AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE ON CUSTOM ADOPTION

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Elders say that custom adoption has been part of the traditions of First Nations people since their history began. First Nations people know that the strength of their communities lie with the care of their children.

This research sought to understand custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective. The researcher is First Nations and he approached the research in an Indigenous manner using proper protocols to ask an Elder, the keeper of traditional knowledge, to share her knowledge of custom adoption. The Elder shared a most important insight about the power of ceremony and its ability to keep children within their communities to strengthen them.

The insights revealed in the interview included an epistemological context within which the custom adoption ceremony could be understood.

Reasons for custom adoption revealed that mourning, jural and fosterage adoption were part of traditional custom adoption. Identity was also identified as playing a part in custom adoption as children who were part of a ceremony were given special status as Mother Earth's children.

The development of the Custom Adoption Program at Yellowhead Tribal Service Agency (YTSA) was discussed and reviewed. It is a recommendation of this research that YTSA should serve as a model for other First Nations agencies seeking to explore custom adoption. The implications of this research will have an impact on First Nations social policy and practice.

Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to the Creator for giving me life to be with my Kokum and Mosum, Parents, and my extended family. My children, Linsday, Russell, Steenan, Akaiyan, and Annika have taught me love and acceptance. And to my wife Alice, for her support and inspiration.

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I also wish to extend my appreciation to Elder Bluestone Yellowface, Cindy Yellowface, Adeline Cardinal, and Carolyn Peacock.

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Chapter One

Introduction

> We do have our own traditional adoption system. We didn't have to sign a paper to say I was going to adopt this child. It was our tradition and way of life to accept others as our own. When there was an orphan, the orphan was taken and had parents. We learned to share that humble house where bannock and tea was our food and that is how we lived. I didn't have to have steak. We didn't have to have a bed. We lay on mother earth. Our bodies were strong. We were straight. We ate. We breathed in the fresh air. (Eva McKay, of the Dakota Ojibway Child and Family Services, addressing the Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoptions and Placements, May 27, 1982 in Kimelman, 1985, p. 217).

First Nations people have a traditional system of adoption that has continued to operate since pre-contact. There is no historical record of First Nations children being dependant or unwanted since they were provided for within kinship systems.

Native children were first placed outside of communities in residential schools by the government who sought to educate them according to the treaties. These residential schools soon became a financial burden and the government looked to religious bodies to take over the care and education of the Native children. The concept of caring for children as a charitable function had begun with Elizabethan laws and had been transferred to North America where missionaries applied it in residential schools. They were not prepared to acknowledge that another culture and belief system existed, much less had value, so they saw residential schools as an opportunity to assimilate Native children to their own religious and social mores (York, 1989).

Residential schools played an important role in the story of adoption for Native children, and it is one which continues today. In The Healing Has Begun, a publication by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2002, the testimonies of residential school students outline the abuses that they suffered. The types of abuse are identified below:

> Kidnapping, sexual abuse, beatings, needles punched through tongues as punishment for speaking Aboriginal languages, forced wearing of soiled underwear on the head or wet bed sheets on the body, faces rubbed in human excrement, forced eating of rotten and/or maggot infested food, being stripped naked and ridiculed in front of other students, forced to stand upright for several hours – on two feet and sometimes one – until collapsing, immersion in ice water, hair ripped from heads, use of students in eugenics and medical experiments, bondage and confinement in closets without food or water, application of electric shocks, forced to sleep outside – or walk barefoot – in winter, forced labour, and on and on. (p. 6 – 7)

The forced assimilation policies left the children struggling with the destruction of their identities as Indigenous people and the destruction of their language and culture. Generations of Indigenous people have memories of shame, neglect, and trauma and it has led to thousands of students coming forward to reveal physical, emotional and sexual abuses that they had endured in residential school. Perhaps the greatest tragedy was that the students had not been brought up in the loving, caring, sharing, and nurturing atmosphere of their families; as a result they did not have these skills to pass onto their children. Instead, the abuse was passed on through generations and more children were taken from their homes and grew up away from the traditions of their families and communities (Fournier & Crey, 1998).

Prior to the 1950's the care of Native children was under the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal government. An exception to this was Metis and Non-status children who were subject to provincial responsibility. The care of Native children changed significantly in 1951 when the federal government amended the Indian Act to include Section 88. Under Section 88 the provinces entered into agreements with the federal government to provide child welfare services to First Nations children and families. Even though the provinces hold primary responsibility for child welfare under the Canadian Constitution, it was the first time Native people had come under provincial jurisdiction (Fournier & Crey, 1998).

In the 1960's as residential schools were closing, First Nations children began to be ensnared in the provincial welfare system. Family networks had been broken down during the absence of the children from the reserves and when the children returned, the families were not able to cope. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> In 1969 we had 156 children in care, and in the spring of that year, Indian Education decided unilaterally that no child on any Reserve served by Child Welfare Agencies should be eligible for attendance at Indian Residential School. One set of grandparents on a Reserve in this area had 27 grandchildren returned to their two room house in June 1969. None of their daughters, who were single parents living off the Reserve, were prepared to plan for their children. The grandparents were obviously unable to cope with so many and requested that 20 of the children come into our care. (Goodman & Fraser in Kimelman, 1985, p. 220)

These circumstances were part of the phenomena coined the '60's scoop' in which First Nations children were apprehended from their families and communities at an alarming rate.

> In 1955 there were 3,433 children in the care of B.C.'s child welfare branch. Of that number, it was estimated that 29 children, or less than 1 per cent of the total, were of Indian ancestry. By 1964, however, 1, 446 children in care in B.C. were of Indian extraction. That number represented 34.2 per cent of all children in care. Within ten years, in other words, the representation of Native children in B.C.'s child welfare system had jumped from almost nil to a third. It was a pattern being repeated in other parts of Canada as well. (Johnston, 1983 as cited in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), Vol. 3, pp. 24-25)

As a result of this 'sixties scoop' and in an effort to stop the removal of the children from their communities, First Nations across Canada began to take control of the child welfare agencies on the reserves. The evolution of First Nations control over child welfare was a slow process that began in the late 70's and gained strength throughout the 80's. The flow of First Nations children into non-First Nations homes was reduced, but the First Nations agencies have been hampered in their efforts. They are required to follow the policies and procedures of the provincial system, which is built on beliefs that are often contrary to those of First Nations people. These trends demonstrate a need for exploring traditional ways of caring, as First Nations people seek to provide for their communities' children in ways that are congruent with their beliefs. Custom adoption is part of this exploration and it is the main focus of this thesis.

A traditional system of custom adoption has continued within First Nations communities throughout the times of residential schools and provincial

jurisdiction. My personal experience can attest to this continuation. I am of Cree ancestry and I was born in 1962. At the age of 18 months I was given to my present parents who are also of Cree ancestry. My natural family and my adoptive family were not related by blood, but they were from the same region in Saskatchewan. My natural mother stayed with my adoptive parents who were a childless couple. The arrangement was made between them to have me raised by my adoptive family. Later the process was legalized through the courts.

My adoptive extended family also practiced custom adoption. My Kokum and Mosum (grandmother and grandfather) have thirteen children, six boys and seven girls. Within this extended family, eight of the grandchildren were given at birth to families who were better able to care for the child or who wanted a child. These children have been raised in the homes that they were given to at birth, but all of the children move freely among the homes. There has never been any legal intervention, and all extended family members accept and are comfortable with the agreements. These arrangements are part of the families' and the peoples' beliefs and traditional ways of life.

This research will explore the concept of custom adoption further and it will focus on the knowledge of First Nations people in relation to adoption. A review of the literature has been conducted and is presented in Chapter Two. Different forms of traditional alternate care are described. Theoretical and policy perspectives found in the literature are also discussed. Chapter Three outlines the methodology for the research. Chapter Four includes data

collection and data analysis followed by conclusions and recommendations in

Chapter Five.

A definition of terms as it pertains to this research is outlined below.

Indigenous People: These are people who have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, from non-dominant sectors of society, and are determined to preserve and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories as the bases of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

First Nations Person: A person who is registered as an Indian under the *Indian Act* (also referred to as Status or Treaty Indian).

Native: A person with Indigenous heritage. A member of an Indigenous people of a country, region, etc., as distinguished from settlers, immigrants, etc. or their descendants.

Métis: A person, who self identifies as a Métis, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry, is distinct from other Aboriginal Peoples and is accepted by the Métis Nation.

Perspective: According to the Oxford Canadian Dictionary (1998), a perspective is "a mental view of the relative importance of things" p. 1085. This term is used in this study to reflect a holistic view, which derives from Natural Law – a Cree philosophy of life including respect for culture, language, and knowledge - in order to interact with the world.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Chief Crowfoot of the Blackfoot Nation adopted Poundmaker because he reminded him of one of his sons who had died in battle. First Nations custom adoption has a long history that has been rooted in everyday life for First Nations communities and families and there is evidence of this history in the literature.

A general review of the literature was conducted to provide background information on adoption among Indigenous people. The review is developed under the following headings:

- What is First Nations Custom Adoption?

- Jural Adoption

- Fosterage

- Mourning Adoption

- Theoretical Perspectives

- Policy Perspectives

What is First Nations Custom Adoption?

The literature reveals definitions of custom adoption from Indigenous perspectives. Customary adoption is part of a centuries old tradition of love, support and care. This is evident in the following editorial.

> Prior to the introduction of foster care as we know it today, the Native people had their own system of foster care. In the event of death to the parents of a Native child, the grandparents or some other close relative would take it upon themselves to raise the orphaned youngster as one

of their own. There were also instances where the grandparents adopted children from a large family and raised them as their own. Some people devoted their entire lives to raising children, other people's in addition to their own. (Oswalt, 1974, p. 43)

Eva McKay of the Dakota Ojibway Child and Family Services also expressed the Indigenous view of custom adoption when she addressed the Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoptions and Placements, established in Manitoba in the early 1980s to investigate placement practices involving Aboriginal children.

> We do have our own traditional adoption system. We didn't have to sign a paper to say I was going to adopt this child. It was our traditional way of life to accept others as our own. When there was an orphan, the orphan was taken and had parents. We learned to share that humble house where bannock and tea was our food and that is how we lived. I didn't have to have steak. We didn't have to have a bed. We lay on Mother Earth. Our bodies were strong. (Kimelman, 1985, p. 217)

Jourdain (2002) conducted research through informal conversational-style interviews with Anishinabe Elders, spiritual advisors and healers to acquire their knowledge about customary care, which is a traditional system of caring for children and families. He speaks of custom adoption within his findings of customary care in the following way:

> Customary care is not new and has been around as long as the respondents can recall. There are instances where families have effected customary care arrangements and custom adoptions for various social problems and situations. These arrangements were mainly consensual and activated during social hardships and at the death of primary caregivers. There is information that supports that customary care was applied when parents did not meet the acceptable standards of care...Strong evidence suggests that secrecy and privacy was not assigned to customary care and that the placing family had access, and shared in the cost of raising the children. (p. 31)

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This literature review focuses on the adoption traditions of Indigenous people. The literature has very few accounts of custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective, as outlined above, but Non-Indigenous anthropologists have recorded the adoption practices of Indigenous people both within North America and around the world. In the 1960's anthropologists began to critique the existing models of adoption and they tried to expand the definition of adoption beyond the legal texts to include an understanding of adoption from the participants' context. These traditional definitions are known as customary adoption systems (De Aguayo, 1995).

Vern Carroll (1970) in the book, Adoption in Eastern Oceania, gives a broad definition of adoption as being the process whereby one takes as one's own, a child of other parents. Adoption arrangements, especially among Indigenous people, included adoption of children by grandparents, brothers, sisters or other relatives (Black-Rogers, 1989; Brady, 1976; Firth, 1961; Hilger, 1952; Landes, 1937; Teicher, 1953).

Carroll (1970) suggests that the term custom adoption is defined and interpreted within the language of the people. He argues that the context and meaning of adoption for Indigenous people is lost when the term is translated from an Indigenous language and culture to English and applied in a western context. He notes that the Indigenous people of Eastern Oceania clearly distinguish between fosterage and adoption. Fosterage is the temporary taking care of others' children as an obligation of kinship, while adoption is permanently assuming the major responsibilities of natural parents.

An adoption within mainstream society whereby an orphaned child is adopted by relatives would be considered "fosterage" in Eastern Oceania. From a traditional Indigenous perspective, if the foster parents had not asked for the child from its natural parents then the child could not possibly have been "adopted" (Carroll, 1970). This demonstrates the misinterpretation of cultural patterns that often causes conflict when mainstream laws and policies are imposed upon Indigenous people.

Parenthood is another term that is subject to cultural interpretation. Mainstream culture defines parenthood in terms of a nuclear family and children are adopted by one or two parents. However, the responsibility of parenthood in Indigenous cultures is broader and includes extended family as well as kinship ties that are created within culturally specific rules (Carroll, 1970). Brady (1976) describes these incorporative social arrangements as 'transactions in kinship'.

Custom adoption is based on these social ties and is recorded in oral or customary law. However, models of adoption in the western context are derived from written texts, usually legal, and based on inheritance and property rights originally associated with agricultural states. Early adoptions fulfilled the needs of the family by providing workers and heirs. During the Second World War the priority shifted to the orphaned children of Europe and this established the "need of the child". Post war times found charity agencies matching childless couples with needy or illegitimate children (Hepworth, 1980).

Western cultural values also played a role in adoption policy at the time, in that it was believed that biological aspects of personality played an important role in the development of a child, but that they could be counter acted by a new environment. Thus, it became imperative to reduce the effects of the natural parents by adopting the child as young as possible and severing all ties with them. Laws and policy served to protect the adoptee and the adoptive family by making all arrangements through the courts, church or agency and sealing all records. Adoption was equated with shame for the adoptive parents, who were childless and infertile, for the natural parents, who wanted to avoid reconnecting with the child they gave up, and for the child, who may be psychologically damaged if they found out they were abandoned, illegitimate or orphaned (De Aguayo, 1995). Western culture prioritized and legalized a permanent separation between the adoptee and their natural family.

This clean-break adoption policy is very contrary to the majority of custom adoption patterns. In most Indigenous societies, adoption only took place between families who knew each other and who had established a trust. The kinship ties between these families would be made even closer following the adoption (Goody, 1971; Guemple, 1976; Shomaker, 1989).

Mainstream society has moved away from a clean-break adoption policy in the past two decades and toward a system of open adoption. Shinyei and Edney (1992) define open adoption in the following:

> Open Adoption is where the birth parent chooses the adoptive family for her baby, both sets of parents usually meet, exchange complete identifying information and make an agreement for ongoing contact. The

contact is most likely to take the form of letters and pictures but, increasingly, it includes a plan for visiting. (p.1)

Society has become more open, and its view of unplanned pregnancies has changed over the years. Open adoptions began in the United States in the seventies and it was first introduced in Canada by Leslie Wade in her agency, Family and Community Services of King's County, Nova Scotia. She made about forty successful placements before she was ordered to cease by the Minister since not enough was known about open adoptions (Shinyei & Edney, 1992).

Adoption falls under provincial jurisdiction and in most provinces, except Saskatchewan, it is administered through departments of social services. These large bureaucracies have not responded to the call for openness and most open adoptions have occurred within private agencies in a number of provinces. The control over private agencies varies greatly among the provinces and laws governing open adoptions also differ. For example, in Alberta all private adoptions must be open, while in Ontario only semi-open adoptions are allowed (Shinyei & Edney, 1992).

The movement toward open adoption in mainstream society cannot be equated with a resurgence of custom adoption in traditional societies since the motives for adoption are different. In mainstream society open communication between birth and adoptive parents serves to strengthen the child's identity. The emphasis on open communication among birth and adoptive parents in custom adoption serves to strengthen the ties of the community. Custom

adoption provides community support for the child while open adoption provides support from two families.

These opposing motives for adoption are described further by Benet (1976) when she explains that in Polynesia, adoption is supposed to happen while in the West it is not supposed to happen. She discusses the importance of adoption to the community when she states, "In Oceania, to adopt is easier than to keep one's own children. In fact to keep a child, parents may have to risk offending their kin and cutting themselves off from normal social life" (p. 50).

In customary adoption, the highest rates of adoption occur among grandparents, older siblings or "classificatory parents" (Guemple, 1970). De Aguayo (1995) explains the term "classificatory parents" in the following.

> In some societies, i.e., Hawaiian, all the generations of one's biological parents can be addressed with the term 'my mother, or 'my father'. This use of terms would classify large numbers of people in a parental relationship to you; they would be known, in anthropological literature as 'classificatory parents'. (p. 7)

Clan systems exist in many Indigenous societies and these represent another extended family system within which adoption occurs (Lowie, 1912). The Tlingit of Alaska had a traditional clan system for adoption that mutually benefited the clan and the individual by ensuring parentless children remained in the clan. This system is still in place.

> The clan nurtured commitment to caring for one's relatives children is widely prevalent among contemporary Tlingits, despite the fact that many clans no longer function as the primary family unit and have lost much of their authority and influence in directing the behavior of the individual. (Petershoare, 1989, p. 27)

De Aguayo (1995) suggests that adoptions among Indigenous people in North America have been termed Cultural or Ceremonial Adoption in the United States and customary or custom adoption in Canada. She outlines the components of customary adoption.

> The Canadian pattern of customary adoption emphasizes arrangements between close relatives, particularly older 'classificatory' siblings, parents and grandparents, rather than with strangers. The needs of the adults as well as the child are taken into consideration. It is also important that the 'natural' family, the children and the adoptive family do not lose contact with each other. (p. 8)

Customary adoption is deeply embedded in the community life of Canadian First Nations people (Kimelman, 1985; Ward, 1984). A child may move in with a grandparent to provide assistance. A couple without children or grown children may be given a child. The relatives, of a family who need help with a child, will assume custody of that child with the agreement of the parents. A mother who has to work or go to school away from home may leave her children with a relative for a period of time knowing that they will receive the same care, love and support that she would provide. These adoptions are a common occurrence and they rarely become legal in the courts.

De Aguayo (1995) divides customary adoption into three main categories: jural, fosterage and mourning. She states that jural adoption and fosterage are still extensively practiced while mourning adoption is only sometimes found among more traditional people. This review will consider the examples in the literature of jural, fosterage and mourning adoption, which are variations that De Aguayo (1995) names "transactions in parenthood". These

transactions revolve around the care of a child and the individuals who take on the responsibility of the natural parent. The three categories deal with changes in the kinship status of the adoptee. Comparative aspects of these three adoption types include: age differences; gender differences; permanency of the arrangement; initiators of arrangement; category of persons involved; and primary functions. This are summarized in Appendix A, and discussed in the following pages.

Jural Adoption

Jural adoptions are intended to be a permanent arrangement. They are based on the caring and sharing ideologies of Indigenous communities. Matrilineal lines and cultural practices also play an important role in jural adoption.

Caring for children in need is part of the cultural way of Indigenous people. Jessie Rowlodge, an Arapaho Elder, speaks of his tenderness of heart for a parentless child who was not related to him and how he was taught to sympathize with this child. He describes speaking with his wife and then adopting the child in an Arapaho Adoption Ceremony (Hilger, 1952).

Elder Rowlodge also describes the support he would offer to his relatives if their children were left without parents.

> If my brother died, I would adopt his son as my own through pity and sympathy. I would support him. If my wife's sister died, we would adopt her children. The ceremonies would be the same... These children could either stay with us or go back to the surviving parent, but I would help to support them. (Hilger, 1952, p. 52)

Sharing is also an important cultural value in Indigenous communities. The sharing of children through adoption to families who could best care for them or who most needed them was an accepted practice. Matonabbee was Chipwyan, and a guide for Samuel Hearne. He was in a position to be able to support others and he was reported to have seven children, two adopted (Oswalt, 1966).

Hilger (1951) noted that formal adoption ceremonies were not required among the Chippewa. A clear understanding by both parties concerned was the only requirement. Parent's consent was needed for the adoption of a young child, who could be adopted by a relative or a friend. Older children were invited to be adopted into a home or they could choose a home and ask to be adopted.

The classification of kin played a role in determining adoption patterns in matrilineal societies. In the Northwest Coast Nations all the nations north of the Haisla organized themselves matrilinealy (Suttles, 1990). Strong jural adoption traditions were noted and the matrilineal society's tended to adopt on the mother's side. Among the Tlingit Nation the maternal relatives, those belonging to the same clan as the mother, were considered immediate family. The mother's clan could choose which clan member would assume the parenting role of a child (Petershoare, 1985). The clan and the children benefited as the clan invested in its future well being socially and economically by ensuring children remained in the clan (McIlwraith, 1948; Petershoare, 1985).

Lismer (1974) notes that in the Blood Nation in Alberta, jural or a more permanent adoption took place when there was a death, illness or overwork of parents. The eldest child was usually taken in this case.

Cultural beliefs also played a part in adoption patterns of the Blood Nation. A mother who had lost a child through miscarriage or early death would often give up a newborn for adoption. She did this out of love for the child since she felt that by giving the child up for adoption she would thwart the bad luck that surrounded her (Lisper, 1974).

Fosterage

Fosterage arrangements were less permanent and often involved relationships of reciprocity. As Black-Rogers (1989) noted among the Oji-Cree of Northern Ontario, fostering arrangements not only provided children with a home who needed one, but also provided homes with children who needed them. An example was given of a young grandmother who lost four children in a strange illness. She then raised the twins of extended family whose parents had too much to do. The needs of the grandmother and the twins were fulfilled and it presented a fostering situation since the father still provided for the family.

Lismer (1974) describes fostering within the Blood Nation of Alberta. She defines "visiting" as staying with relatives for long or short stays, varying in frequency. "Raising" is described as a more permanent situation, which usually takes place with the grandparents. There is no severing of natural family ties

since the child could be taken back by the parents. The child refers to their grandparents as grandparents. Hilger (1952) also reported that grandparents often raise children for companionship.

A type of fosterage for ritual training was found among the Tlingit Nation and is described by Petershoare (1985). Traditionally, adolescent boys after the age of ten left their parents home to live in the house of their mother's brother. The maternal uncle taught the history and ceremonial traditions of his clan and lineage to the boy. Also, the boy was versed in how to be a hunter, warrior and family man in the traditions of the clan.

Mourning Adoption

The literature also identifies adoption patterns around mourning practices. McIlwraith (1948) noted that among the Bella Coola Nation children would be born who would be considered a reincarnation of a recently deceased elderly relative. These children would be referred to by their relatives using the appropriate kin term of the deceased relative, e.g., my uncle, my grandmother. The child would be adopted by the deceased person's relatives, but they would not change their home or their membership in the first family.

McIlwraith (1948) also describes a mourning adoption, which is common in the literature, in which an individual, either a child or adult, was adopted to replace a deceased relative. The individual being adopted had some physical resemblance to the deceased and was usually close in age and of the same sex. The adoptee would be expected to take part in the ceremonies of the

adoptive family and to visit, but they remained with their first family. They were

also required to adhere to the incest and marriage taboos associated with their

second family.

Elder Rowlodge explains this practice among the Arapaho.

If I had a son and he had died, and in my visit to any tribe, I saw a boy
whose features were similar to my son's, I would say, 'He is my son.'…
This boy would be of the same age as our dead son. Then, before the
next large meeting of the Arapaho – this might be the Sun Dance…- this
boy and his parents would be notified that they should be present since
we wished to adopt their son. I would announce … that the boy was my
son, that my folks were his, that the boy should tell me his worries and
his pains, that my ponies and saddles or anything in my possession was
his. I would give away a horse; my wife would give away blankets to
anyone who was visiting, but not to the boy's immediate father and
mother…The boy's or girl's family never objected; they were flattered.
This adopted son could come and live with me if he wanted to, but he
was not obliged to do so. His relationship to me was the same as my
son's. (Hilger, 1952, p. 52)

The literature reveals that the practice of replacing the deceased by

look-alike friends and relatives and sealing the arrangement with an exchange

of gifts and the use of kin terms was found among the Blackfoot (Lismer, 1974),

the Plains Crow (Lowie, 1912), the Winnebago (Radin, 1923) and the Plains

Ojibway (Landes, 1937).

Based on my experience, mourning adoption is a form of kin

transactions within indigenous communities that still exists today. It is important

to be aware of this practice, but it will not be a focus for this work.

Theoretical Perspectives on Indigenous Adoptions

Two perspectives on theories of adoption among Indigenous peoples seem to be revealed in the literature. The first is a "demographic hypothesis", which sees adoption as a method of moving people to resources. Childless and older couples are burdened by tasks such as daily wood gathering and water fetching. Children were redistributed to these couples according to their food production abilities. This theory has been applied to the Inuit by Guemple (1970), the Southampton Island Inuit by Dunning (1962), and the Misstassini fosterage practices by Teicher (1953). This theory proposes that adoption takes place because of economic ends. However, an economic base for adoption does not seem to explain why children would be given to families to help deal with food shortage when these families are already sharing food and resources.

The second theory revealed in the literature is a "kinship hypothesis". This train of thinking deals primarily with the social roots of adoption. It suggests that customary adoption reinforces existing kinship lines since mutual support and responsibility are being reaffirmed with every adoptive arrangement. It not only brings people to resources, but rather creates bridges among families over which resources can flow. These kinship ties have been described by several authors including Bowers (1965), Goodenough (1970), Guemple (1970), Kimelman (1984), and McIlwraith (1948).

The importance of these kinship ties can be found in the description of clans in the article by Brady (1976). He describes the clan system among the

Namoluk people and their belief that all members of a clan descend from one woman and therefore share the connection of blood relatives. Adoption is a part of the close kinship ties these people share as is demonstrated in the following:

> Adoption and fosterage are viewed as an integral part of the pervasive pattern of sharing among close relatives on the atoll. Children (and sometimes adults) are shared for companionship, love, pleasure, a sense of personal worth and fulfillment, and a variety of economic reasons. To give one's kinsman a child in adoption or fosterage is simply one more way of expressing kinship solidarity by sharing valued resources. (p. 40)

The clan system among the Tlingit people described by Petershoare (1985) also exemplifies this strong bond of affection among members of the same clan. In terms of adoption, the entire clan would decide which clan member would assume the parenting role of a deceased clan member so that their children would be cared for within the clan. Also, the clan would decide if a particular family was dysfunctional and would assume custody of their children without the parents' initial approval. Even though the clan system was set up along matrilineal lines, the children of a brother's siblings would be eagerly cared for by a sister.

Adoptive kinship arrangements outside of the clan system are described by Hilger (1952) among the Chippewa people. An example of a dying mother who arranged with her relatives for the placement of her five children was given. One of these children describes her life with an aunt and says that she was treated just like the other child with no discrimination shown toward her in

either food or work. This example shows the supportive nature of the kinship arrangements.

Support through kinship relationships are also demonstrated in examples of mourning adoption. Grieving parents were given relief in their beliefs of reincarnation, in that the spirit of their deceased child could be found in the spirit of another child. Radin (1923) describes how a family found a replacement for their deceased child in the physical resemblance of another child. They adopted this child through a ceremony in which they gave his parents gifts. In these cases the adopted child was often a friend of the family and the child would share a special relationship with the adoptive family, but would remain in their own home.

Goody (1971) describes kinship ties as reciprocities of rearing. He suggests that these relationships are based on the child's care through the stages of nurturance and education. The strength of these adoptive relationships comes from moral obligations which are strongly sanctioned within the culture and are jural in nature.

These examples all fall under the hypothesis of kinship. The strengthening of kinship lines is a strong force in the understanding of traditional adoptions.

Although some Indigenous voices are found in the literature, like Eva McKay's who spoke about traditional adoption to the Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoptions and Placements in Manitoba (Kimelman, 1985), these voices are not yet interpreting and theorizing. Jourdain (2002) states

that, "There is a need to conduct research that explores and examines customary care within a specific cultural context. Research into customary care must be done by persons who understand Aboriginal culture and are able to work in a manner that respects Aboriginal models of knowledge keeping (p.31)

It is a purpose of this work to add to the interpretation of knowledge on customary adoption from an Indigenous perspective.

Social Work Policy Perspectives – a Clash in Ideologies

Understanding the underlying roots of custom adoption requires a philosophical change in the Western concepts of family. The belief that biology is the heart of a parent-child relationship and that a single household is the proper way to child-rear is only one perspective. Custom adoption emphasizes the networks of family and the sentiment that can exist between parents and children within an extended family, regardless of their biological link. It is the face-to-face cooperation that makes a real kin structure work and not the biological ties (Guemple, 1979).

A clash in ideologies leads to problems when western adoption policies are imposed on First Nations communities. McGillivary (1985) notes that families who have set up child rearing arrangements according to customary adoption patterns have had to later legalize the adoptions. This has meant that the birth families have had to give up all formal ties and responsibilities for their children, which was not the intention under the custom adoption traditions.

Another clash of ideologies also occurred as First Nations child welfare agencies were established in the communities to lessen the drain of First Nations children into non-First Nations homes. The administration of the child welfare caseload was passed on from the provincial government to the band agencies along with the western policies that governed adoption. The policies for determining qualified homes are different under the provincial legislation than they are in a custom adoption arrangement, and this causes conflicts. Also, the caring for children sometimes comes with monetary compensation under the provincial policy. Allowances for caring for children are now necessary since much of the traditional way of life does not exist. Conflicts over who receives these funds occur since definitions of families differ within ideologies of Indigenous and Western adoption. For instance, a parent may receive funding for the child under the Western definition of family while the child is actually being looked after by extended family who are not receiving financial support.

Some reports support the legal recognition of customary adoption (Weurschler, 1979); (Ward, 1984). However, problems arise between the customary adoption and legalized adoption even when social services agencies try to adapt to First Nations culture. In a court of law, custom adoption may recognize that the birth parents have moral rights, but they do not have legal rights.

In the 1970's, customary adoption was recognized legally in the courts of the Northwest Territories (McGillivary 1985, Morrow 1984, Zlotkin 1984).

Though customary adoption was recognized, it still awarded the responsibility of the child to the adoptive family. When one family wanted their child back the court ruled in favor of the adoptive family (Zlotkin, 1984). This took the flexibility out of the custom adoption pattern and allowed the court to be a maker of family ties. The underlying basis of the court system may not be able to recognize the subtleties of a cultural system that is based on interconnections and balance.

Policy needs to be developed by considering the values and worldview of the people who will be governed by that policy. A goal of this research is to provide an Indigenous perspective on adoption to inform policy for both government and First Nation Agencies.

Summary

It is important to note that custom adoption has always been a part of First Nations societies' and that it has continued through the history of residential schools and the government policies which created the 60's scoop. A study of First Nations custom adoption will reveal what exists rather than what was.

The literature reveals differing ideologies and motives for adoption between the Western and First Nations perspectives. The Western perspective of adoption is centered upon a nuclear family. Models of adoption were based on inheritance and property and the needs of the family were met by providing workers and heirs. After the Second World War a shift in perspective occurred

as the orphaned children of Europe established the needs of the child as a priority. Then, cultural values played a role in adoption policy as illegitimate children were adopted by childless couples. Western culture legalized the permanent separation of the adoptee from their natural family creating a clean-break adoption policy. This policy still exists today in Canada even though adoption policy has made a move toward open adoptions.

The First Nations perspective of custom adoption is based on the extended family and community where family members beyond the mother and father fulfill parenting functions. Traditionally, it was imperative to strengthen ties among family members to increase the chances of survival. These traditions are evident in the modern cultural values of sharing and caring which play a major role in adoptive practices. The sharing of children to promote caring within the community strengthens the community bonds. A strong community meets the needs of its children.

Custom adoption was examined under three headings. Jural adoption was described as a permanent arrangement and it would often follow the matrilineal lines of the family. Children were adopted into their mother's family as if they were one of their own. The cultural beliefs of sharing and caring extended to children of their extended family or community and no child was left uncared for. In fosterage, the arrangements were usually less permanent and based upon reciprocity. Children were temporarily given to homes that needed them for support and children who needed support were taken in by caring homes. Mourning adoption involved adoption practices around death.

Sometimes a child would be adopted by a family because they resembled a deceased family member, and they would visit and attend ceremonies of the adoptive family, but they would not change family membership.

It is this differing perspective in ideologies, culture and history and its impact on adoption that makes the study of custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective important. An examination of adoption from an Aboriginal perspective can provide understanding and knowledge to develop policy for First Nations agencies that are now responsible for caring for their own children. This knowledge may lead to adoption practices that seek to strengthen family ties in ways that recognize the responsibility of the extended family and the community in raising a child.

A clash in ideologies and adoption practices contributed to First Nations children being taken from their homes during the residential school era and during the 60's scoop. Communities and families have lost their strength to care for their own. A study to promote the traditional adoption practices of First Nations children that keep children within their families and community can help strengthen the communities as a whole. It is my experience that traditional practices are a key to promoting healthy communities.

The move in mainstream society toward open adoptions also indicates the importance of studying alternative systems of adoption that can meet the changing cultural values of society in general.

The review of the literature demonstrates that there are very few resources that speak of traditional ways of custom adoption from a First

Nations perspective. This research is unique in that it will obtain knowledge about custom adoption from an Elder who is the keeper of that knowledge within the cultural framework. Jourdain (2002) states that, "it is imperative that Aboriginal family service authorities take advantage of their access to the elders, healers and persons of cultural wisdom, and maximize the tribal knowledge of customary care"(p.34)

Also, the interpreter of that knowledge (the researcher) is First Nations and has the life experience of being adopted into a First Nations family and in turn adopting a First Nations child of his own in a custom adoption ceremony. A study from this perspective can greatly enhance the knowledge base on adoption for all of those who work with children in care.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Rationale for Study

<u>A Personal Perspective</u>

Conducting this research is important to me and my life experience for four reasons. These reasons include experiencing the adoption of my daughter through custom adoption, sharing my own positive experience of adoption, seeing a need for custom adoption in my professional practice and hoping to influence government policy on custom adoption.

My wife and I adopted our daughter through a custom adoption ceremony. The experience demonstrated to me the natural process of adoption that Indigenous people have been living for thousands of years. I understood and felt the power of ceremony on a different level. My daughter's adoption ceremony was also unique in that it melded the Court of Queen's Bench adoption proceedings with the traditional custom adoption ceremony. I realized that there was a way that the traditions of First Nations people could be combined with government policies so that First Nation children could be kept within their community. I was interested in following that way.

My own adoption story was the second reason I choose to conduct research on custom adoption. I was adopted into a First Nations family, and extended family, in 1965 which was a rare occurrence at that time. My adoptive grandparents, especially my grandmother, made it a welcoming world for me. I

was accepted as the eldest grandchild by my grandparents and my extended family and I was given a special place within the family. I still enjoy that special status today. Even though I had questions about my biological family, I felt safe and secure within my adoptive family.

My grandmother is the matriarch of the family and she made sure that her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren all remained within the family and that strong bonds were established among them. As I grew up, I saw eight of my cousins being given to siblings of their parents to be raised. Each child was seen as a gift and this gave them a strong identity and they knew they were important. This natural adoption process strengthened the families and made the bonds between them stronger. No children were adopted outside of the extended family, which I defined as the immediate family in my culture.

My experience of extended family is strength, since our family had our language, culture and ceremonies. I was given an identity and strong roots. I did not share the need of other adoptees who wanted to find out who they were. I hope that this research will allow me to help other First Nations children have the same positive experience of adoption that I had.

In my professional practice as a social worker I learned that very few First Nations adoptees shared the strong family bonds that I had grown up with. It is their stories that prompted me to also pursue this research. In my work, I have come across many cases of First Nations youth and adults who had been tossed out of their adoptive homes. When they reached adolescence, they

were no longer accepted by society and their questions of identity could not be answered by their non-Native families, so they rebelled. They did not have anyone to talk to them about being First Nations or being adopted and they became lost. They began a search that would eventually lead them through the hidden mystery of their adoption to their communities. It was in the communities that I met them as they walked into the child welfare offices and asked: Who are my family? Who are my people? What can you do for me? How can you help me? In most cases their stories were tragic and their families were lost before they could meet them.

The Alberta Child Welfare system adopted these people out and when they came back to the system to ask for help to look for their families, they did not receive any answers. They were told that now they are adults and they are on their own. Their stories strengthened my resolve to research custom adoption from a cultural perspective. Our people had a system of adoption in place that is still evident within my own family. It is my experience that this system strengthens families and gives children an identity. It also recognizes the child's birth and adoptive families, so that they do not have to embark on a life long path of searching for who they are.

The final reason I am conducting this research is because it is calling me to take my life experiences and to learn from them so that I may benefit others by effecting change in government policy. I was the Co-Chair for the First Nations Directors of First Nations Delegated Child & Family Services Agencies between 1996 and 1998. In this position, the directors and I worked to change

government policy by taking a resolution from the Chiefs Summit of Alberta that stated that no First Nations child was to be adopted out of their community. With applied pressure from the directors, the resolution became a moratorium within the provincial government which stopped First Nations children from being adopted out of their communities for a year. During that year policy was to be developed that would work toward making the moratorium a government policy. Unfortunately, even with increased pressure from the First Nations directors, this did not happen. It is my intent that through researching the custom adoption ceremony from an Indigenous perspective that I will be able to help change government policy in the future.

An Indigenous Perspective

The study of custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective is significant for several reasons. The literature reveals evidence of custom adoption, but it is from an historical perspective and from an anthropological point of view. A study of adoption which acknowledges customary patterns among Indigenous people in the past as well as in the present may validate the practices as a parallel system of child care.

A study of custom adoption within a cultural context will bring understanding to the epistemology of First Nations people. An awareness of the workings of an Indigenous worldview is needed to make policy changes. This awareness is important because when custom adoption is placed within

the mainstream's cultural context and the policies that have historically resulted from that context, a clash of values occurs.

De Aguayo (1995) explains the differing concepts of family that underlie adoption practices. The Western concept emphasizes a nuclear family and the belief that biology is at the heart of the parent-child relationship. This reinforces the premise that a single household is the proper situation for child rearing. In contrast an Indigenous concept of family affirms the networks of an extended family. The sentiments and support of a family exist even though all the members may not share a close biological link.

The models of adoption that stem from these concepts of family also differ. The nuclear family is seen as ideal in the western model while the care of a child within an extended family is the basis of the Indigenous model. Also, the western context emphasizes the severing of contact with the natural family to ensure permanence for the child. There has been a move toward open adoptions where the child remains in contact with their natural family, but any decision-making or responsibility for the child lies with the adoptive family. An illustration of this can be found in the legal customary adoption cases. In a case in the Northwest Territories where custom adoption is a legally accepted alternative, a natural family had decided that they wanted their child back. It was ruled that the legal responsibility for the child lay with the adoptive family (Zlotkin, 1984).

Indigenous people have arranged adoptions within the extended family or among other extended families to strengthen ties and provide permanence

for the child. The child is in constant contact with their natural family and the family has not been expected to give up their right to the child. Finally, the process of child care has been delegated to an institution and bureaucracy in the western model, whereas the adoption of children was a matter between families, governed by cultural traditions, for First Nations people (De Aguayo, 1995).

Custom adoption has been defined within the literature, but an Indigenous perspective of that definition has not been explored. This research would contribute to the knowledge base of adoption in general and custom adoption in particular. As well, a further understanding of the cultural context within which custom adoption sits will help those creating policy within government and the First Nations agencies.

This research will examine how custom adoption operates as a system of childcare within First Nations culture and how it is connected to traditional ways of knowing.

Main Research Question

The main research question of this study is: What is custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective?

The concept of Indigenous custom adoption was explored in this research by interviewing a First Nations Elder to determine her perspective. As well, three custom adoption ceremonies was observed and documented. Finally, the researcher's personal narrative was added to the database. The

researcher is First Nations and was adopted by a First Nations family. He also adopted a daughter in a traditional custom adoption ceremony.

Limitations of Study

Custom adoption is a tradition that was and is practiced by Indigenous people in many parts of the world. However, the findings of this study are applicable only to the people of the First Nations in the Yellowhead Tribal Council (YTC), which are Alexander First Nation, Alexis First Nations, Enoch Cree Nation, O'Chiese First Nation and Sunchild First Nation.

This research focuses on the knowledge of only one Elder which may be considered a limitation of the study. However, this Elder has been given the right by her people to be the keeper of this traditional knowledge. The knowledge holds a spiritual element to it and the Elder prays in order to know if the knowledge should be shared and with whom. The Elder received the custom adoption ceremony for the five First Nations of Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA).

Design of the Study

<u>Methodology</u>

The methodology used in this research is qualitative and it falls within Denzin and Lincoln's (1994, p.2), definition as

> …multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, and a naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety

of empirical materials…that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives.

This research is interpretive, and naturalistic in methods and settings. The knowledge of custom adoption is shared and interpreted by those who are within the culture that practice it. Therefore, First Nations people will bring meaning to the phenomena and interpret it within the natural cultural setting.

Narrative inquiry and autobiographical methodologies are used to study custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) describe narrative inquiry as "the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2).

Narrative inquiry reflects an Indigenous perspective based on respect because it allows participants to have a voice. In narrative inquiry the collection of data is known as field texts. A central foundation of narrative inquiry is the collaborative research relationship. As Clandinin and Connelly (1990) state, "narrative inquiry occurs within relationships among researchers and practitioners, constructed as a caring community" (p.4). They refer to the research-participant relationship as:

> Central to the creation of field texts…[since these relationships] shape the nature of field texts and establish the epistemological status of them [in that] a relationship embeds meaning in the text and imposes form on the research texts ultimately developed… what is told, as well as the meaning of what is told, is shaped by the relationship. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 419)

This type of inquiry allows participants to have a voice through the

collaborative process. Of equal importance, is the fact that it allows an Elder-learner relationship to exist, which is paramount in acknowledging an Indigenous perspective.

Research based on reciprocity between the researcher and the participant creates respect, a deeply held value in Native communities. Lavina White, a Haida Elder and stateswoman, notes that Indigenous inquiry focuses on respect rather than on power (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 259).

The Elder-learner relationship is described by Archibald as she shares her experience as a graduate student asking a respected Elder for knowledge.

> The Elder determines where we should meet; the learner ensures that there is sharing of food and tea. The learner creates unhurried time and talking space so that the topic of discussion arises at the 'right' moment. It would have been disrespectful to ask my questions immediately. During our breakfast, I also realized I needed to respect his role as a gifted teacher and to follow the proper cultural way of having him direct the learning process for me. (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 251)

In this example the roles and methods were defined by cultural learning protocols. The Elder and learner have a relationship based on reciprocity and respect for one another and the traditional cultural ways of knowing. The Elder respects the learner in terms of her lineage and motives, before he or she agrees to become the teacher. The Elder also respects the knowledge, since the teachings indicate that the knowledge cannot be rushed and it must occur at natural intervals. This learning protocol also indicates that the learner must respect her responsibilities by listening carefully to the Elder and thinking hard about the meanings, and then validating her understandings with the Elder before they are formally shared (Haig- Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 252).

A second methodology, autobiography, is also employed in this research since it aligns with traditional cultural learning protocols. The protocols require the learner (researcher) to integrate the cultural knowledge into their own life experiences in order to interpret the knowledge for themselves before they can share their learning with others. This methodology acknowledges that our autobiographies and our scholarly works are deeply integrated and that our autobiographies can be drawn upon to elucidate our knowledge. (Roth, 2000).

The incorporation of the researcher's story also allows for the cultural perspective of the First Nations researcher and of the researcher's interpretation of the First Nations participant's words. This is critical to understanding an Indigenous view of custom adoption, which is a focus of this work. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) recognize this close connection between interpretive research and the researcher's biography by proposing that behind every interpretive study stands the biographically, multicultural situated researcher. They explain this in the following quote:

> Three interconnected, generic activities define the qualitative research process. They go by a variety of labels, including ... ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the gendered researcher, who speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural, and ethic community perspective. (p. 23)

Participant

The participant for this research was selected in line with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) strategies for participant selection within grounded theory. They suggest that the participants are those who know most about what the

research is hoping to learn about and who are able to communicate this knowledge.

Bluestone Yellowface is a Saulteaux Elder from the O'Chiese First Nation in Alberta. She is a recognized Elder in her community and a signatory of Treaty #6. She is a pipe holder and knows the ways and ceremonies of custom adoption for her community. She sits on the Elder's Advisory Committee for Custom Adoption for Yellow Head Tribal Services Agency (YTSA). YTSA is part of Treaty #6 and consists of the following First Nations: Alexander First Nation, Alexis First Nation, Enoch Cree Nation, O'Chiese First Nation, and Sunchild First Nation.

As a respected Elder, Bluestone Yellowface is the keeper of traditional knowledge about custom adoption. She is familiar with ways of knowing that are often not recognized in mainstream society. Couture (1991) describes this knowing in the following.

> Elders as 'knowers' know intimately, directly, and are non-dualistic in their perceptions and understandings… [their consciousness] is unbounded by space and time, all the while remaining in direct consideration of both dimensions of historical time and space. (p. 211)

Elder Bluestone Yellowface has a connection to the knowledge and traditions of the Saulteaux people through oral traditions and spirit. She is connected to the knowledge of the ancestors as well as the knowledge of her people through life experience. Elder Bluestone Yellowface received the custom adoption ceremony from a shaman and it was given to the five First Nations of YTSA. Her knowledge of custom adoption is more than a memory, it

is a responsibility to the ancestors and the people; this makes her an ideal participant in this research.

<u>Data Collection</u>

This study employs a research interview based on narrative inquiry. In keeping with the Elder-learner relationship, an unstructured conversational format is used rather than a formal interview style. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain the attributes of the conversational method.

> Conversation entails listening. The listener's response may constitute a probe into experience that takes the representation of experience far beyond what is possible in an interview. Indeed, there is probing in conversation, in-depth probing, but it is done in a situation of mutual trust, listening, and caring for the experience described by the other. (p. 422)

I met with Elder Bluestone Yellowface at a pre-arranged time and meeting place. There was a sharing of food and tea and a space of unhurried time was created for the sharing of knowledge to occur. The conversation was led by the Elder.

In accordance with cultural protocol, Elder Bluestone Yellowface was presented with tobacco well in advance of the meeting to ask if she would share her knowledge about custom adoption. When the tobacco was presented to the Elder, I told her that I was working on my Master's degree in Social Work and that I would like her to share her knowledge about custom adoption with me so that I could write about it for others. My words were interpreted by the Elder's sister, Cindy Yellowface, to the Elder. Elder Bluestone Yellowface acknowledged the tobacco and said that she would speak with me.

This protocol set our conversation for the interview. The Elder then had time to prepare for out meeting according to her cultural traditions. The interview was video recorded with the permission of the Elder. The duration of the conversation was three hours, which was set by the Elder's teachings.

The second data collection method that was used was a reflective journal. This journal served two closely linked purposes within the methodologies of this work. Within narrative inquiry it served as a field text in which observations and personal anecdotes around the interview and adoption ceremonies were shared. Within the autobiography methodology it served to record personal stories and memories that arose as the researcher listened and thought deeply about the interview with the Elder and participated in the adoption ceremonies.

Narrative inquiry has been described as "a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying… [whereby] the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both [participant and researcher] voices are heard" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 4).

The reflective journal allowed me to participate in the research according to an Indigenous paradigm. As a learner in the Elder-learner relationship, it was my responsibility to listen carefully to the knowledge the Elder shared and to think deeply about the meaning. The reflective journal gave me an avenue to think deeply as well as to share my thoughts on the Elder's teachings with the readers of the research. It also hoped that it will enhance the understanding

of an Indigenous perspective for the readers, which is a main focus of this work since both the Elder and myself are First Nations.

Self-examination, which is an element of the autobiographical method, allows the researcher to consider his/her own biases before interpreting and representing the thoughts of others. This is in keeping with an Indigenous paradigm, but this has not always been accepted in non-Indigenous research. Many researchers now accept that they are not disinterested but are deeply invested in their studies, personally and profoundly (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Autobiographies are organized around particular foci. They can be arranged in chronological order from birth to death or alternatively from death to birth. Less commonly, they can be organized around epiphanies or turning points (Denzin, 1989).

In this research the autobiographical vignettes are organized around important life experiences or nodal moments that explain the researcher's experience of his culture and adoption. These vignettes come from the reflective journal in which he recorded the stories of his memories as the research took place.

It is also within this reflective journal that field notes from the observation of the custom adoption ceremonies were included. A reflective journal is an on going event that can take place during the beginning processes of research such as the proposal writing. A journal is written by individuals to keep,

"ongoing records of practices and reflections of those practices" (Connelly &
Clandinin, 1994, p. 421).

I have also drawn upon journal entries that are incorporated into the text
of the research. This helped to explain who I was as a researcher and what my
role was in the research text. As Clandinin and Connelly (1994) emphasize,
"we must acknowledge the centrality of the researcher's own experience: their
own tellings, livings, relivings, and retellings" (p. 418).

My learning from the Elder's teachings along with my own life
experience informed the research text.

Included in the researcher's journal are entries which describe
observations of three custom adoption ceremonies that occurred in YTSA's
Open Custom Adoption Program. It is useful at this time to provide some
background knowledge in reference to YTSA's Open Custom Adoption
Program.

In 1996, Chiefs and band councils in Alberta announced a moratorium
on the adoption of Native children by non-Natives. In February of 1997 the
Ministry of Child and Family services announced that the Chiefs and councils of
Alberta had to consent to every adoption of a First Nations child. YTSA had
been delivering culturally appropriate child and family services to the five First
Nations it serves since 1987. In 1999 YTSA began an Open Custom Adoption
Program to meet the goals of the community to care for their children on
reserve.

The Open Custom Adoption Program is based on the First Nations traditions of viewing the child as a member of a caring community, not just the sole responsibility of parents. Open custom adoption lets families who have had a child put into foster care take part in deciding who might adopt their child, and to continue playing a role in the child's life. The spirit of openness pervades custom adoption: the biological parents stay in touch with the children, and the children benefit by keeping a connection with their birth family, and thus part of who they are. The community is involved in supporting and affirming the important roles of the biological and adoptive parents and their extended families, as well as reaffirming the culture and identities of the children.

YTSA organizes special ceremonies to finalize and recognize custom adoptions. This brings together Elders, family and community members, and it blends the judicial process with a traditional Cree adoption ceremony. To date, YTSA has hosted three custom adoption ceremonies on the reserves: November 10, 2000 (3 adoptions), May 23, 2002 (6 adoptions), and June 11, 2003 (14 adoptions).

<u>Data Analysis</u>

The video recording of the interview with Elder Bluestone Yellowface was transcribed. The transcripts of the interview were then presented to Elder Bluestone and her sister Cindy. They stated that there were no additional corrections or comments to be made.

The pages were then retyped and each comment was separated by a few spaces. The data was then organized by cutting each comment out separately and placing them in similar theme piles. The comments were placed under the themes of Opening, Epistemology, Protocols, Ceremony, Introducing Elder Bluestone, Reasons for Adoption, Native Children Adopted Out, Identity, Development of Custom Adoption at YTSA, Differences in the Traditional and YTSA Ceremony, and Conclusion. The themes that emerged were more than sections of a conversation on adoption. They spoke of the beliefs behind the Indigenous perspective that led to traditional adoption practices. They also spoke of the cultural ways and protocols that keep these traditions alive. As well, the meaning of sacred, and the power of ceremonies became evident. The identity theme also emerged as important as it was intertwined with adoption. Even though the words of the interview may appear to be simple to the reader who is outside of the culture, they are actually complex and multileveled in dimension.

This research sought to explore this multidimensionality by drawing on the researcher's personal experience of adoption. This personal experience was revealed in a journal and by observing the custom adoption ceremonies.

Anecdotes from the journal and the observations from the ceremony were included in the analysis of the data according to the themes determined from the interview. They were used to exemplify the comments made in the interview and they provided a new generation's experiential insight into custom adoption.

Ethical Considerations

There are two levels of ethics for this research. It was ethically imperative that I ensured the well-being of my participant by carrying out my research in a responsible manner as outlined by the research standards set by the University. It was also imperative that I worked in accordance with cultural protocols. Cultural protocols ensured that the exchange of traditional knowledge that took place was done with a good mind on the part of the Elder and the learner. They maintained ethical standards for the culture.

I obtained written informed consent from the participant (see Appendix B). This consent form explained the nature of the research and its purpose. It also explained that the participant had the right to provide feedback on the results of the study, and that she was free to withdraw consent at any time.

In accordance with cultural protocol, Bluestone Yellowface was presented with tobacco to ask if she would be willing to share her knowledge with me. Before the presentation, I explained the purpose of the work and my intention to share it with others through writing. When the Elder accepted the

tobacco she gave consent and agreed to share her knowledge of custom adoption.

The consent form required by the university is not in keeping with cultural ways. The giving and receiving of tobacco is an ancient way of entering into an agreement, which is respected deeply since it is witnessed by all of creation.

Validity

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that the issue of validity is under development in the narrative research community and that "each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work" (p. 7).

Since validity deals with how research findings match reality (Merriam, 1988), it seems that in order for research to be valid in an Indigenous paradigm, they must match as close as possible the truth of the people. The literature reveals other researchers' (some Indigenous) thoughts about this. These are identified below.

1. The findings must be brought back to the people in order to avoid situations where an entire people have been labeled a certain way on the research of one anthropologist (Te Hennepe, 1993, p. 224). The findings must be validated not only with the participants, but with others in the community who will have to live with those interpretations.

2. The research needs to be based on respect rather than based on power (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 259).

3. Spirit makes it valid. As Urion notes, "The validity of the discourse is the moral authority of the interactants to the interviews, who know that the earth witnessed the things about which they spoke (1990, p.8).

In keeping with the Indigenous paradigm, this research has been validated according to the above criteria. First, the research is in the process of being validated by the participant and the community that will live with the interpretations of the research. The transcripts of the interview were presented to the Elder and her sister so that they could make comments or change any areas that they felt were not presented as they should have been. Also, when the work is complete it will be shared with the Elder and the members of five First Nations through their child welfare agency at a feast given by the researcher.

Second, the research was based on respect rather than power. This research followed cultural protocols and was led by the ways of the Elder. It respected her language and her culture. The researcher followed traditions to make sure that respect was the leading force in this work rather than his need for knowledge.

Finally, is the witness of the earth of the things that were spoken about in the interview. Both the researcher and the Elder are respectful of the knowledge that was shared and they are cognizant that its power is greater than themselves. It is because this research was conducted within the cultural protocols that this validity point has been addressed.

The methodologies employed in this research were chosen from the narrative and autobiographical inquiries because they allowed elements of an Indigenous paradigm for gathering knowledge to emerge. The unstructured conversational format for interviewing respected the Elder's way of sharing information. The inclusion of the researcher's own story gave depth to the Elder's words and created understanding of the Indigenous ways. Ethical considerations and the validity of the work can also be interpreted from an Indigenous perspective under these methodologies, which was in keeping with the objectives of the study.

The next chapter presents results from the data collected in this study.

Chapter 4

Results

There are two issues in the results that the reader should be aware of. First, the journal entries are thoughts from my journal that have been incorporated into the text. They are not direct quotes, but ideas that had surfaced in my journal during the process of the research. Therefore, they will be identified as direct quotes. The second issue involves the wording of the transcripts of the interview with Elder Bluestone. The reader may be confused by the use of the pronouns I and she as they read the interview quotes. The Elder's sister was interpreting and she used both I and she as she spoke to describe the Elder's experience. I wanted to preserve the way the words were spoken, so I have not transposed the text to first person. It is important for the reader to understand that both I and she refer to the experiences of Elder Bluestone in the interview text.

As noted in Chapter 3 results are organized under themes based on the clusters of Opening, Epistemology, Protocols, Ceremony, Introducing Elder Bluestone, Reasons for Adoption, Native Children Adopted Out, Identity, Development of Custom Adoption at YTSA, Differences in the Traditional and YTSA Ceremony, and Conclusion. Data from each theme is presented and discussed below.

Opening

In October 2002, the custom adoption ceremony was given to the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA). A member of the board made a formal request to a community Elder to share her knowledge of the custom adoption ceremony. The request included the transfer of traditional tobacco and an oriflamme (flag) along with four offerings and/or gifts. These offerings included the following:

1. Something alive – animal (e.g. Horse)
2. Something dead – animal – buffalo (meat)
3. Something soft – hide or cloth (e.g. Tent/Tipi/blanket).
4. Something hard – rock item, pipe, etc.

These same protocols were followed in order to honour the Indigenous knowledge and the knowledge keeper who had been asked to share her knowledge in this interview. A formal request was made to the Elder before the interview that was in keeping with the protocols of the traditional knowledge for the custom adoption ceremony. The same four offerings were made by the researcher to the Elder and her helper.

A red rock was presented as a gift and it represented something hard. In the Cree language a rock is named 'mistasinē'. Within Indigenous languages a rock is referred to as being animate. It is considered alive, or possessing a spirit. This animate naming is also represented in the pipe, which is a central part of Indigenous ceremonies. The bowl of the pipe is rock while the stem is made from a tree. Both of these objects are alive and therefore possess spirit.

The pipe or 'ospwā kun' is used for prayer and to carry forth the message to the creator.

Of interest is that the Cree word for book is 'musinahikeŵ ina'. It is translated as something with letters in it and it is considered to be inanimate or dead. The knowledge in books are not considered to hold a spirit and therefore are not valued within the language and culture the same way as spoken words.

The second offering was a blanket which represented something soft. The gift of blankets both traditionally and in contemporary Native society is considered a way of honouring a person. A star blanket is the highest honour that one can receive. Blankets are used for warmth and protection and they symbolize the creation of wealth. In the Cree way, wealth is measured by the creation of children. A rich family is one with lots of children , grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The third offering, something dead, was not given at the time of the request. Instead, I pledged to Elder Bluestone that I would host a feast and at that time I would give her some buffalo meat. A pledge is a Cree custom that is made by an individual in a time of prayer. When the individual asks the spirits for help they make a commitment that they will follow through with. This is an agreement made in the spiritual realm and it is an integral part of Indigenous knowledge (Journal).

Twelve braids of sweetgrass were also presented to Elder Bluestone to represent something alive. My own teachings of sweetgrass involve having a ceremony when the sweetgrass is being picked and prepared for braiding. The

sweetgrass is braided together in three strands symbolizing the integration of the physical, mental, and spiritual. The fourth component, the emotional, is represented in the prayer when the person lights the sweet grass and speaks from their heart. Smudging yourself with sweetgrass is viewed as a spiritual cleansing and it is done at the beginning and the end of the day. Sweetgrass is also used to open and close a ceremony as a way to offer prayer to the Creator (Journal).

In the interview, Elder Bluestone commented on the sacredness of the sweetgrass and its importance in her belief system. She said, "this is sacred [holding the sweetgrass] when you give it, it has the same value as a blanket, that is what gifting is" (Elder Bluestone Interview).

At the beginning of the interview Elder Bluestone began by smudging the offerings I had made to her. She got out a braid of sweetgrass, and she slowly smudged each of the items I had presented. After smudging she said a small prayer. She then took the braids of sweetgrass and, in her language, she admired them and smelled the sweetgrass. Then she took her braid of sweetgrass and looked at me and said that this was her last braid of sweetgrass. She said that when I had given her the twelve braids it reminded her of her uncle and she wanted to tell me a story that is recounted in the following.

> Elder Bluestone's brother had come to her in a dream while she was at her sister's house. He said, 'I come to tell you something. Don't ever leave this [sweetgrass] alone, always use it. I promise you, you'll never run out of it.' He then took one and threw it and she saw it go flying and disappear into her house. When she has one piece of sweetgrass like

that someone will come again and give more to her (Elder Bluestone Interview).

Since I had come and offered twelve braids of sweetgrass to Elder Bluestone, her supply had been replenished just like in her dream.

The offering of the four gifts was a culturally significant part of the interview. It allowed Elder Bluestone to share her knowledge since it followed the protocols of the custom adoption ceremony.

Epistemology

The framework of Indigenous knowledge and its beliefs must be understood in order to put the learnings of this interview into context. The epistemology of Indigenous knowledge recognizes the existence of spirit and the energies that create our thought in the physical and spiritual realm.

When Indigenous Elders speak they first recognize the Creator and know that the Creator will speak through them. The Elders refer to this as the movement or process that creates thought patterns and ways of thinking. This thought process requires an Elder to recognize the spiritual, historical, lived, and future aspect of the topic they will speak on. This blending of thoughts guides the Elder in their thinking and speaking. The spiritual element of being was evident in the interview and spoken about by Elder Bluestone in reference to energies. Elder Bluestone talked of these energies: "She wants to tell us that there is power in everything. We have something; we have a power everywhere. We can use it if we believe about it and know about it (Elder Bluestone Interview).

My Dad taught me that energy exists in our knowledge, speaking, feeling and thinking. He said that when we come into this world we are created from a spark of life and are given a robe. He said that we should think of the human body as a bottle which we fill on a daily basis. As we go through life we need to watch how we fill ourselves spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally. Cree people also believe that we each possess our own fire. This fire is energy and for some this fire burns strong and can be used to gauge our energy level (Journal).

Other aspects of an Indigenous epistemology that were evident in the interview were in the discussion of dreams, storytelling and the spiritual power of language.

Elder Bluestone began her interview by recalling a dream that she wanted to tell me about. The dream about her brother had a message for her about sweetgrass and its importance. She trusts that message and knows that her sweetgrass will always be replenished so that she and others can benefit from it.

Dreams are a way of knowing that reveal our connection to a higher consciousness as discussed in the following:

> Dreams and visions come from a point in consciousness where the private, communal, and spiritual worlds intersect. In an Indigenous paradigm, dreams are not an object of inquiry, but a means of inquiry. They help individuals with personal knowledge, like relationships, with communal knowledge, like the practice of medicine, and with spiritual knowledge and the connection beyond our physical world. (Deslauriers, 1998)

On a spiritual plane, dreams are the communication between the spiritual world and the reality in which we live. Dreams can give guidance about where to find medicines, how ceremonies should be performed, and they can also be an indirect way for spirits to communicate to us individually. From my personal experience, I remember a dream where I was walking along the prairies and the grass was blowing in the wind. I came upon a coulee where I was met by a man wearing buckskin regalia with white hair and braids. He came up to me and grabbed my elbow and guided me into the coulee. He spread his hand out and showed me a lodge, he then pointed to a sweat lodge, and then we moved to a small wooded building where there was a bunch of food. He said "these are all yours, you will learn to use these ceremonies and don't forget to always have a feast. This is the proper way of doing these ceremonies" (Journal). I vividly remember the colours and designs of the lodges from this dream. After this dream, I attended a sweat and talked of my dream. I was told that these ceremonies were given to me and that the man who had come to talk to me would also help to guide me in doing the ceremonies (Journal).

From an Indigenous perspective, dreams are a way of gathering knowledge and a way of communicating with our ancestors so that we can access our traditions.

Story telling tells of another important element of the Indigenous epistemology. Every people has a story of how mankind was created. The Cree people's story of creation is about 'Waschachaka' – a mythical being that

walked the earth. 'Washchachaka' was very lonely, so he created the Cree people from the brown dirt of Mother Earth. Creation stories form the basis of Indigenous beliefs.

In the Indigenous way, the passing of knowledge is done through the story teller. The story teller is the oral historian in the community. He/she is a skilled individual who is able to recall events from the past. The Cree culture is an oral based civilization that uses oral history in order to validate land use, customs, traditions, ceremonies and agreements (Journal).

According to protocol, Elder Bluestone began her talk by sharing a story that demonstrated her humility. I have found that an Elder's story may sometimes seem confusing, and that it may take days, weeks, or years to grasp the meaning of the story. But, as time goes on and I experience more in my life the same story unfolds to reveal deeper meanings. This is the gift of the story teller, to be able to choose the proper story and to tell it in such a way that it keeps on living and its energy is released for the learner years later (Journal).

Story telling is a powerful concept that draws together the planes or realities of dreams, stories, and narrative concepts. Mainstream society may discount story telling as just a story, but among Indigenous populations story telling is the beginning of relationships. Indigenous knowledge uses storytelling as a holistic concept to draw together the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical parts of a person.

My Mosum told me the story of how our family was given the Chicken Dance Ceremony, and I will retell it in the following.

I want to tell you a story. I did not steal this from anyone. It was given to my great grandfather. My great grandfather was out hunting and his family was very hungry and so he went out to hunt. He came upon a small hill and there were lots of prairie chickens standing there. He got on his knees and started to sneak up to the prairie chickens and aimed his gun to shoot. As he was getting ready to shoot, and he was looking through his sight, the prairie chickens suddenly turned into human beings and began to dance. He stayed there for a long time watching them dance. That night he dreamt of what he was to do after having this vision. He was told that this ceremony was given to him to ensure that the community had lots to eat and so they would live a good life. His grandfather was to host this ceremony and invite community people and friends from other reserves to come dance, pray with the pipe, feast, and perform a giveaway (Journal).

Once he was done telling the story he said I could talk about the chicken dance and speak about it. He gave me the rights to tell this story because I had followed the proper protocols and presented tobacco, print (broad cloth), blankets, and gifts to him in the proper way. Story telling teaches, preserves our traditions, records our history and keeps spirit alive.

Another important element of the Indigenous epistemology is language. It includes a spiritual element that is integral to the beliefs of Indigenous peoples. Out of respect for Elder Bluestone and her language, the interview was conducted in her own Saulteaux language so that her thoughts would not be misinterpreted. Elder Bluestone talked in her own language, thereby keeping the spirit of the interview pure. The importance of an Elder speaking in her own language is explained by Lionel Kinunnwa. Elder Kinunnwa was a Lakota Sioux from Oglala. I heard him speak about language and recalled his living words in my journal.

Words of Indigenous languages are exact and do not have two meanings as in English, so they cannot be used in a disrespectful way. Indigenous words also have a spiritual aspect and the sounds made by

the words hold keys to healing. Traditionally minded people are in the 80/20 place when it comes to words, 80% spiritual and 20% physical. Some people's words die right out of the mouth because they have no spirit. You do not have to listen to the dead words of living people, but we are obligated to listen to the living words of dead people (Journal).

Elders speak from a mostly spiritual place, therefore their words contain energy and they are living. Elder Bluestone's words can raise the energy of those who listen and follow them. Preserving her words in her Saulteaux language allowed the living spirit of the words to emerge in the interview. Showing respect for the Saulteaux language is part of the protocol in conducting Indigenous interviews. Cindy Yellowface, a sister to Elder Bluestone, provided the translation during the interview to ensure Elder Bluestone would be comfortable. Cindy's relation to Elder Bluestone, her cultural knowledge, and her bilingual skills served to create an environment where Elder Bluestone could share the concepts put forth in the interview in an Indigenous manner which included spirit. Also, the relationship between Cindy and Bluestone was respected by honouring their language. Indigenous languages are the key to understanding the deep levels of meaning in the Elder's stories.

An Indigenous epistemology is based on seeking balance. Dreams, storytelling and the power of language are all elements of the belief system that help achieve balance. Elders are the connectors to the knowledge that keep us in balance. Elders are like living textbooks and they have the gift of oration. Elders ensure that knowledge is blended with the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical parts of our being and that it is kept alive (Journal).

My father was an Elder, and before he passed away in October 1999, he said to me "I am passing all of what I know to you. I want you to teach my grandchildren the ceremonies, the medicines and the smudges so that that knowledge is kept alive" (Journal).

Elders continually point out the importance of keeping our language, ceremonies, culture, and history alive. The Chiefs and Headmen, who signed treaties across Canada, understood the importance of the Elder's words and they had the ability to think seven generations ahead. Indigenous knowledge incorporates a holistic perspective while at the same time teaching us to live and breathe knowledge each and every day.

Protocols

Protocols are important because they provide the interviewer with an avenue to acquire Indigenous knowledge. They ensure that respect is part of the interview process and they create a relationship between the Elder and the interviewer. In order to access information one must know the proper cultural protocols to follow. Cultural protocols are in place to govern the acceptance or rejection of a learner. The protocols allow the Elder to assess the preparedness of the learner (interviewer). As well, protocols ensure that the person seeking knowledge has asked in a proper respectful manner and that they are in a humble position to receive the knowledge (Journal).

I followed protocols by offering tobacco to Elder Bluestone when I asked her to share her knowledge. In the interview I said, "this is pipe tobacco that my

father taught me to make" (Elder Bluestone interview). I remember when I was given the responsibility of becoming a pipe carrier. After the transferring of the ceremony my Dad said, "come back next week and I'll show you how to make pipe tobacco for your pipe." When I came back I presented a blanket to my Dad. He acknowledged the blanket and then proceeded to instruct me on how to pick the eight ingredients needed to make ceremonial pipe tobacco (Journal).

Elder Bluestone also acknowledged the proper following of protocols when she spoke the following words.

> All this is so important. A lot of people ignore it and they don't really use it or know it. A lot of people don't know it. I know a lot of these things. She listened to her grandmothers. She spent a lot of time with her grandmother cause in those days, when she was young, that's what children did. They worked beside their grandmothers and their grandfathers, while the parents were out making a living and doing the work. The old people had children and they heard these things through a lot of stories. They know a lot of things. But she says, now a days I can't just go and tell these things for a lot of reasons. Some people don't ask. They don't know to come and do this. A lot of people don't know you do this. You have to come and ask her for some information and she will share it with you. That's the only way to do this. Then there's other people who ask but don't do the traditional things. They try to make it easy, but that makes it meaningless when that is done. She says I try to share what I can. I don't know about in your communities, but there are a lot of people in Native communities that don't believe in it and some of them don't like it you know. So she never knows what people, and she doesn't like to infringe her beliefs and ways on anyone. She says a lot of people will talk about people who do things like that ...traditional things. They don't like it because those old ways are tough. They're very, very strict. They have to be disciplined people to live up to some of those traditional things that used to go on. It's a big sacrifice to put up a big feast. Having a feast for something is a sacrifice and in this day and age a lot of people don't have the money. You know, back in those days everyone had adequate food because they went out and got it or they starved you know. In our community she says it's the most important thing you can know to keep these things alive. When these go first, tobacco and that [sweetgrass], it makes it possible and right. She said

because the way he [Darin] did this, things will go right for him. And when it comes to this information, because of how you got it, it will be good for you. (Elder Bluestone Interview)

Elder Bluestone emphasized that since the proper protocols were followed to ask for the knowledge about custom adoption that the research would go well. Protocols are what make ceremonies balanced and powerful.

Ceremony

Ceremonies create balance in the Indigenous way by being performed daily and monthly and by recognizing the seasons of life on Mother Earth. The Cree term for ceremonies is 'sak-ka-hun', the spiritual pole. The ceremonies move in a circle to respect and create the balance of life. Ceremonies also join the living and the spiritual world.

Ceremonies recognize the parties that gather to celebrate and share as a community. In general, they guide life and ensure a good road for living, working and celebrating as a community. They record the events of life from birth through death (Journal).

The data revealed three types of discussion about ceremonies. The first was about aspects of traditional ceremonies, of which there were three. The next section was about the power of ceremony including the loss and gain of power. The final section was about how Elder Bluestone received the custom adoption ceremony.

Aspects of Traditional Ceremonies

Elder Bluestone spoke about the importance of ceremonies during the interview. She described three aspects of traditional ceremony which are sacrifice, the prevalence of ceremony in everyday life and the involvement of the entire community in ceremonies.

Elder Bluestone noted the sacrifice that was part of traditional ceremony in her following words.

> It is hard. The ceremony a long time ago was very long and elaborate. What a man had to offer when he wanted to be the leader of a tribe, he had to bring a house and a buffalo. Kill that buffalo and bring it to the Elder in those days. That was hard in those days and was a sacrifice. He had to bring a shelter or a blanket or a hide and a pipe. A nice pipe which was hard to get in those days. It was hard. That is what ceremony was. (Elder Bluestone interview)

My Dad taught me to give what was very important to me when trying to gain knowledge about the traditional ways. He used to say that it isn't about giving a lot that matters, but rather giving something that is difficult to give, something that is very important to you, something that is a sacrifice (Journal).

A second aspect of traditional ceremonies that Elder Bluestone talked about was that ceremony was part of everyday life and that it marked the events of life. She made this point in the following.

> That's how Indian people should be. There was ceremony for everything. You know there was a ceremony that the families had, the tribe had. Where they took the kids at a certain age group, at a certain time of the year and they would put up a lodge. One ceremony for the little boys, one ceremony for the little girls. They would ask four Elders, male and female. All the families, they would plan for this. They would have offerings: blankets, they would have one of these [cloth], and one of these [braid of sweetgrass] and a feather. Every child was given that, and they walked up to that tepee and the Elders would have them overnight and they would have a ceremony to make them feel important. These children had a reason for being. I guess it would be like an adoption ceremony to validate or confirm that this is my child. This is my

daughter and these are my offerings here. But all those ceremonies are lost, but some of those ceremonies in our community are maintained. One ceremony where little girls become women. There are a few people in our community who will have a feast for the process to prepare the girl for womanhood and they have Elders come and do different teachings. They did things for a day. These were ceremonies that all our young grew up with. There were certain things that happened certain times of the year, when they were a certain age. There were ceremonies when a boy killed his first meat, even if he was a little boy and it was a little rabbit. There's a big elaborate ceremony to ensure he is always a good hunter. And for little girls when they pick berries for the first time. It was an important milestone in a child's life. (Elder Bluestone interview)

Coming of age ceremonies are still found among the people of the five member bands of YTSA as Elder Bluestone describes. As manager of a group home on one of the reserves, I have been involved in arranging a coming of age ceremony for one of the girls in the home. She spent a day and a night with an Elder to learn the teachings of womanhood (Journal).

The third aspect of traditional ceremonies that Elder Bluestone described was the participation of the entire community in all ceremonies. She tells about community involvement in ceremonies in the following passage:

Well all the Elders, they had to keep the tribes strong and to make everyone part of one another. They all shared in the activities and ceremonies so it made the community strong. In those days, way back, it was a community thing. A community ceremony, the whole community participated, and it was done at certain times (Elder Bluestone interview).

In my observations of the custom adoption ceremonies, I was aware that there were many people present from the five communities of YTSA. But, the ceremonies did not include all the members of the communities (Journal).

Power of Ceremony

The power of ceremonies can best be understood in the following

description of the chicken dance ceremony.

> The power of ceremony was recalled by the Elders and my grandfather
> when they described the chicken dance. A man who was quite sick and
> in the hospital was told he was going to die. The doctors could do
> nothing for him. His family knew that the chicken dance was being held,
> so they took him out of hospital. He was carried into the building where
> the ceremony was being held. He put his hand on the centre pole, and
> print (cloth) was presented for him. The Elders came to the pole and
> prayed for him. The pipes were lit and more prayers were said for the
> man. After three or four hours the man got up and walked out of the
> ceremony. My grandfather says this is the power of the chicken dance.
> He says that this is how ceremonies look after us. This is what they can
> do for people when they are done the right way (Journal).

Elder Bluestone who spoke of the power of ceremony in the following

words.

> Ceremonies are very important. They are a very important part of our
> culture and our tribes and in keeping our children. It was something that
> was very important that had been lost. If it hadn't been lost, none of
> those kids would have been apprehended and adopted out and taken
> away. Our people forgot how to take in their nephews and cousins and
> grandchildren into their houses. We lost it. Children were very much a
> part of the societies and tribes. Now, most of our people in the
> communities collect welfare for the children and family loans and they go
> to town leaving the children sitting at home. Some of them have nothing
> to eat. And some leave the teaching to the school. You know that's how
> children are raised now. That's how those old traditions have been
> forgotten. Then we wonder, why did all those children disappear? Why
> are people drinking and leaving our children? Because we've lost the
> power that ceremonies have. We have lost that power because we didn't
> maintain the ceremonies that we were supposed to. It kept our families
> safe (Elder Bluestone interview).

Elder Bluestone spoke about the power of ceremonies and about how

this power kept the community strong and the children in their families and their

communities. She said that the communities have become dysfunctional and the children have been lost and adopted as the people have stopped practicing the ceremonies and have forgotten them.

Elder Bluestone also spoke of hope and how returning to the ceremonies would return the strength back into the community so that no more children would leave. She said that the most important way to return to the ceremonies was through the pipe. She said,

> The first thing, that was the most important, was the pipe. In ceremonies that's always the first thing. So in our ceremonies, we do that. If we try and maintain the ceremony and we try and do what we are supposed to do, it will give us power. See, it's powerful (Elder Bluestone interview).

The discussion of the power in ceremonies turned very positive as the Elder spoke of the changes in government that would occur because of the return to the ceremonies. These hopeful words are evident in the following:

> She said that all this that we do, like [protocols], that's what is going to bring it back. And with the power that's in this ceremony, we will start being able to hang onto those children and keep our children in our community. It will help us. It will give us the power to do more to help our children. She was saying the other day that she sees the law changing. She sees the whole government saying, 'we won't do it [take Native children from their community] anymore, we'll do it for families'. You know that's what legislation is going to do. She said the power these things have will bring it back" (Elder Bluestone interview).

Elder Bluestone also spoke of the future and about teaching the children about the power of ceremonies as a responsibility. This is demonstrated in the following:

> Children were happy, content and felt important. That's what I always tell our young people. It's your responsibility for things like this to survive. To be passed down, to be known and to be used and gained for our

protection and for the protection of children fifty years from now and a thousand years from now. If we try and maintain the ceremony and try and do what we are supposed to do it will give us power. See, it's powerful (Elder Bluestone interview).

<u>Receiving the ceremony</u>

The third section of the discussion on ceremonies centred on how Elder Bluestone received the custom adoption ceremony for YTSA. The story of how the ceremony was brought back is explained in the following:

> Elder Bluestone has always been involved with YTSA child welfare. She is the Elder in her community, the Elder for child welfare. When we need advice, our advisors are Elders and each one of them knows things. We got together to get advice on custom adoption. Well, it started out as custom care and it led to custom adoptions. She got the information on how adoptions were done. She was given that knowledge and she just told us [YTSA]. She got them all together, the Elders, and had a custom care committee. They brought the same Elders and different people from the bands to form this committee and to do the research and work. Then when we were planning the adoption she got the information on how these old ceremonies were done. We would meet and she would tell us what was to be done and we planned around it. We offered her this [points to sweetgrass]. Carolyn [Executive Director YTSA] and I got all the things together and gave it to her (Elder Bluestone interview).

Elder Bluestone is the keeper of the knowledge on custom adoption for her community. When the community became interested in revitalizing the ceremony, they followed the proper protocols and asked Elder Bluestone for that knowledge. She then followed her protocols and received the knowledge. The knowledge about the ceremonial protocols and the ceremony itself were shared with those who asked for the community. The ceremony needed to be received in the proper way so that its power would be intact for the protection of the children (Journal).

The interview revealed three areas in this discussion of ceremony.

First, the aspects found in traditional ceremonies were identified. Then, the power of ceremonies was explained. Finally, the process by which Elder Bluestone received the custom adoption ceremony was shared. The ceremony itself seems to be an integral part of the adoption process for Indigenous people.

Introducing Elder Bluestone

In the traditional way of introduction, the Cree people say *Owee nee ya gia ya?* When translated into English, this literally means 'who are your people'? The person introducing themselves tells who their grandparents are, followed by who their parents are, emphasizing the mother's matrilineal lines. Finally, they introduce themselves. These protocols create the dynamics that are in keeping with the ways of the ceremonies. They strengthen extended family ties, and ensure that ceremonies follow the practices that have been laid out by the "old ones". Bluestone will be introduced according to the terms of these traditional protocols.

Bluestone traces her matrilineal lines through her grandmother, whose name was Tall Woman. She originally came from the smallboy's camp near Nordegg, Alberta. This camp was a break away group who left to live in the mountains of the Kootenay Plains. At the camp, the people lived a traditional lifestyle. Bluestone's mother's name was Mary Louise Yellowface. Bluestone is the oldest in her family. In true First Nations custom, Bluestone spent the majority of her childhood with her grandmother who taught her the traditions of

her people. Bluestone was also a twin, her twin sister Redstone passed away in adolescence. Bluestone eventually married into the O'Chiese First Nation.

As mentioned before, Elder Bluestone is a signatory of Treaty #6. The O'Chiese First Nation signed the Treaty in 1945. Elder Bluestone spent her childhood and adolescence with her grandmother and she did not attend school. The children in her generation were caught between the traditional system and the mainstream system. Her Elders avoided the mainstream life until she was too old to attend school. The Elders did not want the children to go to school because they saw the school as a block that would not allow the children to understand their cultural ties and language. The Elders were afraid that the people's way would be lost. There was an attempt to stop the schooling system, but it was brought into O'Chiese First Nation in 1950. The impact of schooling has been felt by the whole community. As Bluestone states, "Now most of the children don't talk Cree. She [Bluestone] speaks Cree to her grandchildren, they understand, but do not speak Cree. They speak English." (Elder Bluestone interview)

In my adoptive family, the same cultural system existed. My grandmother and grandfather live on a reserve in northeastern Alberta. My grandfather is 90 years old and my grandmother is 86. They have been married for 65 years. My mother is the oldest in her family and I am the oldest grandchild. My adoptive family followed the same cultural patterns as Elder Bluestone's family when I was growing up. As the oldest grandchild, I was given to my grandmother. I lived with my grandparents and my uncles and

aunts. And because my grandmother continued to have children I have an uncle who is the same age as me and another uncle who is a year younger. I considered my uncles as brothers and I spoke only Cree when I lived with them. When I was required to go to school, my parents moved to a small town in southern Alberta and I started grade one. I had forgotten how to speak English and I had a difficult year. What I remember most about my early childhood is the strong bond that I formed with my grandparents and I remember how close I was to them, especially my grandmother. Later in life I met my biological mother, and I talked this meeting over with my grandmother. Her only comment was, "you are my first grandchild and that is the way it is" (Journal).

Elder Bluestone was raised in traditional ways. It was her upbringing that led to her becoming the keeper of the knowledge for the custom adoption ceremony. The teachings she received from her grandparents as a child also gave her the knowledge to retrieve the custom adoption ceremony when she was asked.

Reasons for Adoption

The interview revealed that custom adoption was an integral part of Elder Bluestone's life. She experienced mourning, jural, and fosterage adoption within her life time.

Elder Bluestone identified mourning adoption as one of the reasons for custom adoption. She stated, "one reason for adoption was if someone lost a

loved one. They would adopt someone to take the place of the one they lost. The person was usually the exact same age. They may be total strangers, but they looked like the person, resembled them." (Elder Bluestone interview)

Elder Bluestone's description of mourning adoption agrees with several authors' findings who were cited in the literature review (see Landes 1937; Lizmer 1974; Lowie 1912; McIlwraith 1948; & Radin 1923). Her words also describe the experience of Elder Rowlodge who was quoted in Hilger (1952) as stating, "if I had a son and he died, and in my visit to any tribe. I saw a boy whose features were similar to my son's, I would say, 'he is my son ...' This boy would be of the same age as our dead son" (p. 52).

Elder Bluestone shared her experience of mourning adoption in the interview in the following way:

> In this life she adopted a few people. She lost a son in 1996 and adopted a man, his close friend who resembled him. They met and she took him for her son. And when we lost our brother, this man came and said, 'I'll be your brother.' So we adopted him. I watch her with them [the adopted ones]. They are hers. They are all grown up and they still don't leave her. They have families and relatives from Saskatchewan. They have gone and met their families, but just go say hello and come back home. Another one she adopted is up North. He just wants to comfort her and be a comfort to her so she visits him. (Elder Bluestone interview)

An important aspect of custom adoption is revealed in the Elder's words. She speaks about how her adopted children are free to move between the households of her adoptive home or the homes of their natural families. It would appear that in custom adoption the children are not bound to the titles of a nuclear family, but rather they are able to choose the relationship within the extended family, either adoptive or natural which they feel defines them. In

other words, custom adoption ensures that they will be cared for, but they are free to establish close bonds with the relatives of their own choosing within their adoptive or natural family.

My own family experienced, mourning adoption. My sister passed away when she was sixteen and my parents adopted a girl who resembled her as their daughter. This girl did not live with us, but she is treated as a daughter and a sister within my family (Journal).

Elder Bluestone also spoke of a type of permanent adoption that was identified as a jural adoption in the literature review. She stated that there was an adoption if "the children were orphans and the mother died. The tribe would look for someone to take care of the children" (Elder Bluestone interview).

In the interview the Elder told of how she adopted a newborn and this is recounted in the following:

> Then she had a boy who was given to her. She went to the hospital to learn how to take care of him and he was premature and very small, fourteen ounces. She had to spend some time and learn how to take care of him. He was given to her before he was born by the father and the mother. A few years ago she made a public ceremony for him at a pow wow. She publicly acknowledged the family as members of our family. She didn't have a ceremony before so that is what she decided to do. (Elder Bluestone interview)

This adoption may be an example of cultural belief playing a role in adoption as noted in Lismer (1974). Lismer notes that a couple who has lost a child through miscarriages or early death may give up a newborn for adoption to thwart bad luck. My mother has told me about couples who are fearful about the health of their unborn children so they promise the Creator that they will give their child to another couple if their child is born healthy. This may have

been the reason for Elder Bluestone receiving a premature baby to raise as her own. As well, couples are honoured to have their child raised by an Elder in the traditional ways, so this may also may have been the reason for this particular adoption.

There are many cases of jural adoption within my own extended family. My brother was given to my parents by my mother's sister at birth. There are also seven other cases of jural adoption within my extended family, where the siblings of the parents were given the child to raise. The siblings were in a better situation to raise the children at the time of their birth. These children have remained in the homes they were given to, but the siblings are strong extended family members who are responsible for raising all of the children. My cousins are aware of their birth parents and have a strong bond with all of their aunts and uncles.

My sister was adopted at birth from a family in the community outside of the extended family. She was treated the same as the other members of my family and she knew and acknowledged her natural family. I have never witnessed any tension between natural and adoptive families within my family system. Adoption is a natural process in our family and children were not treated differently because they were adopted (Journal).

Another personal experience of jural adoption is the adoption of my daughter Annika by my wife and I. Annika's natural mother was looking for a First Nations family to adopt her daughter. We did not know her, and she is from a different community than I am, but she still wanted a family that shared

her culture to raise her daughter. She was told about us and she chose our family.

We knew Annika was coming to us even before we were contacted about her, through our dreams. We had been waiting for her to come for three years. We had told our three boys about her and they would often ask when she was coming. When we finally heard about her, it was a natural process. We received her when she was seven days old. She was two months old when we attended her custom adoption ceremony at YTSA and she was given to us by an Elder and Chief. Custom adoption is about spirit and relationship and my wife and I were prepared for our daughter by the Creator in our dreams. We know that she is a gift from the Creator. Adoption is not about possession. We and her natural family have only borrowed her from the Creator. She chose us and we are responsible for giving her love and kindness and teaching her. If we are true in our hearts and our minds then she will choose to have a strong bond with us. We don't earn that bond just because we call ourselves her parents. She is now four. She is truly a gift of patience, kindness, sharing and humour. We all knew she was coming even before she was born, it wasn't a practical or bureaucratic decision. Adoption is about spirit and the heart (Journal).

A final type of adoption identified in the interview is fosterage. Elder Bluestone gave an example of her fostering relationship with her granddaughter when it was stated, "she got a little girl who was brought to her when she was two years old. Her son's daughter. Nobody was looking after her. Then the family brought that little girl to her and she raised that little girl"

(Elder Bluestone interview). Foster adoption by grandparents was noted by

Lismer (1974) and Hilger (1951) in the literature review and their description

agrees with Elder Bluestone's account.

Fosterage adoption is how I came to be part of my family. This story is

recounted from my journal.

> My biological mother knew Margaret and Ivan Keewatin (my adoptive
> parents). One summer when I was about fifteen months of age, my
> mother came to visit the Keewatin's and stayed with them. At the end of
> the summer my mother asked the Keewatin's if they wanted me. They
> agreed and I was left with the Keewatin's, who became my parents,
> when I was eighteen months of age. My parents adopted me through the
> courts shortly after. I did not have a relationship with my biological
> mother as I was growing up (Journal).

This data (i.e., the interview with Elder Bluestone) confirms results

reported in the literature about the reasons for custom adoption. The Elder not

only spoke of the reasons for adoption from her knowledge about custom

adoption, but also provided examples of each type of adoption from her

personal experience.

One point the Elder stressed was the importance of adoption in the

balancing of the individual and the community. Elder Bluestone explained that

she had lost seven children of her own and she said, "that's why whenever an

opportunity arrives, I adopt. They fill those places in my heart" (Elder Bluestone

interview).

Native Children Adopted Out

The sixties scoop became labeled as cultural genocide by First Nations

leaders due to the high number of First Nations children who were adopted out

of the country. Child welfare officials scoffed at this term of cultural genocide until Justice Kimelman (1984), who headed a provincial inquiry into First Nations adoptions and placements, agreed that cultural genocide was occurring in Manitoba.

Elder Bluestone provided many examples of children being adopted out of her community:

> She knows of two families who lost their children. One man, he lost his children and one of them got taken out of the country. They think he is in England. He was adopted and then his adoptive parents left the country. And there is another family and a few children were taken to Australia. In this one family a preacher adopted a whole bunch of Indian kids ... they adopted six kids. One family they came back. Another family with three girls, we just heard from them a few days ago. They want to see if the band people can find some way to bring them back. She said the other one they know, he's over there, but he hasn't found his way back. She knew him when he was a little boy when he was taken away. She says it's very likely that he's coming back. They all come back. Their hearts bring them home. One of the reasons that a lot of those children get lost is because the white people change the child's name and they give them different names. They don't remember their real names. That's why a lot of them get lost because they don't have the same names anymore and they are lost (Elder Bluestone interview).

In my own family, there was an adoption made to Australia. My late uncle had a girlfriend who became pregnant. She carried the baby, but remained hidden in the community. She was taken to Edmonton, Alberta to have the baby due to medical reasons. While there, she gave up the baby girl. This little girl was taken to Australia where she lived her entire life until 1989 when she contacted the Kehewin First Nation and came back home to meet her family. She came home to a large extended family on the maternal and paternal side. She came home to meet her biological mother and her father (my uncle). She had a little boy herself and had always wanted to find out

where she came from. She spoke with a thick Australian accent. A year after

meeting her First Nations family, she died from complications of meningitis

(Journal).

Cindy Yellowface, sister to Elder Bluestone, gave her own example of a

person searching for her identity during the interview. It is recounted in the

following passage:

> About five years ago a young woman walked into our office. She told me that she was looking for child welfare. So I said, 'I guess you can talk to me.' She said, 'I'm a Sunchild band member.' I think she was twenty-two. She told me "When I found out I was a Sunchild band member, I finally was able to save enough money to make my way over here." She said, 'I've come to find my family. Do you know who I am?' I didn't know who she was! I asked her name and her name was totally white. They gave her a different name and didn't tell her what her name was. She couldn't find out so she was asking me and I had no idea. She could only tell me the day she was born. I didn't know her family. She didn't have any information, and her foster parents and adoptive parents didn't have any information. So she left our reserve not knowing anything and she couldn't find out. I told her to contact YTSA and see if they could find out. I never heard from her and that poor girl didn't know who her family was. I tried to look at her and tell which family she was from, but I couldn't. (Elder Bluestone interview)

From the YTSA video, <u>From the Heart</u> comes another story of being

adopted out. Orlando Alexis, whose name was changed to Roberto Autobahn,

came back to the Alexis First Nation to find out who he was. He lived and grew

up in Virginia Beach, Washington. He came to know a life of living in foster

homes and group homes once his adoptive home did not work out. Only after

losing his identification and making a search of his identity, was he informed of

his real name, which was Orlando Alexis. He was told that he not been

registered properly and that if he used the name Roberto Autobahn he would

be deported to where he came from, Canada. Orlando began to create a whole

new identity based on his real name, Orlando Alexis. He took the information he had and began a search. He phoned the Canadian government knowing only that he was adopted and had status as a First Nations person. He was told only that he came from a band in Alberta. He phoned information and obtained a phone number for the Paul First Nation. He called and was told to contact the Alexis First Nation. He immediately phoned Alexis and spoke with the Chief. He found out about his entire family and then waited for his mother to call him for the first time in twenty three years. A few hours later he spoke with his mother for the first time. She said to Orlando, "we tried to look for you, but they (child welfare) said you were doing great and should not be bothered."

Later Orlando flew to Edmonton and meet his large extended family. After this he packed up from Virginia Beach and moved to Alexis First Nation with his wife and a newborn son. He told the Chief that he wanted to raise his son close to family since he had not had the opportunity to be with his natural extended family.

In my own experience, I denied being adopted. The reason I thought that way was because I did not have a need to look for my biological parents. I was adopted into a Cree speaking family who had a strong extended family that was brought together through ceremonies. I felt I did not need to look for my biological family. That changed when I got a phone call from my Dad who wanted me to come home for the weekend from college. I asked why, and he replied "your mom wants to meet you and she's bringing some kids with her."

I drove to my parent's home and met my biological mother for the first time. She had not told anyone that she had me, not even her husband or children. For the first time in my life I was looking into the eyes of people who looked like me. She told me her reason for giving me up was so that I could have a better life. I also found out later that she had contacted my Mom and Dad, asking them to take another son and daughter she had after me. She explained that she wanted to keep the children together. My parents were not able to take the other two babies at the time.

I grew up knowing from the age of 8 that I was adopted and that my parents were not my biological parents. There was no real outside change in my life because both my parents were Native so there were not obvious appearance differences. I had resolved that I didn't need to find my biological parents, but in my mind I developed the notion that I didn't belong. This began a lifelong process of feeling that I didn't belong, a feeling that sat somewhere in the back of my mind. It wasn't that I felt that I did not belong in my adoptive family, but rather that I did not belong anywhere. I have spoken to other adult adoptees who share this feeling of not belonging. It is because we think that our biological parents gave up on us, that we have this sense that we never belong.

At certain points in my life it would surface. Since my family did not live on our reserve we did not really belong in the communities where my Dad worked. As a child, I was considered an outsider. Over the course of my adult life, I found that I always moved, looking for a place to belong where I would

not be told "you're an outsider". Three events occurred in my life that allowed me to remove this feeling and they all related to knowing my biological family. First, when I was twenty one I met my Aunt Dolly from my biological family who showed me pictures of myself when I was a baby. I had not seen a baby picture of myself. I only had pictures of myself at age two or older that my parents had taken. Seeing myself as a baby filled in a missing piece of my past and gave me a sense of belonging in my life.

Next, I went to meet another biological aunt, Aunt Rena. One of the first questions she asked me was if I was still left handed. I told her no, since I had been switched by my Mother because of the Roman Catholic beliefs she had been taught in residential school that made her believe that left handed people worked for the devil. The recognition by my Aunt Rena, of a characteristic that I had been born with, gave me a piece of belonging that I needed to define myself.

Putting all the parts of my childhood together along with everything that I had done as a social worker in the field of child welfare allowed me to take the final step toward finding where I belonged. I went in search of my community. When I was living in Winnipeg I drove to Regina to attend a child welfare meeting. As I was driving home I drove past the turn off to Cowessess First Nation near Broadview, Saskatchewan. I pulled over to the side of the road and wondered if I should stop and look for my biological aunt who lived on the Cowessess First Nation. I drove back to the turn off and drove to the reserve. I saw the Cowessess First Nation sign and continued on. I drove past a school

and the band office. I kept driving until I got to a store and went inside to ask if anyone knew where my aunt lived. The clerk did not know where she lived. I then went to a land entitlement office and gave the name of my aunt and asked if they knew where she lived. The secretary at the desk asked me why. I told her she was my aunt and I wanted to see her. The secretary phoned someone and when she got off the phone she said, "She is my aunt too. Who is your Mom?" I told her my biological mother's name and we discovered we were cousins. Another cousin showed up and introduced himself. He took me over to meet my aunt. After visiting with my aunt, my cousin took me around the reserve and took me to the old homestead where our family lived. After seeing the homestead, I was able to put together the pictures of me as a baby that had this land in the background. I left later on and for the first time felt comfortable and at peace. Before leaving the reserve, I stopped and offered tobacco on the side road near a coulee. I gave thanks that I had come to this land and reconnected with my family and where my feet touched mother earth for the first time. I then felt that I belonged in my life (Journal).

Being adopted out from one's family and community is an experience that shapes people's lives in many different ways. In my social work practice I have crossed paths with many youth who have been adopted out.

I am a practicing social worker who graduated from university in 1983. During my studies I learned that in 1951 the Canadian Association of Social Workers appeared before the House of Commons to plead to the Federal Government for a way to help Native people who were living in abject poverty.

The Association's solution was to request that each province's child welfare legislation be applied to the reserves in that province. This was the beginning of the sixties scoop, where thousands of First Nations children were removed from their communities and taken into care and eventually adopted out to non-Native. I was saddened to find this out. I wanted to become a social worker to help change the system. I was hoping that I would not become part of the systemic racism that existed. In my work as a social worker I have come across numerous cases of Native children being adopted by non-Natives. It is my experience that in adolescence, these youth end up on the street, rejected and thrown out by the very families that adopted them. They are rejected by the same families that had changed their names, and denied their First Nations heritage in hopes of helping them.

I came across my first incident of this while completing my last year of undergraduate studies. I dealt with a case of two adolescent Native males who had been adopted at birth by parents who were both doctors. When the boys became teenagers they began their identity crisis which caused them to rebel. The solution their adoptive parents used was to lock them out of the house. When the boys broke into their own home the parents had them charged. Finally, Alberta Family and Social Services (AFSS) were contacted but they would not do anything to assist the boys. The boys were rebelling because the society they had been brought into would not accept them and their parents only furthered their alienation by preventing them access to their home.

In another case, I met a young girl who was involved with the Alternative Measures Program (AMP). She was caught shop lifting and had been identified by the police as having Native ancestry. As soon as I met her I could see that she was First Nations. She started to tell me her story. She said she was living on the streets and in a youth emergency shelter. She had grown up attending private schools in Australia and her parents were well off. Her family had moved between Canada and Australia. She was supposed to go back to Australia with her parents, but didn't want to and had run away. Her adoptive parents had given her an ultimatum. She was to come to Australia with them or live on the streets. She chose not to go with her adoptive parents. Over the next three months I worked with this young girl and found that she had come from a reserve in Alberta. Her parents eventually came back to Edmonton and found her at the youth emergency shelter. The parents then came to meet with me to "clear the air". The first question they asked was how she had been identified as having Native ancestry. I explained that this was standard procedure for the police service. The adoptive mother continued on with the matter and said that this young girl did not look anything like a Native person and that was one of the reasons they had adopted her. The parents also refused to contact her reserve even though she was entitled to a trust. In the end, the young girl completed the AMP program and returned to her adoptive parents.

The experience of the youth that I worked with seems to be an experience of other Native youth who have been adopted out to non-Native

families, and can be found in the literature. Bagley (1993) conducted a survey of 37 Native youth who had been adopted out to non-Native families and the conclusions are as follows:

> The majority of adoptions of Native children by white parents in our survey (based on random sampling) had experienced difficulties, often profound. It should be added that attempts by some of these white parents to give the child a sense of identity as a Native person were not particularly successful – Native adolescents with profound identity problems were equally divided in our sample between parents who had ignored identity issues, and those who had tried to emphasize Native identity. We draw from these results the conclusion that the extreme marginalization of Native people in Canada means that there is little possibility for a Native child to adapt successfully in a white family. (p.237)

The conclusions of this study reflects with the experiences of the youth that I have worked with. Locust (2000) conducted a study of Native children who were adopted out and determined that, "there are unique factors of Indian children being placed in non-Indian homes, that create damaging effects in the later lives of the children" (p.11). She states that there are a cluster of psychological factors that can be recognized as a syndrome and she names this syndrome the split feathers syndrome. She concludes "The split feathers syndrome appears to be related to a reciprocal-possessive form of belongingness unique to survivors of cultures that have faced annihilation" (Locust 2000, p.11).

The need for belongingness is a strong factor in the cases that I described and others that I have worked on. There seems to be a common theme of coming home. Countless adoptive children begin a search of their roots, especially in their adolescence, but in the case of the First Nations child

there is also a connection to the land and their community. That is a part of

each Native child who has been adopted out.

Identity

During the interview Elder Bluestone spoke of the identity of adopted

children and how they were treated with special regard. This is described in the

following excerpt from the interview.

> What is the Saulteaux word you used for the children? They are called
> Mother Earth's children. How do you say that in Saulteaux? Askiaw
> ....well it's in Cree, Askiawasis. That's what you're supposed to call
> them. They understand Askiawasis. Adoptees a long time ago were the
> Askiawasis. You know it's rude to say go tell it to your mother or father,
> so as soon as they say 'Askiawasis' they know. If someone asked
> regarding a child people would say Askiwask. Then everyone knew the
> connection to family and that a ceremony had been put on to honour
> that child. (Elder Bluestone Interview)

Traditionally the children who had been part of an adoption ceremony

were referred to as "Askiawasis" which meant Mother Earth's children. This title

gave them a special status and positive identity within society.

Adopted children were treated as the parent's own. In Elder Bluestone's

case, she had never legally adopted her children, but the community knew they

were children. In the interview it was stated, "She (Elder Bluestone) never did

any adoption. These are her children, everybody knows they are hers. They're

from different bands, but their home is still where she lives" (Elder Bluestone

interview).

The acceptance of adoptive children in terms of identity was also evident

in my own personal experience. During the interview, I shared my experiences

of adoption with the Elder. And she in turn questioned me regarding my

grandparents, parents and the community I came from.

I told them that my Kokum always told me that I was her first grandchild

and it didn't matter where I was from, I was hers. My Kokum and Mosum

always refer to me as their Noisome (first grandchild). In fact, the whole family

refers to me as Noisome. I have always held a special place within my adoptive

family.

> As a child growing up in this caring extended family, I did not experience
> any issues regarding identity and my family. I did however experience
> identity problems with the society around me. Fortunately, I was able to
> go to my family who had experienced the same issues and get some
> reassurance. We lived in a small town in Alberta where my Dad worked
> hard and I went to school. I knew that I was Native and that we were
> Catholic. The town was dominated by people who practiced the Mormon
> faith. The message that our entire family heard was that we needed to
> be saved by the Mormon faith. We were told that our skin was brown
> due to the fact that Native people had sinned so much and that we were
> marked by our brown skin. I remember in grade five when a Native girl
> came to our school. I was so excited to see someone like me that I tried
> to talk to this girl over and over. She finally looked at me and said "I can't
> talk to you." I replied "Why not?" She said "You're not Mormon." My
> identity issues with society continued, and when I was sixteen I directly
> asked my parents what it meant to be a Native person. The response
> from my parents was that residential school had taught them not learn
> anything about their culture or language. Instead, they were taught that
> a Grade 8 was good enough and that they should work hard and avoid
> their language and ceremonies. I then left home and went to go live with
> my Kokum and Mosum in North Eastern Alberta. It was then that I
> started to learn about ceremonies by driving my Grandmother to
> different meetings. As we drove she spoke and taught me many things
> about life and how Native people lived when she was growing up. This
> strengthened my identity and I was connected more closely to my family
> and my culture. This is when I made a pledge to myself that I would
> adopt a child to share the goodness and kindness that I have lived
> growing up in my extended family (Journal).

The interview revealed that adopted children hold a special place within

Native society. Adoption is part of the balance that is strived for and maintained

within Native communities. The adopted children are seen as gifts from the

Creator and therefore they are not stigmatized.

Development of Custom Adoption at YTSA

The development of the custom adoption program at YTSA was a slow

process and many factors shaped the final program. Elder Bluestone speaks of

the struggle of developing the program in the following passage:

> It just took a long time to get this. We've been working with the child
> welfare people and the five bands since 1987 and it took us this long. I
> think it took us till 97. See that's ten years. Ten years it finally took us
> before we finally got here, until we had this ceremony and had this
> program. It took a long time and we had a lot of planning and a lot of
> working toward it. It's a very important thing we have here that we have
> been given. There's a reason, we have to find this out this way. If it was
> meant to be, we would come upon this knowledge. We come upon this
> information and knowledge in our own way and it keeps our children in
> our communities amongst our own people (Elder Bluestone interview).

The custom adoption program at YTSA was developed using the same

premise as the custom care program which was the foster program at YTSA.

The foster program runs on First Nations principles of caring for children as

described below .

> Custom care is not a new concept in First Nations communities. It is a
> long-standing tradition that involves relations caring for the children of
> their relatives. This arrangement was informal in nature. When children
> required an alternate placement, they were cared for within the extended
> family. All family members participated in caring for these children; it
> was not left to one or two individuals. There are many aspects of a
> custom care program which makes it challenging. It requires strength,
> perseverance, and cooperation by caregivers. The agency must
> advocate for children and caregivers and provide support and guidance.
> Child welfare authorities must be sensitive and flexible. Everyone works
> as a team to encourage child development through family and
> community reunification. (YTSA Custom Care Pamphlet, 1992)

It is this focus of keeping children within their extended family and community that makes the custom adoption program a natural extension of custom care at YTSA.

My own professional practice played a role in the development of the custom adoption program at YTSA. I was a supervisor for a delegated First Nation child welfare agency in northern Alberta when a woman walked into the office with papers in her hand. She was illiterate and she wanted someone to explain the papers to her. She was an excellent Cree speaker and when she was asked about the papers she told the story of how these papers had come into her hands. She had moved to Edmonton and got involved with the wrong crowd. She had three children, an eight month old boy, a five year old girl, and a seven year old boy. She had left the children with a baby sitter and returned home to find them gone. She waited until a child welfare worker showed up at her door and gave her the papers. She did not understand what they meant.

The papers were an application of Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO). Since the mother could not read the papers, she kept them and went home to live with her mother in the community. She now came to the office asking to have a visit with her children and she brought the papers. The court date had been passed on the PGO. I contacted the social worker who was indicated on the papers to try and locate the children. The worker knew that the two older kids were in foster care, but did not know the location of the youngest boy. The social worker agreed to supervised visits for the mother.

The boy's whereabouts soon became known as the local band office received a notice of consultation which was forwarded to the child welfare office. The boy was to be adopted by a family in Calgary and the children's advocate was supporting the adoption. This began a stream of meetings between those wishing to have the child adopted out and those opposing it.

In a meeting of Chief and Council, the decision was made to no longer have any of the community's children adopted out of the community. The Elders and the child welfare committee from the community met with the family that wanted to adopt the boy. They listened to the demands of the family and how they wanted to change the boy's name and have an anonymous gift sent to him on his birthday and Christmas from the band, but how he wouldn't know where the gift came from. They listened to how the family had taken a course at the local friendship centre about Native culture and had read many books about it. I told the family that learning the boy's culture from a course and reading books was like placing the community and their culture behind a glass case in a museum. Then the Elders and the community told the family that they didn't want the boy adopted out of the community. The response from the family and their worker was that they would meet them in court.

At the time I was the co-chair of the directors of First Nations child welfare agencies in Alberta. We had met repeatedly with the assistant deputy minister at the time regarding our concerns about adopting First Nations children out of their communities. We informed the Chiefs of the communities and they met and passed a resolution that no First Nations child was to be

adopted out of their community. This led to the province placing a one year moratorium on the adoption of First Nations children during which time the government was to work with the directors of the First Nations agencies to develop policies to govern the adoption of First Nations children. The directors continued to push the issue with the government during that year, but there was no headway made.

Meanwhile, the band's lawyer and myself went to court to oppose the adoption of the boy using the moratorium as a foothold. The Elders and committee members could not speak on behalf of the boy because the court case was a closed process between the judge and the lawyers. The judge ruled in favour of the family saying that he sided with the Children's Advocate. The Advocate's arguments were that the mother could not parent, and that the child was a permanent ward. The community asked that the child return to the community and that a suitable placement would be found for him, but the judge would not consider it.

The Elders and committee members were very disappointed. I told them that I wrote on the boy's file that they cared and that they had fought for him, but that they couldn't stop the court process. Hopefully, when he is older he will read his file and know that his community cared about him and that they are waiting for him to return.

It was because the moratorium was not successful in keeping First Nations children within their communities that YTSA began to explore custom adoption. At this time YTSA produced the video, From the Heart, which was the

story of Orlando Alexis returning to his community, as described. Those running the agency felt that they could do more to prevent children from being taken from their community so they began to focus on their custom care program. This program seeks to provide foster care to children within their extended families or community.

Custom care was a success and had produced eighty placement resources on reserve. As an extension of custom care, the next step was to create a specialized program for adoption, which would ensure that the children stayed within their communities. Children and youth who had been living in custom care homes for lengthy periods of time would move toward a First Nation's view of permanency planning. YTSA approached Elder Bluestone to serve on the Elder's Advisory Committee for the custom adoption program. YTSA asked Elder Bluestone, in a traditional manner following protocols, if she would share the custom adoption ceremony. Elder Bluestone was then able to receive the adoption ceremony and the rights were given to YTSA to do the ceremony. The rights for the custom adoption ceremony were given to the five member bands of YTSA and their respective child welfare programs.

The custom adoption program was then implemented. The first custom adoption ceremony took place on November 12, 2000 at one of the First Nations. The ceremony began with a pipe ceremony in the morning with the Elders of the advisory committee, the adoptive parents and the three children who were being adopted that day. It was during this first adoption ceremony that we received our daughter Annika. During the pipe ceremony each family

was given broadcloth and specific instructions about what to do with the broadcloth. The broadcloth was to be taken to a Sundance, which is a significant ceremony amongst the Plains Cree. All the families participated in the pipe ceremony.

In the afternoon the building was set up as a court house. It was to represent a Court of Queen's Bench. A judge presided over the adoption along with other invited dignitaries including the Chiefs of the YTC First Nations, the Minister of Children's Services in Alberta and the Assistant Regional Director of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

In this ceremony the three families lined up in front of the judge as he reviewed each application for adoption. He then legalized the adoption and commented on how proud he was to be part of this historic event. He said he was honored to approve the adoptions of First Nations children by First Nations families. He said he was extremely proud of the agency and hoped that there would be more occasions where these types of adoptions would occur. Once the formal Court of Queen's Bench was complete, the children being adopted were taken by the social workers who had completed the home studies of the families. The children were then given to the Elders and Chiefs. In our case, an Elder and a Chief spoke to us and then presented us with our baby daughter Annika. Afterward, a meal was hosted by the agency and a traditional give away was made for all invited guests.

The second adoption occurred on May 29, 2001. This adoption had fifteen children who were under private guardianship applications and who

were waiting to be adopted. The Court of Queen's Bench was not a part of this ceremony, but the adoption applications where heard at the courthouse in Edmonton, Alberta. The ceremonial function of the custom adoption was hosted by YTSA. The families again participated in a pipe ceremony in the morning. Then the children being adopted were presented to the Elders who in turn called the families forward to present their children to them. The event was concluded with a traditional feast and a giveaway.

The third adoption ceremony was on June 22, 2002. This ceremony saw the adoption of seven children, the youngest being 20 months old and the oldest being an adolescent boy. The adoption ceremony followed the same protocols of the other adoption ceremonies, a pipe ceremony in the morning, a Chief and Elder presenting the children to the adoptive parents, and after the ceremonial aspect a feast and give away hosted by YTSA.

Elder Bluestone stressed the importance of the ten year process in establishing the custom adoption program in the following quote from the interview.

> It's a very important thing we have here that we have been given. There's a reason, we have to find this out this way. If it was meant to be, we would come upon this knowledge. We come upon this information and knowledge in our own way and it keeps our children in our communities. amongst our own people. So they aren't taken, taken away by aliens and other people. (Elder Bluestone interview)

She speaks of a belief in a 'reason why' it took the program so long to be established. This is in keeping with an Indigenous epistemology. First she discusses that the information needed to be come upon in an Indigenous way through ceremony. She says that because it did come the proper way,

following protocols, it would ensure that the children are no longer taken by aliens or outsiders. A belief in the spiritual process was important to the development of the program and it is important in its continuation.

Differences Between the Traditional Ceremony and YTSA's Ceremony

When the data was analyzed a common thread became evident. Throughout the interview Elder Bluestone pointed out discrepancies between the traditional custom adoption ceremony and the one that was performed at YTSA. Elder Bluestone stated, "there were things missing in our program that were kind of improvised, like the ceremony itself" (Elder Bluestone interview).

One of the first discrepancies was the depth and length of the ceremony. YTSA's adoption ceremony had been improvised, but Elder Bluestone noted that traditionally, "it was hard, the ceremony, a long time ago it was a very long and elaborate ceremony".

A second difference in the ceremonies, as outlined by Elder Bluestone, was the level of sacrifice that was made to have the ceremony. Elder Bluestone describes the sacrifice that had traditionally taken place in the following.

> He had to bring a horse and a buffalo and bring it to the Elder in those days. That was hard in those days and a sacrifice. He had to bring a shelter or a blanket and a hide and a pipe, a nice pipe which was hard to get in those days. It was hard, that is what the ceremony was. (Elder Bluestone interview)

There were blankets and eagle feathers presented at YTSA's ceremony. Also, a pipe was present, but it had not been brought by the families adopting

the children. There was also a feast, but it had not been killed and prepared by the families. The ceremony was more in line with modern day ceremonies.

Another difference in the ceremonies involved the participation of the community and the timing of the ceremony. Elder Bluestone states, "in those days way back, it was a community thing. A community ceremony, the whole community participated and it was done at only certain times" (Elder Bluestone interview). At the YTSA ceremonies, the Elders of the community bands are invited along with the Chiefs and the child welfare committees. As well, the members of the bands are invited through posters and word of mouth. There were many Elders, Chiefs and members who attended the adoption ceremonies, but not all members of the communities were present. Also, the timing of the ceremonies were set by the staff at YTSA. They were not set according to seasonal protocols as they would have been in the past.

Another discrepancy was the custom of giving gifts to the adoptive mother and her family. Elder Bluestone describes this traditional practice in the following way.

> The whole community would give gifts to the family. Gifts would be brought by all the community members to be given to the family or the mother who adopts the child. (Elder Bluestone interview)

During YTSA's adoption ceremonies there were gifts of eagle feathers and blankets given to the adopted children, but not to the mother or families. YTSA gave the gifts, but other community members did not bring gifts.

The final discrepancy in the ceremonies has to do with naming the adoptive children. Elder Bluestone describes this in the following passage.

At the ceremony there was one thing we missed, all those Elders that were at the ceremony, they probably didn't know, but she knows. They didn't, but, she did go over to that child, touch them on the head, and tell them that now you are Mother Earth's child. That's what the Elders must do to the child. She did it though. She knows it is part of the ceremony." (Elder Bluestone interview)

Since Elder Bluestone received the ceremony she would know that this is part of the protocol. The other Elders will have to be informed of this practice for future ceremonies.

It was important for Elder Bluestone to continue sharing her teachings of the custom adoption ceremony. She saw an opportunity to teach about the traditional ceremony and strengthen the protocols through sharing knowledge in the interview. As the keeper of the knowledge, she indirectly teaches and strengthens the ways of the ceremony knowing that it will be shared with those who are responsible for making it.

Conclusion

There were many insights revealed in the analysis of the interview with Elder Bluestone. The results have been reported according to the following themes: Opening, Epistemology, Protocols, Ceremony, Introducing Elder Bluestone, Reasons for Adoption, Native Children Adopted Out, Identity, Development of Custom Adoption at YTSA, Differences in the Traditional and YTSA Ceremony, and Conclusion.

Opening

Sweetgrass was used to open and close the interview and the custom adoption ceremony. Elder Bluestone taught that sweetgrass is sacred in her

belief system and it is braided together like the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual parts of a person. Sweetgrass is integral to the custom adoption ceremony because it brings the humans in line with the spiritual world and prepares them for the ceremony.

I understand the sacredness of sweetgrass since I have the rights to gather and prepare it. As well, I have been given the rights to use it for opening and closing gatherings.

Epistemology

Elder Bluestone taught me that energy exists in everything. There is energy in our thoughts, feelings, speaking and knowledge. The energy is acknowledged through dreams, storytelling and language, which are avenues for retrieving ancient knowledge such as the custom adoption ceremony.

I have been told by a medicine man that I have a strong energy within me. I work to keep this energy alive by doing ceremonies and speaking good words in the cultural workshops that I offer that bridge the Native and non-Native worldviews.

Protocols

Elder Bluestone also taught that we need to be disciplined people to follow the protocols required by the traditional ways. And most importantly, she taught that ceremonies like the custom adoption ceremony are meaningless when protocols are not done properly.

I feel that this is one of the most important conclusions that can be drawn in this work. From the teachings of my Elders and my own experience I know that following protocols are critical to being able to be connected to the ancestors, the creator and the spiritual world.

Power of Ceremony

Elder Bluestone spoke of three aspects of ceremony that must be remembered and present in the custom adoption ceremony. First, there must be sacrifice by those who are adopting the child. Next, the ceremony must become part of everyday life so that adopted children are given an identity and recognized within their community. Finally, all of the community must come together for the ceremonies so that the Elders can keep the community strong by making the people part of one another.

Another conclusion is that children are kept within their communities by the power of the custom adoption ceremony. Elder Bluestone stressed that this same power can eventually change government policy. She also states that it is the responsibility of the children to learn about the ceremony for future generations.

Elder Bluestone used traditional ways of knowing to retrieve the custom adoption ceremony. It is important to realize that the traditions and the power within them are not lost because they can be retrieved through prayer, dreams, storytelling, protocols and ceremonies.

The teachings about the power of ceremony demonstrate how integral the ceremony is to the adoption process for Indigenous people.

I can understand the power of ceremony as I look back at my life. The power of ceremony is evident in my own adoptive family because I was drawn to them, and the ceremonies that I have learned from them have become my own life's work. I believe the power of ceremonies create families, create new ties, strengthen relationships and heal communities. This conclusion has been the most enlightening for me in this research.

Introducing Elder Bluestone

Elder Bluestone's traditional upbringing prepared her to become the keeper of the knowledge for the custom adoption ceremony. The teachings she received from her grandparents as a child also gave her the knowledge that would allow her to receive the custom adoption ceremony when she was asked.

My experience was similar to Elder Bluestone's. My grandparents took me in and made a special connection with me so that I understood the protocols, the power of ceremonies and the energy that exists in the language and everything around us. It is the people who have had this connection with the Elders who are responsible for carrying on the traditions.

Reasons for Adoption

The life experiences that Elder Bluestone shared demonstrated that traditional custom adoption did and does occur for reasons of mourning, jural and fosterage. Her experiences also revealed that the adopted children were free to move between the households of the adoptive and natural family forming relationships as they chose.

Carriere and Kumpf (2000), in their Report on Custom Adoption confirm that First Nations children who are adopted through custom adoption maintain their relationships with their natural family. They state, "children usually retained knowledge of and access to their birth parents and kin, even when they became a part of the adoptive parents' kinship group" (p. 2).

In my own personal experience, I feel that the reason why I was adopted was so that I would do this research. My life experiences around adoption have led me to adopt a daughter of my own through custom adoption and experience mourning and fosterage adoption through my extended family. I have been given the opportunity to live the traditions of custom adoption and to speak about them through this research and in my life's work.

Native Children Adopted Out

First Nations youth struggle particularly with identity issues during their adolescence. Custom adoption keeps them connected to their communities,

biological families and their roots, which can help to address these identity concerns.

My experience of being adopted into a First Nations family and not having to endure the identity crisis that other First Nations youth do when they are adopted into non-First Nations families is a valuable insight. My adoption story shows me how critical it is to have First Nations children adopted into First Nations families. My adoption strengthened my identity as a First Nations person so that I could help other children who have experienced the adoption process.

Identity

Adopted children hold a special status within their communities when they are part of a custom adoption ceremony. They are Mother Earth's children. I was not part of a custom adoption ceremony as a child, but I held special status within my extended family as the first grandchild.

Development of Custom Adoption at YTSA

A belief in a spiritual process was important to the development of the custom adoption program and it is important to its continuation.

The development of the custom adoption ceremony at YTSA brought Annika into our lives. The birth mother wanted her to go to a First Nations traditional family. The way we live our lives opened the spiritual path for her to come into our family.

Differences in the Traditional and YTSA's Ceremony

Maintaining the custom adoption ceremony is an ongoing process of teaching and learning. It is only for the use of the five member bands of YTC who have been given the rights to conduct the ceremony and who continuously work toward maintaining its protocols.

There is much depth in the words and teachings of Elder Bluestone. And, as explained in the epistemological section, the words will continue to impact the researcher as he gains more life experience.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

It is important to note that the methodologies used in this study (i.e., narrative and autobiographical) have highlighted data that may not have emerged from other methods. The open ended story telling of the Elder gave me, as the researcher, an opportunity to reflect on my life experiences. I was able to add a further dimension to the Elder's words on adoption by recalling my experiences of adoption. I feel that the methodologies have been very meaningful to this research. These conclusions have been determined through the use of these methodologies.

This research sought to answer the question - What is custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective?

It was found that custom adoption has been a part of the traditions of the people of the member bands of Yellowhead Tribal Council (YTC) as long as the Elder and her ancestors could recall.

It was also found that mourning, jural and fosterage adoptions have been part of the custom adoption practices of the YTC band members and that they are still present among the traditions of the people.

The study found that custom adoption takes place between families who know each other and have established a trust. The bonds between the families

are strengthened through the adoption. This is in keeping with the theoretical perspective that supports the "kinship hypothesis" as a motive for custom adoption. This hypothesis holds that custom adoption takes place in order to build bridges among families over which support and resources can flow. There was emotional support for Elder Bluestone's family when a mourning adoption was arranged. Also, Elder Bluestone shared her home and resources with the adoptive children she cared for and they in turn provided support for her in her later years. The strengthening of community ties was evident in this research.

It was found that Elder Bluestone's account of custom adoption and my own personal experience were in keeping with the objectives of YTSA's Open Custom Adoption Program. First, the child is viewed as a member of a caring community and not the sole responsibility of the parents. Next, the parents play a role in deciding who will adopt their children and then they continue to play a role in their children' life. Furthermore, the child and the birth parents maintain contact which ensures that the child is secure in their identity. Finally, the community supports the birth and adoptive parents and their extended families and reaffirms the culture and identities of the children.

The research also confirms that an Indigenous perspective is integral to custom adoption. It is within the framework of an Indigenous worldview that the custom adoption ceremony must be understood. The Indigenous perspective teaches that all things are energy. Custom adoption is based on ceremony and ceremony is energy that can be very powerful. The protocols of the custom adoption ceremony must be learned and followed precisely since that is how

the energy and the power of the ceremony builds. Offerings must be items which contain good energies. The words that are spoken must be of a good mind and come from a place of spirit to hold the energy. Each Elder, community leader and community member must come to the ceremony with a good heart and mind so that the power of the ceremony can transfer to the bond of the adoptive child and their parents and so that the community can be strengthened. The ceremony and its protocols are the strength of custom adoption. Understanding and practicing traditional custom adoption requires an Indigenous perspective. Traditional custom adoption cannot be practiced without ceremony. Children are kept safely within their families and their communities by the power of the custom adoption ceremony.

Recommendations

In Daly and Sobel's (1993) report on adoption in Canada the following was noted about custom adoption.

> In those provinces where there are Native child welfare agencies, there is an increased possibility of Native children being placed in Native homes; and where custom adoptions are part of the fabric of local Native culture, almost all Native children in these communities are placed within Native homes. (p. 105)

It is a recommendation of this study that custom adoption should continue to be practiced by YTSA to keep the children of the member bands within the communities. It is also recommended that the custom adoption program at YTSA be viewed as a model for other First Nations child welfare agencies hoping to establish a custom adoption program in their communities.

It was also established in Daly and Sobel's report that culture is passed on to First Nations children who are adopted through custom adoption. This is evident in the following:

> Whether allowed by law or practiced without legislative authorization, custom adoptions are the primary means by which Native people are able to ensure the continued cultural exposure of their adopted children. Custom adoptions are not a foreign construction of family formation. Issues of ownership and the denial of biological heritage, which are seen by Native groups to be imposed by non-Natives, are avoided through the use of rituals that have been part of Native culture for millennia. (1993, p. 41)

This study recognizes that identity is an issue for First Nations youth who have been adopted out of their community. It is recommended that the practice of custom adoption be continued since it keeps adopted children in contact with their community and preserves their culture, language and knowledge of ceremonies.

Another recommendation that this research supports is that custom adoption is a natural form of permanency planning for First Nations children in long term care. Daly and Sobol (1993) conclude that custom adoption is a positive option for First Nations children, but that regulation is a concern. They state, "There is a need to establish guidelines that respect the cultural institution of custom adoption and provide an acceptable level of protection of children adopted through such procedures" (p. 42)

The custom adoption program at YTSA has regulations and procedures in place to ensure the safety of children. Home studies, child welfare information checks, and criminal record checks are required of prospective adoptive parents. The ceremony also provides protection for the children if it

has been performed properly. It is recommended that the regulations and procedures implemented by YTSA to ensure the safety of children be followed by other custom adoption programs that are established.

Another recommendation involves the rights of the custom adoption ceremony. The ceremony cannot be replicated without following cultural protocols. Communities wishing to initiate a custom adoption program would have to approach their Elders and follow their respective teachings to bring the custom adoption ceremony into practice at the community level. This is in keeping with Carriere and Kumpf's (2000) definition of custom adoption which states that "there is no single meaning of customary adoption since practices are unique to each local community. Further, there are great variations between Aboriginal nations and cultures and, accordingly their customs and practices relating to adoption differ significantly" (p.2).

It is also a recommendation of this study that custom adoption be legally recognized by the province of Alberta as a type of adoption under the Child Welfare Act. A report on custom adoption made by Carriere and Kumpf (2000) recommended a model for Alberta that is based on the Northwest Territories *Aboriginal Custom Adoption Recognition Act.* That Act recognizes customary law and therefore recognizes that an adoption, by custom, has taken place. A Custom Adoption Commissioner is appointed by the communities to help couples complete the process. The process is described in the following passage:

> The adoptive parent or parents simply provide identification papers
> along with a written statement for interested parties that an adoption

took place in accordance with Aboriginal custom. Once the Custom Adoption Commissioner is satisfied that the information provided is complete and in order, a certificate of adoption is forwarded to the supreme Court of the Northwest Territories where it is certified, stamped and filed by the Supreme Court clerk. The adoption is also registered in appropriate vital statistics files. The test that the Commissioner applies is does this adoption comply with the customs of the community. (Carriere & Kumpf, 2000, p.7)

Carriere and Kumpf (2000) suggest that the model for Alberta should follow the N.W.T. act with modifications that relate to consent, Child Welfare Information System (CWIS) and Criminal Record checks.

An alternative framework could see an Elder's Council take the place of the Custom Adoption Commissioner in some communities. This research has shown the importance of the role of an Elder's committee.

Implications

The above recommendations could lead to policy changes at the legislative level in Alberta and eventually across Canada. As recommended above, YTSA would serve as a model for First Nations to develop their own custom adoption program based on their specific traditions and overseen by the Elders of their community. As these programs are being developed, regional tables could be set up across Alberta involving the First Nations in Treaties 6, 7 and 8 along with representatives from the provincial and federal governments. A custom adoption act could be proposed for consideration and reworking at the regional tables that could follow the framework of the Northwest Territories *Aboriginal Custom Adoption Recognition Act*. As recommended above, it could have modifications for consent, CWIS, and

criminal record checks as well as replacing the Custom Adoptions Commissioner with an Elder's Council.

At the regional tables, legislation would be agreed upon by the members. The provincial government would sanction the legislation, the federal government would supply the funding according to their treaty obligations and the community leaders and Elders would provide the context and standard for custom adoption. The custom adoption legislation would be equal to the adoption laws to Alberta. The community would then have a resource for service delivery and also an avenue for long term permanency planning for the children in their care.

A further implication of this legislation is be the impact it would have on provincial social work policy and practice. The provincial child welfare agencies have many First Nations children who are in their care off the reserve. The workers could go to a First Nations child welfare agency that has an established custom adoption program and follow their ceremonies, policies, procedures and the provincial legislation to have the First Nations children in their care adopted by First Nations families who live off reserve. The children would be reconnected to their own community or to a First Nations community. The cost of these adoptions would be covered by the Federal Government. This would reduce the number of First Nations children in care while keeping the children within their own culture.

There are currently repatriation programs funded by the Federal Government in provinces such as Manitoba and these same funds would be

sought for Alberta. The process of custom adoption within communities and the establishment of regional tables to determine legislation would then be shared among all the provinces of Canada giving the First Nations of Canada a voice and the legislation to care for their own children.

An implication of this study is further research of custom adoption from an Indigenous perspective should be conducted. As Jourdain (2002) states, "There is a need to conduct research that explores and examines customary care within a specific cultural context. Research into customary care must be done by persons who understand Aboriginal culture and are able to work in a manner that respects Aboriginal models of knowledge keeping (p.31)

This research utilized methodologies that were sensitive to Indigenous ways of knowing. The research was conducted by a Native person who is knowledgeable about the protocols required to obtain traditional knowledge. Most importantly, the keepers of traditional knowledge were the focus of the research. As Jourdain noted, there is a need for research to be conducted within a cultural context by those who understand the culture and are able to respect the ways of the knowledge keeping. I believe this research succeeds in doing that. I feel that the methods used in this research should serve as a model to obtain and share knowledge of custom adoption from Indigenous people internationally. This knowledge should be shared through an international custom adoption conference so that Indigenous communities around the world could be strengthened by keeping their children within their

communities. A sharing of research and knowledge would also bring strength

to the methods and findings of this research.

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Appendix A

Transactions in Parenthood

Jural Adoption

- full kinship status change: name, even Clan changes from that of first set of parents to second;

- permanency of arrangement is assumed;

- arrangement usually initiated by adoptive family;

- usually occurs between close kin, adoptive parents are usually an older couple with grown children;

- ties with birth family usually maintained;

- creation of an heir for status and property rights can be a major motivator as can the provision of a helper to an older couple;

- strong emotional ties between child and adoptive family;

- usually involves infants or children. In cases of inheritance of names, property, etc., adults adopted; and

- gender can be very important depending upon requirements of adoptive parent, i.e. girls preferred, if new parents want her to eventually increase numbers in a matrilineal; boys preferred, if new family has girls and wants to balance gender numbers in the family, etc.

Fosterage

- kinship status (name, Clan, etc.) does not change from that of birth parents;

- arrangement is temporary in nature but can be transformed into an more jural adoptive one;

- arrangement initiated by adoptive family due to perceived need of kin or at request of birth family;

- almost always occurs between close kin, especially between birth parents and classificatory grandparents or parents;

- usually a child or infant, gender rarely a factor; and

- child or children transferred due to temporary needs of birth families or need of foster family for extra help.

Mourning Adoption

- kinship status (name, Clan, etc.) does not change from that of birth parents but gifts and visits to adoptee common from adoptive family;

- highly personalized, highly emotionally motivated;

- very psychologically effective mourning institution;

- permanency of arrangement assumed for life of adoptive parents;

- initiated by parents of a deceased child or adult;

- the more militaristic societies formalized this type of adoption and integrated it with political adoption;

- often present in groups with important social offices and positions which function best when all roles and status positions are filled; and

- adoptee is usually a young adult, can be a man or a woman but usually a man, adoptee usually was a close friend of deceased or someone with striking physical resemblance to the deceased.

(De Aguayo, 1995)

Appendix B

<u>Consent Letter</u>

Research Project Title: An Indigenous Perspective of Custom Adoption

Researcher(s):   Darin Keewatin

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and references, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

I understand that I will be answering open-ended questions on traditional custom adoption and the interview will be recorded on video. I realize that the gathered information will be used to record the custom adoption practices of the member band of Yellowhead Tribal Council. I understand that this information will be used for thesis research and that it will be shared with a committee at the university and with the child welfare agency of the five member bands of the Yellowhead Tribal Service Agency. I know that I will be given the opportunity to give feedback and that I will receive a copy of the transcript to look over after the interview.

I acknowledge that the interview will be conducted according to traditional protocols. I agree that confidentiality is not a concern when Indigenous knowledge is shared between an Elder and a learner. I understand that the video recording will be kept in a locked file to ensure confidentiality and it will be destroyed when the research is complete.

I understand that I am free to withdraw consent, without reprisal, and to discontinue participation in the study at any time.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. Darin Keewatin

and Supervisor, Brad McKenzie

This research has been approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you many contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat   . A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

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_____   _____
Bluestone Yellowface Signature   Date

_____   _____
Cindy Yellowface Signature   Date
As Bluestone Yellowface does not understand the English
language, I Cindy Yellowface, will and truly interpret the
contents of the interview to the best of my knowledge.

_____   _____
Researcher's Signature   Date