience. The results of the 1984 study suggest that most pre-school children do not understand much about adoption but by the age of 6 children begin to differentiate between birth and adoption and they understand the permanence of the adoptive family relationship. Between 8 and 11 the conception of adoption broadens. The overall results are similar to the 1981 study and suggest that children's adoption knowledge undergoes clear changes in development. According to the authors, most adoption experts suggest early telling before the age of 5 with the reasons being the "desire to establish a trusting relationship with the child, desire to reveal adoption information in a warm, loving and protected family environment, desire to facilitate a sense of confidence and positive self image in the child, desire to provide the child with at least a basic understanding of his/her unique family status" (Brodzinsky, Pappas, Singer & Braff, 1984, p. 876). Success, however, cannot be "measured by what, how much, or even when information is revealed but only by what the child is capable of understanding and accepting at a given point" (Brodzinsky, Pappas, Singer & Braff, 1984, p. 878).

Rosenberg (1992, p. 130) argued that "The content, quality, circumstances, and timing of the disclosure of the adoption will interact with the child's developmental state" and determine how the child will respond. When being told about their adoption some children may become distressed and act out emotionally and behaviourally. Some may get defensive. Others may see themselves as being special. According to some of the authors (Rosenberg, 1992; Smith, 1997; Lifton, 1988, 1994) the telling can be life changing and is a very important time in the child's life. There are also different ways of telling the story such as the Chosen Baby, the Adoptee as Mythic Hero, the Adoptee as Double, and the Adoptee as Survivor (Lifton, 1988, pp. 19-42). No matter how the story was told, there is agreement in the literature that the child needs to be told about their adoption and that "they should be told by their parents early enough so that they are most unlikely to hear it from others" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 130).

Howe, Shemmings & Feast (2001) looked at the age at placement of adoptees and the current level of contact with both their adoptive family and birth parents. They found that 77% of searchers and 84% of non-searchers were placed for adoption before they were 1 year old. The findings suggest that placement after the age of 2 years, particularly if the searchers were female, presents an increased risk of the children experiencing their adoption negatively. The researchers found that earlier placed children were least likely to feel different from their adoptive families and most likely to feel that they belonged and feel loved. Older age at placement increased the risk of more negative outcomes. Another interpretation from the study was that answers to questions about the adoptees background would help the adoptee to resolve issues of identity as the most common reason for searching was getting more information about them.

### **Transracial Adoption**

Numerous studies have been completed on transracial adoption particularly with African American children adopted by white adoptive parents (Hollingsworth, 2002; de Haymes & Simon, 1993; Burrow & Finley, 2004; Feigelman, 2000; Hayes 1993; Bagley, 1993). Hollingsworth (2002) suggests that other studies on transracial adoption have focused on racial/ethnic identity, self-esteem, and psychological adjustment, quality of family life and intellectual functioning and academic achievement (p. 290).

Feigelman (2000) did a follow up to a previous study on transracial and inracial children who were adopted in infancy in the mid 1970s. The study was done through parental assessments and compared 151 Asian, 33 African-American and 19 Latino adoptees. The study showed no significant adjustment problems. It found that transracial adoptive parents who lived in predominantly white communities tended to have adoptees that experienced more discomfort with their appearance than those who lived in integrated settings (p. 180). The study however, showed no correlation between the age at adoption and adoptees' adjustment problems. Bagley (1993) did a 12-year follow up of a group of transracial adoptees in the late 1970s. He found that the outcomes of the adoption were generally excellent. There was no evidence that intercultural identity leads

to unfavourable adjustment and Bagley suggests that transracial adoption should be considered for all children who cannot be placed with their own racial group.

### **Adjustment of Adoptees**

Numerous studies have explored adjustment among adoptees. Haugaard (1998) looked at the body of research involved in the issue that adoption increases a risk for the development of adjustment problems. He looked at two explanations, biases in referral and the influence of the adjustment problems in adopted and non adopted populations. He found that the clinically based literature shows that adopted children are over represented in outpatient and inpatient settings and that this suggests a prevalence of mental health problems in adopted children. In non clinical samples, the picture is different as the "studies found few or no differences in the mental health of the adopted and non adopted children and adolescents" (p. 59). Smith & Brodzinsky (2002) looked at the relationship among adopted children's appraisal of birth parent loss, their coping strategies for managing the loss and child and parent reports of the child's adjustment. Eighty-two 8-12 year old adopted children and one of their parents participated. A questionnaire was used for the children. The questionnaire looked at the negative affect about birth parent loss, their curiosity about birth parents, use of coping strategies to manage their distress and their levels of depression, anxiety and social competence. The children who had a higher level of negative affect about birthparent loss also had higher levels of depression and lower self-worth. Curiosity about birth parents predicted externalizing behaviour. Wierzbicki (1993) conducted an analysis of 66 published studies which compared psychological adjustment of adoptees and non-adoptees. Adoptees were found to have higher levels of externalizing disorders and academic problems although the study did not look at the causes of the increases of the problems.

Lanz, Iafrate, Rosnati & Scabini (1999) looked at 450 adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 (160 from intact non-adoptive families, 140 from separated or divorced families and 150 from intercountry adoptive families) to see whether there was differences in parent-child communication and in adolescent self-esteem among adoptive,

separated and intact non-adoptive families. Results showed that adolescents from separated families have more difficulties and that adopted children have more positive communication with their parents than biological children. However, adoptees showed lower self-esteem than the other two groups. Saiz & Main (2004) looked at the early recollections of 30 adopted and 30 non-adopted adults to discuss four variables, grief and loss, abandonment, concerns about parental efficacy and loss of control. The findings suggest the themes of grief and loss, abandonment, concern for parental efficacy and loss of control are all present in the early recollections of adoptees.

A significant amount of research has been done on the bonding and attachment of adoptees. Soo See Yeo (2003) looked at bonding and attachment of Australian Aboriginal children. He notes that Australian Aboriginal children are nine times more likely to live in out of home care and suggests that most assessments on Australian indigenous families are based on the dominant Australian communities' perception of what constitutes competent parenting. He questions whether the decisions are ethically sound and culturally appropriate. Borders, Penny & Portnoy (2000) compared 100 adoptees and their friends on psychosocial well-being by looking at similarities in life satisfaction, life regrets, and purpose in life, intimacy and substance abuse and differences in connectedness, depression and self-esteem. There were little differences other than in chemical dependence, social support, self-esteem, depression, and seeking counselling. Four scored above the cut off in the area of substance abuse and the four were adoptees. Adoptees felt that they had less social support from their family and friends, had lower self-esteem, more depression and were more likely to have sought psychological counselling.

### **Search and Reunion Practices**

A significant body of the literature focuses on search, reunion and reunification (Lifton, 1988; Lyons, 2000). According to Sachdev (1992) what propels most adoptees to search is,

their compelling need to attain a more cohesive identity. Because they had been cut off from their past they felt a void, a missing link, a discontinuity in life. By knowing that they belong to their genetic roots and that they look like someone related to them by blood, they hoped to experience the life they lost by separation. Behind the overlay of informational need lay the emotional pain, hurt, and frustration of the loss of years (pp. 3-4).

Lifton (1994) sustains that this is the search is universal; it is a search for Home.

We can see the search for Home as a universal quest, but for the adopted person it is also a literal one. It is a quest for the beginning of one's narrative; for the lost mother; for unconditional love; for meaning; for the recovery of lost time; for a coherent sense of self; for security; for form and structure; for grounding and centering. The search for Home reflects the adoptees need for biological, historical, and human connectedness. (p. 127).

Sachdev (1992) did a follow up study which looked at the experiences of 124 Anglo-Saxon adoptees that had completed a reunion with their biological mothers and relatives. Four measures were used to look at the outcome, the frequency of meetings, the nature of the initial relationship and how it changed over time, the degree of satisfaction and the adoptees overall feelings of accomplishment. He found that the main motivator to search was the need to find out more information about their identity, "Because they had been cut off from their past they felt a void, a missing link, a discontinuity in life" (Sachdev, 1992, p. 3). Another important reason was "their desire to share the period of life they had lost by separation and to assure their biological mother they were well cared for" (p. 4). Sachdev found that adoptees most distressing fears regarding searching were "being disloyal to the adoptive parents and that it could prove disruptive to the biological mother's life" (p. 5). There was also the fear that the biological mother might not want to meet them. The reunion experiences were characterized by many emotions and questions about the past with most of the adoptees being pleased with their decision to search.

Sobol & Cardiff (1983) conducted a Canadian study on adult adoptees searching for their birth parents. Participants were in various stages of the search from no involvement to reunion. According to the researchers "increased searching was found to be related to a traumatic adoption revelation, knowledge of circumstances of birth and

adoption, strained adoptive family relationships, poor self-concept, the experiencing of stressful life events and a belief that having been adopted made one feel different and incomplete” (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983, p. 477). Most reasons given for wanting to search was “a desire for genealogical history, to increase their sense of identity and to establish a relationship with birth parents” (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983, p. 477). Those who did not search did not want to hurt their adoptive or birth parents.

Howe & Feast (2001) looked at the experiences of 48 adult adopted people who first had contact with their birth mothers at least eight years prior to the survey. The outcomes were examined according to the adopted person’s evaluation of her/his experience and the frequency of contact. The study found that women were more likely to remain in contact than men were. Adoptees who said they ‘felt different’ when growing up were more likely to remain in contact than those who said they did not feel different. Adoptees who have felt they did not ‘belong’ when growing up were more likely to remain in contact than those who said they felt they ‘belonged’. Adoptees that felt uncertain or disagreed that they loved their adoptive mother were more likely to remain in contact. Those who felt uncertain or disagreed that their adoptive mother loved them as a child were more likely to remain in contact with their birth mother, and those adoptees who evaluated their overall experience of adoption as mixed or negative were more likely to remain in contact (pp. 355-356). According to the researchers “gaps in one’s biography and feelings of unresolved loss mean that questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Why was I rejected and placed for adoption?’ remain important (Howe & Feast, 2001, p. 363). The need to find out the answers to these questions is significant to the need to search. However, even eight years after reunion, “those surveyed said that their primary relationship was still with their adoptive mother, even in those cases where a long-term relationship had been established with their birth mother” (p. 364). But still the need to “have a sense of genealogical and genetic connectedness appears strong as it is part of the drive that motivates people to search” (Howe & Feast, 2001, p. 365).



## **Outcomes of Adoption**

Another highly researched area in this field is outcomes of adoption. Brodzinsky's (1993) review of literature indicates that most adoptees are well within the normal range of functioning but they are more vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, and academic problems than non adoptees (p. 153). The focus of his study is primarily on those adoptees that were placed in infancy and those placed within their own race. Brodzinsky defines and explains a stress and coping model of children's adoption adjustment which looks at biological variables, child characteristics, environmental variables, cognitive appraisal, coping efforts and adaptational outcome. Silverman (1993) reviewed the literature on transracial adoption. He suggests that delay in placement and pre placement problems have a negative impact on the developmental and adjustment of these children. According to Silverman, "most transracial adoptees have a sense of identity with their racial heritage, but the strength of this identity depends, to a large degree, on the commitment of the adoptive parents to foster it" (p. 104).

## **SUMMARY OF LITERATURE FINDINGS**

The roots grow scattered in many directions. The over representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system has been well documented. The views of Aboriginal people on this topic take the reader into an understanding of the historical wrongs that have been inflicted on not only Aboriginal children but also Aboriginal people in general. Aboriginal children have for far too long taken the brunt of racist and paternalistic ideologies that in effect may not be looking after the 'best interests of the child'. The past adoption practices of placing Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal homes justify this belief. However, adoption is an alternative to a life in care and this practice must be viewed as an alternative.

From the literature review, we begin to understand that there is a lack of adult Aboriginal adoptees voices and views about adoption in the literature. There has been minimal work completed on this important issue. Locust (1986; 1998) looked at the

placement of Aboriginal adoptees in non-Aboriginal homes with a focus on discussing the loss of Indian identity and loss of culture. Another study discussed participant's feelings about the child welfare system and Richard (2004) provided a question of the definition of in "the best interests of the child". He asks us to question in whose best interest does the best interests' guideline follow? Trevethan, Auger, Moore, MacDonald & Sinclair (2001) provided the acknowledgement of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal offenders who were involved in the child welfare system as children. This study discusses the correlation between the child welfare system and the prison system. Bagley's (1996) study concluded that Aboriginal children adopted by non-Aboriginal parents have poorer adjustments and more problems with depression, low self-esteem and suicidal ideas but the cause of this is unknown.

Other research and studies have reviewed the affect the age at placement can have on the future of adoptees and the importance of the telling of the adoption story. Transracial adoption, another important area was reviewed along with the psychological affects and adjustment issues of adoption. Search and reunion was another area of research that was reviewed. Researchers looked at which adoptees searched, what prompted the search and measured the outcomes of reunions with birth family. According to the researchers adoptees wanted to know "Who am I?" and "Why was I rejected and placed for adoption?" Other researchers looked at the closeness of the adoptee with his biological and adoptive family. The researchers suggested that there were structural, interactive, motivating and values and outlooks which had an affect on how close the adoptee felt with both sets of families. Although adoption is a life long journey, other researchers have looked at the outcomes of adoption.

This chapter reviewed the historical, social and political views of adoption. A review of the history of adoption provided the knowledge that the adoption of another person's child has been in existence since time immemorial, this is especially apparent within the Aboriginal community where adoption has been a traditional practice. Adoption is seen as an alternative for children who through circumstances were and are

unable to live with their parents. Legislation and policies guide today the practices of adoption.

The conceptual framework provides a way of looking at the issue of adoption. Western models of development such as Erikson's eight stages of development and Bowlby's attachment theory were reviewed (Waters & Cummings, 2000). These models are based on Western ideals and may be biased when looking at the issue of adoption from an Aboriginal perspective. A suggestion is that the life cycle should be looked at through an Aboriginal world view using an Aboriginal life cycle model which incorporates culture and the past knowledge and practices that are still in use in some Aboriginal communities today.

This look at the roots of adoption has provided a means to review the issue of adoption from a more holistic view. The review of the historical, social, political, theories and literature shows that the voices of adult Aboriginal adoptees are very much absent from the issue of the adoption of Aboriginal children. It is this knowledge that guides the researcher in seeking the voices of those involved to be heard. The next chapter provides a description of the research design and methodologies used in this study.

## **CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY: TRUNK**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter, the Trunk or the methodology provides the base for the study and thesis. It analyzes how the research proceeded and was completed. This qualitative study used categorical content analysis and used an Aboriginal life cycle developmental approach that is based on an Aboriginal world view. Oral history methods, specifically storytelling were also incorporated as traditional Western methods of research can be frustrating for Aboriginal peoples. In this study, I was aware that Western methodologies can be seen as “ethnocentric research methodology that is culturally remote and often unacceptable to the Indigenous epistemological approach to knowledge” (Foley, 2003, p. 44). For this reason, Aboriginal life cycle development, Aboriginal world view and oral history were used because I believe that research with Aboriginal people must be aware of the detrimental impact that traditional research and Western research methodologies, have had on Aboriginal peoples.

Not all of the storytellers viewed themselves as Aboriginal and some did not know their cultural ways. My intent was not to impose a world view on the storytellers but to look at their experiences and influences with adoption from an Aboriginal world view. Looking at an issue from two diverse perspectives can have an influence on the outcomes of the study and as the research involved the transmission of knowledge through storytelling, it seemed appropriate to use the methods that have been used in Aboriginal society since time immemorial. For this study, I conducted oral history interviews. This chapter presents the rationale supporting my methodological approach, describes the procedures followed and importantly, the participant’s or storytellers in the study.

## ABORIGINAL WORLD VIEW

Within an Aboriginal worldview, storytelling is an important cultural practice and serves to fulfil how information is passed on to others. "Traditional teachings are conveyed through example, through stories and songs, in ceremonies and most importantly, through engagement with the natural world which is governed by laws of life just as human beings are" (Castellano, 2004, p.100). The stories of the experiences and influence that adoption has had on Aboriginal adults while they go through infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood or the developmental markers of growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing informed this study. To understand the Aboriginal adoptees experiences with adoption, one must understand the person in the situation and hear the adoptees story. From an Aboriginal perspective, it is important to understand the legacy of colonization and assimilation practices and how these practices have impacted on the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Adoption itself, some argue is another attempted assimilation practice, that has replaced the Residential School by removing children from their families, communities and nations (Fournier & Crey, 1997). It is through the stories told by the participant's that we are able to understand what has occurred during their life cycle.

Oral knowledge brings a metaphysical presence and a natural, holistic, intuitive, and spiritual response to the research context. Thereby, a qualitative research approach is more compatible with traditional ways of knowing, as it examines relationships and the whole (Crazy Bull, quoted in Struthers, 2001, p. 126).

Within Aboriginal cultures, storytelling has traditionally been the means of passing information on to others. Children learned through the stories told to them by others in their family and community.

The persons, who are most knowledgeable about physical and spiritual reality, the teaching and practice of ceremonies, and the nuances of meaning in Aboriginal languages, are Elders. Elders typically have been educated in the oral tradition, apart from the colonizing influence of the school system. They carry credentials that are recognizable within Aboriginal society, but invisible to those who assess expertise on the basis of formal education. They enjoy respect as sources of

wisdom because their way of life expresses the deepest values of their respective cultures. In many cases, they have exceptional skills in transmitting those values to those who seek their counsel (Castellano, 2004, p. 101).

The stories and the analysis conducted are a form of narrative research. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998) believe that “narrative research refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative material” (p. 2). In effect, “a story is somebody’s story” (Bruner, 1990 p. 54). Stories “give order to the world and help us shape our experiences (McLeod, 2000, p. 1; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998),

...stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world; at the same time, however, they shape and construct the narrator’s personality and reality. The story is one’s identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell (p. 7).

Within traditional Aboriginal culture, it is through the stories that we learn about our ancestors and about our traditions. Oral history provides a way of gaining insight into people’s experiences, “oral narrative offers a unique and provocative means of gathering information central to understanding lives and viewpoints” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 43). The use of storytelling can be very empowering as telling stories allows people to speak about issues in a safe environment.

More frequently our history lives as a personal narrative - remembered and told inside our head. Throughout the passage of our lives we only ever speak about the past through our memories, the mental impressions we retain and are able to recall. These memories and the stories we tell about them help explain our identity and place in the world (Veale & Schilling, 2004, pp. 2-3).

The stories in a sense, give people their voice (McAdams, 1993, p. 27) and through the story we realize that “the larger story reveals a strong rhetorical strand, as if justifying why it was necessary (not causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) that the life had gone a particular way. The self as narrator, not only recounts but justifies” (Bruner, 1990, p. 121). The stories give voice to peoples experiences.

This means that we may gain an insight into the changes in people's values and the landscapes and places they consider important through their lives and experiences. Moreover, we may learn from recording the stories and memories that are passed from one generation to the next how different values become part of social memory and history and be able to track the shifts in values between the present and the past (Veale & Schilling, 2004, p. 8).

My goal in this study was to make the experience of being interviewed as safe and respectful as possible. I wanted any "negative perceptions about research to be shifted and replaced with a positive view" (Meseyton, 2005, p. 33). The intent was to create research that would be relevant to the Aboriginal community, other adoptees and those involved in the adoption field. From an Aboriginal perspective, oral history provides a look into the past and a lesson for the future. The storytellers or participants will reveal their stories through their own words.

## STORYTELLERS

The storytellers were eight self-identified Aboriginal adults (six females and two males) over 19, living in the Vancouver lower mainland, adopted\* in infancy or childhood. They ranged in age from 30-54. Five of the storytellers are of Cree descent, one is Carrier, another Tahltan and the final is Kwakwaka'wakw<sup>1</sup>. Two of the storytellers were born in Manitoba, three in Alberta, and three in British Columbia. The age at the time of adoption ranged from 10 days to two years of age. All of the storytellers were placed or adopted into non-Aboriginal homes. Figure 1 presents a description of the participants in this study.

Participant Gender	Aboriginal Identity	Current Age	Born	Age at placement	Placement in Aboriginal/Non Aboriginal
Female	Dene/Cree/Scottish	54	Manitoba	5 Months	Non Aboriginal
Female	Cree/Irish	49	Alberta	16 Months	Non Aboriginal
Female	Kwakwa 'kwak	31	British Columbia	2 Years	Non Aboriginal
Female	Carrier	53	British Columbia	10 Months	Non Aboriginal
Male	Cree	53	Manitoba	2 Weeks	Non Aboriginal
Female	Cree	50	Alberta	3 Months	Non Aboriginal
Female	Tahltan	32	British Columbia	10 Days	Non Aboriginal
Male	Cree	30	Alberta	2 Years	Non Aboriginal

Figure 1 – List of Participants

\*NOTE: One of the storytellers was not adopted but spent from the ages of 2 to 8 away from his family with the intent for his adoption. Another participant was not legally adopted.

<sup>1</sup> The participant's were from various geographical locations. Cree which are Algonquian and are as far west as Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Northern Alberta; Chipewyan who are Athapaskan from the Northern Prairie Provinces; Carrier who are Athapaskan and are in the British Columbia interior; Tahltan which are Athapaskan and are located in the Yukon Territory and Northern British Columbia region; Kwakwaka'wakw: who are Wakashan and are located in the Northeast Vancouver Island area.



The study applied criterion-based selection. The storyteller's were recruited through a third party recruiter. Information about the study (Appendix A and B) was forwarded to a person who had knowledge about the issue of the adoption of Aboriginal children and who had previously worked in the adoption reunification area. This person forwarded the information (Appendix A and B) to possible participants under the condition that the third person recruiter would not know who decided to participate in the study. Vancouver Native Housing and the Native Education Centre were sent a letter requesting permission to display a recruitment poster (Appendix B). Posters (Appendix B) were placed at the Native Education Centre and posted in each of the Vancouver Native Housing buildings. Storytellers who had agreed to be a part of the study forwarded the information about the study through word of mouth or snowball sampling (someone passing on the information to another person). The criterion applied was that the storytellers be Aboriginal adults, over 19, who were adopted in infancy, childhood or adolescence and who were willing to discuss their adoption experiences. The reason for using these criteria was that as the participants would be adults, they could give informed consent. Anyone who was unable to give informed, voluntary consent, anyone who did not speak a language of familiarity of the study researcher would be excluded from the study.

The research student was contacted through e-mail or telephone. As the participants that were contacted through the 3<sup>rd</sup> party recruiter had already been forwarded the information about the study and letter of consent, they were asked to forward the signed consent to the student researcher or researcher. The student researcher spoke with each of the participants and arranged a time for the interview.

## **INTERVIEW PROCESS**

Maxwell (1996) considers interviewing "a valuable way (the only way, for events that took place in the past or ones to which you cannot gain observational access) of gaining a description of actions and events" (p. 76). It is through discussing and asking questions that we find out information. Oral history is both about personal stories and the

memories that people tell other people about the past (Veale & Schilling, 2004). The interview, in a sense, relies on memory. It is a personal reconstruction of the past and no two people will have the same experience.

In recent times historians and others have turned their attentions to the questions circulating around identity, narrative and historical memory – how people make sense of and remember their past, how they connect their experience to what happens around them, how their past is remembered in the present and how they explain their lives in relation to the world they occupy (Veale & Schilling, 2004, pp. 3-4).

An excellent tool to provide a look into the past and present is the personal interview. Twelve people initially contacted the researcher and the first eight participants were interviewed for the study. Each of the participants contacted the researcher to arrange a time for the interview. Interviews were arranged based on the participant's schedules and were held at a location chosen by the participant. At the interview, I reviewed with the participants that they have the right not to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable with. Additionally, since sensitive topics were being discussed, the participant was reassured that s/he did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to answer and reassured that identifying information would not be used in the process. The interview ended with a debriefing about issues arising in the interview to give the interviewer and storyteller the opportunity to discuss experiences and assure the safety of the storytellers.

The interview consisted of 6 open-ended interview questions. Data was obtained by a narrative approach to storytelling. Questions were asked and the participants responded to the questions with their own views and words as it was their stories that were being told.

As the focus of the study was on the lifecycle, it seemed appropriate to develop questions that were relevant to experiences and influences during the life stages. Of particular importance were the significant experiences and influences that the participants discussed during each of these stages. Questions were developed which sought to seek

out this information. Participants were asked the following open-ended research questions: 1) Tell me about you. Who are you? 2) What story were you told about your adoption? At what age? 3) What is your most significant memory from childhood? 4) What is your most significant memory from adolescence? 5) What is your most significant memory from adulthood? 6) Is there anything else that you would like to say about your experience with adoption? Or that you want others to know about you?

Each of the interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes (1 ½ to 2 hours). Six of the interviews took place at the Native Education Centre and one in a restaurant, in Vancouver, between February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005 and March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005. The final interview was on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005 at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Vancouver. Interviews were audio-taped for data collection and the research student wrote notes after each interview. Aboriginal protocol was initiated in asking permission to interview each participant and informed consent was obtained with the participant being given a copy of his or her signed consent. Participant's were given tobacco (which is customary protocol for a person to offer an Aboriginal person a gift as acknowledgement of their participation and a custom amongst the Cree, displaying respect for the sharing of knowledge), and a small gift as a way of thanking the participant.

The interview process was a very important part of the study and I made sure that the tape was working, that there were limited disturbances and that the interviewee would be as comfortable as possible as the participants were sharing an important aspect of their life.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of the study was to hear the stories and voices of Aboriginal children, now adults who have been involved in the experience of adoption. The intent was to gain an understanding of adoption and how it has influenced Aboriginal adoptees lives and to gain knowledge that can make a difference in the practice of the adoption of Aboriginal children. The study sought out to answer the following questions: What are the

influences that adoption has on Aboriginal adults adopted in infancy, childhood, or adolescence as they go through their life cycle? What are the stories that Aboriginal adults tell about their experiences of adoption? How do the stories speak of the influence that experiences of adoption have on Aboriginal adult's life cycle?

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The process of data analysis is very time consuming. Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. As the analysis contained the story of the lives of the storytellers it was important to verify that what was transcribed was what the storyteller had said. It was very important to keep the storytellers involved in the process. After each transcription was completed, interviewees were given a copy of the transcripts for review, editing and revision to assure accuracy. After transcription of data and review from the storytellers, the researcher analyzed the data by looking at the transcripts line by line and at the content and categories that emerged. Notes were taken as the researcher read each transcript. Transcripts were read and reread. The researcher kept in contact with the storytellers to ask for their input throughout the process.

An initial set of categories were compiled and brought back to the storytellers. The categories were placed in a medicine wheel as the medicine wheel is a traditional learning and understanding tool used by some Aboriginal people. I considered the medicine wheel an appropriate way to display the categories as it is known to many First Nations people and it is a visual guide.

Medicine wheels can be pedagogical tools for teaching, learning, contemplating, and understanding our human journeys at individual, band/community, nations, global, and even cosmic levels (Calliou, quoted in Battiste, 1995 p. 51).

The medicine wheel has four directions and "each direction generally corresponds to a phase of human evolution" (Calliou, quoted in Battiste, 1995, p. 53) or the life cycle.

The medicine wheel conveys concepts derived from introspection and illustrates the pathways to self-discovery, the first door to mystery. They speak, in the silence of the unknown, about the progressive growth of self through a cyclical journey of repetition, experience, and construction of meaning (Ermine in Battiste, 1995, p. 106).

The four quadrants are placed in a circle as the circle symbolizes “the continuity and connectedness of events with the added dynamism of movement” (Calliou quoted in Battiste, 1995, p. 51). There is no one particular version of the medicine wheel (Calliou in Battiste, 1995, p. 51), the wheel can be adapted for each individual.

After the medicine wheel and the categories were reviewed, the storytellers forwarded their revisions and suggestions. A new set of categories emerged which looked at significant developmental markers during the life cycle of an Aboriginal adoptee, specifically, growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing (see figure 2).

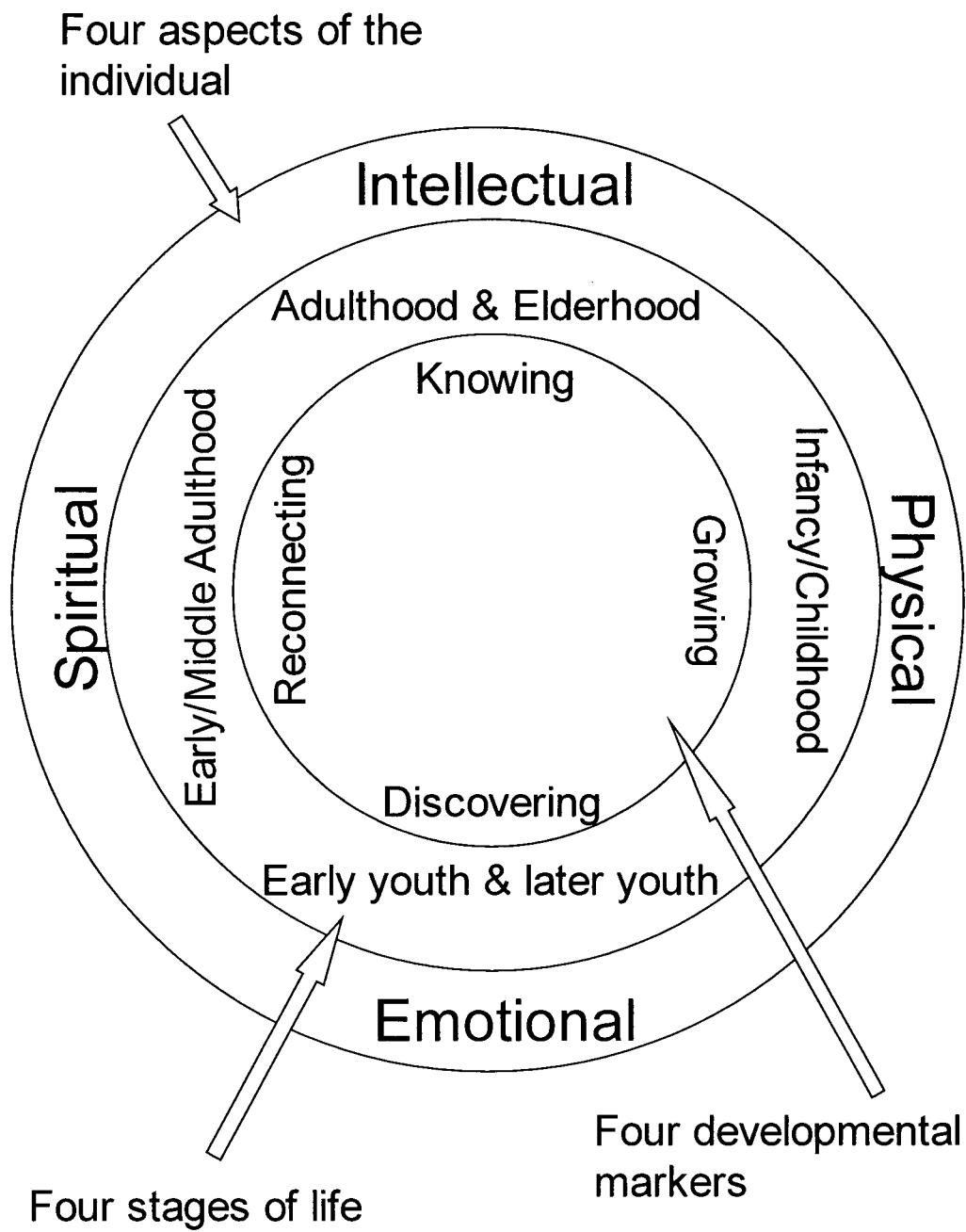


Figure 2 – Model of Categories

The categories were brought back to the storytellers for their review. Transcripts were read and reread. Categories and quotes that fell into the category were highlighted in specific colours. The categories and quotes were then taken out of the transcripts and placed into a different file. I then had another set of transcripts, with categories and quotations. These transcripts were read line by line and relevant quotes were highlighted again. A final set of categories were developed and placed into a medicine wheel.

The medicine wheel depicts each of the four aspects of an individual (physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual), the four stages of development (infancy/childhood, early and later youth, early and middle adulthood, adulthood and Elderhood) and the four categories (growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing) which emerged in the model.

According to Figure 2 above, starting in the east (physical), the time of infancy and childhood is a time of growing. This is the time when the child grows from infant to child. Moving toward the south, this is the time of early and later youth. It is during this period when a youth goes through the many changes and challenges that are put in his/her path. The theme that came out of the stories indicates a major achievement during this time is discovering who they are. This is the time of preparing for the future of decision making and of searching for love and companionship. It is also an emotional time.

The next phase of the life cycle takes the adoptee to the western doorway (spiritual), the merging of spirituality. This is the time of early and middle adulthood. A period of quiet reflection and a time of asking questions of themselves and others to gain an understanding. This search for understanding can ultimately lead the adoptee to reconnect with the past by beginning to ask questions and start the search for their birth family or the time of reconnecting.

The final phase of this model is the northern direction (intellectual). This is the time of adulthood and Elder hood. It is the time of knowing. This is the time of putting together all of the pieces of the persons life, to reflect back on all the knowledge of what

they have gained about their past and present, to ultimately lead to knowledge of who they have developed into as a person within this cycle of life.

The visual display or medicine wheel provides a format and visualizes the storyteller's life cycle. It presents a holistic view of development because,

Humans are not vertical beings with four separate, pull-out drawers in which to store emotions, thoughts, physical sensations or spiritual enlightenment. The production of knowledge is a holistic, self-constructed process (Calliou, in Battiste 1995 p. 53).

No two people will follow the same life path or journey. Figure 2 presents the working model for my analysis. It is assumed that adoptees will go through the stages of developmental stages of growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing, however, this cannot be generalized to the larger population due to the small size of the research.

## **VALIDITY**

According to Maxwell (1996), validity is "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation or other sort of account" (p. 87). Validity was addressed in this study by transcribing the interviews verbatim. Transcripts were then provided to the storytellers for their review and correction of any errors in interpretation.

Maxwell (1996) considers that, "the main threat to valid interpretation is imposing one's own framework or meaning, rather than understanding the perspective of the people studied and the meanings they attach to their words and actions (pp. 89-90). As with the transcripts, the categories, and later on themes, were also brought back to the storytellers for their review. The storytellers provided their feedback and comments on the categories. This was a process of putting the categories on a medicine wheel and forwarding the wheel to the storytellers for their review. After many examples and



suggestions for categories, a final wheel emerged. This same process was done with the themes.

The storytellers were provided with a copy of the first draft of the thesis to verify whether their stories were portrayed accurately and with respect. Their feedback and comments were vital for this study that seeks to validate their voices and experiences and display with accuracy their life stories.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As the storytellers discussed personal experiences which were often painful, there was a risk they could become distressed. Sage, a traditional prairie medicine was available for smudging for participants who became distressed during the interview. As a social worker, I was also available for listening and providing emotional support. I also had a list of appropriate resources should a participant require follow up assistance.

I played various roles in this experience. I was the interviewer, an Aboriginal person but also, I was a member of the adoption circle. Being aware of my multiple roles helped me to stay focused, present and aware.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Although the intent of the study was to interview people adopted in infancy, childhood and adolescence, all of the storytellers were adopted in infancy or childhood so they do not represent those who were adopted in adolescence. Only two of the storytellers were male so this study does not present a comprehensive analysis of Aboriginal male adoptees. Also, the youngest storyteller was 30 and the oldest was 54 so the less than 30 and over 54 age groups are not represented. A final consideration in this study was that all of the storytellers were adopted into non-Aboriginal homes so the study does not examine those who were adopted into Aboriginal homes.

## **RESEARCHERS NOTES**

Within this study the researcher has chosen to:

1. Use pseudonyms for the participants.
2. If pauses occur by the participants they are incorporated by three dots (...).
3. If the researcher used a part of a long quote this is described in the transmission by brackets and three dots [...].

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter provided a description of the research design of this study. I discussed the research methodologies used which included categorical content analysis and an Aboriginal world view. I then briefly described the storytellers and took the reader through the interview process and data analysis including the categories for the study. I further discussed the issue of validity, ethical considerations, limitations and researchers notes.

The following chapter presents the results of the study. The chapter first gives a brief introduction of the storytellers then the results are separated into the four aspects of the individual, the four stages of development, and the four categories of the individuals.

*My soul cannot connect  
No flesh and blood reveal  
My countenance knows no mother,  
And this existence makes me weak  
To float from room to room.  
Uncertain of any past.  
Your immortality makes you bold,  
And me a jealous fiend.  
You take your eyes for granted  
For you know from where they came  
You have your father's angry stare  
And own your mothers winsome smile.  
Your own legacy shares with you your legal right.  
But in the silence of the night  
My soul cries out to reconnect  
For just a second if I could  
And touch the face that gave me life  
To see my mothers hallowed face.  
Would give the warmest golden fleece,  
Or maybe just a kiss.  
Joy Chalmers, Aboriginal adoptee, 1997*

(Used with permission of the author)

## **CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS: BRANCHES – GROWING & DISCOVERING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Like tree branches, the results of the study branched off in many directions. Analysis of the data provided insights on four aspects of the person (physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual), the four stages of development (infancy/childhood, early/late youth, early/middle adulthood, adulthood/Elderhood) and the individuals' four developmental markers (growing, discovering, reconnecting, knowing) (see Figure 2). The results in this and the next chapter build on the broader categories in the working model (Figure 2) connecting the stages and developmental markers of the person to their experiences and influences of adoption. This chapter provides an introduction to the storytellers, discusses the two former stages of development, growing and discovering, and examines the broad categories and themes that emerged. Direct quotes from the storytellers are incorporated as a research strategy that seeks to validate the voices of Aboriginal adoptees. Finally, a summary is provided to show the relationship between the themes and how they link together.

### **INTRODUCTION OF THE STORYTELLERS**

Prior to discussion of the categories, themes and results that emerged I offer a brief description of the storytellers. The storytellers are Trish, Diane, Eliza, Alice, Gord, Daisy, Laverne and Jay (pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of those interviewed). Three of the storytellers are in their 30's, one is in her 40's and four are in their early 50's. Two of the storytellers are photographers, one is a musician and one collects masks and dances. Six of the storytellers currently work in the Aboriginal community. Five of the women are mothers and three are grandmothers. Seven of the storytellers have traveled back home to their Aboriginal community and all the storytellers have been reconnected to birth family members. The storytellers self identify themselves as:

Trish	Dene/Cree/ Scottish
Diane	Cree/Irish
Eliza	Kwakwaka'wakw Nation
Alice	Carrier Nation
Gord	Cree Nation
Daisy	Cree Nation
Laverne	Talhtan Nation
Jay	Cree Nation

All of the storytellers were placed into non-Aboriginal homes and grew up away from their communities. The storyteller's early life as an infant and child appeared to be a good place to start to discuss their experiences. I begin in the eastern doorway which is the time of birth, infancy and childhood. It is also the time of growing.

## **PHYSICAL - INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD - GROWING**

Infancy or childhood is a time of growing. It is the time when physical changes happen for the person. During this stage the child begins to develop and secure her placement within the family. This is accomplished through the child's interaction within the family. A sense of security and love is necessary for bonding to occur. The primary task for the family is to ensure the infants physical and emotional needs are met. This is similar from an Aboriginal perspective. This stage of life is also the time when most adoptees discovered that they were adopted or heard their adoption story. The specific experiences, events or feelings, interactions and actions that participants discussed in this stage of their lives were: hearing the adoption story, feeling or not feeling safe and secure, feeling or not feeling a part of the adoptive family and feeling or feeling or not feeling a sense of belonging.

## Hearing the adoption story

The experience of being told about their adoption and how the telling transpired provided the adoptees with knowledge of their past and new information about how they came to be with their adoptive family. As stated previously, there is dispute in the adoption literature about when the best time is for telling an adoptee his story. What is not disputed is that the child needs to be told. Each of the storytellers was affected differently by this experience. For Trish, how the story was told changed her life.

At the age of five years before I went to school...my mom and dad sat me down, my adoptive mom and dad sat me down and told me they needed to tell me something because they didn't want the school or church people to...umm...tell me first. And...they told me that ... they were ... had adopted me, now that word to a five year old is elusive... like um...and they said that I had come from another family... and I believe they said who didn't love me as much as they did. That day changed the rest of my life...It changed, they said that they loved me as they did the other kids...I need to go fast forward because you know this is kind of significant to the story because throughout my, so that day changed my life...in that I heard they didn't love me as much as...you know my adoptive family did. So...I never felt loved. I never even though they said they loved me as much as they...you know my other family... my other... siblings... I felt different...I felt... I never felt wanted, I never felt needed...no, let me take that needed back, I never felt wanted. And that began the cycle of my life.

The telling of the adoption story had a devastating and traumatic effect on Trish. First she is told the story before someone else tells her. Secrecy is involved in the telling. The word 'adoption' is then used which appears foreign to Trish. She does not understand its meaning but she heard that she was not loved. Being told became the "day [that] changed her life" when she felt different, not wanted and the moment that she sees as where a new cycle of her life began. From that point on, she didn't feel loved.

For Diane, the story was told in a gentle caring way and she was not impacted negatively by the experience. There was no secrecy involved and she always knew she was adopted. She is given bits and pieces of the story and is finally told the whole story in her 20's. The knowledge of her adoption appears to have always been a part of her life

I can't pinpoint a specific time...that it dawned on me. I just, if anybody ever asked me, "When did you find out that you were adopted"? My answer has always been that I just always grew up knowing that I was adopted.... So as far as hearing about the actual story, I was probably married. I would have to say I was in my mid 20's when my adoptive mother kind of told me the whole story and I think what it was, was because she was a lot older, she was 47 when they adopted me so as she aged... I think she [adoptive mother] felt it necessary to tell me things to share the story with me. And it was quite funny, it was like a piece of a puzzle, puzzle pieces, because she would tell me something, then she would tell me something else, and then she would tell me something else...So a long story short, she [birth mother] landed up on my adopted mother's door step saying would she [adoptive mother] baby sit me. Cause she [birth mother] had kept me, my birth mother had kept me and...so mom [adoptive mother] said it was daily, then all of a sudden she was leaving me over night, then all of a sudden it was Monday to Friday and you know she said you were always really well taken care of, you were fed, you were clean, you were a good baby...and then...she said she [birth mother] left me with them for quite a long time and then she came back and she wanted me at Christmas and my adopted mother said "no I promised the boys that Diane would be here Christmas morning", and she [birth mother] was okay with that. My mom [adoptive] said she [birth mother] was fine and she [birth mother] came and got me Boxing Day...and brought me back New Years. So she [birth mother] had me for 5 days. And mom said at that point and time when she [birth mother] came back, she [birth mother] asked me if she [adoptive mother] would adopt me...So that is how I came to be with my adopted family.

Diane appears to have quite a bit of knowledge about her adoption. She is told the story over time. She mentions being told through puzzle pieces with her mom telling her something, then telling her something else. She is also told a bit about her life prior to her adoption. Diane knows that she was well taken care of, fed, clean and a good baby. This information gives Diane some knowledge about her past.

For other adoptees, their stories raise other issues. Eliza was told of her adoption at a young age. However, she already knew and sensed that she was different from her adoptive family.

Um, I used to love this story growing up...cause at a very young age I knew that...obviously I was different and that was very hard for me in different respects but my mom's [adoptive mothers] story was that they [adoptive family]...cause my two brothers and my sister and my mom and dad they got all dressed up in the Sunday best [laughing] and they...wanted to adopt another child...and originally they were going to adopt and they were looking for a Vietnamese baby

but...evidently she said that whoever she spoke to said that there was a little Indian girl that needed to be adopted and so they dressed up and it was on a weekend they remember and they drove out to Coquitlam to see me...um...she said that I...I was always hiding behind the chairs in the dining room there at the foster home and that I didn't want to...approach them...and they said that they came to visit me, and then one day they decided they wanted to keep me and brought me home.

Eliza's story was told like a family event, there was a "little Indian girl" that needed to be adopted. She was visited by the family and eventually chosen to become a part of her adoptive family.

Daisy was the rescued child. She is pulled back from a possible death and saved by her adoptive parents. Her story appears and is described as a tragedy with the adopted parents rescuing her from an unknown life

I was born in 195\_ and at three months old, social workers told my mother [adopted] they found myself, two brothers, 2 years and 3 years, and a sister 5, wondering the streets on E. H....in the rain, in the middle of winter, in downtown V. and they...took us in...and my adoptive parents told me that they got a call in December saying that they had a little native baby, 3 months old that they needed a place for...that they couldn't locate the mother and that they wanted to leave me with the family until they could locate the mother and find out, and and then they took the other three children and put them in foster care at that time. Um...that was the very beginning. I never, um, found out that I was adopted until I was about four years old and I remember distinctly the conversation about...how it went about. It was a real tragedy that this little baby was in a buggy, that...I had deep scarring and open pox marks on the back of me from not being changed...that my the size of my head was twice the normal size and the back of my head was completely flat and hairless and the top of my head was covered in black hair...and because I was three months old, I had a flat effect, I had no actual response to anybody that would come to talk to me except for a man and then I would cry...my toe nails and my finger nails were all bitten off, even though I didn't have any teeth...and I had...um a sobbing kind of I wasn't crying, my body would just heave and sob. So they, the social workers told my mother [adoptive] that I had probably not been taken care of and I wasn't going to...amount too much because I had no real response, I had not been held enough or talked to enough and they thought I was probably retarded...and um...my mother [adoptive] said that it was a real sad sight, the ...it took her about two months to heal the scarring on my back which was probably just from sitting in urine and having a five year old look after me and talk to me. But...over the period of time between five and seven when my mother [adoptive] started telling me about my history, my adopted mother started telling me, she explained to me about my mother [birth] being native....and...there would be no



hope for me to be raised by a person like that who lived in the downtown eastside on E. H. and...you know from the time I was four or five, I couldn't figure out why someone would ever want to give birth and not want to keep you like to me it was just a very, um...abstract thing to tell a four year old child or a five year old that their mother didn't want them...and I think that is the basis for, you know...most of my life history being dysfunctional not only with my relationships with people but relationships with myself.

The tragedy of hearing the story itself and how the story was told has left deep traumatic memories with Daisy. She remembers the story distinctly and cannot figure out why someone would want to give birth to a child and give the child up. For Daisy the story is a tragedy that starts at the point of her being placed with her adoptive family and ends when she loses her siblings. She says that was the "*very beginning*" but at the same time *it was the end* of the relationship with her birth siblings.

The stories of Eliza and Daisy speak of the ways that the adoption process works as a racialized system. Eliza and Daisy's stories make reference to "little Indian girl" and "little Native baby". The terminology used was not unusual to see in past foster and adoption files. The children were placed for adoption and referenced by their race. Also in Daisy's case there is reference to her mother being native and there being "no hope" of Daisy being raised by her birth mother. This suggests that being Aboriginal is enough evidence to argue for the need for adoption. It is quite evident that the story is a significant event and what spurs the telling of the story varies. For Laverne and Gord, awareness of difference and of their adoption comes as a result of comments made to them by others [including children] that remark about their being a different "colour" from their adoptive parents. Laverne says,

When I was in grade 1... somebody actually told me that I was a different colour from my mom [adoptive] and...then my mom...I just remember that day and my mom [adoptive] she looked down cast and she said well I have something to tell you...and...both of us don't really remember what she said but I remember her telling me that my mother [birth] had to give me away...um...and that...that it was very hard for her [birth mother].

Gord's reference is very similar to Laverne's.

My adoption, I really didn't think to much about it until I started going to school in elementary school...maybe...seven...not grade seven but seven or eight years old. The kids had told me that...I was a different colour than my parents [...] they [adoptive parents] were white and I had never given any thought, or thought about it, you know...and then I went home and I asked them [adoptive parents] and they said...I was being raised by us [adoptive parents] because my mom [birth mother] didn't want me, she gave me up...to be raised by somebody else who could look after me. I never gave a real thought about it, you know after all these years...you know well even being just raised, my mom was my mom and my dad was my dad and that was it.

Although the circumstances that led to the telling of Laverne's and Gord's stories are similar, there is a definite difference in the telling. According to Laverne, her story is told in a very understanding way, the birth mother had to give her away but it was "hard for her". In Gord's situation, the telling appears much harsher, "my mom didn't want me, and she gave me up." The stories are similar stories but they are told differently.

Laverne is always reminded of her story every time she travels through Osoyoos as this was a significant event for her adoptive parents and herself. The fate of the adoption in effect rested on the phone call to the social worker.

There's a story about how my parents [adoptive] received me. I was 10 days according to the adoption rules at the time, I wasn't to be released till I was 10 days old, and at that time, my birth mother had to sign the papers but my parents [adoptive] had to be down in Vancouver BC to pick me up by 4:00 pm (the time the social worker got off work) But before they drove all the way to Vancouver, they stopped in Osoyoos and phoned the social worker to see if my birth mother signed the papers. She had, so they drove the rest of the way to pick me up by 4:00 pm that afternoon. **So that phone booth they phoned from, every time we drove thru Osoyoos, was pointed out to me and the story was explained to me.**

Still other adoptees, like Alice, were not even told about their adoption until they had been moved to several different placements.

Well I was born in P. G. hospital...apparently and this was told to me...I think in my fifth or sixth home...so I would be six or seven that age...that...I was older...that my mom [birth mother] had come from an isolated area...and had me in P. G....and then...I was adopted out. And I learned a lot about that later,

later...but born there. I was adopted out by a white family and it sort of rings a bell with the 60's scoop...I don't think cause I was adopted out but it was like...born in the interior and went to the Coast and that what happened to me. I went down to P. R....and I stayed in this family when I was a baby. And I think I didn't leave the hospital until I was about 10 months old...And then I stayed in that home for probably five or six years.

Alice's story leaves many holes. She is not really informed about her past. She doesn't know if her adoption was a part of the 60's scoop and also the age that she was actually adopted. She is left with unanswered questions as she has no real knowledge of what happened to her and why.

For Jay, hearing what the plan was [for his brothers and his adoption] gave him some understanding of why he was separated from his family.

So I was probably eight years old, going on nine when they came, when the Ministry finally came...what I heard was they [Ministry] were trying to adopt us [him and his brothers] out. That is what I heard, that is what my mom [birth] had told me in the end [when he was home] and... This is how it went down. They were trying to adopt us out so they wouldn't allow us any contact so my mom went before the Judge and it was all timing right...and the Judge said when was the last time you seen your kids?, and my mom said two or three years ago, something like that and the Judge freaked out and he said what is your story now, what is going on with you. The Judge said; "give this woman back her kids."

The telling of the adoption story is certainly an important experience within the adoptee's lives. There is no dispute that a child needs to be told about their adoption. What has been disputed is at what age and how to tell the story. The average age that the participants in the study were told their adoption story was six years of age. Another participant always knew and another was told at a very young age. Three were told the story by their adoptive parents, three by their adopted mothers, one by foster parents and one by their birth mother. How the story was told varied. One was sat down and told before someone else told her; another was told through puzzle pieces, overtime, and two were told through stories, the chosen and rescued child stories. Starting or being in school appeared to be a time when children were told about their adoption as three of the

adoptees were told during or before going to school. Affects of hearing the story were diverse. Four spoke about this experience being the beginning of their lives. Two were told or felt their birth mother did not want them. Two remembered the day they were told, distinctly, one was unsure and another finally understood what happened. What is apparent is that hearing their adoption story was life changing for the participant's. For the storytellers, their story signified a beginning, the beginning of their knowledge of their adoption and the beginning of their journey to discover, reconnect, and know who they are. For the storytellers, there were many obstacles along their journey. During this stage of life a particular feeling the storytellers encountered was feeling or not feeling safe and secure. Like hearing their adoption story, this experience also signified a part of their journey.

### **Feeling or not feeling safe and secure**

An important aspect of childhood is feeling safe and secure. For a child, this is developing a sense of trust and confidence. This is usually accomplished through the relationship that a child creates with their caretakers. Bowlby would call this form of relationship, attachment. This feeling of safety and security sustains a person throughout their life cycle (Berk, 2004). In order for an individual to grow into a healthy person, they must have that sense of security, a feeling that they are loved and cared for, that they belong and a sense that they are protected from harm. Some of the participant's spoke about being abused while in childhood and this profoundly impacted on their sense of safety and feeling of security. According to Caroline Tait and the researchers for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2003), "sexual, physical and emotional abuse have been identified as harmful to childhood development, particularly if the abuse is experienced by the child on more than one occasion and over an extended period of time" (p. 39). For some of the storytellers, the presence of physical and sexual abuse marked their childhood experience.

According to Tait (2003), some of the problems that have been identified by survivors of childhood abuse are:

Anxieties, fears, depression, angry destructive behaviour, phobic reactions, deficits in intellectual, physical and social development, sleep disturbances, insomnia, nightmares, somatic complaints, eating disorders, guilt, shame, increased psychiatric diagnosis, impairment of memory or identity, forgetfulness, excessive fantasizing and daydreaming, sleepwalking and blackouts. While the nature of the links between sexual abuse and childhood problems, such as those listed above, is difficult to precisely pinpoint, several factors, such as the child feeling powerless, betrayed and exploited and feeling a loss of trust have been suggested as important variables (Tait, 2003 p. 42).

Through Trish's words we hear about the lack of trust, she says the abuse "ruled my life" and that nobody was there for her.

Being sexually abused and that was from the ages of about six...between five and six to about eleven. By three different perpetrators from the church and we were a very Christian family...It ruled my life. It...it came in a way of accepting love. Because I really did think inside that I was trash. I thought that really I was nobody and ... like there was nobody there for me.

Trish's experience affected how she viewed herself. She felt like she was nobody and that there was nobody there for her. Trish's trust was shattered by her experience. She appears to feel very alone and doesn't trust anyone enough to disclose what is happening.

Alice speaks of the level of pain and the horrific treatment that she had to endure in her adoptive home.

But the level of pain in that home [adoptive], it was significant like...um..I had to always be ....conscious...who I am, as a woman, as a little girl, as a human being because of the treatment...I guess that consists of being locked away and starved and beatings, being broken...broken bones and I still have some of these scars...I think she [adoptive mother] was trying so that I couldn't have any babies...that's...but being in and out of the doctor's office, many times and the hospital. I remember a few trips that actually...one time they [hospital] kept me there and said she [Alice] can't go back [...] I mean she was, whatever she was, she was still my [mother].

Although Alice suffered horrible, significant abuse in her adoptive home, we hear Alice's defence of the person who inflicted the pain as "she was still my" [mother]. Alice is powerless over what is happening to her. Her trust is also shattered; the person who is supposed to protect her is abusing her.

Although Daisy was apprehended and taken out of an unsafe situation and adopted, the experience in her adoptive home became another way for her to feel insecure and unsafe. Her words speak of the abuse she suffered at the hands of a member of the family.

Um... there was molestation and sexual abuse put on me between the ages of five and eight by my second eldest brother, not by the birth son of my parents [adoptive]. The foster boy who had been, you know, a very difficult child he had attention deficit and tuberculosis as a child, up until 4 and he was institutionalized so when they got him, he had no...behaviour....he was like a two year old and he never matured and for some reason he had coerced me into all this...sexual behaviour between five years old and about twelve.

Daisy conveys that the perpetrator had problems. He was a difficult child and he coerced her into sexual behaviour. However, what was happening was impacting Daisy's school work. At the age of twelve, Daisy actually disclosed her abuse.

And when I was twelve and I actually went and exposed it [sexual abuse] open and I had thought at that time...it was like going to confession, it was like...I would be free and I could tell somebody and they would say D. that is awful for you that something awful happened. It is not fair that somebody could ever do that to you...So it was like it never happened...I wasn't allowed to understand that it was wrong for someone to take advantage of a little child like that and that another adult should be responsible. Another adult should say...you know...I've adopted you into this house and I have to take responsibility for you and what is going on here.

Daisy felt that disclosing the abuse would give her some relief. However, after her disclosure she was still left victimized as no one took responsibility for what had happened to her. She says "it was like it never happened." Alice went through a similar experience. Her abuse was also discovered but like in Daisy's case, nothing was done.

There was one time that I was screaming, because she [adoptive mother] left the window open and they [neighbours] reported that I was screaming and so a lady came. I didn't know who she [social worker?] was. She came and she asked, of course I was dressed this day, because I usually didn't have clothes. And so she [adoptive mother] brought me out into the kitchen and she said "Here she is" and...the lady said "I'm going to ask you some questions, A." And I said "Okay". She said "Are you being hurt by this lady?" And she [adoptive mother] was standing right there. I said "No, No, I am not being hurt by this lady". And I was hoping that I that probably, it would be better, for me after that. But of course it didn't.

Alice used a defence mechanism. She thought that if she denied that she was being abused, the abuse would end. However, for Alice, denying what was happening did not end her pain. Laverne's story reveals the use of another coping strategy, the blocking of memories of the traumatic experience until later in life.

Sexually abused...when I was in grade two...my friend's brother abused me and his sister and I never told anybody until really, really late in life but I didn't remember it until I got to high school. I don't know why that was.

Other participant's, like Diane, felt very safe and secure in their homes. This was displayed through the participants feeling accepted and adored, feeling special, the quality of parenting and the absence of abuse.

That was a really hard one...that's a really hard one. I honestly...you know it was all really good, I have to say, the most significant thing in my childhood. Boy...it really is hard to pinpoint something that was so...special. I had a wonderful life. We did piano lessons, we lived in a you know a fairly normal...neighbourhood...I mean we didn't have, they were very comfortable, they weren't rich by any stretch of the imagination...you know my mom and dad [adoptive parents], my dad worked, my mom didn't, my mom worked sort of part time when I got a bit older...you know I just think...there is a lot of...I think because I was the youngest...and because I was adopted...and because I was the only girl. You know there was always this feeling that I, was very protected and very adored, I mean short of sounding really snotty, that sounds really bad. And really, I mean, I didn't have...and to pinpoint something that was really special, I can't because there were a lot of special things.

Diane appears to have a lot of knowledge about her family. She speaks about feeling protected and special which suggests that trust and confidence has been built in their relationships. She in effect is connected and feels a part of her family.

Through the words of the storytellers we begin to understand the importance of feeling safe and secure. Six of the storytellers spoke about being abused. Abusers were church people, an adoptive mother, and an adopted brother, a brother of a friend, the school and a foster home. The storytellers coped with their experiences through submitting, disclosing, forgetting, denying, and displaying anger. This experience affected the storytellers through their not trusting others, being in denial and blocking the memories of the abuse. Three storytellers' spoke about their adoptive homes as being very caring and loving. Feelings of safety and security were an important part of how the person felt in their family. These storytellers felt accepted, special and protected within their homes. This experience, of feeling safe and secure affected whether or not the person felt a part of their family.

### **Feeling or not feeling a part of adoptive family**

The family is one of the most important institutions within our society. The family plays an important part in the development of our own personal views about us, our families and our life experiences. Experiences and feelings within the family varied with the storyteller's. Feeling a part of the adoptive family were discussed and shown through being raised with only one family, feeling loved and secure, having a close relationship and feeling bonded to the family. This was signified by the following responses.

For Laverne, life was "pretty normal" and her family was really close.

Growing up, was I think it was pretty normal, lots of people tell us we [adoptive family] were the...I don't know, the Brady bunch or something because we grew up really, really close, all of us were really close and um of course my brother D. was you know really, really, really smart and my brother B. he was a jock, he was



into sports, stuff like that so I was the one who was the bad (laughing), the bad seed. I was the bad seed.

However, Laverne sees herself as the “bad seed” in the family. She does not discuss what she means by this. It could be that her brothers appeared to excel in a specific area and Laverne does not see herself as being special in any particular area. She was not like her brothers, even though one of her brothers was also adopted. They are all very different.

Diane grew up feeling very secure. Diane always felt like a part of her family.

I always knew, [she was adopted] there was never any surprise. There was never, really any bad feelings and I think...the way I explained that to G. [birth brother] was that because I grew up with such...love and security that it [adoption] never ever really was an issue with me and because my mom [adoptive mother] was not the kind of person who said, Oh she gave you away or...there was no negative talk around the adoption it just that...you know we chose you, kind of thing. It was sort of, you know it was more they [adoptive family] made me feel really special it was more of a special feeling to me than it was...I'd been given up or I'd been abandoned. So it was always really positive. It was always very positive.

Diane's experience was positive. It appears that nothing is kept from Diane. She is aware of what happens in her family and feels very much a part of her family. However, not all the storytellers' felt a part of their families. In Daisy's story, there is reference to her feeling out of place within her adoptive family. She is the middle child. She also feels the difference between the natural family members and herself.

You know very early on I had, no, low, no self-esteem because I just had...no ability to place myself in any kind of...order of life you are always around people who have real mothers and real fathers and because I was part Aboriginal I didn't look like anybody in my family at all. My mother, my adoptive mother and father had two older boys...at the time when they got me a seven year old and an eight year old. The eldest, the eight year old son was their natural born child...and the seven year old was a foster boy who... And then when I was four years old my mother adopted two nieces of hers...[...] So both of these two little nieces, were natural family of my mothers [adoptive] and that was, to me, a huge gap because I never felt like I was really a part, those two sisters are blood relatives of hers. And they remained that way through most of my life, I have been the middle child with

two much older brothers and two younger sisters who I have never connected to because...not only do I look totally different...my two younger sisters are very tiny and petite and I am really tall and dark and...I always felt favouritism for most of my childhood.

Daisy uses the words “real”, “natural” and “blood” in reference to other members of her family. She says she “never connected”, looked “totally different”, and “felt favouritism”. She sees herself and is in fact the middle child in her family. Her experience affected her self esteem. She didn’t know where she was placed in the family and because of this feeling, she has “never connected.”

Eliza says she felt the love in her home but the comments she had to listen too were hard.

I think...at times...I felt the love I felt the you know...but there was just odd times where, just...especially when...you got down to...oh like my sister looks so much like her mom, when stuff like that came up, and that’s just...and I had nobody and I didn’t even meet any Aboriginals until I was a teenager. I didn’t know any...so I was, I felt very alone.

Not looking like anyone in her family left Eliza feeling very alone and sometimes not a part of her family.

The experiences of feeling a part of the adoptive family varied with each of the participants. Words used were fortunate, lucky and normal; love and security, positive and special, and real close. Two of the storytellers spoke about not looking like anybody in their families, two spoke about being really close whether it be with the family or with a brother, two spoke about feeling love, and three felt alone and that they had nobody. What was apparent was that feeling safe and secure and feeling a part of the family was important for the storyteller to develop a sense of belonging.

## Feeling or not feeling a sense of belonging

Developing a sense of belonging is having that feeling that you are a part of and that you belong. It is feeling that you are a member and that you have established your own place within the family and community. Eliza noticed the difference in the coloring of herself and her family. For Eliza, looking different made her feel different.

My mom [adoptive] always thought and this is very interesting because she just told me this...not to long ago. She said, because I remember wishing I was white...all the time...I wish I was white, I wish I was white...and it was...and I don't know if you'd call it an obsession but it was always brought up on a daily basis...and...um...and then at one point I switched it around and said I wish you guys were brown. So she thought it was an acceptance of me...but really it wasn't...it was just you know, well if I can't be white why can't you just be brown. You know. Yeah...and I think...I don't even know if I'll ever bring this up to my parents [adoptive] but they have been very...I think you call them prejudiced...or...they made comments even as an adult, "Well you never stoop to their level". What the heck does that mean? Stoop to their level. "Their" is me (laughing). You know. But I have never said that, I've never, ever.

Eliza did not feel white, she did not feel Aboriginal. The difference between her adoptive family and herself appears to weight heavily on Eliza. She saw Aboriginal people but to her they were foreign. She did not know where she belonged. She was raised in a non-Aboriginal family yet she did not look like her family. Eliza felt really out of place. It probably did not help that she was told (by her adoptive mother) negative, stereotypical comments about Aboriginal people. The experience of hearing the comments had a horrible affect on Eliza's self esteem.

And I remember, we were really young and passing by a reserve, I can't remember where...because we used to travel around a lot. And we passed by a reserve and my mom (adoptive) would make comments and it still stings, you know...they are all filthy, they're all you know the typical things you hear, the negativity. You know...they always drink, they're always dirty...they're and it's like HELLO, (laughing), and I don't even think she even realizes the impact that had on me. And I denied it for a long time but I think that had to do with my self esteem. Like my self esteem seemed to be...like pounced on with comments from my...you cause when you look at your parents...you look up to them and what they say is the

gospel truth...in the mind of a child. And so I was worthless...I was dirty...I was lazy.

Hearing the negative and stereotypical comments from her adoptive mother affected Eliza's self esteem. For Eliza, she saw herself as "worthless", "dirty", and "lazy" as an Aboriginal person as this is what she had been told. She knew she was Aboriginal and the comments she heard weighed heavily on her thoughts and feelings about herself. This experience affected her self esteem and left her feeling out of place.

For Alice, because of all the moves in her life, she had no permanent home and therefore no sense of belonging. She could not develop relationships with people because she never knew when she would have to move again.

There are memories, right, there are memories um, and one is provoked like gas, the smell gas and orange, that orange crush that is really fizzy... And another home I was in was near railroad tracks...and there were some kids [...] Then there was one where he was a very, very big man and she was Aboriginal...yeah...and I started to be sick...and then...I don't know what that was about, I felt good and then I ate and then I would be sick. I remember I would not tell him [foster father] I was sick...so I very seldom....I don't know...whenever I ate, I would disappear for a little while. And in that home, there was...3 boys and she [foster mother] always wanted a girl and I was it...and I think the 3 boys, at least in a couple of them...there might have been jealousy, going on [...] and finally I guess I was getting too weak and she [foster mother] caught me, right and...I had to go to the hospital again...In there I was operated on, I guess...and they [hospital] said it was almost time for me to go home...and I said okay. You know. They [foster family] had come to visit me a number of times and they had sent me in a book about growing up and a doll, a fancy doll, I couldn't believe it...probably some other things but those two really stick...and when...it was the day to go home some other people came and took me. So that was my other home. I think there was about 5 or 6, probably in there, I haven't gone back to my file at all [...] and then I came to my last home[...] I was just raised in foster care. Yeah, It was torture, emotional and in every way.

Through Alice's words, we see her constant movement through the foster care system after the adoption breakdown. What is missing in the description and decisions are Alice's input into the planning. Even when Alice assumes that she will be going home to the foster home she left, she is moved to another home. For Alice there can be no sense

of belonging as she is constantly moved. She has no time to become a part of a family. Alice couldn't develop significant connection with the families she lived with. There was always the knowledge that she might have to move again so it was impossible to connect with the people in the homes and to establish a sense of being a part of the family. Jay also spoke of being moved from his first foster home to an orphanage and then to another foster home. He said he had a hard time connecting and felt the foster mother's favouritism of her son over him in his last placement.

Although Daisy was in the same home all of her life, because of her experiences and gained knowledge about her birth mother, she also felt disconnected.

And then I had to kind of...reconcile the fact that my mother [birth] had...this you know this sorted past that I was told at 4 or 5 and that she was an alcoholic that she was probably a prostitute, my mother [adoptive] told me that and constantly being told throughout my childhood that I had been rescued by her and...my father. And always I'd feel like some...you know fate incomplete that I made their life, that they had rescued me from the gutter and I would be...you know...I had to be really good to live up to what they had done for me you know by basically by saving my life if they had not come to my life and adopted me, I would have been just in the gutter and never been found and...No I just felt disconnected at an early age. I didn't feel like I was...um...you know part of the plan like I had come from a bad seed, my mother [birth] was a prostitute probably, they [adoptive parents] never used those words but my mother said that I had, that my mother [birth] had lots of children by lots of different men.

Daisy struggles in trying to deal with the feelings about her birth mother and living up to what her adoptive parents had done for her. She says she felt like a "fate incomplete". That her life would have and could have been very different if her adoptive parents had not saved her from the life she had with her birth mother. She did not feel like she was a part of the plan. She feels disconnected.

Diane's experience with adoption is very different from the others. Diane felt very secure and safe within her adoptive family.

I always had a bond with my family...with my brothers, with my...with my aunts, my uncles, I mean everybody, honestly, I can...when people, when I told people I was adopted, they just like, couldn't believe it.

Diane felt very much a part of her family. Her sense of belonging is very apparent as she uses words like "my family", "my brothers", "my aunts", "my uncles", the family is very much a part of her life and it is very apparent that she has found her own niche within her family.

Developing a sense of belonging was different for each of the storytellers. Three of the storytellers spoke about feeling out of place and not fitting in their families. This was due to their looks, feeling different or being moved. Three spoke about being disconnected from their families. Two other storytellers felt cared for and bonded. This time of infancy and childhood provided the storytellers with an opportunity to find their niche within their families. For some the experience was positive while others endured feeling unsafe and not belonging. This life stage and experiences provided the storyteller with a base for their movement into early and later youth.

## **SUMMARY OF GROWING**

For the storytellers in this study there were specific experiences during this stage of growing and they were connected to the telling of the adoption story, their feelings (or absence of) safety and security, being part (or not) of their adopted family, and their sense of belonging. The experience of adoption was the marking event, the beginning of their journey for understanding and knowing. This stage of life began the cycle of their life; it was how they came to be with their adoptive family and how they were brought to their adoptive homes. They were all placed for or adopted out and this event marked the very beginning of their lives in their adoptive homes. It was at this point, that the past became unknown to them.

Each of the storytellers was adopted at a different age; however, all were placed or adopted before the age of 2 years and all were placed into non-Aboriginal homes (see

Figure 1). This study supports findings from previous research that indicates that the telling of the adoption story constitutes one of the most significant experiences for adoptees (Sorosky, Baron & Pannor, 1979; Brodzinsky, Singer & Braff, 1984; Brodzinsky, Pappas, Singer & Braff, 1981; Rosenberg, 1992; and Lifton, 1988). In this study those adoptees that were told the story at a younger age fared better than those who were told the story later. Before the storyteller started school was also a healthier time to divulge the adoption story as this ward off the possibility that the child would be told of the adoption by another child or someone else in school. A critical aspect of this experience was how the story was told. If the story was told in a loving, caring way and in a story form, the adoptee appeared to cope better with the knowledge of being adopted. This is particularly evident in Diane and Eliza's telling. If the story was told negatively or traumatically, through the negative images of the birth mother or kept as a secret such as in Daisy and Trish's case, this had a devastating impact on how the adoptee felt within their adoptive families. In the case of Daisy and Trish, the way the story was told to them left them feeling different from their adoptive families. This supports the findings of Locust, 1986; Rosenberg, 1992; Smith, 1997 that feeling different is a feeling that many adoptees experience.

Feelings of safety and security were also important for the participants during this stage of their life. For six or 75% of the storytellers in this study, their feelings of safety were seriously affected by their experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse during childhood. Three of the storytellers were abused by someone within their adoptive family. One was abused by church members, another by a friend's brother and another by the school system. These experiences left the storytellers feeling very unsafe and appeared to influence their feelings about themselves and their future relationships. There were feelings of being alone, that they were not loved and that nobody was there for them. This left some of the storytellers with an inability to trust other people which in effect altered their future relationships with others. They found themselves in unhealthy relationships looking to fill the need for love.

Others felt very safe and secure in their homes. There were feelings of being accepted, feeling special and being protected. Feeling or not feeling a part of the family also appeared to affect the storyteller's sense of belonging. Three of the storytellers (38%) felt a part and had a sense of belonging in their adoptive homes. Three other storytellers' did not feel a part of the adoptive home. Six of (75%) the storytellers were adopted into and grew up in one home while two (25%) storytellers were moved to numerous homes. This definitely had an impact on how the adoptee felt in the family. There was always a sense of being aware that they may be moved again. As a consequence they were unable to attach or form a bond with the family. Three of the participant's spoke about being the only one adopted in their family while four (50%) had siblings who were also adopted in their adoptive families. Four (50%) felt different and three (38%) spoke about being a different colour than their families. This supports the findings from Locust (1986) on how many Aboriginal adoptees that were placed in non-Aboriginal homes grow up feeling different. This, of course, had an affect on how the storyteller felt in their homes. Three storytellers (38%) spoke about not connecting or feeling disconnected from their adoptive families. This knowledge supports the work of Bagley & Young (1991) and Sobol & Cardiff (1983) that discusses how many adoptees feel disconnected from their adoptive families.

None of the eight storytellers spent time with Aboriginal people during their young years and none were exposed to Aboriginal cultural practices. Only Jay spoke of being exposed to Aboriginal items (vests and canoes) and talked about Aboriginal people, although he does not divulge whether the discussions were positive or negative. Five of the participant's or 63% spoke about hearing negative comments about Aboriginal people and two (25%) spoke about not being told that they were Aboriginal. Looking at this issue from an Aboriginal perspective, being Aboriginal is very much a part of who you are so for some of the storytellers, this provided them with negative views about Aboriginal people. They also suffered a loss of Aboriginal identity, culture and heritage. This was an important aspect of them that was missing. This is supported in the literature by Locust (1986) and Silverman (1993).



## **EMOTIONAL - EARLY AND LATER YOUTH - DISCOVERING**

Moving to the southern doorway, the child moves from infancy to childhood and goes through the physical changes that lead to their movement into youth. Early and later youth is the time when a child goes through many changes in their lives (Berk, 2004; American Psychological Association, 2002). Physical changes include a growth spurt and sexual maturation. There are social changes with many youth beginning to date, developing peer and family relationships and developing a need to “fit in.” Cognitive changes include the development and expansion of thinking and reasoning processes. This is an emotional time for youth when the youth begins to develop their sense of identity. Learning how to relate to others, to cope and manage stress and their own emotions are part of this time of life. This is when self-concept develops, the beliefs about themselves, their attitudes, roles, values and beliefs. The youth becomes aware of their self-esteem and how they feel about themselves.

From an Aboriginal perspective, youth is one of the great periods of a child’s life (Morey & Gilliam, 1976). Traditionally, this time period was marked by ritual and ceremony. Adolescent males were usually sent on their first fast and adolescent females were told of the importance of their moon time through ceremony and practices. Young men were told of and practiced their roles as providers. Young women were taught how to prepare foods, pick berries or roots, how to be kind to others, to bead, to tend hides, and how to respect the home (Morey, & Gilliam, 1976).

This stage of life is marked by growth and self discovery; the significant experiences for the storytellers in this study during this stage were developing: coping skills and strategies, relationships with family, relationships with others, and questioning adoption.

## **Coping skills and strategies**

Youth is a time of many changes. The storyteller's reactions were quite diverse. For those who had been abused in their childhood, each responded differently to their abuse. Although there is no known correlation between adoption and abuse, six of the storytellers in this study were abused physically, sexually or emotionally. Participants responded to the abuse or traumatic experience by developing strategies that provided them with a way to cope in their lives. According to Rothschild (2000), "The consequences of trauma and PTSD vary greatly depending on the age of the victim, the nature of the trauma, the response to the trauma, and the support to the victim in the aftermath" (p. 13). Coping is the way that something is dealt with or the way the person responds to a situation.

Trish saw herself as a workaholic. She needed to excel but it was for herself.

That I tried to bust ass, till I puked in school that is where my workaholic tendencies came in because I needed to excel for me. And I was going to be the best that I could be like... in hindsight, I guess it was self will that I was going to be somebody but it was for myself, it wasn't...it wasn't...I thought that I could get rid of the pain you see. You see it started very, very early.

Her need to be the best was for herself. Trish felt like nobody was there for her. She turned this around and through her own self will she became an overachiever. However, she soon realized that her need for excellence did not necessarily get rid of her pain.

Laverne responded differently to her abuse. She says she started acting out by staying out late and as she says "being boy crazy."

I didn't know what was going on and it just started coming out, and my grades started slipping and uh...I was getting really upset and I was getting really angry and my mom [adoptive mother] just said you know one day you turned from this sweet girl who loved Michael Jackson (laughing) and teddy bears and then suddenly you were this different person.

The comment by Laverne's mother reveals the sudden and dramatic change that Laverne underwent. For Laverne, this was her way of coping with her abuse. It is not uncommon for youth to start acting out especially those who have been abused in some way.

The experience of being moved so much left Alice feeling like she missed so much. She had to always be prepared because she did not know when she would be moved again.

There was this intensity that you had to deal with, somewhere. You didn't know what it was. I had to learn how to deal with this intensity. I can't even describe it to this day. It was like, missing so much, and then yearning, it was almost like a passion.

Because of the constant movement and instability, Alice says that even today she has a hard time describing what she was missing. She eloquently describes this feeling as a yearning, a passion.

I can't even describe it to this day. It was like missing so much. And then yearning, it was almost like a passion, yearning for how to, how to love or how to be loved.

Her need for stability and a stable home were not fulfilled. Despite the harshness, she learns to deal with this intensity and yearning. She is left still yearning for what she has missed and wondering what she has missed.

For others, like Daisy her self esteem was affected so she says she sought attention in others. Daisy responded by searching for and grabbing on to anyone who showed her attention.

But, and I realize now, years later you know that that really...what happens to you as a child and what happens to you as a young adult, you have no self esteem and you just grab on to anybody that is walking by and sense this little probably littlest form of attention you can get and you just glomp on to it.

Jay's experience of being moved and being abused left him an angry child. He did not know how to control his feelings so he responded through anger. Anger was a defence mechanism that worked for Jay.

I think it related to everything, the way I was brought up, I was beaten down right away, aggression wise, I can fight back, really hard and I will never give up until I win...and that is my feeling about it, if I am going to do it, I am going to do it now, there is no questions asked and that is what people responded to they didn't respond to anything else, so that is where I came from. I was mad I was a mad kid, I didn't know too much about the culture like so many friggin kids you know that don't that were taken away, they don't know their culture, they don't know themselves, struggling with their identity, like who am I, the teenager, the whole thing. Here I was surrounded by white kids who just hated Indians and I didn't know why. I just was like...well okay [...] and it was like that until I was in grade 12. I was always fighting and it was mostly white kids I fought.

Jay did not know about his culture, his identity and he wondered about who he was. Jay was perhaps reacting to the trauma that he had endured in the home, fight, flight or freeze. For Jay it was the fight response. Rothschild (2000) description of the limbic system reaction to traumatic events is useful for explaining Jay's reaction to his abuse. Jay chose to fight as a way of coping.

If the perception in the limbic system is that there is adequate strength, time, and space for flight, then the body breaks into a run. If the limbic perception is that there is not time to flee but there is adequate strength to defend, then the body will fight. If the limbic system perceives that there is neither time nor strength for fight or flight and death could be imminent, the body will freeze (pp. 10-11)

For Jay, getting angry and fighting were coping skills that helped him to deal with his pain. Eliza touched on how her self esteem was affected by her experiences. Her experience, of feeling different, left Eliza feeling less than, like she was not good enough. It is at this point where Eliza feels suicidal.

I think it was very hard. I think at that point I found...when I touched on the self-esteem...I had...no self esteem. I felt...worthless, extremely worthless...the first time I was suicidal was when I was 11 and that just breaks my heart like when I step outside of me and if or if I was to hear of an 11 year old wanting to take their life it just...it just saddens me that I was at that place.

Reactions during this stage of life varied with the individual. This was a time of acting out whether it was through personal actions to self, like overachieving or suicide ideation, or responding with others through anger or acting out sexually. Two of the storytellers felt different, and their self esteem was affected. Another felt like she was missing so much. She sees this feeling as a yearning, a passion. Being abused in childhood created the need for the participants to work toward creating more stability in their lives, changing their situations and improving the feeling about themselves. The storyteller's reactions significantly impacted on their lives in their adoptive families.

### **Relationships with family**

The trials and tribulations of adolescence and the family do not go unnoticed during this stage of development. This stage of life is a constant struggle for many going through their movement into adulthood. Adolescents require freedom to experiment (Berk, 2004 p. 395). They also need guidance. The storyteller's feelings and experiences within their families affected their relationships within their families.

Trish speaks about her family's high expectations on her. Although Trish was still a child her adoptive mother suffered from depression and was unable to perform her role as mother, this left Trish with the task of taking on this role. Even though the expectations in her family were harsh, this seemed normal to Trish because of her life being so busy. In her experience with the family, she did not remember fun. Trish signifies that although she was around family, she really did not feel like she was a part of the family.

Happy! No absolutely not. I don't remember fun, I don't remember...uh...uh...The only thing I can remember about perhaps fun. Or perhaps...was I had a camera always when I was younger and I would always take photographs of family events when there was laughter happening. I wasn't a part of it but there always seemed to be this family [adoptive family].

I went to church 3 times a week you know, Youth for Christ, that kind of thing; you know was into my family obligations thing. And you know one day I woke up maybe when I was 13, 14 and thought, what is happening in our house and the

image that my parent's project is two polar opposites and I am not going to be a fucking part of this. So I quit Church...like I started to rebel. And I mean I could see it as a kid...I mean our house was fucked.

What was happening in the home and the image her parents projected were two polar opposites. To Trish, the home wasn't the happy home that was being displayed to the public.

For Diane, getting pregnant at 18 was "like history repeating itself." Diane does not go into detail about this event but it could be in reference to her own birth or the birth of her adoptive mother's first child. What Diane stresses is the support she had from her family, particularly, from her adoptive mother.

Adolescence...I got pregnant with J. it was like history was repeating itself. I was 18 years old...and when my mom [adoptive] did find out...you know I think that probably was the most significant time in my adolescence. There was no anger involved around it at all. It simply was...she was angry at me because I didn't tell her. That was the only reason she was angry at me. She wasn't angry around the situation. You know she felt that I had been taken advantage of because I was vulnerable at that point in my life and...which I thought was a bunch of hog wash because you know it takes two to tango. I can, I probably could have prevented it but I just think her total...understanding and ...support and support from a lot of people, I think it kind of reinforces the fact that, maybe you've been a good person and you know that you have got those people to fall back on that are willing to help you in a difficult time. You know that probably was, that was the most significant time in my adolescence. And I still was in adolescence. You're not as grown up as you have to be with a baby, your still 17 or 18 years old, you still have a lot of growing up to do.

For Alice, life in her last home was a repeat of her younger years. After many moves, to different homes and families Alice knew what to expect.

I think fear, fear is a big part of it...I don't...it is hard to know, hard to say...it is like a repeat of my younger years its interesting when I was older...so I knew at that age that I didn't trust too many people. I didn't trust the last home and in that home, there was molestation and sexual abuse that was happening. So I always stay away, but my sister's came and so...when they were fostered into that home, I came to be protective of them and the older brother left home and there was a lot of fighting and stuff. I saw lots of things in that home and it was really, eerie.

Gord's adoptive father assisted him asking and finding someone who knew Gord's birth family. Both Gord and Eliza found their birth families during this stage of life. Eliza's adoptive mother helped Eliza by supporting her and assisting her with writing a letter to the birth family. This led to the opportunity for Eliza to meet some of her birth family.

Yeah she [birth aunt] came to my house and I so much wanted to look like her, I so don't (laughing). She is really tiny like she...5'3, 5'2, somewhere around there, she'll kill me if she is taller (laughing) [...] so...I don't think I have shared this with anybody, it was really, she was very nervous I think she was cracking her knuckles...a lot and I have never, ever cracked my knuckles...and I do now. It is just the weirdest...kind of silly...okay...something I do because I started out to be like her, like my aunt. And it was just weird.

We hear that Eliza took on the behavioural traits of her aunt as a way to resolve her need for identification her desire to look and be like someone. She had gone through her life to this point always feeling and looking different from her adoptive family.

Daisy did not feel close with her adoptive family. She touched on how important it is to be held and touched. For Daisy, this did not happen in her family and this impacted on her feelings about them.

I think about that a lot, how important it is for children to be loved and touched and my adoptive mother never held or touched me and said you're a wonderful person...you're the best thing that ever happened to me.

Relationships in families were very diverse. Some families had expectations and others were supportive. For Alice because of numerous moves and experiences there was an inability to get close or to trust others. Other storytellers reconnected with their birth families during this time. Experiences with family and other experiences provided a basis for how the adoptee formed relationships with other people in their lives.

## Relationships with others

This stage of youth or adolescence is the time where most people branch out and become more interested in forming intimate relationships or new relationships outside of the family. The search for developing our own identity leads us to begin to find our own place in the world. This stage was the time when many of the participants' sought out and formed relationships with others. For Trish, this was a very significant event.

And then I met L. who I ended up marrying. I met him when I was 13 and we got married when I was 19. And I left him when I was 25. So here is the story of my relationship because it was the most significant. Um...when I was 15, we had been dating for 2 years, L. said to me there is something that I need to tell you and I said "what is that"? And he said "Your dad and I are having a relationship." So you see L. was the first person in my life that told me that he loved me. I was not going to get rid of him. Like ah, those are the wrong words, but I was not going to say goodbye to him. And so the destruction of ...of...a relationship of not being loved, of not being able to trust anybody, not being able to...yeah, you know it was so huge you know. And so that is my most significant memory...from adolescence.

Although L. discloses he is having a homosexual relationship with her adoptive father, Trish is unable to say goodbye to L. He is the only person who loved her. Through her previous abuse experience she is left not able to trust anybody. For her L. is in a sense a form of security.

Daisy says she responded to the abuse by becoming sexually active but she was already sexually active through her experience with being sexually abused.

And so you don't have any choice. And so you turn into kind of a little psycho, you know...I tried to behave...I was in you know, private Catholic school and I did....I stayed in sports and I stayed in you know Basketball, Volleyball to try to obtain this kind of little good girl look. But on the other hand I was meeting boys that were 21, 22 and I was 13 years old...and like my parents [adoptive] didn't know about it and they wouldn't have approved but I was already sexually active, it was nothing you could do to stop it. And when you start sexually active behaviour at an earlier age, like 5 years old, it puts you 20 years advantage, it advances you 20 years, even though your body is not prepared or your mind and it sets you off on a multitude of...lousy relationships and picking people for the wrong reasons.



Daisy's actions led to involvement in unhealthy sexual relationships. Although Daisy knew that the relationship she was in was unhealthy, she got married. She went from being an adolescent in an unsafe home to marrying someone violent.

I ended up with the same man that I had the two pregnancies with in grade 11 and 12, I ended up marrying him, at 19...and he had a volatile nature and he would beat me on a regular basis, mostly around the head where nobody could see. So I went from being an adolescent in an unsafe home to dating somebody who was really physically violent and that is probably one of the reasons that I opted for the abortions. I couldn't see myself with him on the long term but then it was safer than being with...living at home with a mother who didn't care about me and who was you know she had her own set up problems.

Relationships with other people during this stage of his life led Gord to notice differences. He didn't feel equal as he wasn't the same race or colour as his friends.

Well growing up, I guess it was hard for me because...being a native in school and not knowing much and of course everybody started bugging me, you know. Most of all my friends were all white, Caucasians, they used to rib me all the time, there was lots of things I just didn't like, you know, I just hung around them because I didn't know anybody else to hang around with. But...we grew up a lot I guess, more their way of...you know...how you say; there was more ways of communicating with people. I don't know. Being a person that is not exactly equal to them...or not equal, the same colour, the same race.

Gord struggled with his feeling of difference and discusses that it was hard for him being native and not knowing anything about his Aboriginal heritage. There were lots of things he didn't like but he also had to fit in.

Relationships were very important for the storytellers in this stage of their journey. This could be relationships with significant others, friends or future partners but relationship building was deeply affected by the storyteller's experiences with adoption such as not being able to trust. During their youth years not feeling loved or being abused impacted on the participant's choices, feelings and actions. Another important experience during this time was to begin to ask questions about their adoption.

## Questioning adoption

Looking and feeling different from their adoptive family led some of the storytellers to begin to question adoption and start to search for their birth family. For Eliza, who was so different from her family, there were always questions. During this stage Eliza spoke about her feelings of adoption. She found a priest who listened to her and helped her find her biological family.

So I talked to him [priest] about what I knew. And without, we found out that he had to have permission...but he went and he called different bands...on his own...and he came back, even the next day and he said I found out where your from...your from P. H. I'm like how do you know that for sure...it was a shock...and I was very emotional about it off and on [...] So I talked, my mom [adoptive] and I sat down and talked about it for a long time and, I was 16, and I said...she let me know that she had no problem with me meeting my family and that was very important when I think about it now. It was very important that she didn't say no you can't or I'm going to be very hurt, cause that is the things and feelings that I had that she is going to be very hurt and that I wouldn't look for my other family and she made sure and that was a plus for her, a positive that she didn't make me feel that way.

Eliza talks about being shocked and emotional about this experience of finding her birth family. Finding her birth family also brought up feelings about her adoptive family. Eliza did not want her adoptive mother to be hurt. This experience gave Eliza the opportunity to find out other information, that she had two birth brothers.

I don't know, so her [adoptive mother] and I sat down and wrote a letter to her and then she [birth aunt] sent a letter back. She told me about my birth mom and she told me about her family and that I have two brothers. So I found out that I had two brothers at 16 and that we were all born in March, one year after the other. I'm the youngest. I'm the youngest in my adoptive family too.

Laverne felt loved and very much a part of her family. She explains a bit about her adoptive parent's story. Her adoptive parents had planned to have three children. This was a tradition that was passed down in the family. However, due to unfortunate health circumstances, they were unable to fulfill this tradition naturally. Laverne's

adoptive mother suffered two miscarriages; tragically, two places were left in the family. They chose adoption, a long and heart breaking task to do after such loss, and then as her adoptive mother explained to Laverne, she was blessed with two children, from women who loved their babies enough to give birth to them.

My mother [adoptive] had two miscarriages so she adopted two children. She wanted a family, like a little unit, that was with so many people and she thought okay well I don't want to risk having another child because it was dangerous to her health for one and she just thought she couldn't have anymore children so...they were in adoption and I always asked her [adoptive mother] if it was intentional that she adopted two native children, my brother is from Babine Lake and I am from the Tahltan Nation and I always asked her if it was intentional and she replied that it wasn't intentional, that it was just, it was just the way it happened, they just said they wanted one boy and one girl and that was it.

Her mother loved kids and Laverne feels very lucky that she was adopted into her family. During this time, Laverne also found herself wondering about her birth mother and many feelings came up about her biological mother.

And...you know I don't remember, I don't remember suffering that much but I remember thinking that...my mother [birth] threw me away. You know but it went through stages, it went through stages like, my mother [adoptive] would tell me and I don't remember them that much but my mother [adoptive] would tell me that at first I thought she [birth mother] was going to come and save me because like when I was abused, I didn't know what that was so I had fantasies that she [birth mother] was going to come and save me and take me away from all of this and then I went through the stage of being angry and then I just hated her [birth mother] guts. I didn't want to talk to her, I didn't want to see her, I was so angry that she [birth mother] had given me up and I was such a, I was thinking I'm a good kid. You know, she [birth mother]) should love me and little did I know that she [birth mother] did... but she [birth mother] was not able to contact me.

Daisy also wondered about her biological mother but she said she did not want to meet her. She did not have any love or understanding about what had happened with her biological mother.

But with everything you are taught about native people at that age, completely constructs your view about what native culture is. For most of my childhood I thought all native people just drank and were prostitutes. Every time I saw a native

woman as a child...I would think that...you know, you know, especially when I would take the bus to my school everyday, I went to a private catholic school and I had to wait at H. and M. for the bus everyday and every time a native person would walk by me I would think that could be my mother, that terrible woman, you know. I never felt, I didn't have any respect, I didn't have any love, or any understanding about...what had happened to her to put her there for one thing...and that maybe she wanted me back. The whole process about the adoption became, so convoluted as I got older, about how the actual thing happened.

Daisy had formed her own opinions about native people because of what she had heard. For Daisy, the whole process of the adoption became convoluted. She could not understand. She wonders about why someone would have a child and place it for adoption. Daisy remembers being shown a list which had her birth sibling's names on it and later being told that that event did not happen.

And I remember her [adoptive mother] telling me that when I was about eight or nine and I just wept, I mean what do you mean different men? And she goes well here is a piece of paper and it has you children's names on it and different last names...and so she gave me this piece of paper and it had a bunch of names and birth dates. And I asked for that paper many years later, when I was in my teens, and she said she didn't have a list. I know you had a list, I remember their names, I remember B. and I remember names being on there because when I was 16, I actively starting searching...and...she denied she showed me this list but I remember the trauma of it because I was weeping so hard that...I had a mother [birth] that had all these different men by the different children and it just seemed so awful and you know.

For Daisy this experience was traumatizing, it left her weeping. The shock of the information made Daisy feel awful. This led to Daisy wanting to search for her birth family.

It was during this stage of life when feelings of adoption started to come up for some of the storytellers. They discuss the stages, their feelings, and thoughts about their adoption. Some received new information, others started wondering about their birth families and still others started gathering information to begin their search.

For the storytellers this stage of life was a time of coping, forming relationships and asking questions about their adoption. Experiences varied but going through this time of life was a time of discovering more about themselves, their adoptive families, birth families and others. Their quest for knowledge and understanding provided them with tools to continue on with their journey into adulthood.

## **SUMMARY OF DISCOVERING**

The storytellers discussed how during this stage of life they reacted to the abuse they suffered during childhood. Trish wanted to excel, Laverne did not remember the abuse till later in life. Laverne and Jay acted out with anger, and Daisy responded by becoming sexually active, Alice developed fears and the inability to trust and Gord felt different. Each storyteller used coping skills that enabled them to carry on despite their abuse.

Two storytellers' (Eliza, Daisy) mentioned having low self-esteem and this appeared to be due to their inability to really feel a part of their adoptive families or to their feelings of being different from their adoptive families. Bagley & Young, 1991; Lanz, Iafate, Rosnati & Scabini, 1999; and, Sobol & Cardiff, 1983, find a similar relationship between lack of self-esteem and self-concept in their studies.

Five storytellers were exposed to racism including racist comments (Jay, Eliza, Alice, Trish and Daisy) about Aboriginal people. This had a definite impact on the storytellers. They spoke of not seeing or understanding Aboriginal people and their lack of identification with an Aboriginal person. None of the storytellers lived in Aboriginal communities or had access to urban Aboriginal people. This very much affected their personal views about Aboriginal people and their sense of belonging within the urban or rural Aboriginal community.

Five storytellers (63%) mentioned and discussed forming relationships with other people during this stage of life (Trish, Daisy, Jay, Laverne, Diane). Gord, Eliza, and

Daisy began searching for their birth family. Gord and Eliza also met their birth families during this stage. This stage also provided some storytellers the opportunity to ask questions about their adoptions.

The early and late youth years were for the storytellers a time of intense exploration and discovery and consequently they became more aware of themselves, their relationships and their families. Some acted out by reacting to the abuse that they suffered. For some it was the time when they became more aware of their adoptive status, reconnected or started to ask questions about their adoption.

## **CHAPTER 5 – RESULTS: BRANCHES – RECONNECTING & KNOWING**

### **SPIRITUAL - EARLY AND MIDDLE ADULthood – RECONNECTING**

Moving to the western doorway, early and middle adulthood is a time of reconnecting for many adoptees. This could be reconnecting with other adults, with their Aboriginal/First Nations identity or with their birth family. It is also the time of gaining an understanding of their spiritual side. This chapter presents findings on the two later stages of the participant's life cycle and that are described in this study as reconnecting and knowing. This time of the participant's lives was marked by significant experiences such as: being protected, meaningful relationships in adulthood, getting and withholding of information, and searching or reunifying. From an Aboriginal/First Nations perspective, the western doorway is the time of spiritual enlightenment, time of adulthood, vision and a time of the unknown. This is the place of testing, where our will is tested. "For the nearer one draws toward a goal the more difficult the journey becomes (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1984 p. 53). It was during this stage that many storytellers mentioned those who had assisted them on their journey. The helpers were, in a sense, protectors.

#### **Being protected**

During this stage, the storytellers spoke about their encounters with supernatural or human forces that play a supportive role in their lives. Supernatural forces are those phenomena or things that can not be explained through standard scientific explanations. The protectors took many forms and could be family members who provided the storytellers with a feeling that they were being watched and cared for. Diane spoke about her adoptive brothers being protective of her.

But my brothers [adopted], this is how protective they were in C. They wouldn't let me see him [biological brother] in C. unless they sort of checked him out first. B. said "I am not going to let you meet him I want to meet him first." Whatever, I mean I am a grown up. B. said, "No I am going to see him". So he went and had

coffee with him first, and came back and just loved him and said other than the moustache and the fact that he is quiet you dead ringers for each other.

A lawyer became a protector for Trish. He took care of her son and herself while she was going through the divorce with L.

But in his professionalism in how he handled it. I felt safe and that somebody could take care of me in the sense that he'd protect J. [her son] and I knew that I'd be okay and so he [lawyer] just...to the tune where he just hardly charged me any money. He was just an angel and really the first angel that I felt I had in my life. He was a wonderful man.

With the lawyer, Trish felt safe. She knew she would be protected and sees him as an angel, the first angel she had in her life. He protected her and asked for nothing in return.

Alice mentions a dog being her protector. He seemed to always be there when she needed him.

It was, well because it was very protective of us, that dog. I tell you I would go off in the bush and cry...cause they would be just going at it [foster parenting fighting], and I remember sitting in the bush, and crying all by myself...and I look around and there's the dog, sitting there...always near.

Eliza felt like her mother [biological] was there with her. She realized her birth mother had been in her dreams although she did not see a picture of her until she was in her 20's.

And then...at one point she [birth mother] actually started coming into my dreams. Like...I didn't see a picture of her until I was in my 20's and then when I look back, she was actually in my dreams.

For others there was a feeling of being watched over and cared for.

You know I used to have fantasies when I was a little girl, when I was scared, I would have these fantasies of having God or Jesus come down and hug me and say it is going to be okay, you going to be safe. And that has always kind of carried me



through my life...kind of spiritual and something just hanging on to me telling me it is going to be okay, you're going to be okay.

This experience left Daisy knowing she was going to be okay. She was being watched and she was being cared for. Alice also had this feeling.

My grandmother, her mother [birth grandmother], was very well known and very well liked. She is a very gentle spirit. I feel my grandmother. They said you know, before I left, my grandmother wanted to keep me but the grandfather said no and all for good reasons. But she [birth mother] said before I left, she [birth grandmother] called me A., my name became Alice. But now a days, I know when she is around because someone will go and that is A, meaning me right (laughing). And I love it; I rely a lot on that. I feel them and the spirituality; I love it.

The storytellers felt that they were protected by others who made them feel safe and aware they were not alone. Protectors took many forms from adoptive family members, friends, others, animals, and spirits. This section signifies the importance of protectors within our lives. This stage of life was very important for the storytellers. It was during this time that many became parents themselves and formed new relationships.

### **Relationships in adulthood**

During this stage, many of the storytellers began to notice the difference between being born into and placed into a home. For others, this stage provided them the opportunity to continue to enhance their relationships within their families. For Trish, she took on the role of parent. All Trish wanted was a normal home for her child.

He [son] was born when I was 23. Going home from the hospital...I looked at L. [husband] from the side of my eye, I thought I'm leaving you. I am going to leave you. I am not going to have my son grow up in this kind of family because it didn't matter how much I pleaded, begged, you know, and especially with having J. coming home. That he was not going to have to live in this kind of dysfunction because him (L.) and my dad [adoptive] were still seeing one another and ...I said...so I looked down at J. and I started crying and I said "I will make sure that you are loved and taken care of and you live in a normal home and normal to me whatever that was that I was going to take care of him."

Here we hear Trish questioning “normal”. Her experience of being adopted and her husband having a relationship with her adoptive father has left Trish wondering what is normal. She knows she has to make some changes so she reached a decision to leave her husband. Trish expected her adopted father to support her in her decision to leave L, however, this did not happen.

This is the other significant memory because it kind of put everything into a gel. Was that my dad [adoptive dad] told me when I was leaving L. that he would do anything that he possibly could do to make sure that L. got custody, I got really scared, I got, I knew that I had to go through a lawyer and ah...he [my adoptive dad] said because I was an unfit mom - the worse thing that he could have ever done was take me out of the crib the day that they adopted me and take me home. This is what my adoptive father said to me and that the best thing that could ever happen to J. was that he run out on to the road and get run over by a car.

For Trish the lack of support from her adoptive father is very hurtful. Her preconceived ideas of the role of the father are shattered, again. This experience confirmed for Trish what she had thought, that nobody was there for her.

Eliza also questioned the relationship in her family. She had a hard time understanding the bond her partner had with his child. Eliza did not have that bond so she could not understand.

It was just this outrageous fear that I wouldn't have kids. It was weird. And my kid's dad...had a hard time understanding because he already had a child and I was very and that was part of, my part of the relationship breakdown...was I was...I don't like to use the word jealous but I think that was it was. I was so jealous of his bond with his daughter and I didn't understand that. I didn't have that above me [bond] and I didn't have that below me and...so it was really hard...seeing him totally love his daughter beyond anything and I didn't know what that meant.

We hear the pain in Eliza's voice as she tries to explain something she has not experienced. There is jealousy as Eliza has not experienced bonding with her birth parent. Many of the participant's spoke about their relationships with their adoptive family. Diane and Eliza spoke of their closeness to someone specific in the family.

But I probably had a better relationship with her [adoptive mother]...then a lot of my girlfriends did with their young moms, just because of the kind of person she was. She was a...she was a pretty neat person. And that was, I lucked out. I totally lucked out.

Like my sister [adoptive sibling] always complains because she is nine years older than me so that made her...11 or 12, whatever, and she said she had to change my diapers, she had to do everything, she had to...I wouldn't let my adoptive mom for a long time...so my sister and I were very close...still are but we don't have as much communication as we used to...but her and I have never, ever, ever had an argument...which I find really out of the ordinary. It is, because I think the world of her, I think that what...helped.

There appeared to be particular people in the family that the adoptee was close to. For Diane it was her adoptive mother and for Eliza it was her sister. For Laverne, meeting her husband changed her life.

He's [husband] the best one I think because, for him, I changed my entire life, I learned how to cook (laughing), I learned how to clean, my whole life revolved around him and I changed everything. I got off the streets and I got off, I stopped drinking for a long time.

For the storytellers there was a need to expand on current relationships or to form new relationships with others. Some began to question what a normal family was and also questioned bonding. Most maintained some form of relationship with their adoptive families. Some storytellers spoke about being close to one particular person in their families. It was also during this time that many participants' started seeking more information about their birth families.

### **Getting and withholding information**

It was during this time of life where the storytellers sought out more information about themselves. Many started to wonder about searching for their birth family so they needed to seek out more information. The appropriate place to start was to first ask their adoptive parents. Some of the storytellers were not told that they were Aboriginal/First

Nations so gaining knowledge of this aspect of their lives was a new experience they had to incorporate into their lives.

Another thing that my parents withheld from me which is really significant which I forgot...was when I started dating which would be when I was 26, 27 after I left L., a couple of fellows said to me "Are you part native or are you Indian?" those were the words and I said, "Of course I'm not" and then I went to a psychic and the psychic said to me 'With your native heritage you have always had a white light shining behind you and its your native ancestors guiding you. You have always been guided". Yeah and I said "Well that's funny but you know I am not native" and she said "Oh aren't you"?

For Trish, gaining this knowledge was significant. Being First Nations had never crossed her mind. This knowledge left her wondering why she had not been told.

Honest, I did not know. Because I said I went to the psychic when I was 26 probably the fellow told me when I was 27 so I went back to my parents [adoptive], around 27 and said, "Mom and dad am I part native or am I native?". They said "What would ever make you ask that?" and I said "Two fellows that that I have dated had asked me whether I was part Indian or part native" and I said "I went to a psychic and she said with my native heritage that I have always been guided through a white light or the white light was always guiding me." Mom and dad looked at one another and said "Well of course you are", at 27. I said well "Why wouldn't you tell me that"? They just didn't think it was important. But I think in hindsight, that they were embarrassed to have a half native daughter. You see dad was a bigot, he always said Indian things, you know that they were all just a bunch of lazy bums...drunks...and I just think they were embarrassed...to have a half native baby...and they hoped that I may never find out...or I don't know if that is what they thought.

Diane was not informed about her ancestry. She grew up and was told that she was Irish.

Nobody ever mentioned that I was native. And I remember A. [husband] seeing this picture and he said to me "how could you not figure that out".

Knowledge of Aboriginal ancestry tended to be a secret kept from the storytellers. One has to question why this was not shared as from an Aboriginal perspective; ancestry is very much a part of who you are.

During this stage, other storytellers requested their adoption papers, either from their adoptive parents or the government. The information was intriguing but some found that there was also information withheld.

D. (grandson) was born in 93, and, I started just...talking a little bit with my parents [adoptive] about me...and they said that when I was ready, they had my adoption papers, they had everything. I said okay fine. So that Easter they said are you ready and I said yes I am. I said tell me my mother's name and my fathers name [birth parents] and so they did....And so that Easter, they started giving me the information but my mother withheld information accordingly.

She [adoptive mother] I guess got scared that I would find out the information anyway and...she told me I had a sister somewhere. I said "Why wouldn't you tell me that before". She said I just didn't think that was important.

Although Trish received information about her birth family, information about her birth sibling was withheld. There could be guilt involved as her adoptive parents as they did not adopt Trish's sibling or like in Eliza's case, they may not have known when to tell her.

My parents [adoptive] didn't know that I had two brothers either. Oh yeah, they did. They didn't know when the right time is. They were in Hawaii when I...when...the priest did all the info...so I was alone when I found that out.

Withholding information can have a devastating effect. For Daisy, she did not understand why information that was previously presented to her was then denied.

No my mother [adoptive] had given me that list when I was a little girl so I knew there was 10 [siblings], but then she had denied giving me a list when I was in my teens...I said I know there was a list because I remember crying cause you said there was a whole bunch of different men. She said, no, I never showed you a list. It is so funny cause when you look back on things you realize that they keep the wrong things from you. They give you the right information, that they think is factual but they never really give you the truth about...everything that they, that they should really.

Information withheld was important information. It appears that adoptive parents were unsure of when to tell adoptees about their siblings and how to tell them. It appears easier to withhold information then to divulge it.

For others receiving the adoption papers provided them with information about their past. For Diane, there was the knowledge that only her sir name had been changed.

And then I went back to C. one time and she [adopted mother] gave me my adoption papers. She said and she was in her 80's at this point in time and she said "I think you better have these, I don't need them anymore and there more important to you". I got on the plane, I looked at them and it said D.A. M. you know and all the details of the adoption and now my name is D.A.P. so they didn't change my name, other than my last name, my sir name. I remember looking at that last name M. and going wow, that's weird and I just folded it all up and put it away.

Laverne started her own search. She had always felt that she would meet her birth parents so for Laverne, it was a matter of starting the process.

She [birth mother] was too young...that is what my mom [adopted] always told me and later on she gave me this file that they were given...with my birth father, just a little blurb...just after I got married, I think a year after I got married. I woke up one day and I said to myself, "I want to go and find my parents" and J [husband] looks at me and says, "whatever", and I said today is the day, so within a week I got my original birth certificate and I was sitting there, I was actually sitting at a bar (laughing). Next thing I know this lady comes up to me and looks at the birth certificate and says "I know her" [birth mother]. I thought she was crazy (laughing). She said "I know her". I said "You do not". She said "yes I do, I used to go out with her brother, R.". So I said so "Where is she now". And she said "they are up north, last I hear she got married and she had 3 boys". I am like "Where up north?" and she said, T.

Once receiving information, Diane had to tell her children that she had withheld information. She had to share with her children that she was Aboriginal.

A lot of this was spurned by G's [birth brother] letter. Now I had this brother that I wanted to see, that I wanted the family to meet and so we had to...we had to...there was a story there that had to be told and that was pretty significant. You know and it's funny how the kids reacted. J was amazing. She just thought kind of what she wanted to hear all these years. "Oh my god you finally found somebody." B, he didn't care and B. who is my middle child and who remains to be different than everybody else in the family was a little... 'no not meeting him, don't care, you mean this person is going to come to the house and you don't know who he is, and you've never seen him before'.

Information withheld for some storytellers was that they were of Aboriginal heritage. This was shocking and the storytellers wondered why they were not told. Others were not told of their birth siblings. Others received their adoption papers so they found out more information about their past. Still others had information withheld and found they withheld information from others. Receiving information on their adoption provided a way for the adoptee to gain information which assisted them in searching for their birth family. It appears that a common attitude among the adoptive parents of the storytellers was to erase/deny/strip the storytellers of their Aboriginal identity in every single way. They did not tell them they were Aboriginal, they did not provide them with information on their family, they stereotyped Aboriginal people and they simply did not talk about the different looks of the adoptees. This denied the adoptees the very basis and sources of their identity and of their right to know who they are. Yet despite the denial and secrecy of the adoptive parents, each one of the storytellers searched or reunited with their birth family and resisted, in their own ways and found the resistance (power not to be affected) to engage in their journey.

### **Searching or reuniting**

All of the storytellers were reunited with birth family members. Reuniting is the bringing together of two or more people after a long separation (Hornby, 2001 p. 1094). The searches took many different forms from writing letters to someone who knew someone else, to going home to their community. The search was spurred by becoming a parent or grandparent, a loss or just wondering and wanting to know about their adoption. For Gord, his adopted father was helping him and also once Gord found one person, he kept finding others.

Um...and then it was a couple of years back down the road when I ended up meeting my mother [birth]...I don't know how, I don't remember how I ended up meeting her or getting introduced to her, probably from a relative or someone, one of my aunts...that was when I was 21 or 22, you know around that age. You know that was a good meet, we didn't have much to say at that time...but...it was a...she didn't turn her back anyways...she was very glad, she knew me, I guess she knew about me all the time through my aunts...and then I ended up...meeting the rest of

my family, you know hanging around people that I knew for the longest time...and I found out they were my cousins.

Through meeting his birth mother Gord was led to meeting his birth father. Meeting his birth father was always something that Gord had wanted to do for he had always wondered about his birth father.

It just seemed to fall in place, you know as I was growing older, you know and at certain ages and at certain times of my life. I think that if I was...I met my dad earlier, you know my biological dad earlier, I think I probably would have been a big burden to him now.

Jay also wanted to meet his birth father even though Jay held a lot of anger toward his birth father as he blamed his father for the separation of the family. Jay, however, was led home to his First Nations community. He had a dream and realized that the dream was pushing him home to search for his father.

So I am growing up, everything is fine, I don't want to meet him [father], I know that I am angry with this guy, I know that one day I am going to have to put this down and go and face him when I am ready, but I am not. Um...and I ended up coming out here and being out here for about 10 years...um...and finally going okay, I am going to go and meet him...so on my...29<sup>th</sup> birthday, I jumped on a plane and I went back home and I went looking for him. I went back to the \_\_\_\_\_ reservation.

Jay speaks about the dream he had which he connected to going home.

The dream was strange, the dream was really strange but I didn't connect the two together for whatever reason until I went back home and realized that the dream was pushing me home.

For others, becoming a parent or grandparent started the search process. Children are inquisitive and want to know. As discussed in Trish and Diane's stories, it appears that some children of adopted are really curious about their parents past.

Yeah...so there is a story, is it okay to tell a story? Okay because you see...I always thought that I would go and find my family when mom and dad [adopted



parents] died. I mean that was my...I didn't want to hurt them. And that is how insidious you know kind of incestuous that...um...I know I felt really very loyal to them... Anyways when J. was in grade 9, he had to make a family tree. And...so I helped him, and I had this great big denial thing around "Ah this is our adopted family and you know this is where we all fit", whatever. He comes home after the day, it was...um...the day that it was marked or whatever...and he threw this family tree in front of me - like across the table at me and he said "That is not our family." He said "Do you know who our family is?" And I said "no I don't". He said "well if you don't do it for yourself I would like you to do it for me". I said "You know J. its not important...to me, I will do it one day, I promise you." So then let's fast forward to when he and S. [his partner] and D. was born... So the first time I held my little grandson...J. said to me..."How does it feel like?" And I said, well I mean I started to cry, you know did all that stuff and he said "have you done anything...about the adoption like finding our family". And I said no. And he said "It is now time, I'm telling you it is not about you now, it's about me and I want to be able to tell my son where we come from." So you know I believe...it affected J. more than I realized. So that's what spurred me.

Diane had a similar experience with her daughter.

But then I had J too and I think that is sort of ...a natural thing to happen, I think you kind of question your genes. You know like when there is just you, there is just you. But all of a sudden there is this person and who does she look like. She looks like me amazingly. But...you know so between that and her getting older ...and her saying, "Don't you want to know where you really came from?" So there was a lot of that that really stirred up a lot of curiosity and so that is when all the stories started with my mom [adopted] cause I that is really when I started asking.

Trish and Diane's children started to ask questions. They in effect spurred their parents. Also in Trish's case a friends words and death propelled her to search for her birth family.

And I groomed him [Friend, Tom] to become president, you know so he was my rising star. We trusted one another implicitly. Anyways...I knew that he was severely depressed...and he told me...and we had both taken a leave of absence around the same time and he said...basically go to your destiny, just go for it...I know that you can do and be whatever you want and he said with this adoption and what I was trying to find he said go and find, you know it will make you...fuller. Anyways, he committed suicide...and I got my birthday card the same day that I found out that he committed suicide...and so it kind of...with his words and with the birthday card (he said some nice words in that) I thought, I am going for it.

Trish's friend spurred her to search. The encouragement to search was almost like a last gift to Trish. Tom's suicide propelled Trish to fulfill his advice. For Trish and Alice a tragic event and a loss lead them to search.

Like Trish, Alice suffered a devastating loss. Her son died in a house fire. His loss spurred Alice to begin to question and to want to find out more information about her life. Alice used the adoption registry to find out information about her birth family and to make that connection.

Yeah, as an adult, I was older though. I went through the pre registry and I registered my name...and my birth date and my stuff the my birth certificate...and the lady said okay, we'll look from here and she did, she found my mother.

I guess after my fire, I asked more about my life. A social worker had put together a letter without the names. Yeah, so I got that and I understood, so I understood kind of what might have happened for my mother [birth]. She [social worker] wasn't wanting to give the names right away until we, she [social worker] had talked to my mother (laughing) to see if she [birth mother] had wanted to see me or not...so a few months passed and then she said your mother [birth] has agreed to see you, to write to you, talk to you, just go slow.

Laverne did a lot of the work herself. She applied for and received her original birth certificate. While reviewing the paper, someone read over her shoulder and knew Laverne biological family. So Laverne had a place to start.

I phoned a couple of places for the last name she gave me, J. so I phoned some of the J's and this lady goes "Oh are you a friend of hers" and I said "yes, I used to go to school with her" and she says "you sound kind of young" and I said "honey that is just my voice" (laughing) and she said "here is her number" and I said "Thank you very much", hung up and so I called H. [birth mother] and I said "HI" and she said "who is this" and I said "Did you give birth to a daughter?" She goes "yeah". I said "May ---, 197\_". She goes, "yeah" and I said "hey, how is it going" and then she drops the phone and goes "oh my god, oh my god", she dropped the phone. I said "H, this is long distance". She is like screaming and crying, G! G! It's her! So she picks up the phone and she says "Is it really you?" and I said "Yeah" and then she goes "okay, okay". I am like, "Calm down, sit, and calm down." I said look, "I have questions to ask you." And we started talking and then we talked for a couple of hours on the phone. I asked about my birth father. Was he a jerk or did he leave and she said no they just broke up they were just different people, they weren't very

compatible and you know I wasn't in my right place and we just broke up and I had to let you go. And I said I have to let you know that I was very angry with you for a couple of years and she said okay, I could understand that. And then I said the important things, I said okay, "Do you do drugs? And are you a drinker and do I have to worry about these things...because if I do, we are not going to talk anymore." and she said no, I don't do drugs but I do drink. And I said don't bring it into my life, I'm not that kind of person and she said okay and of course (laughing).

The quest for information and searching took many different forms. Some storytellers got assistance from their adopted families and others went back home. For others it was being spurred by a birth or a death. Many chose assistance whether through the Adoption Reunion Registry or through assistance from others.

Through taking on new roles, like becoming parents and forming relationships with others and their adoptive family the storyteller's activities led to their eventual search for information about their birth families and their eventual reunification. It appears that the storytellers were guided by some intuition and some implicit indigenous knowledge and power (dreams, mothers, children). This stage corresponds and takes the storytellers to their current stage of life – the time of knowing.

## **SUMMARY OF RECONNECTING**

The time of early and middle adulthood was the time of reconnecting. Storytellers felt that there was someone or something watching over them. For Diane this was her brothers or someone, for Trish it was her special stars – her friend Tom, her brother and the angel, her lawyer. For Alice it was her dog and her grandmother, for Eliza it was her birth mother being in her dreams, for Daisy it was fantasies about God or Jesus, for Jay it was the dream guiding him home, for Laverne it was her adoptive family and for Gord, he couldn't explain it but everything just seemed "to fall into place". It appears that although the storyteller may not have particularly been searching, they were being led to reunite with their birth family members.

The forming of relationships was also an important experience during this period for the storytellers. Some storytellers spoke of being particularly close to one person in their adoptive family while others started to question what "normal" was. This was also a time for the storytellers to seek and find out new information about their birth family. Two of the storytellers had information about their Aboriginal/First Nations ancestry withheld (Trish, Diane). Three storytellers, (Trish, Daisy, Eliza) had the information about their birth siblings withheld. Four of the storytellers (50%) spoke about receiving information through their adoption papers (Diane, Laverne, Trish, Alice).

During this time of adulthood, all the other storytellers, with the exception of Diane whose birth sibling found her, initiated the search for their birth family during this stage of life and all spoke about an event that started them searching. Jay was spurred by a dream that he felt was calling him back to his home. Trish was spurred by her son having to do a family tree in school, his questions about her birth family and also the birth of her grandson. Alice started her search after the tragic death of one of her children. Daisy received a letter from the Adoption Reunion Registry and for Laverne, she just knew it was time and started her search.

Many of the storytellers discussed relationships with their adoptive family or with their partners. In their search for reconnecting, participants looked for information about their adoption and highlighted the need to feel the need to connect with their birth family.

## **INTELLECTUAL - ADULTHOOD AND ELDERHOOD - KNOWING**

Moving to the northern doorway, adulthood and Elderhood is the current life stage of life of the storytellers. This is the time of knowing or true wisdom. This is the time of careful thought and compiling of all that they have learnt on their journey through their lives. According to Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane (1984), gifts from the north, include the ability to think, synthesize, speculate, predict, discriminate, imagine, analyze, understand, calculate, organize, criticize and remember. Significant experiences for the

storytellers during this stage of their lives are: reunification, knowledge and understanding, knowing who I am and healing and resistance.

## **Reunification**

For many of the storytellers meeting and reunifying with their birth family was a positive experience. This gave them an opportunity to ask questions and to find out information about their birth family. For Gord, meeting his birth mother and a brother eventually led to his finding out about his birth father.

Actually she [birth mother] knew all this time [where birth father was]. I think if it wasn't for my brother...and my sister-in-law being there, meeting them, actually I would have probably maybe not known, maybe, maybe eventually, but I don't know I can't say. But I am glad. That is where I met the rest of my family of 16, there is 16 all together. My mom [birth] has 6 and my dad [birth] has 10 children and 3 passed away. There would have been 19 of us all together. That is a fair size amount.

Although he was raised an only child, after meeting his birth family, Gord discovered that he is actually from a family of sixteen children. This was quite a shock. He was the oldest child, and the only one adopted.

For Trish, meeting her birth aunt and uncle, made her realize that this was what she had been searching for. She had always been inspired by those who inspired others but she could not figure out why until she met her birth uncle and aunt.

Then I have to go back because when I was a young girl...my role models in life were Mother Teresa, Mahata Ghandi and Martin Luther King. They were...their spirituality is like something that I just...they were people of the land, they made a huge difference to people's lives and it was just...the sun ruled and set. I couldn't get enough reading about them, I couldn't you know...that is where I think I got my spirituality from just the reading about who they were as people. Fast forward to meeting Uncle K. and Auntie M., it's like you know such revered Elders in the community and it's like...oh my god this is what I have been looking for all my life.

For Trish, this meeting was really the first time she felt loved by someone other than her son and grandson.

But you know I just really felt loved...you know aside from my son and aside from my grandson, and I don't have a very close relationship with my step granddaughter, but...I felt loved for the first time and you know revered in my own way and seen for who I was...really. They saw the good....they saw only the good and they inspired me to be my best.

Diane had the opportunity to meet several members of her birth family as her birth brother had arranged a family reunion. For Diane this experience was enlightening.

Well, I almost didn't want to come home when I had to come home [laughing]. Just because it was, everybody was so welcoming and so warm [at the reunion]. We just had a great time. You know and very, it was so neat meeting these other two younger brothers. That was a totally different time in her [birth mother] life you know so there was her time with us, which didn't exist for her after she met this other guy, and then there was this time afterward raising these four boys with her husband and they were raised pretty...Caucasian in the white world as well.

For Laverne, although the meeting of her birth family was good, she was made to feel like she was something or someone she was not.

My brothers are younger than me so he is 31, no maybe turning 30, 1975, my other brother D, who is younger than me and D. who is the youngest. They were all fine with it. They were just like I have a sister, hey how is it going. H. [birth mother] has been kind of weird; she puts me on this pedestal like I don't really belong up there.

For Daisy, meeting birth family has also brought up questions about her birth mother.

You know the assumptions that my mother [birth] was a drunk or that she was a prostitute are wrong...there is no data or basis on her personhood and after I met my 10 siblings, I mean if she was that much of a drinker and so much of a dope, why would we all be in you know...positions and I mean why would we all have most of our wits about us and...and so that has been a big journey on its own, the last five years of meeting my birth family.

The journey of meeting family is a time of discovery for Daisy. She is able to make a connection and break down the stereotypical assumptions about her birth mother.

Eliza noticed the similarities and differences between her and her brothers.

So him [birth brother] and I are so much alike in our personality...like he is very sensitive and then our other brother, who is in town now, he is so much not like us...Yeah, I used to...say to my friends that I'm in the middle...of them cause my brother, is hard core, he's been in jail, he's done a lot of stuff and my other brother who is holier than though, would hate for me to say that.

For others, the meeting of family was very overwhelming. For Trish, she was all of a sudden placed into an atmosphere that she is unaccustomed to. Not growing up in the urban Aboriginal/First Nations community and then becoming entrenched in it left Trish overwhelmed.

So...um...my first Elder at the Institute of Indigenous Government ended up being my uncle... my biological uncle (laughing). Oh it was just a weird story but it is not weird. Umm...there is just a whole great big story but its just like the native...coming home...its just one great big story its just wonderful really...They saw the good....they saw only the good and they inspired me to be my best... I mean I was so overwhelmed; things really happened quickly.

The experience of meeting birth family can also leave some with unanswered questions. Meeting her birth mother gave Laverne the opportunity to ask questions about her birth father. Laverne found out that her birth parents had been in a relationship for two years prior to Laverne's birth. She also discovered that her birth mother knew where her birth father was so Laverne had the opportunity to meet him.

But I did get to meet him [birth father] at an airport once and we went out for dinner a couple of times. He is very impressed with me. He was 'oh my god your so organized, it is not a trait either of us has' (laughing). My dad's a chemical engineer, my mom's a medical records technician [adopted parents], and lets see (laughing). But he was really good, you know at first he was well I have a daughter but he was kind of sceptical at the same time because I guess H. [birth mother] wasn't the most...ah, what do you call it...she wasn't the most whatever kind of person.

Meeting her birth father gave Laverne some answers but also raised questions about whether or not he was her father. For other storytellers there was some uneasiness. It was hard to become a part of a family that you were born into but did not grow up in. Eliza speaks about her feelings about this.

Yeah...and sometimes I don't even feel welcome with my birth family...but I don't think it is a matter that they don't want me there, I can't speak for them, but I just, I feel very alienated from them sometimes.

There could also be uneasiness on the birth family's part as Eliza explains.

I guess you can say meeting my birth dad was significant but I don't know I just kind of feel detached from him because I met him and then I call him and he never returns my calls and...he just doesn't seem to keen and just hearing about all the kids he has and none of them are in his life, just and I know that I have a dad...my adopted dad. But I think that was one significant part.

Laverne has decided to find out about her birth father. For even after meeting, there is still the questioning and wanting to know, whether he is her father.

I am not too concerned because I got to meet my dad [birth father] and that is all I really wanted to do. I don't really want a relationship with him because...what kind of relationship can we have. I do want to get a DNA test...just to say, okay it is done, it is over with, when I have kids I can say this is your grandfather, la la la. That is going to cost me \$1,000.

Many of the adoptees spoke about seeing resemblances as this was something that they had not experienced.

I honestly think that G. [birth brother] and I have the same father. I really do because we are dead ringers, (I didn't bring G. picture) dead ringers for each other. Yeah, the first time I met him, I remember we met at Earls in North Van and we were standing in the lobby. I said okay I'll have a black leather coat on and my hairs dark and he said I have long black hair and I can't remember what he was wearing. Well we could have been naked, I mean (laughing) I remember going whoo, whoo, I would have recognized you anywhere kind of thing. Really, it was pretty neat and we really do look a lot alike.



Eliza and Laverne also spoke about seeing resemblances.

Yeah...and I met a lot of my cousins and that's where I saw the resemblances, cousins that look exactly like me...but my aunts...I don't...people say I look like some of them but I don't see it. I said I don't see it.

Big time [resemblances], big knobbly knees, you know same fingers, same chin, everything, I was just amazed. The only thing that might be different is her lips [birth mother], my lips are bigger, above the bridge of my nose, is all my dad [birth father] but everything else, oh my god, it is amazing. But the weird thing is, I talk like my mom [adopted mother] and H. [birth mother] in turn talks like me... Her speech will pause where my speech pauses but she has a really thick rez accent. It is just hilarious. When J. [husband] first came up like he came up after, when he came up he was just stunned to see how alike we all were. My brothers all look like me; you know they are male images of me, except thinner, damn Inuit father.

Although some had grown up feeling different, they were now in a position of finding someone they looked like.

We [Alice and her birth mother] were both like...a couple of kids, looking at each other. I hugged her up and just...I can't believe...we both kept saying that. Oh yeah. And finally her daughters came, which were my siblings, and we went to visit with one, it was like unbelievable. Do you know what was so neat? We all looked so much a like (laughing).

For others, like Gord, it was finally going home to their First Nations community. Gord who moved from Manitoba, to Ontario, to Alberta and then to British Columbia with his adoptive family now had a place he could call home.

Oh yeah, I've been welcomed and I met the Grand Council when I was there...first time...the first week when I was there. That was quite an experience meeting everybody in one morning. They were introducing themselves and I'm trying to remember all their names. Impossible!

For several of the storytellers' reunification was a positive experience. This gave them the opportunity to ask questions and get more information. It was also an overwhelming experience that left some of them with unanswered questions and feeling unsure. Some were amazed to finally see resemblances but there was also uneasiness

with others. Some chose to go home. Reunification also brought up feelings about their birth family and this helped the adoptee to better understand why they had been adopted out. The meeting also gave the storytellers the opportunity to find out more about their birth families. They had reached a stage in their journey where they could move into a different place, the place of knowing and understanding.

### **Gaining knowledge and understanding**

The storytellers were given the opportunity to hear their birth families stories. The stories were not always good as Trish explains.

I mean there was some sickness too (laughing). Actually my cousin who was in recovery developed a crush on me...you know there is alcoholism throughout the family [birth], there is suicide throughout the family, there is drug addiction throughout the family and when she (cousin) went to treatment she had to do a tree on addiction and so almost everyone is affected in some way.

For Alice, after receiving information on her past, she knew that if she reconnected with her birth family, she would be bringing up the past which could be painful to her birth family.

Yeah, so I got that and I understood so I understood kinda what might have happened for my mother, there was sexual abuse and that is where I came from, right (laughing). And so...so I knew that if I got into contact with her [birth mother], that I would be bringing all this up for her.

For Trish after hearing about the dysfunction in her birth mother's family, she did not want to hear any more. Trish got scared.

I guess what happened is I got scared that if I went and found my dad's [birth] side, there is enough drug addiction and alcoholism on my mom's side, I just can't, you know what, I just can't go there.

Meeting and hearing birth family member's stories; however, also allowed the storyteller to finally understand what had happened and why they had been adopted out as Daisy explains,

It wasn't until I gave birth that I realized that there is a bond...that anybody who was a part of me could never have given up their children...NEVER, without screaming, fighting, mad, anger, pain...nobody who is a part of me could naturally give up a child or a baby without...going through terrible sorrow and that's a natural instinct, I think that...I just think that is such a huge...you know, I mean the mother bond with your children is so, through my adulthood that is when I realized that things were out of her [birth mother] control. If there was a way that she could have kept her children...or different circumstances, whatever, she would have and she could have been a good mother cause she didn't lose all of us till the eldest was five.

For many of the storytellers, there was a connection but there was also a sense of loss. Although Jay had been back with his family, he could never get past the anger toward his father. He finally went home to his father's funeral and let go of the anger that he carried.

Adulthood, I would have to say that it was at my...that weekend, my dad's funeral where it was just my family and we were digging his grave, put him to the ground and did the prayers and my brother was coming out and my brother spoke so pure, like I had never heard him speak so pure before and I was like so proud of him. We really connected for that time that we were together, we put everything aside and we were happy for that while. Yeah I felt incredibly happy and proud and sad, all at the same time. But I felt pretty good, I let a lot of things go and I said what I had to say...it was very significant for me.

There was also loss. For Gord, there was the realization that he had only had a little time with his birth brother.

Yeah this happened here...4 years ago, yeah I just got to meet him...my stepmother, my dad's [birth] wife and I came down and picked him [birth brother] up in S. and brought him back Spent 4 days with him and that was the end, that was the end. We had so much to say and we were planning on doing so much it is so unfortunate but in a way it's good that he is gone because he was suffering a lot too...but...we were hoping the best for him...he is resting now...but memory is always good. I always have my brothers and sisters to talk about the things he has done through his

lifetime. It is a good thing. I'm pretty sure that if he was around, he would have been one of my closest brothers.

There could also be the fact that you are too late. You have to deal with the loss and feelings that arise from this as Daisy describes.

It is so sad because we [birth family] were all just so close to meeting and we would have been able to see her [birth mother] if she had been alive if we had got our act together. Cause, you know, it would have been...you know her [birth mother] distance would have given her life meaning if she had seen 6 [birth siblings] of us together, that we were healthy and whole and our lives were okay and that she didn't do a bad thing giving birth to us. So...uh...they [two birth siblings] saw her in the coffin. And here was this, they said she was beautiful, this elderly native woman with long white hair and they just stood and stared at her. They were just amazed that, I mean they felt like they were, it was like the holy grail being in the same room with something that was the holy thing that had gave you life, it was totally spiritual, it was like a gift for them to actually see her in the flesh even though and I think that is a native spiritual thing too you know. Death is not that scary for native people, you know that it is just peaceful, you know.

For Daisy, hearing about her birth mother brought up feelings about what was lost.

I would have just loved to see her face [birth mother]...and I wish she had had the chance to stay alive for another two years to see us all together [her and her birth siblings] so that she would know that...you know everybody forgave her you know that whatever shit happened to her wasn't her fault...whether she picked the wrong people, I mean, I wouldn't have known...you know...what a chance it was to be a wonderful mother until I had my own children.

Along with the loss came feelings of being alone. Through Daisy's story we begin to understand the isolation and solitary feelings the storytellers struggle with.

Since I was taken away from my mother [birth] really...I don't feel ever connected and my other siblings who are also adopted have that same feeling that they have never really been with anybody that they have been on their own. And we often get into fights about who is more alone than the other one, or who has been more alone longer. You know because it is just your own perception because basically you are alone when you're adopted or you're fostered out.

For some of the storytellers, meeting birth family and hearing their stories for the first time were the means by which they got to learn about their culture. For Daisy, this was eye opening.

You know if I had known what I know now that I have become nativeized in my last 5 years, if I had known that in my early teens, you know what a rich culture it is, you know what the story telling processes are you know what native culture was like before colonization. How rich it was. You know...how motherhood was respected...how the importance of mother was like, you know they [mothers] were like the matriarchs of society where people were just centered on the mother and mothering and children and animals and wildlife and nature. I mean it is the most basic beautiful society that you could ever understand.

Huge, I only leaned that now when I talk to other women that are in the Native community. The THINGS THEY SURVIVE, IT WILL JUST BLOW YOUR MIND when you think wow, that inner strength comes from...people surviving in 30 below, dragging a tepee around, in winter, looking for rabbits, like there are not that many people that can survive those kind of...those kind of, not just weather conditions, survival skills in every aspect, emotional, social, like to survive what any of us survived through...and still be whole, it is pretty amazing.

For others, the whole concept of reunification is hard. Trish explains how hard it is to meet someone and develop a relationship with a stranger.

I have no desire to meet any more relatives, they have a desire to meet me but I have heard enough of them to know I don't want to be a part of their lives. My cousin J., she and I are best friends, my sister and I have a good relationship um...you know...as good as...she lives in Thunder Bay and I live here...but...you know I think as adults we kind of...we are still in the getting to know stage...she is um...see I am an over achiever...she is an underachiever....so I am helping her or trying to assist her to think beyond, to break the cycle of the welfare regime and I just...yeah.

The meeting also is full of expectations. There are expectations from both sides. Are you going to bond? Are you going to like each other? What kind of life have you had? The meeting is full of questions and in a sense entering the unknown. As Daisy explains, there are expectations.

I think the reunification is a huge thing, I mean there are expectations on both sides of the people when they find each other that they are going to bond...the fantasy of the perfect sister. I mean I am still not perfect enough for some of mine. You start to realize all their issues and all their stuff and you are kind of taking all that on too...I mean really to get to know five or six people all at once.

The storytellers realized that by going back, they would find out information. However, not every thing may be good as they would be bringing up the past. They also realized that things could have happened differently. Many reunified to find out about losses and realized that they were alone and that they had always felt alone. The knowledge of Aboriginal/First Nations culture was important and for some was eye opening, as it was trying to get to know family members as adults, and all at once. Overall the storytellers felt that reunification was hard and that it was only a part of the adoption process.

### **Knowing who I am**

Knowing who I am, was not just about gathering information on their past, it was finally knowing and understanding who they were. Because of their experiences it was in a sense putting all the pieces of their lives together. Daisy and Alice spoke about a passion to give back.

You know, just to show you right...that there is just this passion to either give back to society or try to make positive change no matter what happens to you.

So I guess in my life, part of it is about giving back and someday maybe that won't be needed in our generations but...for me, I took a lot out of this life...and I was treated badly but I did hurt others, people that I shouldn't have, so I try to remember about...the giving and the kindness and being...generous, caring. And in my family, what I found was a little one...she was just, how old was she...she was two and half when she actually came to us but she was about nine months, ten months and I found out she in care and that was by my natural sister's daughter, and that is how she came about.

Others spoke about turning everything negative into something positive. For Trish, the whole adoption experience is huge.

Actually my whole life experience, through the adoption experience, it is so huge...and the process of recovery, of whether you are accepted or not. Because you see I have always had a fear of rejection...that wonder if my family rejects me, it was a choice that I knew was a possibility and then having my first female cousin kind of going overboard from rejection to almost falling in love with me. You know the healing inside, it takes years. It just takes years... to heal...and for me...I guess, I'm not saying for anyone else. There was identity to deal with, there was sexual abuse to deal with, there was feeling alone, like out on the water of...I don't know not knowing who you are is so huge because you do feel lost and I mean I have had my own struggle with alcohol, depression and suicide. I mean there was a time when I just felt so spiritually dry, there was nothing left. But you know through all of this, I think with the identity part, I really am a survivor, I really am a precious person inside and outside, I really do have a love, a genuine love and compassion for people. I really do want to make a difference for me and for others on this planet. And I am lovable and I am you know and I really don't have a fear of rejection anymore because I really don't give a shit. I have become stronger even more forthright. The truth, its so much bigger than myself because I have lived a life of denial with my adopted parents also I guess with finding myself and then with my son pressuring me to find...And you know what, here I am thinking he is going to be overjoyed with finding my family and all he said was "At long last we know who we are."

For Jay knowing who he is meant making his own choices and decisions without having to check with someone else. He has in fact taken control of his life.

I don't feel like helpless anymore, I make my own choices, I make my own decisions, nobody tells me what to do or what it is I can or can't do...cause that is how I want it to be.

Eliza still struggles with not feeling white and not feeling native.

Yeah, I didn't even feel, I didn't even know who, sometimes I still don't know who I am but it helps with who I surround myself with now, I mean...I am around a lot of Aboriginals all the time now, and then I have my two little kids, right, they are me, they are a part of me.

For Alice, knowing herself is gaining an understanding that adoption is beyond yourself and out of your hands.

So I remember that children all have their guides with them, children all have their family, all their relations. I do believe I had mine. I knew I came from a large family when I was really young, I even named off some of them. So I think that is grandma, or somebody watching over me.

For others, knowing who they were meant understanding the concept of adoption and how it can influence lives. For Daisy, she sees herself as growing and learning and turning the negative into a positive.

I suppose that I am a successful, happy person, you know and that my legacy to my children now is that they see me as being...you know even though they had to live with their father and I carry some guilt about that...and his violent, temper that they look at me now as a happy, whole person and a positive contributor to society on all levels whether it is with my own immediate family or with people around me that I have a positive impact on them.

For Diane, there is acknowledgement of her roots – a beginning of understanding her Aboriginal/First Nations ancestry.

You know it is not that I've lost my roots, I mean I never really had...I can't go so far as to say I didn't have roots to begin with, its just that I didn't know about them.

Trish explains her feelings of being connected to her biological family. Although she struggled, she now has made a connection and knows who she is.

I really was a lost woman for many years. And it has only really been since I found my biological family that I feel...I feel...I know who I am, I feel really a brand new person...I feel...humbled and grateful, especially...to have discovered that for my grandson. Because he knows who he is and probably that is more important to me than...you know, what I have had to endure to come to that place. Because I know to look at him and to see a strong little individual knowing who he is is way more important to me than the pain, the struggle of what it took to get here,... and to see that, it just makes my heart sing, really.

For Trish, knowing herself means not being a victim and making her own choices. She realized that anger might be healthy but that she could not stay in the anger for then she was feeding the perpetrator. Trish realized she had choices, and she could make them.



Now...the anger...before it was at the perpetrators. Like I really, I couldn't get rid of the victimization...I feel...I am not at that anger point anymore...and I really don't feel like a victim anymore of it. Through therapy the choices that were given to me...were to lay charges...or to get on with my life because getting on with my life under a clear choice would be to not be a victim anymore and to move on in a healthy way.

Storytellers spoke about learning and teaching others. For Laverne, as she is gaining knowledge and understanding, she is passing it on to her birth family. This is the traditional Aboriginal way. Knowledge is meant to be shared.

Through Diane's words we understand that perhaps there is someone watching over us and making decisions that are out of our hands.

I lucked out. I totally lucked out. And I told that to G. [birth brother] I said...somebody must have been looking out for me because...a) my birth mother made the decision that she made, and b) I landed up with a great family...so...you know it's...it's kind of made me...they really have made me who I am. I mean any genes or any characteristics that are genetic well...you are going to have those no matter...how you're brought up but...you know as far as what kind of person you turn out to be... it is, how you were raised.

For the storytellers, knowing who I am has resulted in a passion to give back whether this is through work or in their personal lives. Many chose to turn negative experiences into positive ones. Their experiences gave them a better understanding of adoption. For others, they have taken their learning and are now teaching others. What is also apparent is that they have travelled a long road and their journey is life long.

### **Healing and resistance**

Healing and resistance is where the storytellers see themselves now. The Oxford dictionary defines resistance as "1) dislike of or opposition to a plan, an idea, etc.; 2) the act of using force to oppose somebody/something; 3) the power not to be affected by something; and 4) a force that stops something moving or makes it move more slowly" (Hornby, 2001 pp. 1066-1067). For most of the storytellers this journey has been a

struggle but from that struggle they have grown into individuals with a passion to enhance the growing of the next generation. Although Alice's experience with the foster and adoptive systems was very damaging, she chose to work with the system to assist a family member.

She [birth niece] is just I love it...I love her...she has taught me again to not just stay certain ways, rigid...or anger to come out, just accept it the day as it is, so she is just like our little blossom there. So we'll be raising her and the hope is that we will adopt. But then the other hope is there is a bit of healing to our family...because I want my sister to see her and where she can see her face, to go up there to be with her, that is her grandmother...and...you know.

Even though there was a fear of being alone, there was the recognition that for an adoptee or those separated from birth parents and family, they had already been alone since they were separated. Daisy realized that even though she had been in a relationship for 27 years, she had been alone all of her life.

I'd say finding my family and leaving my husband were two of the most important things that happened to me in my whole life, you know because...finally leaving my husband after 27 years of abuse...you know, it opened me into a little flower, you know, it gave me a new leaf on life. It made me realize that I didn't have to be afraid to be alone, that I was alone from the time I was born and here I have been clamping on to sick people trying to give me wholeness when I didn't need anybody because I already been on my own since I was born. Since I was taken away from my mother really...I don't feel ever connected and my other siblings who are also adopted have that same feeling that they have never really been with anybody that they have been on their own.

There was also the understanding that you make your own life. Jay believes it is up to you to turn the negative into a positive and create change.

I am where I am because I took everything that was shitty in my life and made it something positive I wouldn't let anybody keep me down, I wouldn't let anybody keep me down no matter what anybody said. I believe in myself and I felt something I think...a lot of people feel something in themselves and they should follow that and do whatever that is, it is very powerful.

For others, like Laverne, there was the understanding that they had to learn and teach themselves what they had not learned while growing up.

I didn't grow up native. So I have to learn this all from scratch. All the traditions, I have to do on my own but also my birth family, they...my birth family lost a lot of their traditions because they were drinking and they were...because of the alcoholism so they lost out on a lot of traditions and stuff like that and I think that caused a lot of trouble for their family. So when I am regaining it I'm trying to teach my brothers as well. Now I have to act as the older sister.

For others, like Alice, she has to teach herself. How do you learn to be a mother if you are not shown, how do you parent if you are not parented?

And I had to teach myself, because I had a lot of holes in my life. I had a lot of places where I had to fill up...the word adoption? What is that? What is fostering and adoption all about? And I don't think people really answered that very well... You know I don't recall too many social workers.

Although Eliza had a caring and loving home, she feels that there needs to be more love and she expresses this with her children.

I think...I embrace my kids a lot more and I don't know in a...an extraordinary or different...I don't know how parents treat their kids who stayed with who were with their parents. I know for me it just feels like...more so, that extra little love that I have for my kids has to stem through not having that 100% bond that I have, didn't have above me.

For all of the storytellers their journey has been a long road they have travelled. They have grown and thrived and they have developed into unique individuals. Their resistance is remarkable. Eliza speaks of being a survivor and that her quest has been a long, hard, road.

That I am a survivor...that I think...that I am very strong...sometimes I may not appear so...but through healing and crying, it has made me stronger...and it has been a long road to accepting me...for who I am...it's been a long road.

I think...that it has been a long healing journey for me and in some ways I think it's going to be life long for me. I can't speak for other people but...it's, it is hard.

This journey can also empower the person as Trish explains.

I feel empowered throughout all of this the more you keep people down the more you are thwarting the next generation of amazing, amazing successors.

For the storytellers healing and resistance are about giving back. Four of the storytellers see themselves enhancing the growth of the next generation and each one of them spoke about making positive changes in their lives while Eliza described this process as a long healing journey.

## **SUMMARY OF KNOWING**

The final stage of development is adulthood and Elderhood or the time of knowing. Storytellers were reunified with birth family members. Four storytellers (50%) mentioned finally seeing someone who they looked like or they noticed resemblances between themselves and with their birth family members (Diane, Eliza, Laverne, Alice). Seeing resemblances was important for the storytellers as this provided a basis for identification. Four (50%) travelled back home (Gord, Jay, Laverne, Diane) to their First Nations communities.

For many of the storytellers, reuniting brought up questions and answers. Daisy questioned what had happened with her birth mother. Laverne had the opportunity to ask her birth mother questions about her birth father. Eliza found out that she was not given up for adoption but that she had been placed for adoption. Diane found out information about her birth mother and her other siblings. Alice found out about her conception and also had the opportunity to meet many of her siblings. Trish heard about her birth family and gained understanding. These responses support the studies by Sobol & Cardiff, 1983 and Neil, 2000 that for many adoptees there is the need to find out "why" they were adopted and that there is the need to find out about their genealogical history.

Reunification provided the storytellers with the opportunity to find out answers to questions and also more information about their genealogical history. For Trish, there was the realization that not everything was “good,” there was some sickness too. For Trish and Gord, the experience was overwhelming. Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Howe & Feast, 2001; Sachdev, 1992 discuss the importance of genealogical history for the adoptee. Two storytellers also spoke about the feeling of being disloyal to the adoptive family (Trish, Eliza) should they pursue the search.

There was also a connection to Aboriginal culture. For some this was overwhelming but it was also empowering to find out about the resilience and survival of Aboriginal peoples. This knowledge helped to shed some of the stereotypes and racist beliefs that had been told to the storytellers. For some of the storytellers, reconnecting brought to light feelings of loneliness and a sense of loss as they realized what they have lost and regretted they had not pursued the search early enough. Although Gord got to meet one of his brothers, he also lost him during the meeting through extenuating circumstances. For Alice, Trish and Daisy, there was realization that they had been alone for so long. Daisy had regrets about not making a connection sooner when her birth mother was alive. Tied to these feelings, three of the storytellers spoke of their difficulty in being able to trust others (Trish, Daisy, Alice) and how this deeply impacted on their feelings of themselves and their ability to develop relationships.

The storytellers evolved through their life experiences and their experience with adoption finding a common goal of wanting “to give back.” Two of the storytellers (Daisy, Alice) spoke about a passion to give back. Diane and her family took in a foster child. Alice is adopting a birth family member and her hope is that there is healing within her own family. Jay is working with youth and he sees changes happening, so for him there is hope. For Eliza, there is giving her children that little extra love. For Gord, it is being involved as a dancer and collector. For Trish and Laverne, it is working in the urban Aboriginal community and trying to make change.

Three of the storytellers (38%) spoke about learning and teaching others. For Laverne it was learning about cultural practices and then teaching these practices to her birth brothers. For Alice it was teaching others in the work that she does and for Eliza it was teaching her children.

Through the journey of adoption and reconnecting the storytellers became who they are today. Some spoke of finally opening up and gaining the ability to be who they are. Most saw and realized that they had choices. They could make decisions on how they wanted to live their lives. They could turn things around.

Through their personal empowerment, the storytellers had decided to learn from their experiences and teach others. Overall, some of the storytellers saw themselves as survivors. Their journey, however, has been plagued with experiences that has impacted their lives and made them who they are today.

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

Chapters 4 & 5 discussed how the storyteller's experiences with adoption have influenced their lives. They have provided a link to the knowledge of their adoption and how they came to be with their adoptive family. Each of the storytellers were placed for adoption at different ages, however, the commonality was that they were all placed into non-Aboriginal homes.

Experiences varied however each of the storytellers' appeared to go through similar experiences (Figure 3). How the storytellers reacted to the experience made the difference. These chapters have taken the reader through the different aspects of the individual (physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual), the different stages of development (infancy/childhood, early/late youth, early/middle adulthood, and adulthood/elderhood) and the different developmental markers (growing, discovering, reconnecting and knowing) of the storytellers. This journey through growing,

discovering, reconnecting and knowing has provided an insight into the lives of the storytellers and their experiences as adoptees.

The branches flowed in many directions and provided the reader with an understanding of the storyteller's experiences and influences of adoption through their words and description of their experiences. Figure 4 below, (pp. 136-138) summarizes the experiences of the storytellers. The final part of the tree has yet to be exposed, a connection to the seed, roots, trunk and branches will be revealed through the leaves. The next chapter, the leaves, provides a discussion of the results and a conclusion as well as it presents the implications and recommendations of this study for practice, policy and research.

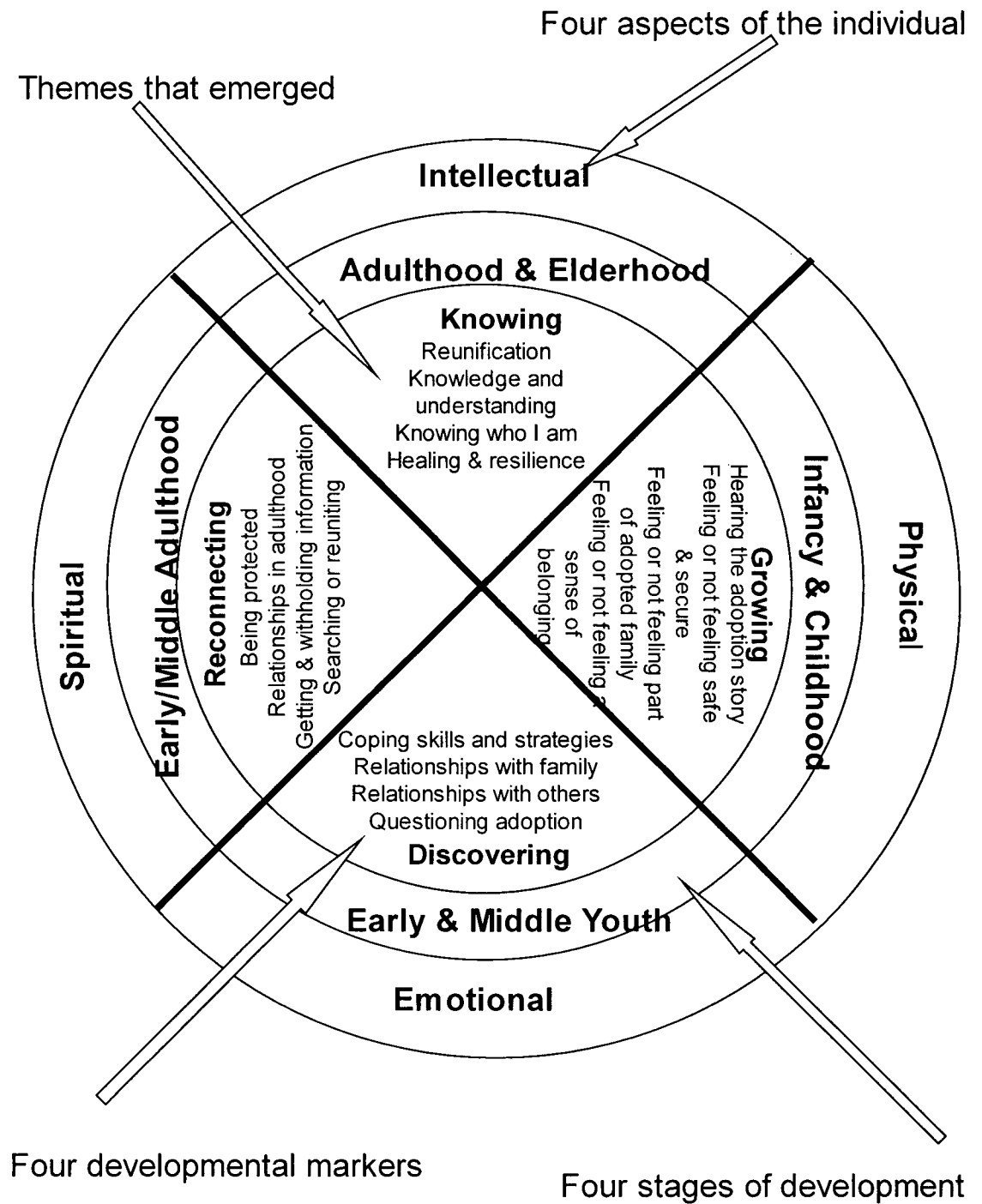


Figure 3 – Expansion on model



Figure 4 – Table of results

Experience	Trish	Diane	Eliza	Alice	Gord	Daisy	Laverne	Jay	#	%
<b>GROWING</b>										
Felt unloved	X			X		X			3	38
Felt/looked different	X		X		X	X			4	50
Negative telling of story	X			X	X	X			4	50
Positive telling of story		X	X				X		3	38
Suffered abuse	X			X	X	X	X	X	6	75
Used defense mechanisms	X		X		X	X	X		5	63
Did not trust	X			X					2	25
Felt safe and secure		X	X						2	25
Felt alone	X		X	X		X			4	50
Heard negative/racist comments about FN people	X		X	X		X		X	5	63
Multiple placements				X				X	2	25
Stayed in the same home	X	X	X		X	X	X		6	75
Felt like they belonged		X	X				X		3	38
Only one in family adopted	X	X			X				3	38
Not exposed to FN culture	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		7	88
Did not feel a part of adopted family	X					X			2	25
Felt lucky		X			X				2	25

Experience	Trish	Diane	Eliza	Alice	Gord	Daisy	Laverne	Jay	#	%
<b>DISCOVERING</b>										
Abuse was discovered			X			X			2	25
Self esteem affected			X			X			2	25
Felt disconnected	X			X		X			3	38
Displayed anger							X	X	2	25
Felt the need to excel	X								1	13
Sought attention in others						X	X		2	25
Felt supported by adopted family		X	X		X		X		4	50
Had suicidal ideals			X						1	13
Formed unhealthy relationships	X					X			2	25
Had support from adoptive family with search	X		X		X				3	38
Reconnected during youth		X			X				2	25
<b>RECONNECTING</b>										
Not told they were FN	X	X							2	25
Felt protected	X	X	X	X		X			5	63
Had information on siblings withheld	X		X			X			3	38
Wanted to meet same sex parent					X			X	2	25
Had support from agency with search				X		X			2	25

Experience	Trish	Diane	Eliza	Alice	Gord	Daisy	Laverne	Jay	#	%
Mentioned seeing resemblances		X	X	X			X		4	50
Spurred to search by a birth	X								1	13
Spurred to search by a loss	X			X					2	25
Searched by self							X		1	13
Reunited with birth family	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8	100
<b>KNOWING</b>										
Spoke of adoption as a journey			X			X			2	25
Felt alienated from B. family			X						1	13
Felt welcomed by FN community		X			X				2	25
Now working with/in urban FN	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8	100
Discussed giving back		X		X					2	25
Spoke of now teaching others			X	X			X		3	38
Traveled home to FN community		X	X	X	X		X	X	6	75
Discussed genealogical history	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8	100
Talked about feeling connected	X							X	2	25
Learning about culture	X				X	X	X	X	5	63

*I BELONG*

*It came upon a status card that read – Aboriginal group...Métis...it didn't*

*Come too fast*

*Four years in the waiting to belong to my roots and myself at long last.*

*A lifetime of an historical journey, of discovery, of my past*

*Somehow amalgamating and articulating it with my present*

*And now holding onto it dearly into my future. My card, my belonging, my self  
40 some years of yearning something whatever that was...I searched for it through  
relationships with people from all walks of life.*

*I searched for it through alcohol*

*I searched for that feeling of belonging through workaholism...*

*And I searched for it in nature.*

*The latter is where I found myself and my roots.*

*I found the essence of me no matter how hard I tried to push it away*

*I found myself in nature and being at one in it...and*

*I became known to her – she woke up from a sleep that was fraught*

*With lonely nightmares – dreams that were always searching...For something*

*The something was found in proudly embracing my Aboriginal*

*Roots...coming out so to speak.*

*Who am I? A combination of my ancestral roots, my adoptive families*

*Teachings – no more, no less – it is all a part of me.*

*Part white, part Indian and a contemporary person not enmeshed in*

*Either world but alive in my own*

*"I did it my way" as the song goes – there are no regrets!*

*Pride comes from within, not getting it from anywhere else*

*There's power in that card – power to stand up proudly for who I am*

*And what I've become*

*With Aboriginal blood flowing through my veins, I am also Scottish Mixed with a family  
of upbringing that makes me who I am today...I am...*

*Pat Christie, Aboriginal adoptee May 2001*

*(Used with permission of the author)*

## **CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION: LEAVES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter builds on the branches which provided the results of the study. The branches flowed in many directions and provided the reader with an understanding of how Aboriginal adults have been affected and influenced by adoption. This chapter, the leaves provides a gathering of the information with each leaf engulfed with the knowledge gained from the material presented through the history, the literature and the storytellers' words.

The purpose of this study was to hear the voices of Aboriginal adult adoptees, to gain an understanding of adoption and how it has influenced Aboriginal adoptees lives and to gain knowledge that can make a difference in the adoption practices of Aboriginal children. My review of the literature discussed how past historical and child welfare practices inflicted on Aboriginal/First Nations peoples have had devastating affects (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Kimelman, 1985). The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the current child welfare statistics is proof of this (Blackstock & Tromé, 2004). Aboriginal children are still being placed for adoption and most in non-Aboriginal homes (Fournier & Crey, 1997; York, 1990).

This qualitative study was conducted by way of categorical content analysis, developmental theory, Aboriginal world view and storytelling. Eight Aboriginal adults were interviewed and asked about their experience with adoption. The study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the influences that adoption has on Aboriginal adults adopted in infancy, childhood, or adolescence as they go through their life cycle? What are the stories that Aboriginal adults tell about their experiences of adoption? How do the stories speak of the influence that experiences of adoption have on Aboriginal adult's life cycle. Using the medicine wheel as a framework to explore the life cycle of Aboriginal adoptees, four developmental markers were identified: growing, discovering, reconnecting, and knowing. Figure 3 (medicine wheel) displays the

developmental markers and the themes that emerged during the analysis of the narratives of the storytellers. This chapter will provide a summary of the research and a discussion of implications for practice, policy and research along with recommendations in each of these areas. Recommendations from the storytellers and a final conclusion are also presented

## **CONCLUSION**

Adoption is a practice that has been around since time immemorial. When adoption was traditionally practiced in First Nations communities, the child had knowledge of its roots, family, history and Nation (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Connolly, 2003). Overtime, this practice has become secretive. Adoption protects some but not others from knowing their identity or the identity of their parents, families, and peoples. The various aspects and issues involved in the practice of adoption have called into question the legislation and practice standards that are to work in the “best interests of the child”. Yet this over used phrase has yet to be defined when discussing its relevance of the term to an Aboriginal child. The enforced divisions of Status, non-Status, Métis and Inuit have further created havoc as different policies, legislation and governments have to be reviewed and consulted depending on how the child is defined. Adoption legislation is not universal across Canada as each of the provinces and territories has their own legislation and this is another issue that provides confusion to the issue of adoption.

Growing up in one home is a positive for an adoptee. Being or looking different had a devastating impact on the storytellers as did being exposed to abuse. The exposure to negative, stereotypical racist comments impacted profoundly on how the storytellers felt in their families. Even though the storytellers all are Aboriginal, not one storyteller spent time with Aboriginal people or learnt about Aboriginal culture in their childhood. Although not all adoptive homes were safe and secure storytellers felt that there was someone or something looking or watching over them. Remarkably, the storytellers appear to create their own security through these connections.

Although the storytellers were all separated from their birth families and First Nations community, they all felt the need to reconnect with their birth family and six of the storytellers returned home to their First Nation community. This study documented how each of the storytellers engaged in a journey to search, discover and seek out their birth rights despite secrecy, lack of information or painful experiences of abuse, racism and discrimination. The strength exhibited by these storytellers is remarkable and suggests that connections with roots and culture are important sources of resilience and resistance and how these linkages can be present despite colonization or adoption. Despite information being withheld all eventually were reunited with their birth families through their family members searching for them or their own search for their family. Reunification provided the storytellers with the opportunity to see resemblances and to ask questions and get answers to questions that they had been seeking information on.

The storyteller's experiences with adoption have influenced their lives and shaped the type of questions they ask, the type of work and choices they made and their feelings. The storytellers experiences also made them recognize that they have choices in the decisions they make in their lives. Some of the storytellers spoke about being overwhelmed as they tried to understand the losses they have been through. The loss of their birth family, loss of the ability to know their siblings, loss of knowledge about their people, loss of culture and traditions are some of the losses that the storytellers endured during their lives. There is recognition of what they have been denied and for many of them there is the feeling of being alone or an inability to trust. For other storytellers, there is regret. Regret that they did not look harder or ask more questions, regret that they had not initiated the search earlier and regret for all that they feel they have lost through their experience.

The storyteller's experiences provided them with the opportunity to learn and teach others and also enabled them to develop their own views on adoption. Some of the storytellers gained knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal people and have begun to work within the urban Aboriginal community. Ultimately, all the storytellers are giving back in their own way. The storyteller's quest through growing, discovering,

reconnecting and knowing has brought them to where and who they are today. Their stories give us a view of their experiences. It is up to the reader to hear their voices in the words they have spoken about their experiences and influences with the practice of adoption.

Researchers [and others] must listen closely to adoptees to hear their hopes and desires, their gratitude and their resentments, their joys and their sorrows. Only by moving away from preconceived notions about adoption and entering the inner world of the adoptees can researchers ever hope to understand their experience and be helpful to them when needed (Brodzinsky, 1993 p. 162).

For all the storytellers, there was a need or a want to go back home. Despite secrecy, not knowing, not being exposed to Aboriginal people, racism and abuse, they all reconnected with their birth family and embraced Aboriginal culture in some way. Too reconnect with their Aboriginal roots and reunify with this side of themselves there was a journey back through time, to a time they had very little knowledge about. Figure 5 illustrates this journey through time.

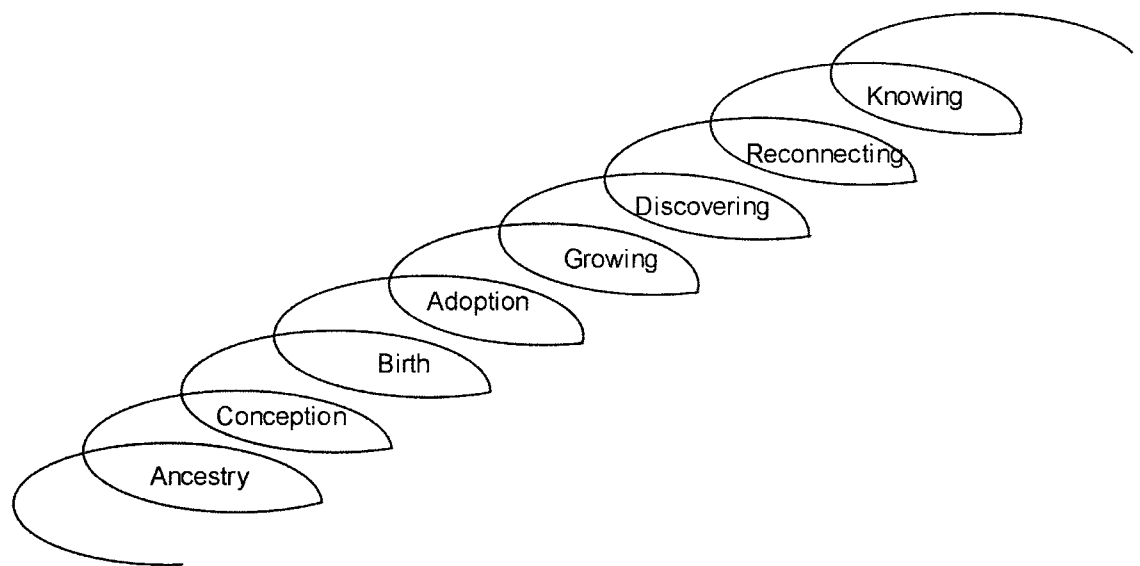


Figure 5 – Spiral of experiences



As Figures 5 presents, for an adoptee, there is limited knowledge of their life prior to their adoption. In order for the adoptee to gather information about their past, (birth, conception, ancestry) they (in a sense) had to go back in their adult years through time to a time they had no knowledge of. They had to go back to understand the past. To find out information about their birth, they had to seek out and find information about their birth family. The only way they could do this was to obtain their adoption papers, their original birth certificate or to speak with someone who was involved, usually the birth or adoptive parent. So in effect, for the adoptee, their journey for information about themselves is a journey through time, from the present, to the past. The search for the past is what allows them to move forward to discover information, to reconnect with their birth family or community and to finally bring all their knowledge and information together.

However, not all adoptees choose to find out information on their past or to reunite with birth family. For the adoptee who chooses not to seek out information about their past, they move forward but their past can remain unknown to them.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The conclusion provides a knowledge base for practice. The analysis of the narratives and the literature review underscore that practice must be centered on the “best interests of the child” but that there is conflict in the interpretation of this phrase (Richard, 2004). The most important implication for practice that this study offers is the introduction of an Aboriginal perspective to the consideration of what constitutes the “best interests of the child.” An Aboriginal perspective includes the individual, family, community, and Nation and places culture as an important aspect of the daily life of an Aboriginal child’s life. Consequently, the practice and decision making about adoption that considers the “best interest of the child” should regard culture as an important part of the Aboriginal child and the adoption process. Culture should be a daily part of the Aboriginal child’s life. This clearly has implications for practice and public policy.

Culture is a fundamental aspect in a system that works in the best interests of the child. Cultural practices should include conducting ceremony and ritual, the use of storytelling as a cleansing and educational tool and the incorporation of the wisdom of the Elders. Systems and programs need to connect and incorporate these practices. By implementing these practices, governments, agencies and First Nations communities would truly be working in the best interests of the child and acknowledging the child's culture as an important aspect of the child's life. Following, I develop specific recommendations in each of these areas of practice.

First Nations Elders ought to be involved and work within the Ministry and other Family & Child Service agencies. The Elders should be acknowledged for their wisdom. An important aspect that was missing in the storytellers lives was being exposed to or connecting with Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are people of the land and they are very much community oriented. Other than seeing Aboriginal people on the street, not one of the storytellers had a connection to Aboriginal people or to a First Nations community. Healthy practices need to be implemented that assure that the Aboriginal adoptee has access to Elders and other First Nations people. Aboriginal culture is strong and adoptees need to gain a sense of pride in who they are as Aboriginal people. Ideally story telling and cultural practices of ritual and ceremony would be a part of this exposure. The importance of the stories amongst First Nations people cannot be over emphasized. The stories are in fact a way that traditions and practices are passed on to the next generation. If this generation is not hearing the stories or practicing the traditions, these resources will be lost.

The life story booklet, which is a book that provides the foster child or adoptee with information about their life prior to their placement, should contain all information about the child and his family. It should include the child's ancestry, their family history, and the history of their people, the stories and traditions, and the history of their community or Nation. This knowledge is very much a part of being First Nations. Adoption should not stop the child from knowing who they are, who they are related to and where their people are from.

A further recommendation is to incorporate ceremony and ritual into practice. Ceremony and ritual are important aspects of Aboriginal culture. There is usually a ceremony performed for any important event within the Aboriginal family and community. None of the adoptees mentioned being exposed to ceremony in any way. In the ideal world, the child would have a ceremony at birth and then be placed in a foster or adopted home and a ceremony would be performed to acknowledge this event. If possible, the child could be handed over by the biological mother or biological family member with the child being welcomed into the foster or adopted family. Having a ceremony signifies the importance of the event. Social workers need to be aware of this practice and the importance of ceremony within the Aboriginal community. This is not just for show; this is to acknowledge the event as an important time for the person and provide witnessing of this important event.

Finally, as the telling of the adoption story is such an important part of the whole adoption process, cultural practices need to be put into place which makes this process as less painful for the adoptee as possible. It has been discussed by the storytellers, that how this telling happened had a definite impact on how they felt during their later years. Ideally, the story should be told at a younger age, before the child goes to school. The telling should be done in a respectful manner through story and there should be no negative stories about the adoptees birth family. If possible, this process would happen through storytelling. However, there does not appear to be any books about Aboriginal adoption that are written for children or specifically Aboriginal child adoptees. Elders provide us with stories. If the adoptive family desires, having an Elder involved in this process could assist the adoptee and adoptive parents to reveal this important event in a kind, respectful manner through story. Another recommendation is that books be written by Aboriginal people explaining the concept of adoption from an Aboriginal world view can assist adoptive parents in being able to tell their children their adoption story in a safe, secure manner through story.

Another area of practice that tended to be absent in the adoptees lives was support services during times of crisis. The support that was provided to the adoptees and to the

adoptive and biological families was not appropriate. Only one of the storytellers mentioned accessing counselling services to work through her adoption issues. One felt that she would have benefited from accessing support but there was none given. Two of the storytellers accessed the Adoption Reunion Registry to access their birth information and to get assistance with the search for family. Two were given their adoption papers by their adoptive family. One had the assistance of a priest and another one the assistance of his adoptive father. One did all of the work herself from accessing her original birth registration to initiating the search and arranging the reunion. Adoptees need to know that services exist. One recommendation is that support services need to be offered to adoptees. This would include cultural competent counselling, support groups and assistance with search and reunion.

Support services should be made available to adoptive parents. In this study, all of the adoptive parents were non-Aboriginal. As Aboriginal children are still overrepresented in the foster and adoption systems, support services need to be available to all adoptive parents. As Diane says, "ethnicity is not the be all and end all of adoption that children need love and security". However, despite this important consideration, there did not appear to be any assistance available to support the adoptive parents in explaining their transracial adoption to their children. Ultimately, in two cases, how the story was told had a devastating affect on the adoptee. Also, since the children were Aboriginal children, cultural support and services should have been provided to the adoptive parents to assist them in helping their children to acknowledge their cultural identity. A recommendation is that non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal adoptive parent's need to have access to culturally relevant resources (books, Elders, cultural material, support groups) within the urban and First Nations community which can assist the adoptive parents in helping their children to learn about their cultural roots.

Support and services also need to be available to biological parents. If at all possible, the best place for the child is with their biological family, this criteria is written in legislation. Assuring that parents know that there are support systems available such as family support programs, respite care and homemaking services and that the Ministry

is there to offer support and not to apprehend their children may encourage parents who are having difficulties to access services. Accessing services and implementing services within the household may provide assistance to the family and ward off the need to take children into care. It makes more sense to provide preventive services before protection is needed. It appears to be more cost effective to provide services in the home then to take the children out of the home, go through the court system and process, place the child in a foster home and provide funds to cover this expense.

Providing follow up support services should be an important part of working in the adoption field. After listening to the stories of the storytellers, I understood that only one of the storytellers was visited by a social worker during her childhood. In Canadian legislation, the process for follow up for adoption is between 6 months to 1 year. A follow up system where the child is visited for a lengthier period may have provided an opportunity to identify the abuse that happened with some of the storytellers during their childhood. Although it is safe to say that you cannot change what has happened, we can learn from it. Follow up is an important practice that assures the system is working, that children are cared for, and that abuse is not happening within the home. As adoption is a life long process follow up should also be life long.

Another recommendation is to provide support to families that are involved in the court system. The drastic cuts that have been implemented to the legal aid system have made many parents attend court without legal representation. This increases the risk that the child may end up in the Ministry's care. Without being able to legally fight for their children, many children are being lost to the system and ending up in foster and adopted homes. Legal representation and support needs to be accessible to all and the provision of legal support to biological parents need to be reinstated.

Aboriginal Adoption Support Workers need to be an important part of the adoption system. This includes having Aboriginal Support Workers in the urban Aboriginal community and also in the rural First Nations communities. Many of the storytellers spoke of the issue of adoption being a life long issue and that support should

be life long. The whole search and reunion process is very demanding and time consuming. Many issues can come up for someone in this process. Once reunion happens, it is also hard to get to know people that you have not met or do not remember. This can be a very stressful experience. There is also reference to Aboriginal adoptees having different issues like the loss of cultural identity and the acknowledgement that they have been removed from their culture, family, community and Nation. This supports the studies of Locust (1986) and The Correctional Services et al (2001). These losses themselves are very huge. A direct implication for practice of this finding is that it highlights the need to have Aboriginal adoption support workers who have cultural knowledge about the issues and who can support Aboriginal adoptees going through the feelings and experiences of the adoption process.

The final recommendation is that as First Nation communities are reclaiming their children who have been separated through foster care and adoption, there needs to be a specific reunification worker within each First Nation community or territory to assist in this reclaiming process. This worker should have access to all historical information about the community, information from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs about the adoptee, information on the birth family and any information needed in regards to the adoptee. In this regard, this would give the worker the opportunity to contact the adoptive/biological family and adoptee to assist in the reunification process, if this is what the adoptee wants and to also assist the biological family and community through the whole reunification process.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Aboriginal children are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Yet adoption is an alternative to spending a life in care. The Adoption Council of Canada (ACC) argues that there are adoption alternatives for these children, such as open, kinship, and subsidized/assisted-adoption (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2004). National statistics of the number of Aboriginal children in care are 40% with some of the Western provinces having 68% of the children in care being Aboriginal (Child Welfare League of Canada,

2004). One has to wonder whether the 60's scoop has stopped. Aboriginal children continue to be taken away from their families and continue to be placed into non-Aboriginal homes. In this context, this study highlights the importance of consultation with Aboriginal communities in the implementation of adoption policies. First Nations leaders, Elders and communities should be an active part in the planning of services provided to their people.

This study shows the painful impact of this practice on the lives of Aboriginal adoptees. A recommendation is that policy should facilitate the increase in the numbers of Aboriginal foster and adoptive homes. The challenge with this recommendation is to go beyond being looked at or discussed to actually going through this process and making it happen. Social policy, social programs in the field of adoption and social workers need to encourage and support Aboriginal people to become foster and adoptive parents.

As Aboriginal children continue to be overrepresented in the child welfare and adoption systems, policies need to be developed that introduce training for workers in diversity of Aboriginal peoples, the rich history, culture and the atrocities that have been inflicted upon Aboriginal peoples. This should be engrained in the internal policies of the agencies and in the training of social workers. A recommendation is that the Schools of Social Work implement and make mandatory for social work students to have knowledge about the history of Aboriginal people including the devastating impact that policies, legislation and practices have had on their lives. As well, Schools of Social Work and First Nations communities need to be supporting enrolment of First Nations students in the field of social work. More Aboriginal people need to be involved as social workers working in the community.

Secrecy and withholding of information had a negative impact and impacted on the rights of the adoptees. There is a need for consultation with Aboriginal adoptees, birth family members, adopted parents and First Nations programs, services and communities. There is recognition and understanding for the need for privacy for those that do not want contact but what about the right of the adoptee or birth parent to have

information about their birth or their child? An adoptee and a birth family member should have access to information like every other Canadian citizen and there should be no fees for the access to your personal information. Adoptees should not have to pay to search for family members who have been taken away from them. This means access to personal information on their past should be available free to adoptees and birth family members. Laverne recommends that open adoption needs to be looked at as an alternative to the secrecy that is currently implemented in the legislation. This secrecy cost money. A policy for the adoption system is the need to provide access to information at no cost to adoptees.

A final recommendation in the area of policy is that the adoption regime (governments and non profits) needs to ensure appropriate and cultural competent knowledge and hiring of workers in the adoption field. The ideal candidates would have knowledge of the diversity of Aboriginal people's history and the atrocities that have impacted on their lives. Further knowledge should include knowledge about the policies and legislation that further create havoc in First Nations people's lives and of the cultural practices and traditions that provide and display the uniqueness of Aboriginal people.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research is valuable as it provides a starting point for future areas of research. The study and the review of the literature show the lack of Aboriginal adoptees voices in research in this important area of practice. In this research, the telling of the story to an Aboriginal researcher facilitated a powerful, clearing process of making sense of the storytellers' story, their past, their resilience and resistance. This process gave the storyteller the opportunity to discuss the often painful issue of adoption in a safe manner with another person who had knowledge about the issue.

Keeping contact with the storytellers and their active participation through the entire research process (from the interview, to the reading of transcripts, the discussion of the analysis and the review of the final text) followed traditional Aboriginal practices.



The use of oral history and the storytelling process validated an Aboriginal epistemology/methodology as well as the storyteller's knowledge and experience. Storytelling became a ritual, a kind of ceremony for the storytellers as they engaged in a process of sharing with the researcher their life experiences. An implication of this practice is the consideration of oral history as a powerful and effective method to conduct research with Aboriginal people and with individuals who have experienced colonization. It gives the storytellers their voice, allows them to speak and goes beyond research.

Another implication of the results of this research is the potential of storytelling for community work. Community programs can integrate these methodologies into their programs. The use of this practice enables the storyteller to tell their story, in their own words. Further research needs to look at oral history as an effective tool when working with people in the community. The active participation of the storyteller in the process provides validity to the study.

Social workers working with adoptees could use this study as a resource for practice as it provides knowledge of some of the issues, feelings, experiences and influences that adoption practices have had and continue to have on Aboriginal adoptees.

The study also shows, as Daisy recommends, that there is a need to provide knowledge about Aboriginal people in the current school curriculum starting at the elementary school level. This study would and could provide teachers and students with knowledge about the diversity of Aboriginal people, the rich history and culture, the wrongs that have been inflicted and the resistance that is happening. A recommendation is that curriculum developers should include knowledge about Aboriginal peoples in their curriculum starting at the elementary school level. Further research could look at how implementing this curriculum with elementary school children impacts the child's views in regards to Aboriginal peoples.

The negative experiences and influences on some of the storytellers in this study and their determination to reconnect with their families suggest an area for further

research. Studies could look at what contributed to the positive outcomes for these storytellers whether they have particular traits that contribute to positive outcomes and what causes resilience and resistance to the factors that contributed to their negative experiences

This journey through the seeds, roots, trunk, branches and leaves of the tree has taken the reader through the lived experiences of eight Aboriginal adoptees. It is through their words and experiences of the past that the reader is better able to understand how the storyteller's lives have been influenced by their experiences with adoption. From the time of placement into non-Aboriginal homes, all the storytellers' lost the connection to their culture, family and traditions. Through the storyteller's experiences and journey of growing up as a child, to their discovering themselves, and reconnecting with their birth families and culture, the storytellers gained knowledge of, who they are and were Aboriginal women and men on their journey through life.

Jamie Sams (1998) sums up this continuous journey through life. For along this journey,

There is also a strong, active, and reciprocal relationship between our physical world and the 'Above World' or spirit world. We are connected not only with the spirit energy of every living thing here in this physical world, but also with the spirit of our ancestors and those to come. We are as leaves on a tree whose roots extend deeply into the body and spirit of Mother Earth, and from whom branches will continue to stretch themselves toward the eternally blue silence of Father Sky, giving life to new leaves whose beauty and presence serve to strengthen and renew the essence of its roots (pp. 148-149).

For the storytellers their journey continues...they give life to new leaves and continue to renew and strengthen their roots and their connections to their adopted families, their birth families and future generations.

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**Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:**

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line at the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.

**Consent:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy.

If abuse is disclosed there is a legal duty to report any current belief that a child has been or is likely to be physically or sexually abused. This must be reported to a child protection social worker.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

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Subject Signature

Date

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Printed Name of the Subject signing above.