TS’EKOO BENI HINZOO:
URBAN ABORIGINAL PARENTS’ EXPERIENCE
OF A CULTURALLY SPECIFIC PARENTING PROGRAM

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

JANUARY 2007

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ABSTRACT

Urban Aboriginal parents are an under-researched group, as are culturally specific parenting programs. The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) in the Province of British Columbia is in the process of devolving child welfare services to regional Aboriginal Authorities. Part of devolution involves reconsidering how to best approach Aboriginal child welfare. Considering that referral to parenting programs is currently the norm in cases where there are child protection concerns, this study analysing how Aboriginal parents experience a culturally specific parenting program is vitally important to determine whether programs such as these are working, from the parents' point of view. This study analyzes the experience of urban Aboriginal parents from a symbolic interactionist/feminist standpoint theoretical perspective.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my partner Meghan Thompson for her infinite patience as I progressed through this journey towards completion of this degree. I thank my sister Shannon Cameron for her support and encouragement. I thank my mother Cecelia Talley for being my role model, and for being such a source of strength to me. I thank my grandmothers Nancy Charlie and Gerry Cameron for the gifts of being the women they are. I thank my thesis chair Dr. Margaret Wright for being the professor I wish one day to become. I thank professor Elizabeth Robinson for her guidance and shoulder to lean on throughout my academic pursuits. I thank Dr. Richard Vedan and Dr. Merry Wood for their valuable time and energy being on my thesis committee. Finally, I wish to thank all of the Elders, facilitators, and parents from the EAGLE Spirit parenting program at Helping Spirit Lodge in Vancouver, B.C., for their vital input into this study; without you, it could not have happened. Musi cho to you all, I raise my hands to you in gratitude!
INTRODUCTION

I am a member of the Dakelh-ne (Carrier Peoples) First Nations. I am privileged to have the full support and acknowledgement of my Band, and Indian Status through the federal government. I mention this because many Aboriginal academics writers do not acknowledge or analyze the position of privilege from which they operate. It is hypocritical to attack systems oppressing Aboriginals, and not to acknowledge whether you are benefiting in any way from them in the meantime. My location as a First Nations woman contributed to my understandings of which methodologies and theories would be most aligned with traditional Aboriginal values and beliefs.

To honour Aboriginal women's daily, grinding struggle to exist and to keep their families together, I have titled this thesis Ts'ekoo Beni Hinzoo which in Sheraton Carrier means "Women With Good Minds". What I am referring to with the Carrier title is how these women work so hard to better themselves, and bring about positive change for their families, using their mind, heart, and spirit. Aboriginal mothers are the ones showing through their actions that they are willing to travel down the hard road to wellness, to recover their children, and hold their families together. I honour the courage, integrity, resilience, and beauty inherent in all Aboriginal mothers as they try to walk the Red Road to balance. Traditionally, women were honoured for doing this; now it seems it is just taken for granted. I chose the name of this thesis to honour these women: our sisters, aunties, mothers, and grandmothers.
Background

According to Statistics Canada's 2001 data, British Columbia has the second-largest Aboriginal population in Canada, at 170,025 people (2006, p.79). The majority of Aboriginals in British Columbia live off reserve (73%), and the Aboriginal population is growing rapidly (Statistics Canada, 2006, p.79). Between 1996 and 2001, the Aboriginal population grew by 22%, as compared to only 5% growth for the total population of British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2006, p.79). In addition, in 2001 48% of these Aboriginals were under the age of 25 (Statistics Canada, 2006, p.79). Urban Aboriginals are a young, diverse, and rapidly growing population.

Combine these demographic characteristics with British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) statistics indicating that in 2001/01 Aboriginal children represented 36.6% of the total population of children in care of the ministry. This has steadily increased to 49.1% in 2005/06 (MCFD, 2006, p.20). Statistics can be higher, depending on the region you are looking at. For example, "As of March 2005, there were 900 children in care in Vancouver. Of those children, 580 were Aboriginal (65%)" (MCFD, 2005, p.3).

Cardinal & Adin (2005) state that in 2001, 36,855 Aboriginals were living in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), comprising approximately 1.85% of the total population in the GVRD (p.18). Aboriginals make up less than 2% of the GVRD total population yet make up over half of the children in care of the Ministry. This glaring statistic reflects the vast over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system in the Lower Mainland. To put a stark lens on the issue, there are three times more Aboriginal children in care in Canada now than at the height of the Residential School era (Bennett & Blackstock, 2002). This is especially shocking considering that in traditional Aboriginal societies, it was never necessary to put our children into the care of strangers (Community Panel, 1992); the extended family, Clan, or tribe would arrange for care of children when necessary.

Aboriginals have been increasingly pushing for control over their own social services (Community Panel, 1992). Many Aboriginals envision control over child welfare service provision as a component of Aboriginal self-governance. As MCFD
moves towards devolving child welfare services to Aboriginal Authorities, questions have been raised by Aboriginals working in the field of child welfare. These questions focus on the appropriateness of current programs, and how to ensure that they are the best choice for urban Aboriginal clients. Sinclair, Bala, Lilies, & Blackstock state: “While increasing the degree of control and involvement of Aboriginal communities in the provision of child welfare is having positive effects, the transfer of responsibility is a complex and contentious process” (2004, p.201).

The Ministry’s strategic policy shift towards devolution began with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) September 2002 between MCFD and various Aboriginal agencies/community stakeholders that indicated a commitment to return child welfare services to Aboriginal communities through Regional Aboriginal Authorities (Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), 2002). In the MOU, MCFD acknowledges Aboriginals’ inherent jurisdiction over their own children, and the subsequent need to provide their own child welfare services to their children and families.

Aboriginal Regional Authority Planning Committees have been assembled, and are in the process of preparing for transfer of governance to Aboriginal Authorities. On the Aboriginal Child & Family Development component of MCFD’s website, it states, “The first authority is expected to be established by 2007. Once created, the authority will eventually assume responsibility for the Aboriginal child and family services currently delivered by MCFD" (retrieved January 8, 2006 from: http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/aboriginal/index.htm). The devolution process is a lengthy one, and is currently ongoing.

In the Indian Act, s.88 transfers authority to enforce child welfare regulations over to the Provinces, which in British Columbia is done through the Child Family and Community Service Act, 1996 (CFCSA). Regardless of devolution, any child welfare provision will have to adhere to the CFCSA. However, there is flexibility as to what form the programs associated with child welfare services will take. This means current norms need to be examined to help determine which services Aboriginal clients find the most helpful, and why they find them helpful. Based on my own
experiences and interactions within the Ministry of Children and Family Development, it seems that two of the most common child welfare responses to protection concerns are referral to family preservation, and referral to parenting programs.

In a previous social work practicum placement, I encountered a culturally specific Aboriginal parenting program in another Region of the Lower Mainland. Based on the successes I witnessed in that program, I became more interested in the culturally specific aspects of parenting programs. Subsequently, when I decided to do thesis research for my Master of Social Work, I already had an interest in culturally specific parenting programs. For this reason, I decided to focus my research on the experience of urban Aboriginal parents taking a culturally specific parenting program in Vancouver, B.C.

Considering the number of Aboriginal children in care, the number of Aboriginal parents taking parenting programs must be similarly high, as these parents struggle to regain care of their children from the child welfare system through compliance with MCFD’s requirements. In addition, not all parents taking parenting programs are mandated by MCFD to be there. There are many who voluntarily attend the parenting program in an attempt to keep their children out of care of the Ministry.

However, this over-representation of Aboriginals involved with the child welfare system is not reflected in the number of culturally specific parenting programs targeted at their needs. In Vancouver, there are few culturally specific parenting programs for Aboriginal clients. For the purposes of this research, I am defining “culturally specific” as a parenting program that describes itself as including traditional Aboriginal teachings, has Aboriginal facilitators, and has Aboriginal Elder involvement. MCFD does not define “culturally specific” in their policies or procedures; however, they do emphasize in their Service Standards the need for services that respect the child’s and family’s culture and identity (Child and Family Service Standard 5, Children in Care Service Standard 2), (MCFD, 2003, p.23 & p.96).
Literature Review

The term “parents” can be defined as “all those who provide significant care for children in a home or family context” (Moran et al, cited in Hume, Hubberstey & Rutman, 2005, p.3). This definition acknowledges that a parent need not necessarily be biologically related to the child. This definition also acknowledges that the typical vision of a nuclear family is a narrow construct, which is not culturally appropriate for some non-Western constructs of family and kinship, such as Aboriginal families. Aboriginal families often involve extended family, Clan, and kinship networks, as well as informal familial inclusions such as non-biological “Aunties”, which is a far more expansive concept of family than Western constructs.

Hume, Hubberstey, & Rutman (2005) state that “good” parenting practices “are culturally defined and influenced, and are rooted in the belief systems that define the culture” (p.4). It is important to note that those defining “good” parenting practices in Canada are for the most part distinctly non-Aboriginal. Child welfare services in Canada are marked by a critical shortage of Aboriginal social workers. This means most of the people assessing Aboriginal parents’ parenting skills are outsiders to Aboriginal cultures and norms. This lack of knowledge about Aboriginal cultures and their norms undoubtedly contributes to the growing over-representation of Aboriginals in the child welfare system. In any case, a common response to child protection concerns around parenting issues is to refer to a parenting program.

Watson, White, Taplin & Huntsman (2005) define a parenting program as “A clearly planned and specified set of activities to be undertaken with parents” (p.25). Parenting programs exist to improve parent/child interaction, to provide support for parents, and to alleviate child protection concerns. According to Barlow & Parsons (2004), group-based parenting programs began in the 1970’s, and their usage has expanded ever since. Numerous studies exist that purport positive benefits of parenting programs (Bunting, 2004; Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004; Thomas, Camiletti, Cava, Feldman, Underwood, & Wade, 1999; Barlow, 1999; Webster-Stratton & Taylor, 2001; Coren & Barlow, 2003). However, very few of these studies
address minority populations that utilize parenting programs. If culture or ethnicity is addressed at all, it is usually done in the “suggestions for further research” section.

An exception to this is an article by Cheng Gorman & Baiter titled “Culturally Sensitive Parent Education: A Critical Review of Quantitative Research” (1997). Cheng Gorman & Baiter state, “Restricting the evaluation of culturally sensitive parent education programs to quantifiable measures (e.g., the occurrence of specific target behaviours) may be reductionistic in light of the intricate nature of interpersonal relationships” (1997, p. 366). This statement was useful for two reasons; first of all, it helped me to decide I wished to avoid reductionistic thinking and analysis in my study. Secondly, it helped me to subsequently pick a theoretical framework that would accommodate my desire for non-deterministic thinking. Cheng Gorman & Baiter point out the need and value of qualitative analysis around parenting programs, rather than a sole focus on quantitative methodology.

This is echoed in the paper by Hume et al (2005), which states, “The exclusion of other types of research and evaluation, particularly qualitative designs, leaves us with little information about why certain interventions seem to produce positive changes, as well as which program components make the difference, and with which groups” (2005, p.24). This statement serves as a rationale for the qualitative and phenomenological design of this study.

In addition, Hume, et al (2005) state, “Most of the knowledge about parenting support is based on interventions with women, and in particular, white women. Engaging fathers and cultural minorities has proven more challenging” (2005, p. 25). This limitation of the literature was echoed by Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman (2004), who state, “Limited attention has been paid to considering whether program efficacy can be enhanced by focusing on relevant racial, ethnic, and cultural issues for the targeted group” (p.278).

This was indeed true of most of the literature I reviewed. Considering Aboriginals are vastly over-represented by the child welfare system, and referral to parenting programs by child welfare workers has been growing steadily since the 1970’s (Barlow & Parsons, 2004), it makes sense to take the time to evaluate what
Aboriginal parents taking parenting programs actually think about the experience. Hume et al (2005) and Coard et al’s (2004) statements serve as a justification for my qualitative focus on urban Aboriginal parents’ experience of a culturally specific parenting program.

Aboriginals are increasingly demanding cultural relevance in programs provided to them. Aboriginals are tired of paternalistic programming that assumes others have the knowledge and expertise as to what is needed:

First Nations have a wealth of traditional cultural knowledge about child development and parenting, about the importance of environment and experience from the point of conception throughout early childhood. We have teachings about pre-conception and conception, as well as teachings, songs, and ceremonies about birth and parenting. We need to value and trust those ways because they remain valid for our people today. They are a source of strength for our children and youth. We need to use those traditions to support families and communities to give their children the best fighting chance for survival and well being (BC Aboriginal Care Society, 2005, p.63).

Aboriginals are the experts on what Aboriginals need, not the oppressive systems that purport to serve them while continuing to contribute to their ever-expanding over-representation. Aboriginals are calling for greater control, cultural relevance and specificity. The literature does not adequately address culturally specific parenting programs, a gap which this small study attempts to begin to fill in.

Brave Heart’s (1999) article helped guide the research questions in this study. She discusses how a parenting program curriculum that dealt with intergenerational effects of trauma, combined with a re-attachment to traditional Lakota values was experienced as helpful and effective by the parents in the program. Braveheart’s (1999) innovative study directly informed the central research question in this study, which asks the parents what the cultural components such as Elder involvement, the pipe ceremony, utilizing the Medicine Wheel, and participating in traditional ceremonies such as the Sweat mean to them.

Cheng Gorman (1996) delineates three types of cultural parenting programs: culturally translated, adapted, and specific. Culturally translated programs are translated, unaltered, into another language. Culturally adapted programs
incorporate parts of the target group’s culture. Culturally specific programs are
designed specifically for a target group, with their needs and context in mind
throughout the process (in Cheng Gorman & Balter, 1997; p.343). Because of
events like the “60’s Scoop” and the Residential School system, Aboriginals have an
abysmal relationship with the child welfare system. For this reason, I think culturally
translated or adapted programs are inadequate to deal with their unique needs.
Only culturally specific programs that cater to Aboriginal worldviews and
understandings have the potential to work, and to overcome the legacy of distrust
Aboriginals deservedly feel towards the child welfare system.

Yellow Horse & Brave Heart discuss this when they state that there is a need
for “culturally based, culturally congruent, and culturally grounded practice that
emerges from traditional AI/AN [American Indian/Alaskan Native] worldviews. Native
philosophies, behavioural norms, relationships and attributes are included and
Natives develop the program for their own population” (in Strode, 2004, p.35).
Additive solutions will not work in an Aboriginal context, especially in the contentious
realm of child welfare and the support services that accompany it. Yellow Horse &
Brave Heart liken additive solutions to “Indian window dressing”, which will ultimately
not work due to its superficiality (in Strode, 2004, p.35).

A major component of cultural specificity for Aboriginal programs needs to
involve an honest acknowledgement and awareness of the effects of previous
assimilative policies and procedures. Yellow Horse & Brave Heart address this when
they discuss the idea of Historical Trauma, defining it as “cumulative and emotional
psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from
massive group trauma experiences” (in Strode, 2004, p.39). I doubt there could be a
better working definition of the effect the Residential School system had on
Aboriginal societies. Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski (2004) also discuss the idea
in their paper Historical Trauma and Aboriginal Healing, prepared for the Aboriginal
Healing Foundation. Duran & Duran label this as Intergenerational Posttraumatic
Stress Disorder (1995, p.30), and Stone labels it as Postcolonial Stress Disorder
(2002, p.99). Mainstream parenting programs lack this focus on Historical Trauma,
and therefore ignore a major contributing factor to why Aboriginal parents intersect so often with the child welfare system.

Dufour & Chamberland (2003) point out that, “Interventions for abusive and neglectful parents have seldom been evaluated and they are still subject to significant methodological limitations” (p.17). However, based on their systematic review of available literature, they also support the idea that many of the parenting programs are “promising”. Many of the smaller parenting programs such as the EAGLE Spirit program are too small to pay someone to do an evaluation or to attract academic attention. Therefore, although programs such as this one may be promising, they are not usually written about. This study focuses on two neglected areas in the literature: urban Aboriginals, and small, culturally specific parenting programs.

Bunting (2004) outlines five different types of parenting programs: 1) behavioural, 2) cognitive-behavioural, 3) relationship-based, 4) rational emotive therapy, and 5) multi-modal (p.330). Behavioural parenting programs involve learning and applying new parenting skills. Cognitive-behavioural programs add techniques to help parents learn new ways of thinking about themselves and their children. Relationship-based programs teach communication skills, as well as teachings around understanding relationships. Rational emotive programs aim to reduce negative thought patterns, and replace them with healthier ways of thinking. Multi-modal ways incorporate several of these modalities into one program.

Due to the numerous legacies of the residential school system in Canada, I put forth the argument that a multi-modal parenting program stands the best chance of success with Aboriginal parents. The reasons for this tie in closely with Duran & Duran’s (1995) concept of historical trauma. Events such as centuries of attempted assimilation, residential schools, the “60’s Scoop” of Aboriginal children, and the continuing over-representation of Aboriginal children in care of the Ministry all indicate that a simple “one size fits all” parenting intervention will not work with Aboriginal parents. The legacy of mistrust they carry is too large, and their memory of social work and social workers is far too dismal for a generic intervention to work.
This links in with Goodman & Richards' (2005) report pointing out the variables risk factors may be associated with. Goodman & Richards (2005) state:

Adverse risk factors may be associated with the parent (e.g., alcohol/substance abuse, depression), family situation (e.g., low income, single parent), parent-child relations (e.g., ineffective parenting, family dysfunction), the child (e.g., disability, health problems, difficult temperament), or the community (e.g., high-risk, under-resourced, disproportionate criminal activity) (p.5).

Aboriginal parents deal with multiple intersecting risk factors and oppressions in their daily existence. Some deal with all of these listed factors. A single mode type of parenting program is clearly insufficient for their needs. A multi-modal program has the best chance of adequately serving their complex needs as an indigenous minority with a unique history of colonial and assimilative oppression exerted through social services in Canada.

Bremberg (2004) splits parenting programs into an even more basic dichotomy: parenting support geared towards children, and parenting support geared primarily towards the parents. According to Bremberg (2004), there is ample literature indicating positive outcomes for programs that target children; however, there has been little research done on programs targeting parents. The lack of available research becomes even more evident when looking for literature on minority groups involved in parenting programs or, more specifically, Aboriginal, Native American, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous groups involved with these programs.

Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins (1997) state, “Underutilization has been attributed to several factors including cultural and linguistic appropriateness of services” (p.24), and that this could have a detrimental effect on recruitment for a parenting program. This influenced me to ask the parents what drew them to this particular parenting program, and how they heard about it initially. This helped to determine if the obvious cultural components in the program’s description helped in the recruitment process.
The dearth of literature on Aboriginal peoples' involvement with parenting programs was a major incentive to pursue this research. The EAGLE Spirit program is very different than most of the other parenting programs offered in the Lower Mainland. One of the main differences between the EAGLE Spirit parenting program, and others offered in Vancouver Coastal region are the Aboriginal culturally specific components of the program. The backbone of this study is built around determining what the cultural components mean to these urban Aboriginal parents. Similar to the program in Brave Heart's article, the EAGLE Spirit program also examines the intergenerational effects of the Residential School system, and how this has impacted several generations of Aboriginal parents.

The EAGLE Spirit program is a multi-modal parenting program, with workshops that have elements of all four types of parenting programs as defined by Bunting (2004). These elements include: behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, relationship-based and rational emotive therapy. The EAGLE Spirit program is also an Early Childhood Development (ECD) program, so theoretically it focuses on the children. However, when one looks at the workshop schedule of their standard structured program, it is obvious the program pays a great deal of attention to the parents' needs also. As Bremberg (2004) points out, there is a gap in the literature around programs focusing on the parents, and this served as another rationale for the construction of this study. In addition, from the literature review, it became evident that humanistic, interpretive qualitative studies are rare in the discourse and research around parenting programs. This in turn led me towards the selection of a theoretical framework and methodology that were culturally appropriate for use with Aboriginal peoples, and respectful of their ways (and my own) of being and knowing.

1 See Appendix A for a sample of a schedule of workshops for the EAGLE Spirit program's structured parenting program.
Theoretical Framework

As stated previously, a major flaw with positivistic quantitative methods and theories is that they assume a universality that does not exist. Holstein & Gubrium (1994) state that these sorts of methods and theories “Assume that others experience the world basically in the way we do, and that we can therefore understand one another in our dealings in and with the world” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.263). Battiste (2000) labels this as “cultural imperialism” (p.xvi). Aboriginals have had their worldviews, values, and norms denigrated, attacked, and dismissed by a dominant society since its first contact with the colonizers.

The absolute rule of positivistic empiricism has meant that often research purporting to be “helpful” to Aboriginals is, ironically, at the same time contributing to their continued silencing through the implied assumption of superiority of Western constructs of epistemologies and ideologies. This is something that I, as a First Nations researcher, sought to avoid perpetuating. For these reasons, I was drawn more towards humanistic, interpretive theories.

As an Aboriginal researcher, it is essential for me to choose theories which are not only congruent with Aboriginal epistemologies, but which actually embrace Aboriginal ways of being and knowing. Qualitative methodologies and humanistic, interpretive theories are the best fit for this reason. Because I decided to focus the study around the meanings that the parents assign to the culturally specific elements of the program, symbolic interactionism fit well as the theoretical underpinning to this study. Besides the focus on meaning inherent in symbolic interactionism, several other aspects of symbolic interactionism informed the development of this study. These include symbolic interactionist understandings of symbols and roles, which I will discuss further later in this section.

In Blumer’s seminal text Symbolic Interactionism (1969), he discusses two important concepts central to symbolic interactionism: emergence and personal agency. These two concepts tie in very well with the Aboriginal concept of self-determination because they value the individual’s expertise in their own affairs.
Within the following quote by Musolf are several of the reasons I selected symbolic interactionism as my primary theory for analysing the experiences of the parents:

Interactionism will always emphasize agency no matter how overpowering the structure. Emergence, indeterminism, choice, meaning, definitions of the situation – in general, minded activity, that is the interpretive, reflexive, and mediated nature of everyday life, and the agentic aspects of human nature – are emphasized" (in Reynolds, 2003, p.114).

As an Aboriginal researcher, I seek out theories and methodologies that are compatible with my indigenous worldview, and the worldview of the Aboriginal parents I conducted the research with. Kenny, Faries, Fiske, & Voyageur state that for Aboriginal people, a core component of their worldview is a belief in adaptability and change (2004, p.8). Symbolic interactionism shares this core belief in humanity, and as such, is a good fit for this research.

The Chicago school of interactionist thought follows a more purely interpretivist Blumerian tradition; and this is where I locate the symbolic interactionist side of my theory, rather than in the more positivistic Iowa school of thought. The Blumerian tradition holds a greater sense of human agency and emergence than the Iowa tradition of interactionist thinking. This belief not only fits better with the Aboriginal worldview, but I also think it fits better with a social work perspective, where the worker, ideally, must maintain faith in the client’s capacity for change.

Symbolic interactionism guided data analysis by identifying the patterns of meaning ascribed to participation in the parenting program, towards the culturally specific components of the program, as well as repeated symbols or metaphors used by the participants. These were then grouped into broader themes, and analysed for interrelationships between each other. Throughout the process, client ideas on what works from their perspective were noted, and grouped together in the Recommendations section of this thesis.

Charon states, “Culture means the ‘consensus’ of the group, the agreements, the shared understandings, the shared language and knowledge, and the rules that are supposed to govern action” (2004, p.164). When the consensus, language and knowledge of the group are being negotiated against the norms of dominant society,
there is an increased likelihood of role conflict and role strain. Having Aboriginal facilitators, Elder involvement and traditional teachings incorporated into the program is an attempt to bring the culture of the program into alignment with the culture of the Aboriginal parents using the program. The focus of this study is to analyze what the shared cultural aspects of the program mean to these parents.

I utilized feminist standpoint theory to analyse several underlying contextual factors salient to this study. Sayers, MacDonald, Fiske, Newell, & George state, "Not only have First Nations women's traditional roles been profoundly affected by colonization and the actions of the state, many First Nations men (and women) have internalized the White male devaluation of First Nations women, resulting in a denigration of the roles of women and the exclusion of women" (2001, p.5). This has had an enormous effect on parenting roles and expectations within Aboriginal cultures, an idea that is expanded upon in the Findings section.

Humm defines feminist standpoint theory as having "as its base the idea that subordinate or less powerful members of society have a more complete view of the world than the dominant groups. This is because they have to see both their own subordinate and the dominant perspectives" (1995, p.276). Feminist standpoint theory fits well with symbolic interactionism in that both theories are respectful of the client's self-determination, emergence, and agency, and both theories can focus on meaning. They do not violate central tenets of each other. Feminist standpoint theory brings the deeper understanding of the contextual factors and gendered inequities present in the parenting experiences, which would not be fully drawn out or adequately analysed in a purely symbolic interactionist research project. For these reasons, both theories were utilized and integrated into the analysis of each theme in the Findings section of this thesis.
Methodology

This study was designed to have a symbolic interactionist/feminist standpoint theoretical underpinning, with a phenomenological approach. The focus was on the meanings that urban Aboriginal parents ascribe to participation in a culturally specific parenting program, and more specifically around the cultural components of the program. Because the facilitators and Elders could offer a more thorough analysis of the structure of the program and underlying theories of the program, they were also interviewed in addition to the parents. Data was gathered by means of individual interviews that took between thirty minutes to two hours, depending on availability of the interviewee.

The program coordinator acted as my third party recruiter. She provided a written invitation to participate/description of the study to the parents, and also telephoned several previous participants to give them the same information. Interested parents contacted me, and interviews were arranged at their convenience. The interviews were semi-structured (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) in order to have flexibility over the course of the interview, and to allow the participants to guide the process. The interviews took place wherever the interviewee was most comfortable; this included at the agency, at a community centre, and at their home.

I audio taped each interview, and then transcribed them verbatim. Participants had the option of receiving a transcript, but most chose not to. Several chose to have the preliminary findings emailed to them instead. After several weeks, I went through the transcriptions again to ensure accuracy.

To maintain accountability to the agency and the community they serve, a preliminary report was given to the program coordinators and the agency after all interviews had been transcribed, to distribute as they saw fit. This conforms to Tuhiwai Smith's assertion that research with indigenous populations should be shared with them (1999). Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states, "For indigenous researchers, sharing is about demystifying knowledge and information and speaking in plain terms to the community" (p.161). For this reason, I returned to the agency to present
them with the preliminary findings, and to speak plainly about the research, and gather any comments they had to contribute. I will return to the agency again to present a copy of the final thesis to the agency.

Much of the existing data around parenting programs is distinctly quantitative and positivistic (Cheng Gorman & Balter, 1997; Hume, et al, 2005). I chose instead to utilize a humanistic, qualitative methodology and theoretical framework. The methodological approach I chose was hermeneutic phenomenology. There were several reasons for this selection. First of all, Aboriginal peoples have a long history of being researched for the benefit of others (Deloria, 1988). As Deloria states, “We should not be objects of observation for those who do nothing to help us” (1998, p.94). Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori scholar and researcher, states it even more powerfully: “It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations” (1999, p.1). It is my firm belief that humanistic methodologies and theories are more culturally appropriate and respectful of Aboriginal peoples’ ways of being and knowing because they honour the subjectivity of all peoples’ lived experiences, rather than denying it and imposing an assumption of universality.

Phenomenology focuses on how people interpret or make meaning of their experiences. It assumes there is no one universal truth; instead, “truths” are as variable as the people experiencing them (Patton, 1990). Van Manen (1997) states that hermeneutic phenomenology “requires an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (preface, xi). The research questions were phenomenological in nature because they merely served as launching points, from which the interviewee could take in any direction they wanted to during the interview.

I followed the example of First & Way’s (1995, p.105) outline of a seven-step phenomenological methodology used in their paper:

1) Literature review related to topic
2) Investigate the experience through the collection of stories contained within the interviews

3) Reading and re-reading the interviews to interpret them and begin to form a conceptual framework for categorizing the parents' experiences

4) Extracting phrases that lead to greater insight of the participants' experiences

5) Determining any broader themes related to the interviews

6) Writing the themes into a description that makes sense of the parent education experience with a culturally specific parenting program

7) Articulating the results.

The theoretical underpinnings of this research project needed to also be humanistic and respectful of Aboriginal peoples' worldviews, values, and norms. Feminist standpoint theory and symbolic interactionism therefore influenced both the formulation of the research questions, as well as the subsequent analysis of categories and themes.
Sample Characteristics

After consultation with community partners and child welfare professionals in the Vancouver Coastal Region, I decided to partner with the Early Aboriginal Guidance in a Loving Environment of Spirits (EAGLE) program, through Helping Spirit Lodge Society, in Vancouver, B.C. This is a culturally specific parenting program, designed by Aboriginals for Aboriginals. They offer two 12-week structured parenting programs per year, along with several mobile drop-ins that operate out of various community centres during the summer months.

The parenting program coordinator acted as my third party recruiter. Interviewees consisted of urban Aboriginal parents who are participating/have recently participated in the Early Aboriginal Guidance in a Loving Environment of Spirits (EAGLE) parenting program at Helping Spirit Lodge, as well as individual interviews with the program facilitators, and two respected and integral Aboriginal Elders. My stipulation was that the interviewees had to have participated in the program within the last year. I am defining “urban” as living anywhere in the Lower Mainland, “Aboriginal” as including Status, non-Status, Métis, Inuit, anyone self-identifying as Aboriginal, First Nations, or Indian, and “parent” as the birth parent, or anyone with legal custody of the child. There were no major differences noted between participants who had finished the program in the last year, and the current cohort.

Thirteen qualitative interviews were conducted between May 2006 and August 2006. Morse (1994) states, “In qualitative research, the investigator samples until repetition from multiple sources is obtained. This provides concurring and confirming data, and ensures saturation” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.230). To accomplish multiple sources for data collection, four program facilitators were interviewed, one male Elder, one female Elder, and seven parents who have participated in the parenting program within the last year. Data saturation and repeated themes became evident after the thirteen interviews, so at that point I ceased interviewing.
Amongst the facilitators, there were two Métis, one non-Status Indian, and one Status Indian. All of the facilitators were women in their mid 30’s, with the exception of one woman who was in her 50’s. The facilitators had an average of 4.25 children each, and all were single parents, except for one person.

All seven of the parents interviewed were women who were over the age of 19. The parenting program is less than two years old, and there have only been five male participants during this time, with none in the current parenting group cohort. The program coordinator was unable to track down any male previous participants to recruit for this study. Six of the women had participated in the structured parenting program, and one had participated in the mobile community drop-in parenting program. The average age of the seven women interviewed is 26.4 years old. They have on average 2.4 children each, with an average age of the children being 4.7 years old. Three out of seven of these women were single parenting. There were three status Indians, three non-status Indians, and one Métis in this sample.

Table 1: Demographics of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Parents (n=7)</th>
<th>Facilitators (n=4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>41.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parenting</td>
<td>3/7 (42.9%)</td>
<td>3/4 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Identified Aboriginal Identity</td>
<td>3 Status Indians (42.9%)</td>
<td>2 Métis (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Non-Status Indians (42.9%)</td>
<td>1 Status Indian (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Métis (14.2%)</td>
<td>1 Non-Status Indian (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I do not like using the terms “Status Indian” and “non-Status Indian” for several reasons. Status is a construct of the federal government that creates false divisions in the Aboriginal community. It privileges some, while excluding others.
(usually women)\(^2\). To give a better idea of how oppressive the *Indian Act* is, "It served as a model for the apartheid regime in South Africa" (Bedford & Irving, 2001, p.13). However, I asked the study participants to self-identify because a lack of Indian status is common amongst urban Aboriginals. This is a contributing factor to the sense of dislocation and disconnection from the culture that will be discussed in the Findings section of the thesis. Although I do not like the false division of Indian status, the fact is it exists. For these reasons, I chose to ask the study participants to self-identify to give greater clarity to my analysis.

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\(^2\) As Jamieson (1986) states, "Indians have never been a party to formulating any part of the *Indian Act*" (in Ponting (Ed), 1986, p.113). The federal government's ultimate goal has always been to assimilate all Indians into the mainstream Canadian populace, and to absorb all of our traditional territories and lands. One way they attempt to do this is by controlling who qualifies as "Indian" or not through Indian Status. This is crafted to create a "have" and "have not" relationship between different groups of Aboriginals, a divide and conquer tactic by the colonizer which unfortunately has been all too successful.
MAIN FINDINGS

Theme 1: Myths and Stereotypes

One of the workshops which parents cited most frequently as helpful was the Self-Esteem workshop. A facilitator described this as a “heavy” workshop, which she elaborated meant that it required a lot of introspection, understanding, and growth on the part of the parent. A different facilitator said she calls the Addictions and Self-Esteem workshops “Strong Medicines” because they are hard to do, but provide a great deal of healing for the parents. One facilitator emphasized that in her Self-Esteem workshop she deconstructs “the myths” that Aboriginal parents receive in childhood.

Interviewer: These “myths” that you’re talking about, from childhood, what do these look like, and what sorts of meaning does that hold for the parents?

Facilitator: Mostly, it’s like the intergenerational abuse, and the suffering of addiction, and Residential School. And things like children are meant to be seen, and not heard. Or you’re stupid, you’re bad, you’re dirty, you’re ugly. All of those negative things that we carry. Or, also you know, cultural prejudices. You’re too brown, you’re too white, you’re a dirty Indian; you’re just a, whatever it may be. And exploring what we carry from that, and what we’ve just accepted about ourselves, you know?

The combined effects of Residential Schools, intergenerational abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and negative stereotypes are all intertwined in a complex way, which feeds the poor self-esteem many Aboriginals carry internally in their day-to-day existence. The Self-Esteem workshop operates from a platform of decolonization, whereby the facilitator gently guides the parents through an exploration of these myths, and where they come from. The facilitator explained that by locating the source of these myths and stereotypes within the dominant culture of the colonizer, it allows the parents to “choose not to own this about themselves.”
This in turn prepares the parent to begin to open up more to the cultural aspects in the program.

Narayan (2004) discusses the concept of “epistemic advantage”, which is a feminist standpoint concept that involves the oppressed having knowledge and understandings of both their own contexts, as well as those of their oppressors, out of necessity for survival. Narayan (2004) points out that although this is framed as an “advantage” in feminist discourse, it has a “dark side” (Narayan, 2004, p.221), as she puts it. The dark side involves oppressed peoples having two or more mutually incompatible frameworks framing their social reality. This feminist standpoint concept of the dark side of the dual consciousness oppressed peoples possess can be applied to the first theme of the findings; the myths and stereotypes that the Aboriginal parents experience.

Even if the parents had the good fortune to grow up in a balanced, healthy Aboriginal home, they would still have the negating and oppositional viewpoints of dominant society wriggling into their thoughts and understandings of themselves. These negative views of the oppressor conflict with healthy attachments to Aboriginal culture, and manifest as internalized oppression in the form of rejection of or shame of anything Aboriginal. If the undermining influences of the colonizer’s values and norms remain unchallenged, Aboriginals’ understandings and respect for their own ways can atrophy. This will lead only to even poorer self-esteem and self-image when the parents’ lived experience does not match up with either of their frameworks of understanding. They become trapped between two cultures, and a participant of neither.

About half of the parents and facilitators mentioned the fact that the self-esteem of the parents “gets beaten up” even further by the fact that they are often mandated by their Ministry of Children and Family Development child protection worker to attend. One facilitator states, “Having your kids taken away really beats up your spirit and self-esteem.” Parents describe how they feel other parents or people in general will negatively judge them for having to take a parenting program. This makes for a tenuous beginning when the parents walk in the door of the parenting...
program. One parent explains how being mandated to attend would make her feel like she had “holes in her fabric” which everyone could see and point at.

A facilitator explains the low self-esteem in a similar way. To even work up the courage to walk in the door can be difficult for some.

Facilitator: They come in here; they’re feeling pretty bad about themselves. If their kids are taken away, they’ve got to be feeling like they’re a rotten parent. I’m a horrible person, I don’t know what I’m doing, I don’t even know why I’m here. And they come with all these things stuck on them. And then, hopefully, by the time they leave, some of it gets hung up over there [points away from self]. And, hopefully, they leave it there, and don’t pick it back up again.

Interviewer: So it’s almost like a smudge then? You’re coming in, and dusting off all of the negative things that have been put on you, or you have put on yourself?

Facilitator: Yeah! Yes! That’s a good way of putting it. Yeah, you brush yourself off; get that stuff off. Because underneath everybody is a good person. It’s the choices we make, obviously, that take us down those roads…

The parents often expressed feelings of very low self-esteem upon entering the program. This was a result of pre-existing cultural stereotypes, as well as feelings associated with being mandated to take a parenting program, or participating in the parenting program in general. The low self-esteem experienced by the parents ties in closely with the next theme of cultural disconnection.

Theme 2: Cultural Disconnection and Reconnection

Many of the participants brought up feelings of not belonging, not fitting in, and being disconnected from their Aboriginal cultures.

Parent: That’s a part of me that I didn’t get when I was younger. I actually, I didn’t even know I was First Nations until Grade 9, when I went to a Native school. I thought I was just white! Because that’s how, my
family never really spoke of it. They might of, but I didn't really understand. I felt like I got ripped off, right?

Interviewer:  *Ripped off of your culture? From your childhood?*

Parent:  *Yeah, because I look at other people, and they're so involved with like, powwows, bringing their kids there, to make sure this is what they know, right? Not to rip them off. And there's dancing, and drumming, and stuff.*

This parent powerfully describes the cultural disconnectedness as making her feel “ripped off” of her cultural legacy. This same mother described how she was raised in an alcoholic family, which she blames for the interruption in cultural teachings from her parents’ generation to hers.

From my own experience working with urban Aboriginal families, the sense of disconnectedness that is captured in the quote is quite common. Many urban Aboriginals have moved to the city to escape their Reserve, search for a brighter future, or to follow other family members who have left. Others are in the city because they have been disenfranchised by various discriminatory mechanisms in the Indian Act, and no longer belong to a Band. Sometimes this is an intergenerational effect, where the person’s parent or grandparent was disenfranchised, thereby denying subsequent generations the “privilege” of Indian status.

These parents often spoke of feeling “in-between” culturally. They may “look Indian”, but are not connected to the cultural aspects of Aboriginal identity. Some spoke of feeling too brown to fit into the white world, but too culturally disconnected to feel at ease in the Aboriginal world. This leaves them in an odd, liminal place on the periphery of both cultures. They feel like they are on the outside, looking in to both Aboriginal culture and white culture. There is often a sense of nervousness to become involved with Aboriginal cultural activities.

Taiaiake Alfred (1999) speaks to this very issue in his text *Peace Power & Righteousness: An Indian Manifesto*. Alfred states, “Material poverty and social
dysfunction are merely the visible surface of a deep pool of internal suffering. The underlying cause of that suffering is alienation – separation from our heritage and from ourselves” (1999; p.xv). The sense of alienation, of not fitting in comfortably with either Aboriginal or mainstream culture is extremely problematic for these parents. It limits their participation in the positive, healthy aspects of Aboriginal cultural identity. Daes (2000) states, “Isolation is an important tool, and a devastating result, of colonization” (p.7). Isolation is a key weapon of the colonizer in keeping indigenous peoples from realizing the true power of their traditions, while at the same time keeping them from acceptance in mainstream Western culture as well. Many urban Aboriginals end up perpetually on the margins, fitting in nowhere.

The flip side to the sense of disconnection is the powerful sense of cultural reconnection that emerged after participating in the parenting program.

Parent: Like I said, I wasn’t into my culture when I first started coming here. And just throughout the whole program, I got really interested, got really into it. Especially making crafts, like beading and stuff like that, and the stories behind it. And then we did a Sweat, and I was SO nervous when we did it! But I think I really touched base with my Native culture, and my spiritual culture. That was a new thing for me, and it really changed me. Like, when you touch one thing, and it changes your whole life.

This parent’s transformation from being a nervous outsider to enthusiastic participant is marked. One of the strengths of the EAGLE Spirit program is that it offers a safe, non-threatening place for urban Aboriginals feeling disconnected from their cultures to begin to explore their roots and reconnect with their cultures.

The effect of this cultural reconnection ties in directly with the issues around parenting. Increased cultural connectedness increases the parents’ sense of stability and grounding. One parent expresses it like this:

Parent: It brings me back to just understanding my ancestors and my culture, and gets me involved more in the community, going to see different
events, and not just going out drinking or doing drugs or whatever, because you have to be sober to dance or drum. And just being involved with that is better for me...

One of the major issues bringing parents into contact with the child welfare system is alcohol and drug abuse. Any aspect of a parenting program that can reduce the likelihood that parents will abuse substances is, therefore, extremely desirable.

The importance of the influence of a collective norm should be noted here. Because she has become involved with traditional drumming or dancing, the parent refrains from alcohol and drug use. She does this because other Aboriginals involved in these traditional activities would frown upon any alcohol or drug use. In addition, it goes against traditional teachings of approaching drumming or dancing in "a good way", or in a state of relative balance. Alcohol and drug use indicates a state of imbalance in one's own Medicine Wheel\(^3\), which is why others would frown upon it while participating in traditional ceremonies or activities. This is a collective influence that would be absent without the cultural connection facilitated by the program's cultural focus.

This ties in very closely with what one of the Elders said during their two-hour interview. In this interview, the concept of "Indian Sickness" was introduced.

**Elder:** To explain the importance of the cultural aspects, we have a term in Indian Country called "Indian Sickness". And what that is, is that Aboriginal people, the indigenous people of North America, treaty, status, non-status, whatever, if they don't follow their cultural ways, they get really SICK. And the sickness often includes a lot of different abstracts, like alcoholism, drugs, prostitution's another, family violence, sexual incest and sexual assault. And they end up really, really LOST.

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\(^3\) For more information, see "Wellbriety Movement" literature available from: www.whitebison.org, which focuses on alcohol and drug abuse prevention using a Medicine Wheel model.
In order to get these people, the Aboriginal people from an urban area back into a healthy environment, we REALLY have to introduce them to the cultural aspects, more than anything, because they need to have that base under them. You can’t go anywhere, or build anything if you don’t have a foundation. And CULTURE is the foundation of these people, of ALL of us. Without that foundation, we’re running lost.

According to this Elder, Aboriginal peoples’ cultures operate as a sort of buffer against the detrimental effects of contact with Western culture. The imposition of dominant society resulted in many of the issues that plague Aboriginal communities now. Prior to contact, the power of the collective norms made incidents such as sexual abuse extremely rare. When they did occur, they were dealt with publicly by the group, usually in some sort of shaming ritual, followed by increased scrutiny by the group to ensure compliance. Compliance was often acknowledged in an honouring ceremony, celebrating the re-balancing of relationships between all involved.

The ultimate threat to ensure compliance was banishment. Peat (2002) states, “From within a worldview that is based upon relationship, the threat of banishment is far more serious than life imprisonment or the death penalty, for it means cutting a person off from the whole society, and even from the opportunity to hear and speak his own language. In other words, it removes the very context that gives a person’s life meaning and identity” (p.49). The irony is that this is exactly what the Residential School system and the child welfare system do; they disconnect people from their cultural legacies and traditions. It is almost an unfathomable theft, the theft of one’s cultural foundation, a theft that the colonizers cannot truly comprehend the ramifications of.

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4 See, for example, Rolland’s (1994) dissertation titled Asking Our Elders. Elders describe how rare sexual abuse or incest was in traditional societies before the imposition of dominant Western society.

Without the cultural foundation, Aboriginal people are rudderless in a sea of colonization. As the Elder states, they end up really lost. Being directionless allows one to drift all too easily into negative patterns of thought and behaviour. The constant rejection and negative stereotyping and mythologizing which the parent mentioned in the previous quote ensures that Aboriginals do not feel sufficiently ensconced in mainstream culture to fit in and succeed. Yet, without the cultural connections serving as a foundation, they are not bound by Aboriginal cultural norms either. This contributes to the patterns of dysfunction. When the parent begins to experience and participate in Aboriginal traditions and ceremony, she feels more bound by the group norms and her behaviours change to reflect this.

The sense of belonging and fitting in, which so many of these parents are missing, is exactly what is successful in modifying this parent’s behaviour. “Indian Sickness” is cured by exposure to Aboriginal cosmology, epistemology, and traditional cultural ceremonies and events, as reflected in the preceding quotes. Immersion in and connection to Aboriginal traditional cultures solidifies the parents’ sense of identity, and acts as a counterbalance to the negative associations of Aboriginal identity that is perpetuated by dominant society. As Walmsley (2005) states, “A cultural identity is accomplished only though active participation in and connection to the communal ties that constitute the culture” (p.5).

**Theme 3: Facilitators as Role Models**

All of the facilitators have lived experiences that mirror the program participants’ experiences in some way, to varying extents. Some have had experience with the child welfare system, alcohol and drug problems, domestic violence relationships, and other related issues.

Facilitator: Coming from a background of huge family violence, Residential School, addictions, you name it, incest, lots of sexual abuse, all of that. And abusive partner after abusive partner for, like, most of my life. And then living on the Downtown Eastside, being homeless, and I’m also an ex-sex trade worker. I did all that. I’ve been through most of what you can think of. So yeah, I brought a lot of that into this program.
Maybe for a lot of women, they can definitely identify with one form or another, right? They've gone through the experience that I've gone through, or the other facilitators in the program.

The facilitators' lived experience serves several functions to the parents. In Aboriginal cultures, role modelling is extremely important. It is one of the primary mechanisms by which cultural norms and values are transmitted from generation to generation, rather than through authoritative means. Traditional Aboriginal parenting utilized role modelling, non-interference, and permissiveness towards the child to promote the child’s autonomy (Cross, Earle, & Simmons, 2000). The Residential School system, and the generations of Aboriginal children who were brought into care of the child welfare system, have experienced an interruption of transmission of these traditional ways of parenting.

Because of the generational interruption, many of these parents have had poor parenting experiences as they grew up. The previous generations could not teach them, because they were too caught up dealing with their own issues due to the Residential Schools' effects, or the effects of being in care of the government. Horejsi, Heavy Runner Craig, & Pablo (1992) state, “The boarding schools not only destroyed or distorted the intergenerational (cultural) transmission of family and parenting knowledge and behaviour, but they also introduced new and dysfunctional behaviours, such as the use of severe punishment in child-rearing” (p.334). It is ironic that dominant society now judges Aboriginals for the very behaviours they introduced and imposed onto our traditional societies.

For this current generation of parents, having the facilitators as role models is, therefore, extremely valuable, because many of these parents did not have parental role models. It is not simply a matter of the facilitators have been through similar experiences, so they can understand the parents: a far more important aspect is that the facilitators have lived through these experiences, and come out the other side of them. They can role model being survivors, and throwing off the blanket of victimhood, to be replaced with a protective button blanket of cultural teachings, legacies, and pride.
Facilitator: I've shared my story for years. And that doesn't only help build trust with them, right? They know where you've been; you've been there. And recovery IS possible. Going on to become a survivor IS possible, right? I played the victim for many, many years. But I am CHOOSING to survive today, and just putting that piece into it.

The facilitators serve as role models of survival and resiliency. They show, in the words of one of the parents, that there is “light at the end of the tunnel”.

Another parent echoes this sentiment in the following quote:

Interviewer: You mentioned that the facilitators have been through the same thing, what does that mean for you?

Parent: It means a lot to me, it really does. There’s some people you meet, and you’d rather not get taught by them, because they haven’t been through the same experiences that you have been through. But the facilitators here, I really appreciate and respect them because they GOT here to this place. And they’re able to stand up and say, “I’ve been through what you’ve been through, don’t be ashamed, I’m here to help you”. And that’s really comforting.

The fact that the facilitator has moved beyond her issues clearly offers a source of hope for this parent, along with all of the others who mentioned it.

For the parents, it was much less stigmatizing to speak openly about their struggles with parenting in front of facilitators who have also lived through similar circumstances. The parents mentioned feeling more understood, and less judged than if it were “just another counsellor who learned it from a book”. They emphasized the difference between learned knowledge acquired from education, and lived experience. They clearly valued the lived experience of their facilitators, and felt that it contributed to the parents’ willingness to trust and be honest in the group setting. Several also indicated that this trust helped them to “be more real” in the program, which helped in their learning and healing throughout the process.
Theme 4: Substitute Family

Many of the parents come from communities from outside the Lower Mainland, and can feel isolated in the urban context. Several interviewees mentioned the program gives the parents a substitute community or family.

Facilitator: *It's more like home, like in a good sense of the word, not in a bad sense. From what I've heard the clients say, is when they come from isolated communities, it recreates that feeling [of home] for them.*

Interviewer: *Ok, so a sense of home in a place where they don't have one?*

Facilitator: *Mmm-hmm, yeah. Or, they've lost it, you know? Even in the urban Aboriginal community, suffering through the traumas of foster care, and stuff like that. It gives them that bigger sense of community, you know, in the old fashioned kind of way. Aunties, you know?*

This concept of “Aunties” is an important sub-theme, which several parents mentioned during the interviews. The term “Aunty” in an indigenous context has specific meaning. Aunties are extended family or kin who can help raise your child when you are unable. They need not be related to you necessarily (although they often are); they can be more like close mentors in your community. They offer advice, and are role models.

Horejsi, Heavy Runner Craig, & Pablo (1992) state, “Native Americans are typically part of an extended family structure. Aunts may be called ‘mother’, uncles may be called ‘father.’ An individual’s cousins may be treated as brothers and sisters. Grandparents are often key decision-makers and frequently play a central role in the parenting of young children” (1992, p.338). There is an old adage, “It takes a community to raise a child”, which is especially applicable in an indigenous context. The parents used it to describe the female Elder, as well as the facilitators. For these parents, the Elder and facilitators are operating as substitute Aunties, helping and guiding them in raising their children.
Theme 5: Absence of Men

There are very few Aboriginal fathers attending the parenting program. The program coordinator said in two years they have had only four or five, with several of those “not working out”. The coordinator said that one factor contributing to this might be the domestic violence education aspects of the program. Many of the women in the program have had, or are currently involved in, violent relationships with their men. The coordinator indicated that some men just are not in a place where they are ready to hear the message that violent relationships are unhealthy and unbalanced. This may be contributing to why some men do not become involved in the program, or drop out. Because there were no male participants that were reachable, I was unable to get the fathers’ perspective on participating in the parenting program.

The facilitator talked about the importance of having a male Elder involved with the women in the program. She said he served as one of the few positive male role models that some of these women had ever experienced. Her favourite thing that he teaches was something she called “The 3 P’s” of Aboriginal male identity and duty. The “3 P’s” are: 1) being a good provider; 2) being a good protector; and, 3) procreating. According to the Elder, if you cannot do the first two, well, you have no business doing the third. He tells the women this is what the men in their lives should be doing for them. The facilitator said there are often tears shed when the male Elder speaks to the women in the program because many of the women have had few positive male role models involved in their lives.

I asked the male Elder for his thoughts on the lack of father involvement with the program. He stated:

Elder: The reason that there’s probably not many men in the program is because most of the families that are in the East end, or in the Vancouver area, are single parent families. And the husbands or fathers aren’t anywhere to be found, or they might be incarcerated, or they ran off somewhere and they don’t even know where they are. So
it's kind of hard to run a "family" program when you've only got half of the family!

In fact, three out of seven parents interviewed were single parents (43%). This means the majority had a partner, a partner who was not involved with the parenting program.

One of the mothers in the program vented some obvious frustration at the lack of male participation:

Parent: What's the name of the program? EAGLE Spirit? It doesn't say "Mother's-Only." It could be open to men, but I guess they just don't feel that they need to. Or, the mom's going to do it anyway, so why should they?

Interviewer: The parenting role, you mean?

Parent: Yeah, yeah, like MOST of that stuff. Like, "mom's going to look after the kids, and I'm going to do whatever I want".

The mother who said these words obviously feels that the fathers are not involved because they choose not to be. There may be several other factors at play, however. The program facilitator raised one issue: domestic violence and the men's discomfort around discussing it if it is a current issue in their home. Another contributing factor to the lack of men may be the fact that all of the facilitators are women, as well as most of the other participants. Men may not feel like the program is very welcoming for them, although the program coordinator indicated this is something they are working on. In any case, the reality is that the parenting program usually has all women participants, and while most of the women do have partners at home, these partners are not participating in the program in any way.

Theme 6: Medicine Wheel

The EAGLE Spirit program operates on a Medicine Wheel model (see Lane, Bopp, Bopp, & Brown, 1985). The Medicine Wheel visually represents the Aboriginal value of holistic living (Rogers, 2001). One of the main interview questions asks the
participant to describe one or two things they saw, did, or experienced that fit into each of the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel: the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains. They are then asked to explain what some of these things mean to them. Fig. 1 on p.36 illustrates the wide diversity of answers garnered from this question, each placed in the quadrant which the participant identified it belonging to. There were some very interesting stories that accompanied some of the things listed in each quadrant.

Many of the participants commented on how meaningful the Medicine Wheel work was in their learning, in particular how it was useful as a visual aid as to what areas they needed to “work on” in their lives. The eagle feather in the centre of the wheel signifies balance, which is what humans strive for. The Medicine Wheel provides a valuable visual tool for the participants to fill out with unique details from their own lives, and then analyze it afterwards for areas to work on improving or strengthening. The arrows outside of the wheel signify the clockwise movement throughout the circle, which is the direction many Aboriginals believe to be proper for ceremonies and cultural pieces, as well as being indicative of progressing from one developmental level such as youth, to another, such as adult.

The data from the seven parents filled the entire wheel. Their answers covered all four domains fairly equally, showing that the program is successful in its holistic approach. The ability of the parents to fill the wheel shows that they retained much of the teachings they received, because they were able to successfully recall and explain these numerous items and ideas to me in the interviews, some of the interviews occurring months after the participant had completed the program. One parent states:

Parent: We’ve been shown a few different ways of working with the Medicine Wheel. We’ve had facilitators come in that show us a different way, and different Medicine Wheels. Every human kind, like non-Natives too, everyone has a Medicine Wheel in their own way. And I found that neat, but they show us on a paper how, I forget the word they used. Just if we’re even in all of them, or not, and it shows what we’re doing
good at, and what we need to work on. Mine was the spiritual, I guess, because this is the only time I've ever really been doing our ways, since coming into the program.

Different parents discussed "needing to work on" various areas of their Wheel. It is important that this was described as a struggle to find balance, rather than being couched in traditional social worker jargon and deficiency-based language of "problems" and "issues". The participants did not see the areas that needed improvement as being deficits, or problems, but rather as part of the natural struggle for balance inherent in each Wheel.
The Medicine Wheel is more of a strength-based tool than mainstream assessment tools, and so it is easier for the parents to both understand and accept. Many of these parents have struggled to complete high school, or have not completed it. Literacy is sometimes an issue. Having a culturally relevant visual aid like the Medicine Wheel is a powerful tool that aids in transmission of the teachings offered by the facilitators. Based on the ability of the parents to fill the Medicine
Wheel, and explain the meanings behind it for them, it seems obvious that to these participants, it would qualify as a "significant symbol" in symbolic interactionist theory.

Symbolic interactionists argue that a symbol becomes significant only when the meaning is the same for giver and receiver (McCall, in Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p.328). The facilitators viewed the Medicine Wheel as a culturally appropriate assessment tool and visual aid that can help in illustrating the strengths and areas of future improvement for parents. It is easily individualized, and has the added benefit of being recognizable as a cultural symbol for most Aboriginal groups. The parents accept the Medicine Wheel and engage with it in a way I doubt would be replicated in mainstream assessment tools. For example, would most clients be able to reiterate so many details about a standard risk assessment? It seems unlikely. The reason is cultural relevance. The Medicine Wheel means something to these parents, in a very personal way. In other words, the symbol is significant because there is shared meaning (Reynolds, in Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p.72).

The Medicine Wheel can also serve as a visual aid for the conceptual interpretation of the data. As stated previously, change in one domain of the Wheel impacts the other three domains. Prior to the parenting program, the parents were missing parts of their Wheel, which contributed to imbalance in their lives. This is reflected in the data by the themes of feeling lost, and having the sense that something was missing. Referring to Fig. 1, one can see the direction the Wheel is supposed to turn is clockwise as one moves developmentally through the stages in life. However, one can imagine that if parts were missing from a Wheel, it would not turn properly as it is in a state of imbalance. This is how the parents’ lives were before the program; hence, they were stymied in their attempts to enact change and move forward. Picture Fig.1 with one of the quadrants missing, and one can imagine that it would no longer be functioning as a holistic unit. The Wheel cannot move forward when pieces of it are missing.
In the data, the themes of the facilitators' lived experience, cultural reconnection, and the peers/facilitators as a substitute family serve to fill in the missing parts of the parents' Wheels, thereby re-establishing balance and the ability to move forward. This is vitally important, as several of the parents mentioned feeling "stuck" in their lives before the program. Many of the workshops target the parent, and work towards facilitating healing in the parent, rather than just focusing on parenting tips. As these parts of the parents' Wheels are filled in, the ability to truly enact positive change is restored, and the clockwise motion of the Wheel can resume, taking the parent to their next developmental level.

**Theme 7: The Journey, or the Red Road**

Almost all of the parents, facilitators, and Elders made reference at some point to being on a journey, path, or road. The references to a journey or the red road are behind the title of this thesis. *Ts’ekoo beni hinzoo* means ‘women with good minds’. This title honours the self-work to get to a place of healing that these women have undertaken for the benefit of both their families and themselves. The people doing these parenting programs are predominantly women. The cohorts that I drew my sample from were all women. Thinking of my own Reserve, my Grandmother is the one holding the whole place together. She is the indisputable matriarch of our family. Women are the backbone of every Reserve in Canada. Women are the ones holding it all together. Women are the ones who struggle to feed their children, get them to school, and earn a wage to keep things going. Duran & Duran (1995) state women “are the ones who have been carrying the life of the people through their sacrifices over the past five hundred years” (p.37).

The Elders I interviewed had thoughts about the journey that these women are on. The Elders contrast the concepts of the Black Road with the Red Road:

Elder #1: *The way of the Black Road is dishonesty, and dishonour, and deception, and theft, and lack or morals and values, drinking and drugging, murdering, all the shady shadow side of life.*

Elder #2: *The path to self-destruction.*
Elder #1: The path to self-destruction, yes. And the Red Road is…

Elder #2: The straight and narrow.

Elder #1: Yes, the ‘Good Path’, the path of honour, and right living, and right choices, and living with morals and values, and nurturing, and being a guiding light in the world, and helping people, giving them a hand up, and making the right choices, taking care of the family, taking care of ourselves, and teaching the old wisdom and the knowledge that WORKS.

They summarized that the Red Road was the high road, representing a good, balanced way of living and being; one Elder described it as “living in the light of the world”. The Black Road represented the “shadow” side of the world, where “dark thoughts” thrive, imbalance exists, and evil things happen. Our people walk the Black Road due to the negative influences of colonization and attempted assimilation. The Red Road symbolizes a return to Aboriginal ways of being, before we took the worst traits of the colonizer as our own (patriarchy, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse). In short, the Red Road is nurturance and acceptance, and the Black Road is the path to destruction.

Many of the parents spoke of struggling to be on the Red Road, or to find a path to healing, or the journey to healing. It was described as “a pretty long journey, depending on what you’re dealing with”. And all too often, it is a journey that these women are attempting to complete alone, without the active help of their men-folk. The absence of Aboriginal men in parenting programs indicates that the women are being left to deal with the “family issues” on their own. When there are issues like domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and intergenerational patterns of substandard parenting and various forms of abuse due to the Residential Schools, it does not make sense to only have half of the equation attending these programs.

**Theme 8: Appreciated Program Elements**

The following is a list of elements of the program that parents listed as particularly helpful, beneficial, or convenient and appreciated:
• Parents like East Vancouver location better than Downtown Eastside (too triggering)

• Open door policy very valued (can return to program as many times as needed)

• Self Esteem, Addictions, Healthy Relationships (domestic violence), Traditional Thursdays (traditional foods, arts, stories), one-on-one time with Elders, Intergenerational Patterns, were all very popular or helpful workshops

• Appreciated that this program remains open throughout December

• Mobile community drop-in program was appreciated by parents who could not commit to full structured program

• Cultural ceremonies very valued: pipe ceremony at graduation, Elder involvement, Sweats, smudging, use of Medicine Wheel format, and talking circle

• Appreciated having access to children, but some parents indicated it would be nice if children had their own separate room as it would be less disruptive for parents’ learning

• Appreciated “tangibles” such as provision of bus tickets, food bank and clothing exchange

• Several parents mentioned really liking having an “informal outing day”, where they went to the beach, or some other activity as it really helped them feel more comfortable with the other parents, as well as the facilitators.

From the parents’ list of what they found most helpful, one can see that there are several factors at work. Workshops tailored to the parents’ healing such as Self-Esteem and Addictions were valued. Having the children nearby and accessible was valued. Practical, tangible aid was appreciated; for example, the food bank and bus tickets.

The cultural elements of the program were emphasized as being very valuable to the parents. Some helpful components, such as being open during the
Christmas season, are not only practical, as many families are stressed and in need of the holiday, but are also culturally appropriate, as Aboriginal homes do not have "closed doors". Hospitality is a cultural norm, and maintaining the open door throughout the Christmas season is a reflection of this. Although there were many components that were appreciated, there were also suggestions for improving the program.

Discussion

This study corroborates Yellow Horse & Brave Heart's (2004) assertion that programs for Aboriginals should be culturally specific, rather than culturally adapted or culturally translated. Simply adding Aboriginal facilitators or superficial cultural components to the program do not make it appropriate and relevant for Aboriginal clientele. Tomison (1998) states, "It has become widely recognised that family support programs, and parent education programs in particular, need to be matched to local contexts and family needs" (p.6). The words of the parents themselves reveal that the cultural specificity of the parenting program was what was most meaningful for them. All seven of the major themes were directly connected to the cultural components of the program. These findings support the argument that Aboriginal parenting programs need to be culturally specific.

Furthermore, there is a clear need in the culturally specific parts of the program to discuss and analyze the effects of colonization, the Residential Schools, and other repeated assimilative attempts on the part of Canada's federal and provincial governments towards Aboriginal peoples in this country. As Nabigon states in Absolon's (1993) article, "You have to go to the roots. When you get at the roots then you understand why certain persons are behaving the way they are" (p.14). "Band-aid" solutions will not work when the deeper issues are unacknowledged and unresolved. For these parents, that means looking at how the Residential School system interrupted traditional Aboriginal parenting styles, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

One of the reasons why the EAGLE Spirit program is successful with these parents is because it does address intergenerational trauma. As indicated in Fig.1,
the parents do a workshop where they do genograms and eco-maps about their lives, and the lives of their parents and grandparents. Many of the parents spoke of how they knew that the Residential School system had been bad, but they had never really considered how this was impacting their own parenting of their children until the workshop. The genogram and eco-map exercises make the intergenerational transmission of trauma clear to the parents.

One parent eloquently describes the intergenerational effects of the Residential Schools in the following quote:

*My parents are still together. But I believe that somewhere in there, there was always something missing. And so when you have kids, you always feel like there was something missing from your parents that they didn’t give you. And then you can’t pass that on to your kids, you know?*

The “something missing” that this parent describes are things like connection to the culture, understanding of traditional teachings, and intergenerational transmission of Aboriginal ways of parenting. Instead, these were disrupted and replaced with generations of involvement with the Residential Schools and child welfare systems.

Abnormal norms became accepted in many Aboriginal societies around parenting. Residential Schools taught non-Aboriginal ways such as sexual and emotional abuse to several generations of people. When these people grew up, all they had ever experienced were cold, emotionless relationships with people who actively worked to ensure our cultures were not successfully transmitted to subsequent generations. The colonizers have been hacking away at the cords binding us to our cultures since first contact. As one of the Elders interviewed states,

*One of the hard parts here is Residential School DID what it was supposed to do; it was supposed to stop us from realizing WHO WE ARE. And I think it was originally put into place so we’d assimilate into the population, disappear, and no more land claims, no more nothing,
we’re just Canadians. Well, it didn’t work! But now, grandparents lost identity with their culture, Their children got their identity taken, even though they didn’t even HAVE an identity yet, because they were just starting to learn who they were. And now they don’t even know who their parents are, or who their grandparents were. And their kids come, so now you’ve got three generations of displacement, where they don’t know who they are. All they know is they were taught to be ashamed of being an Aboriginal person.

The theft of our cultural legacies by the colonizers is an on-going venture, perpetuated by the child welfare system. As stated previously, Aboriginal children are still removed at shockingly disproportionate rates, and are all too frequently placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes and adoptive families. The players may change, but the end-result is still Aboriginal children being raised in non-Aboriginal settings, deprived of receiving their full cultural legacies in the form of lived experience amongst their own tribal peoples.

Once it was visually laid out for them through the eco-maps and genograms, the parents could see the intergenerational interruption of traditional parenting. They could see patterns between their parenting, their parents’ parenting, and their grandparents. Analysis of intergenerational transmission of parenting styles helps the parents to form a more positive relationship with their Aboriginal identities (Cheshire, 2001). It is part of a decolonization process because the parents can look at and reflect upon the attempts by the colonizer to erase Aboriginal identities from the collective consciousness of indigenous peoples in Canada. The act of reconnecting and reclaiming Aboriginal identity is an act of defiance, of resistance, and decolonization on the part of these parents.

The utility of visual aids in understanding patterns is reinforced when looking at the Medicine Wheel in Fig 1 on p.36. Parents mentioned that when they did Medicine Wheel exercises where they filled in their own wheels based on their own lives, they could actually see where there were gaps. Certain areas had less written
in them, and this served as a very easy way to comprehend areas that needed more work. As one parent said;

*It all made sense when I saw it. Because I hear about it through my counsellors, but just to SEE it on a board, or write it down, or just hearing other people’s thoughts, it really all made sense to me as to why I was the way I was. And I think that was the best part, I really enjoyed those classes, I was always learning something new about myself.*

This corresponds with my own experience working with Aboriginal families doing strengths-based assessments using a Medicine Wheel format. One mother expressed to me how striking it was that her Spiritual component of her wheel was relatively blank. Reframing, I asked her about people, places, or things she drew strength from. She was then able to fill in that component of her wheel. However, the visual aid of the wheel was what helped her to contemplate her own situation, much more so than my questioning.

The myths and negative stereotypes associated with Aboriginal identity tie in closely with the sense of cultural disconnection these parents often face. When interviewing, I was struck by how many people had been raised outside of their Aboriginal identity and culture, raised without even knowing they were of Aboriginal descent. As one parent states, “I was never raised in the culture because I came from an alcoholic family. So, for me, I want to teach my kids more about the culture, and be more into it. And not just be, like, pretend it’s not there.” Pretending the culture is not there has a lot to do with the shame and negativity wrapped up in the identity, or the “myths” as one facilitator put it. This then feeds into the sense of disconnection from the culture, as expressed in Theme #2.

The sense of shame of being Aboriginal is generated and perpetuated by the media and dominant society. Indians are portrayed in the media as drunks, womanizers, and abusers or, alternately, they are romanticized as stoic, noble savages. Women are portrayed as back stabbing “squaws” or as Indian princesses.
Basically, dominant society has attempted to strip from us the influence of positive role models\(^6\). The facilitators serve as positive role models for these parents. For some of these parents, they have had no positive Aboriginal role models. This program may have been one of the first places they encountered positive Aboriginal role models. The facilitators have experienced much of what the parents have encountered in their lives, and they have come through it all to a place of survival, resiliency, and triumph. This then gives the parents a safe role model to explore re-attaching to their indigenous roots.

Many of the parents mentioned how they found the program to be a safe place to explore their cultures. Usually, indigenous culture is transmitted by the family, extended family, clan, tribe, and Nation. However, as stated previously, many of these urban Aboriginal parents are dislocated from their home communities and Reserves. For these parents, their sense of Aboriginal identity is more complicated by issues like being in foster care, being adopted out to non-Aboriginal families, or by being a disenfranchised Aboriginal who was denied their identity by the Indian Act. Taiaiake Alfred (2005) calls these people “cultural blanks”, or people “with no cultural code or set of norms to guide his or her behaviour” (p.11).

For these parents, the peers amongst the other Aboriginal parents in the program, as well as the facilitators and Elders involved with the program, serve as a substitute family of sorts. This substitute family serves as a safe, non-threatening place to learn about Aboriginal cultures. Several of the parents mentioned feeling scared or intimidated during traditional ceremonies the first time they did them, but this program gave them the safety needed to connect to and try out the ceremony. The value in this should not be underestimated, especially with a population that feels like they do not fit into either mainstream or Aboriginal cultures.

As discussed previously in the example of the mother who did not drink because it is not considered acceptable to drink when drumming, dancing, or

\(^6\) For more on how dominant society (mis)represents minority cultures, see Black Looks: Race and Representation (1992) by bell hooks.
singing, traditional Aboriginal culture can act as a regulator. The mother did not stop drinking because her social worker told her to; she stopped drinking because Aboriginal social norms dictate that drinking during ceremonial events is unacceptable. This is more of a deterrent for her than someone telling her to stop. Western societal regulators are not an efficient regulator for Aboriginal peoples, as attested to by their over-representation in every social service industry in Canada. The substitute family in the parenting program serves to transmit the cultural norms to these parents.

Fixico (2003) states, "How all of us as individuals place ourselves within a system of relationships is very important for understanding our own thinking about achieving balance within oneself and within the community" (p.7). For the mother who stopped drinking so that she could drum and sing, finding this sense of interrelationship was the defining factor. The sense of connection to the culture and positive feelings of pride and belonging to Aboriginal culture, are what operates as a behaviour moderator for this mother.

Another linkage between major themes involves men and the Medicine Wheel. Many of these women did have partners. The partners were not active in the parenting program, leaving it instead up to the mother to complete. Men make up half of the familial equation, yet they are not involved in the parenting program. As stated previously, a wheel needs all quadrants to be complete, and a wheel must be complete in order to turn. Envisioned as an actual wheel that turns when a developmental cycle is complete, it is obvious that without the other half of the equation, the familial unit will not be ready to move to the next level. Until men become engaged, any change imagined for the family will be incomplete. If only the women are attempting to enact change, the wheel will become unbalanced. If men are involved in the family, men must become involved in the parenting program and the changes initiated in the family unit.

Traditionally, men may have been good providers and protectors, but in the modern world some Aboriginal men have now abdicated their parental responsibilities, leaving everything up to the mother. This way is not our way; this is
a learned way of the colonizer. Our men used to be more involved in teaching good ways to our children, but sadly many have accepted the ways of Western society as a norm. The mother ends up over-worked and under-supported in the extremely stressful endeavour of parenting. Then, in a sad twist of fate, she alone is given the responsibility of trying to better her parenting skills in a parenting program, rather than a critical examination occurring around why some men feel it is acceptable to offload all responsibility onto the mother.

More and more Aboriginal women are turning to feminist analysis to explain underlying issues in their lived experiences. Traditionally, Aboriginal men may have been good at the “3-P’s” as expressed by the male Elder, but sadly, many are not now. To examine the marked absence of men in the parenting program more critically, feminist standpoint theory is utilized in this study. For Aboriginal feminists, feminism is not just about patriarchy. As Grande (2004) points out, the oppression of women must also be analysed as an effect of colonization, and subsequent imposition of dominant society’s norms and values.

Colonization and imposition of Western patriarchy on traditional Aboriginal groups has resulted in what Freire (2003) terms a “duality of being” (p.48) for oppressed peoples. Duality in this situation can be understood as Aboriginal women struggling with their historical roles versus their current lived experience. Traditionally, Aboriginal men were good protectors and providers, as well as good fathers. Women may have taken care of the children, but it was more of a collective effort, and men had to uphold their responsibilities to protect and provide, as well as having certain responsibilities to pass on specific male teachings to their children. Also, for many groups, gender roles were not rigidly enforced like in patriarchal Western societies (Gunn Allen, 1992).

Western patriarchal norms dictated that women were to be stripped of their tribal powers, and forced to be “less than” the men. Sayers, MacDonald, Fiske, Newell, & George state, “Not only have First Nations women’s traditional roles been profoundly affected by colonization and the actions of the state, many First Nations men (and women) have internalized the White male devaluation of First Nations
women, resulting in a denigration of the roles of women and the exclusion of women" (2001, p.5). This has had an enormous effect on parenting roles and expectations within Aboriginal cultures.

Freire (2003) states, "Functionally, oppression is domesticating" (p.51). This does not mean domestic housework is necessarily oppression (although it certainly could mean that). What Freire means is that things can become entrenched as unquestionable norms. This has happened with the concept of "tradition" in some Aboriginal communities. Many Aboriginal women unquestioningly accept male domination as "tradition", when in fact this is simply not the case. In addition, "dysfunctional patterns at some point started to be seen as part of Native American tradition" (Duran & Duran, 1995, p.35).

African-American feminist writer bell hooks states; "Black females must not allow ourselves to be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence; we must save ourselves and the race by resisting" (1994, p.123). Although hooks writes about African-Americans, what she speaks of is equally applicable to Aboriginals. When male violence towards women is normalized or minimized, and domination over women is passed off as "tradition", it does a vast disservice to the ways of our ancestors.

When Aboriginal men abdicate their responsibilities as providers, protectors, and active fathers, it makes life that much harder for the women. As the Elder states, procreating is only one-third of the traditional equation. To off-load the parental responsibilities onto the mother is not "tradition". Instead, it is an example of our men acting like our colonial oppressors, with their patriarchal norms and values. Tomison (1998) points out that a major challenge in parent education programs is to find ways to increase father participation, and this is obviously an element that needs further exploration in the Canadian context also.

Finally, the theme of the Red Road or journey is one that the entire family must embark upon in order for success to follow. If one parent travels down the Black Road, whilst the other attempts the Red Road, the family will be torn apart by
the destructive tensions as a result. The cultural elements of the parenting program act as a buffer against the negative stereotypes and influences of dominant society. The cultural components of the program point the way to the Red Road, and the way to wellness for these families. Families may fall temporarily off of the path, but one must have faith that they can always find their way back onto the Red Road.

McKenzie & Morrissette (2003) offer a framework of five core elements for respectful social work practice with Aboriginal peoples:

- Understanding of worldviews of Aboriginal peoples, and how this differs from the dominant Euro-Canadian worldview
- Recognition of effects of colonization
- Recognition of importance of Aboriginal identity or consciousness
- Appreciation of value of cultural knowledge and traditions in promoting healing and empowerment
- An understanding of the diversity in Aboriginal self-expression.

All of the seven main themes found in this study are evident in McKenzie & Morrissette’s (2003) framework. Not only do these five core elements promote positive social work practice with Aboriginal peoples, they can also be seen as being essential elements for program design and implementation for services targeting Aboriginal families.

Recommendations

The following list is a compilation of components that parents, facilitators, or Elders thought could be added to improve the overall program:

- Larger physical space for program
- More funding from MCFD for preventative services, before a crisis occurs requiring removal of child
- Family Support outreach worker to help with basics such as finding affordable housing, food, and transportation
• On-site crisis worker and full time counsellor

• Some indicated preference for proximity to Sky-train line

• Due to previous problems with having couples who were both in program at same time with domestic violence issues, separate night time program for men suggested for after working hours

• Improve training for childminders so that they role model parenting techniques that parents are learning

• Better control over group norms, have an alternate dispute mechanism in place for participants who have conflict with each other, or with facilitators

• More content on communicating with children desired

• More content around parenting older children such as pre-teen and teenagers

• Request for workshop on dealing with re-integrating child returning from care of Ministry back into family

• Liked longer timeline on program (12 weeks for structured program), but many indicated it could be longer to deal adequately with all the issues. Most commonly suggested timeline was six months minimum to a year

• More around family dynamics (suggested this could tie in with workshops on genograms and eco-maps, which were very popular)

• More content on basic life-skills such as budgeting, maintaining a household, shopping

• Parents appreciated the workshops dedicated to their needs, but also wanted more on parenting skills and techniques (overall opinion seemed to indicate a balance of parent self-work, and parenting skills needed)

• A computer so parents can sign up for time to access internet, helps with staying in touch with family, looking for employment, and contact with social workers

• Parents wanted more access to one-on-one time with Elders
• Workshop on dealing effectively with MCFD social workers

• Appreciated lived experience of the facilitators, but also wanted a balance of “book learning” (clinical skills) for on-site counsellor.

What struck me most when reading over the list of recommendations was that it is not like the parents, facilitators or Elders asked for anything outrageous. All of the requests were quite reasonable, and some of them will be easy to implement. Indeed, when I returned to the agency to discuss the findings, several of the recommendations had already been operationalized, such as some of the program content suggestions. Other requests on the list of desired program improvements would be dependant upon increased funding, or a larger location for the program to operate out of.

Role of the Parenting Program

When asked about what they thought the role of a parenting program is, the most common answer was “to help get our kids back” from being in care of MCFD. Other answers included “to empower the parents”, to “reach out to the Aboriginal culture”, and finally, “to improve parenting skills”. It is significant that fewer parents stated the role as being to improve parenting skills in relation to the other roles. This indicates that parenting programs that focus solely on improving parenting skills may not be as successful with these parents, or at least may not be experienced by the parents as being as meaningful as a program which addresses some of their needs in addition to the parenting skills.

Goffman (1959) describes the role of a “service specialist” as being someone who specializes “in the construction, repair, and maintenance of the show their clients maintain before other people” (p.153). Goffman is referring to the production of self or selves that humans do for the benefit of others and their perceptions; however, his concept of service specialist makes sense in the context of the parenting program’s role also. These parents have been “noticed” by MCFD. The “face” that they present is problematic enough to draw the attention and scrutinizing lens of the child welfare system. A big part of the parenting program’s role, as
articulated by these parents, is to help them get their children back. To do this, the parents' production of self must become more aligned with what the protection worker feels is in the best interests of the child, in terms of parenting.

The parenting program's role can be viewed as a "service specialist" because they, in essence, act as mediators between the requirements of the child welfare system, and the parents, so that these parents can maintain/re-acquire control over their children. The program facilitators and Elders do this by attempting to teach the parents the healthier ways of our ancestors, and also by taking the good and useful from mainstream parenting concepts and ideas such as discipline instead of punishment. In Goffman's terms, the program facilitators and Elders are operating behind the scenes, re-setting the scene to a healthier background, and re-orienting the parents so that the face they present does not raise red flags for their child protection worker.

This is not to say the changes from the parents are only cosmetic. They are not. I asked the facilitators if they thought that the whole enterprise was an exercise in "hoop-jumping" on behalf of the parents for the protection worker. The facilitators agreed that this might be the case initially, but after the parent had been exposed to the program for some time, they "bought-in" on a more personal level, and the healing, growth, and positive changes enacted at that point became more meaningful and long-lasting in the lives of these parents.

One parent described the role of a parenting program to be "To provide a service so they can empower and enrich the families, the mothers and the children, so that they can live without all the negatives, like the abuse, and drugs, and alcohol". These statements reflect the myriad of needs that a parenting program for Aboriginals must be responsive to. Focusing only on the children, or only on the parents, will not work. These parents have eloquently reflected the need for a balance of child and parent focussed interventions, as well as the need for cultural relevance and specificity.
Future Directions

Aboriginals are increasingly looking to themselves—as individuals, families, communities and Nations—for their own answers. Clearly, the colonizers are not doing a good job with their social service systems in meeting the needs of Canada’s First Nations peoples. In fact, the growing over-representation of Aboriginals in systems such as the “justice” system and the child welfare system indicate that these systems do little to alleviate the very issues that they had a large part in causing. Social service systems in Canada are prime examples of iatrogenic processes, serving to give thousands of non-Aboriginals jobs, while further alienating the very people they purport to serve. Colonization continues, unabated and for the most part, un-criticized.

One of the Elders I interviewed had a different vision of the future for us as peoples. He said:

*What would happen in all of a sudden no more in-the-streets, under the influence Aboriginals? None. Nobody standing in front of Carnegie. None. All the ones on the busses are all clean-pressed, briefcase, suit and tie, lunch pails, hard-hat, tools. You know what would happen? The people of British Columbia, the government of British Columbia would be scared. They’d be scared that we’ve regained our power that they feel they took away. When there’s an Indian person sitting drunk there’s no fear to anybody that that person is ever going to be better than you are. But to be coming back into our power would be very, very frightening. We NEED to do that, because our children, and their children, and THEIR children DESERVE IT. They deserve it!*

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7 For more on Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system, see: http://www.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/pb/fs/fsajs.html, as well as the new report by the Office of the Correctional Investigator (2006) available online from: http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/reports/AR200506_e.asp
He was not talking about assimilation, which he had discussed previously. He was referring to getting ourselves together as families and peoples, and beginning to find our way back to the Red Road, rather than continuing to walk the dysfunctional Black Road of the colonizer.

Yazzie (2000) echoes this very sentiment when he states, “Ultimately, the lesson is that we, as Indigenous peoples, must start within. We must exercise internal sovereignty, which is nothing more than taking control of our personal lives, our families, our clans, and our communities. To do that, we must return to our traditions, because they speak to right relationships, respect, solidarity, and survival” (p. 47). The glaring over-representation of Aboriginals in Canada’s social services proves that the colonizer does not know what is best for us. To staunch the iatrogenic processes of the colonizer, we must control our own services. Services need to be designed by Aboriginals for Aboriginals, as the dominant society all too clearly does not “get” us. The male Elder I interviewed talked about how Aboriginals need to “take the medicine that heals us”. Clearly, the “medicine” of the colonizer’s social services does little to alleviate our troubles, and in fact serves to contribute to our further domination through dependency.

Fournier & Crey (1997) state, “First Nations can no longer hide behind their history of suffering to rationalize neglecting children or failing to provide protection for them” (p.149). Our history of repeated attempted assimilation and cultural genocide does not absolve us from responsibility for the here and now. As Fournier & Crey (1997) state, “Denial is something we learned from non-native society and it won’t help anyone heal” (p. 150). Intergenerational trauma exists in our Aboriginal families. Child abuse and neglect, the tainted gifts of the colonizer, have infiltrated our family structures. Denying the existence of these problems serves no purpose. Aboriginals are over-represented in the child welfare system due in part to institutionalized racism; however, the fact remains that child abuse and neglect occur in our communities and families. Acknowledging this, and moving forward by utilizing our own ways and means, points the way to the future.
Cardinal (1969) states, “If we as a people are to assume a purposeful role in our own lives, if we are to become truly involved in today's and tomorrow's society, then we must be given the opportunity of controlling our own future” (p.15). The larger picture is the devolution of child welfare services back to the Aboriginal communities that they serve. The smaller picture is the design and implementation of culturally specific services by Aboriginals for Aboriginals, catering to their unique history, worldview, and cultural traditions around parenting and healing.
CONCLUSION

Sometimes the best way to enact change is from the ground up, in whatever small way can “get the ball rolling.” One of the Elders framed it this way:

*You know, there’s a lot of power in prayers, there’s a lot of power in dreaming. We’ve got to put the dream back in the people! By whatever means we can, and if we start off with a little, tiny parenting program, then that’s where we start. We are growing, and these little pockets are becoming larger and larger...*

The EAGLE Spirit parenting program may be small and under-funded, but it is a program designed by Aboriginals for Aboriginals, using our own ways to get our families back on the path to wellness and balance.

If one thing has been proven from centuries of attempted assimilation, cultural genocide, and colonization, it is that we, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, are resilient. We are like rocks that refuse to be worn down by the incessant waves of the colonizer. When I look at the women in the program, I do not see women facing addiction, domestic violence, and intergenerational trauma. I see women warriors, on the front line fighting the battle for our Aboriginal families. Some have battle scars or raw wounds, but they are still standing, they are still fighting the fight. Their strength, beauty, and dignity in the face of enormous adversity are a lesson to us all. They have the strength to carry the next generation back onto the Red Road of healthy, traditional living. I raise my hands to you all, our sisters, mothers, aunties, and grandmothers; I have faith you will persevere.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: EAGLE Spirit 12-week Structured Program Outline

**E.A.G.L.E. SPIRIT**  
Early Aboriginal Guidance in a Loving Environment  
Phone: (604) 873-6625  
Sept 4 — November 24, 2006  
Twelve Week Schedule

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LUNCH  
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What is A.N.G.E.R.
# E.A.G.L.E. SPIRIT
Early Aboriginal Guidance in a Loving Environment
Phone: (604) 873-6625
Sept 4 — November 24, 2006

## Twelve Week Schedule

*Page 2 Continued*

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**Rememberance Day**
No Class

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| 1:00-3:00pm | 1:00-3:00pm | 1:00-3:00pm | 1:00-3:00pm |
| Addictions | | Family Violence Education | 1:00-3:00pm | 1:00-3:00pm |

10:00-11:30am | Loving Kinder Spirits | Self Esteem | Direct Parenting Skills |
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| Addictions | | Family Violence Education | 1:00-3:00pm | 1:00-3:00pm |

11:00am-3:00pm | Graduation Pipe Ceremony |  |  |  |

## Graduation

**Pipe Ceremony**
Appendix B: Qualitative Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Basic Demographics
   Age:
   Gender:
   Self Identifies as Status/Non-Status/Métis/Inuit:
   Single Parent or Not:
   How Many Children:
   Age of Children:

2) What Brought You to the EAGLE Parenting Program?

3) (If applicable) Did you take a different parenting program before?
   How is the EAGLE program the same or different from other parenting programs you've had experience with?
   Can you think of some examples of how it's the same or different?

4) Tell Me About Your Experiences with the EAGLE Program.

   Describe this parenting program for me. What does a typical day look like?
   What does it mean to you to be in this parenting program?
Describe one or two things about this parenting program that fit into the Medicine Wheel quadrants: Emotional, Physical, Spiritual, & Mental.

Describe your feelings about being in this parenting program.

What works for you? What needs improvement?

5) Describe your experiences with the cultural parts of the program (for example: having an Aboriginal facilitator, Elder involvement, pipe ceremony at graduation, incorporation of Aboriginal beliefs and values into curriculum, etc).

What do these cultural parts of the program mean to you?

6) What do you see as the role of this parenting program?

7) What were your hopes and dreams when you started this parenting program?

8) Did you have any fears/worries when you started?

9) Did these change over time?

10) Did you get out of this program what you hoped to?
Appendix C: Notice of Ethical Review

Notice of Ethical Review

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Wright, M.  
Social Work & Family Studies  
B05-1120

INSTITUTION WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED

CO-INVESTIGATORS
Cameron, Michelle Ann, Social Work & Family Studies; Riano-Alcata, Pilar, Social Work & Family Studies

SPONSORING AGENCIES

The Committee has reviewed the protocol for your proposed study, and has issued a Certificate of Approval with the following note:

Provide information about safety precautions taken by the Co-Investigator (Student) for interviews in the participants home.

If you have any questions regarding these requirements, please call:

Ms. Shirley Thompson, Manager, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, (604) 827-5112

PLEASE SEND ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Research Ethics, Office of Research Services, Suite 102  
6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3