IN THE WORDS OF GRANDMOTHERS: STORIES FROM INDIGENOUS GRANDMOTHERS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES RAISING THEIR GRANDCHILDREN

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Margie Brown, candidate for the degree of Master of Social Work, has presented a thesis titled, *In the Words of Grandmothers: Stories from Indigenous Grandmothers about Their Experiences Raising Their Grandchildren*, in an oral examination held on September 22, 2017. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and gain understanding about how Indigenous grandmothers experience their roles as primary caregivers to their grandchildren. Using qualitative research methodologies (Indigenous Storytelling and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis), six Indigenous grandmothers residing in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan shared their grandmothering stories. Four key themes identified were: Reflecting on the past, It’s not always easy, I love my grandchildren, and What I need. Indigenous grandmothers were willingly taking on the primary caregiver role because of concerns for the well-being of the grandchildren and they did not want to lose them to the child welfare system. This role placed the grandmothers’ own health and well-being at risk and had financial implications. The strain of negotiating with adult children was also difficult on the grandmothers and the grandchildren as their adult children were often struggling with their own addictions and relationship issues. Thus, social workers, and other helping professionals, need to be aware of how colonization has impacted generations of Indigenous families and how these grandmothers are working to end the cycle caused by colonization that has existed for years. However, recognizing that each grandmother’s experience is unique is also key in understanding their needs and providing assistance. There are benefits to all parties when grandmothers take on this primary caregiving role; and they should be respected for this work. Future research in this area may include reviewing the cultural competence of social workers, including increased education about residential schools, the implication of gender roles on this phenomenon, as well as the potential use of two-eyed seeing in social work practice.

Key words: Indigenous, grandmother, grandchildren, storytelling, phenomenology
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Dedication

For the Indigenous grandmothers who take on the role of raising their grandchildren without hesitation.

Thank you to those who supported me throughout this journey.
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... i

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................... ii

Dedication .................................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents ....................................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction ....................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Overview ............................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Purpose of Study .................................................................................................. 4
  1.3 Significance of Study .......................................................................................... 5
  1.4 Location of Self in Research ................................................................................. 5

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review ............................................................................... 10
  2.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 10
  2.2 Definitions of Terminology ................................................................................ 11
  2.3 Traditional Roles of Grandmothers (pre-colonial) .............................................. 12
  2.4 Effects of Colonization and Residential School .................................................. 13
  2.5 Contemporary Grandparents in Canada (statistics) ............................................ 15
  2.6 Contemporary Indigenous Grandmothers/Grandparents ................................. 17
    2.6.1 Maintaining Traditions ................................................................................ 17
  2.7 Key Themes relating to Non-Indigenous Grandparents Raising their Grandchildren
      ................................................................................................................................. 19
    2.7.1 Reasons for Assuming the Role of Caregiver .............................................. 19
    2.7.2 Challenges .................................................................................................... 21
    2.7.3 Losses .......................................................................................................... 23
    2.7.4 Benefits of Caregiving ................................................................................ 24
    2.7.5 Concerns for Grandchildren ....................................................................... 25
    2.7.6 Needs from Agencies and Workers ............................................................... 25
  2.8 Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 26

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology ................................................................................... 28
  3.1 My Research Paradigm ......................................................................................... 28
  3.2 Qualitative Research .......................................................................................... 29
  3.3 Indigenous Storytelling and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis .......... 30
    3.3.1 Indigenous Storytelling ............................................................................... 32
    3.3.2 Phenomenology and Research with Indigenous People ............................ 33
    3.3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis .................................................. 34
    3.3.4 Research Question ...................................................................................... 36
  3.4 Methods .............................................................................................................. 37
    3.4.1 Sample Size ................................................................................................ 37
    3.4.2 Recruitment .................................................................................................. 37
    3.4.3 Participant Consent ..................................................................................... 38
3.4.4 Data Collection .................................................................................................................. 39
3.4.5 Analysis of Data .................................................................................................................. 39
3.5 Trustworthiness and Credibility ............................................................................................ 41
  3.5.1 Reflective Journal .............................................................................................................. 43
  3.5.2 Knowledge Transmission ................................................................................................ 44
3.6 Limitations .............................................................................................................................. 45
3.7 Ethical Considerations .......................................................................................................... 46

CHAPTER FOUR: Themes ............................................................................................................. 48
  4.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 48
  4.2 Context ................................................................................................................................ 48
  4.3 Themes ................................................................................................................................ 49
Figure 1. Key Themes ................................................................................................................... 50
  4.3.1 Reflecting on the past .................................................................................................... 50
    4.3.1.1 Their own grandmothers ......................................................................................... 50
    4.3.1.2 Their own parents .................................................................................................... 51
    4.3.1.3 Residential school ................................................................................................. 52
    4.3.1.4 Their own substance abuse .................................................................................... 55
    4.3.1.5 Adult children substance abuse ............................................................................. 56
    4.3.1.6 Adult children parenting challenges ....................................................................... 57
    4.3.1.7 Grandmother’s own shortcomings ......................................................................... 58
  4.3.2 It’s not always easy ........................................................................................................... 58
    4.3.2.1 Internal feelings ....................................................................................................... 59
    4.3.2.2 Grandmothers’ health ............................................................................................ 59
    4.3.2.3 Grandmother’s well-being ..................................................................................... 60
    4.3.2.4 Silence ................................................................................................................... 61
    4.3.2.5 Finances .................................................................................................................. 61
  4.3.3 I love my Grandchildren ................................................................................................. 62
    4.3.3.1 Well-being of grandchildren .................................................................................. 62
    4.3.3.2 Teaching ................................................................................................................ 63
    4.3.3.3 Traditions ............................................................................................................... 65
    4.3.3.4 Grandchildren diagnosis ....................................................................................... 66
    4.3.3.5 Effects on grandchildren ....................................................................................... 66
  4.3.4 What I need ....................................................................................................................... 68
    4.3.4.1 Best I can do .......................................................................................................... 68
    4.3.4.2 Support .................................................................................................................. 69
    4.3.4.3 Resources ................................................................................................................ 71
  4.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 72

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion .............................................................................................................. 73
  5.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 73
    5.1.1 Reflecting on the Past ................................................................................................ 73
    5.1.2 It’s Not Always Easy .................................................................................................... 77
    5.1.3 I Love my Grandchildren ......................................................................................... 79
    5.1.4 What I need ................................................................................................................ 82
    5.1.5 Summary of Discussion .............................................................................................. 83
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1 Overview

In the past 30 years, research on grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren has become more readily available; however, it is only within the last 20 years that this phenomenon has been studied with any depth in Canada (Fuller-Thomson, 2005a). By 2001, there were 57,000 grandparents in Canada raising their grandchildren in skipped-generation homes where no middle generation parent was present (Ontario Health Promotion, 2005). In 2011, that number increased to 72,000 (Milan, Laflamme, & Wong, 2015). Notably, approximately 27% (19,440) of grandparents in skipped generation homes in 2011 identified as Aboriginal (Milan, Laflamme, & Wong, 2015). Milan, Laflamme, and Wong (2015) note that, based on the “growing diversity of the population in Canada – in conjunction with an aging population, there could be an even greater proportion of shared grandparent-grandchild homes in the future” (p. 11). Given the calls to action by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), understanding how Indigenous grandmothers are involved in this demographic phenomenon is an important area of study.

Within Indigenous communities in Canada, the elder generations play key roles in family life and are often the cultural keepers as well as the transmitters of Indigenous knowledge to the younger generations (Castellano, 2000). Further to this, Indigenous grandparents also assist in raising grandchildren by providing socialization, instruction, and physical care (Castellano, 1989). Community members, including elders and extended family, are involved in the protection of children, especially when parents are not always available or the sole source of guidance (Secretariat to the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Child and Family Services Information, 2002).
The colonization of Canada deeply impacted Indigenous families and the roles of family members in ways that resulted in grandmothers increasing their caregiving roles (Anderson, 2010; Thompson, Cameron, & Fuller-Thompson, 2013). Indigenous children were separated from their families through residential school attendance or child welfare involvement and the parenting process was disrupted (Milloy, 1999; Secretariat to the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Child and Family Services Information, 2002). Through these colonialist policies and practices the roles of the extended family members in Indigenous child-rearing diminished and the nuclear family model prevailed, meaning the traditional ways of teaching grandchildren through language and traditional teachings by grandmothers was purposefully suppressed (Jones, 2009). Yet, grandmothers are experiencing greater pressures to resume these vital leadership roles.

The impacts of colonial practices over the years have meant that Indigenous people often come into contact with evolving social welfare systems including the child welfare system (Milloy, 1999; Secretariat to the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Child and Family Services Information, 2002). The child welfare system has often treated affected children and their families poorly, as social workers struggle to consider the needs of their clients and balance those with the constraints of the systems in which they work, including determining where to place a child who is at risk.

Alongside this, the impacts of colonization have marginalized Indigenous peoples who continue to suffer from related traumas as demonstrated by higher rates of domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse (Tsosie, 2010), and poverty than other Canadians (Jones, 2009). In Canada, Indigenous people (9%) were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous people (4%) to report experiencing spousal violence (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2016) and
approximately 40% of Indigenous adults versus 29% of non-Indigenous adults reported having experienced childhood physical and/or sexual abuse prior to the age of 15 (Burczycka & Conroy, 2017). Approximately 32.7% of Indigenous adults versus 22.5% of non-Indigenous adults in Canada were reported as being heavy drinkers (Kelly-Scott & Smith, 2015). In 2010, Indigenous people had lower median incomes ($20,000) than those of non-Indigenous people ($27,600) (Aboriginal Statistics Program, 2015). Indigenous people also have lower employment rates (62.5%) compared to non-Indigenous people (75.8%) (Aboriginal Statistics Program, 2015).

These issues of abuse and poverty may affect Indigenous parents’ abilities to raise their children on their own and thus Indigenous women (grandmothers) come to take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren (Meadows, Thurston, & Lagendyk, 2009). Clearly, they face long odds in this work, compared to other Canadians.

Grandmothers may take on the role of being a primary caregiver through a kinship care arrangement, which is a widely used living arrangement in Canada whereby a child is cared for by a relative or by someone with whom they have an emotional bond (Gough, 2006). Kinship care can refer to a private arrangement made by families or formal placement resulting from involvement with child welfare authorities (Byers, 2010; Gough, 2006).

The likely possibility of an increase of Indigenous grandmothers in Canada who will take on the role of primary care-giving for their grandchildren, coupled with the dearth of literature on this topic, warrants deeper exploration of this phenomenon. As such, the research question for this study asks: “How do Indigenous grandmothers experience grandmothering when they are raising their grandchildren?” Social workers and other helping professionals will benefit from this knowledge as they gain an understanding of Indigenous grandmothers experiences and learn
more in terms of how to support these grandmothers in their front line work and through policy and program development.

1.2 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is exploratory in nature. The aim of the study is to contribute to the broader public knowledge base regarding Indigenous grandmothers in Canada who are raising their grandchildren, and also to inform and shape policies and programs that could better support these grandmothers. This information is important for Indigenous grandmothers, social workers, and other helping professionals who may have on-going associations with this population.

1.3 Significance of Research for Social Workers

Available literature outlining the experiences of Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren is limited, particularly from a Canadian perspective. The paucity of information about the experience of Indigenous grandmothers in Canada providing primary care for their grandchildren supports the necessity to understand this phenomenon better. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to understand the experience of Indigenous grandmothers, how social workers and other helping professionals can support them in meaningful ways, and whether current social policy adequately supports them in the vital roles they have assumed in their families and communities. The knowledge gained from this research enhances the understanding of the grandmother’s experiences; although participating grandmothers shared some common experiences and history, each is also unique in her circumstances. Further, social workers and other helping professionals should be aware of how colonization has impacted generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and how the participating grandmothers are working to end the cycles of abuse caused by colonization, which have persisted now, for many decades.
This study, therefore, provides important context and will assist in developing policies and programs to support Indigenous grandmothers in their caregiving role and social workers in their personal and professional interactions with grandmothers.

1.4 Location of Self in Research

The idea of facilitating a research project involving Indigenous grandmothers was introduced to me in the fall of 2013. Since then, I have spent considerable time reflecting on two key areas: my ideas about grandmothering and my worldview as a non-Indigenous researcher. Both are important for different reasons: because of how my thoughts and ideas about grandmothering have been shaped through my social location and because of the responsibility that comes with my role as a non-Indigenous researcher working with Indigenous people and how my own social history shapes the methodologies I have chosen.

In order to provide context to these areas it is important that I situate myself (Kovach, 2009). Situating myself, describing where I come from and my worldview, is a key principle in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) and also an Indigenous “method of contextualizing knowledge” (Anderson, 2009, p. 21). I am not an expert on grandmothering, nor am I Indigenous. It is through listening to the stories of the grandmothers, reading about this topic, and understanding who I am in relation to my research question, that frames how this project was undertaken and how I have interpreted the experiences of the grandmothers who participated in my study. It is therefore important for the reader to understand my own experience as it is intricately linked to the outcome of this project.

I was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan in the early 1970s. I am a sixth generation Canadian on my father’s side and third generation on my mother’s. My father was born and raised near Toronto, Ontario and my mother was born and raised in North Vancouver, British
Columbia. Both came from middle class working families and met while attending post-secondary school in Ontario. They settled on the Prairies and this is where we have lived our lives. I have one older brother who is married with children. My father’s parents remained in Ontario and therefore I had little interaction with them. My mother’s dad died when she was a teenager so I never met him. Her mother re-married and I did have semi-regular contact with my grandmother and step-grandfather when I was young. In my teenage years we all lived in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and I was able to engage more with my grandmother (on my mother’s side).

These experiences contributed to my thoughts and beliefs about what it means to be a grandmother. Having grown up without regular early contact with my grandmothers, I saw grandmothers as people who sent birthday and Christmas cards, gave presents, and who visited on occasion. They were not people I regularly learned from or who taught me things or discussed my ancestry, cultural histories, or traditions. My mother’s mother was artistic; knitted, painted, and sewed stuffed animals and dolls. She also baked. In my teenage years I learned a little about painting and baking, though I now wish I had spent more time with her which would have allowed her to share more of her gifts with me. Further to this, I did not have the opportunity to learn a lot about her world view. I know she lived through a depression and a drought. I know that times were not always easy for her. Though she did not have a role in raising me per se, I am certain that she and my mother spoke often about parenting. I watched my grandmother age and was at her side when she died in 1997.

While my grandmother was a part of my life, I was raised by my parents. I do not know what my life would have been like if I had been raised by my grandmother. Would I have appreciated learning from her and all the gifts she could offer me or would I have resented that I
was not with my parents? I will never know. I wonder what that would have been like for her as a grandmother raising a grandchild and how she would have perceived the situation.

I have also watched my mother as a grandmother and the joy she experiences in that role with her grandchildren. She has regular contact with her grandchildren and is an integral part of their lives. She is active with them, both by attending their activities and having them to her home for extended periods. She teaches them lessons and skills and has discussions with them about life. If she was to become a full-time custodial grandmother to them, I question what changes would occur if she was solely responsible for raising them and what would be different and/or the same. I wonder about how her grandchildren would view her if she became their primary caregiver.

Further to this, I became interested in knowing more about Indigenous peoples partly because I have had little exposure to Indigenous peoples as communities and nations, and partly because of my own experience. When I was born, my parents had an Indigenous foster-child, Jennifer, living with them. My parents were approached and asked to care for her as her mother was dying. She needed somewhere to live as she had no other family members to care for her. With good intentions, my parents agreed, in essence, making our family part of the 60s scoop (the removal of Indigenous children from their homes by child welfare authorities to be placed into non-Indigenous homes). I have minimal recollection of Jennifer as I was a newborn and she was adopted into another family soon after. Over the years, she did periodically appear in our lives and I recall that she married young and had two sons of her own. I also remember hearing on the radio one morning, when I was in high school, that she had been murdered by her husband; something I could not fathom. This experience led me on a journey to understand
domestic violence and how one could be killed by their spouse and likely a factor in my career choice.

In my journey to gain more awareness about Indigenous cultures and colonization, albeit mainly through my education, my mother and I attended four days of Truth and Reconciliation Commission meetings in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 2012. The organizers of the Truth and Reconciliation event spoke to those in attendance as bearing witness to the stories of Indigenous people who were forced to attend residential schools and endure the inter-generational impacts that experience has had on Indigenous peoples in Canada. My mom and I reflected on the stories we heard and on our life with our family’s foster-child, Jennifer. We considered what might have happened if my parents had adopted her. We considered whether Jennifer may have experienced the effects of trauma or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder based on some of the behaviours she displayed (lack of problem solving skills, developmental delays, risk taking behaviour). We considered our roles in colonization, decolonization, and the privileges that come with being white. For example, I have never been asked to justify my behaviour in relation to the colour of my skin and do not wake up every day wondering if I will be subjected to racist behaviours or attitudes of others. Attending the Truth and Reconciliation hearings further sparked my interest to understand the experiences of Indigenous peoples, which led me to this project.

Through my discussions with my parents and the opportunities they exposed me to, such as art, culture, and sport, they shaped my thinking about the world and who I have become as a person. Alongside this, my own life experiences, such as my time with Jennifer, have contributed to the development of my worldview. These experiences have also shaped who I am as a researcher and the approaches and methodologies I have employed in this study.
The proceeding chapter provides a review of the current literature on the phenomenon of grandmothers raising their grandchildren. Following that is an overview of the methodologies used in this research and the themes that emerged from it. Lastly, a discussion is provided including implications for social work practice, areas for future research, and my personal reflections about conducting research with Indigenous people.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

To assist in understanding the experience of Indigenous grandmothers who are presently raising their grandchildren, it is important to look at the history of the traditional roles of Indigenous grandmothers. I acknowledge that the role of grandmothers in Indigenous cultures was varied, as there is no single Indigenous group. However, as Norris (2009) notes “the literature is fairly consistent regarding the impact of colonialism, Western-imposed patriarchal systems, and gender inequality in the lives of Aboriginal women, families, and communities” (p. 321). Therefore, the term Indigenous is used broadly in this thesis to capture the experience of the peoples who were colonized and their structural location in settler-colonial society.

This literature review starts with the role of grandmothers pre-colonization, noting that grandmothers were a valued part of the extended family and had an important role in raising children. The effects of colonization and residential schools are reviewed to demonstrate the shifts in family dynamics and the resulting family breakdown that occurred within Indigenous communities, as a result. From there, my literature review turns to current trends in grandparenting in Canada, noting an increase over the years in the numbers of Indigenous grandmothers who are the primary caregivers for their grandchildren. This is followed by an examination of the roles of contemporary Indigenous grandparents, specifically in maintaining traditions. Lastly, themes in the literature relating to grandparenting are outlined and include: reasons for assuming the caregiver role, challenges, losses, benefits of caregiving, concerns for grandchildren, and grandmothers’ specific needs for working constructively with social services agencies and workers. I begin the literature review with definitions of key terminology to provide more context about two specific terms that are used throughout this thesis: Indigenous and grandmother.
2.2 Definitions of Key Terminology

There is no one common term that defines all people who resided in Canada prior to colonization and, thus, multiple terms to describe First Peoples are available. In Canada, the term “Aboriginal” is often used in accordance with section 35.1 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Constitution Act, 1982) wherein “Aboriginal” is defined as “consisting of Indian, Métis, and Inuit people; each of these groups and subgroups have their own unique languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs” (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002). In November 2010, principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007) were endorsed by the Government of Canada, and in May 2016, formal support of the declaration was confirmed (Government of Canada, 2016).

Changes to official terminology in Canada have taken place over recent years and the use of the term “Indigenous” has become more common. Examples include the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, CBC Indigenous, as well as many Canadian universities which have adopted the term for their Indigenous Studies programs, in the ongoing process of indigenizing their pedagogies and programs.

In order to be inclusive of the origins of all grandmothers who participated in this study, and given the diversity of nations with whom they identify as belonging, the term Indigenous was selected for use in this project to name the social location of participants. The term Indigenous aligns with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and was thus selected to reflect “those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived” (United Nations, 2007). For some, this term is unifying as it “crosses borders and recognizes a shared history” (Dehass, 2011, para. 3) of colonization.
In Indigenous cultures, all children, whether they are related or unrelated to someone who is from the elder generation, can be identified as their grandchildren (Gunn-Allen, 1992; Byers, 2010; Meadows, Thurston, & Lagendyk, 2009; Pattel, 2007). As noted by several Indigenous women, “these women who we call grandmother wouldn't always be our ‘blood relatives.’ Some of them wouldn't necessarily even be biological grandmothers. They were nonetheless traditional teachers who had a great impact on all our lives” (“Dedication,” 1989, p. 3). Thus, for this project, the word “grandmother” includes relationships involving both blood ties and kinship ties. Conversely, the term grandchild or grandchildren is used to represent a child in the grandmother’s care who is related by blood or kin. Grandmother is used as a generic collective term, because it is recognized that each grandmother may be called a specific name by her grandchildren, such as grandma, kokum, or mom.

2.3 Traditional Role of Grandmothers (Pre-colonial)

Indigenous Elders, often women, held a role as the keepers and transmitters of both language and culture (Norris, 2009), prior to colonization. They held great influence in their communities and were given the highest respect by their co-community members (Boyer, 2009). They had personal autonomy and the equality of women and men provided a balanced society (The Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1999). Women and men shared social responsibilities and received equal social benefits (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009). Women were recognized as an integral part of a communities’ social well-being (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009) and maintained “a balanced society that respected laws and relationships within the larger order of the universe” (Boyer, 2009, p. 69). Grandmothers held authority and were strong, not giving in or staying silent on issues that impacted the community (Anderson, 2000). Women played a central role in their families as well as in community government and ceremonies. Women were
the centre of the family and were revered for their ability to produce new life (Boyer, 2009).

Women were also charged with the care, socialization, and education of children, ensuring that tradition and culture were passed on (Neegan, 2005; The Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1999; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009). Grandmothers were viewed as mentors and provided teachings to their grandchildren (Anderson, 2000). Their role also included a substantial caregiving component (Mutchler, Baker & Lee, 2007). Families were respected and little family breakdown occurred prior to colonization due to the respect that husbands and wives afforded each other (The Aboriginal Justice Commission, 1999).

2.4 Effects of Colonization and Residential School

The role of Indigenous grandmothers in their communities was altered as a result of colonization (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009). The Western values of the colonizers were based on social structures and gender roles that were alien to Indigenous peoples (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009). Through the formal ways colonizers communicated with Indigenous groups, women were often removed from their traditional roles and responsibilities, pushed out of the ceremonial circle and ultimately “pushed to the margins of their own societies” (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009, p. 16). “The structure, cohesion, and quality of life suffered” (Lafrance & Collins, 2003, p. 106) because of colonization practices. For example, the impact of residential schools was particularly devastating on Indigenous families. While attending residential schools, Indigenous children suffered many forms of abuse and neglect. They were physically, sexually, and emotionally abused, were not allowed to speak their languages, or practice their cultures, and many children died of disease and neglect (Flisfeder, 2010; Petoukhov, 2012; Stanton, 2011).

When these children returned to their communities, they became “adults who were constantly reliving their horrifying experiences in their minds and bodies, and in their social and
interpersonal behaviours, were less able to cope with their parental and social obligations” (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009, p. 20). “Parenting skills diminished as succeeding generations became more and more institutionalized and experienced little nurturing” (Lafrance & Collins, 2003, p. 106).

Wesley-Esquimaux (2009) noted that “over time, relations between people became increasingly dysfunctional. Families and relationships began to fall apart, and children were often psychologically damaged in the aftermath of parental breakups and violence” (p. 20). “The traditional family unit was annihilated” (Boyer, 2009, p. 74) and the role of extended family as a constant support changed. Government employees removed children from their homes, placed them in non-Indigenous families, and adopted them into other families, due to the perceived failure of Indigenous families’ abilities to parent their children. As a result, a further distrust of government employees developed (Blackstock & Trocme, 2005). “There has been a denigration of First Nations women’s roles in contemporary society due to the impact of colonization” (Boyer, 2009, p. 75). A cycle was thus created whereby the trauma of colonization has been passed, in some form, to each successive generation:

Those who spent much of their time in residential schools were deprived of valuable opportunities to experience family life and many reached their adulthood with no clear concept of parenting behaviour or traditional family functioning. The residential school effectively destroyed the intergenerational transmission of family and parenting knowledge and behaviours. Now, one or more generations after the residential school era, many Aboriginal people are ill prepared for the parent role. (Lafrance & Collins, 2003, p. 121)

The destruction of traditional family structures continues to have implications for Indigenous people in contemporary life. Indigenous people, from multiple generations, are now dealing with compound issues including, but not limited to: self-destructive behaviour (substance abuse), poverty, family violence, family break up, loss of parenting skills, health issues, depression, suicide, incarceration, a sense of powerless and inferiority, loss of language, culture
and traditions, unemployment, inadequate housing and education, and distrust of authority (Boyer, 2009; Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2002). Tousignant and Sioui (2009) noted that:

A large number of Canadian Aboriginal communities are experiencing a period of acute crisis due to historical policies whose explicit goals were to annihilate their culture. On the psychological level, many factors have contributed to the diminishing strength of the family and to increase the vulnerability of the children who were socialized in these families during the last two generations. (p. 44)

Despite the injustices that Indigenous peoples have faced and continue to endure, they are also resilient as they heal from the trauma and loss of culture they have experienced because of colonization. Resilience is an ongoing process that may take a long time to build and “the challenge for many communities is to overcome the historical burden of colonization, to repair their social fabric, and to assert pride in their culture” (Tousignant & Sioui, 2009, p. 43).

Indigenous grandmothers have demonstrated resilience by recognizing these injustices and how they have impacted their lives. They are creating resilience in their grandchildren by taking on the role of raising them (Meadows, Thurston, & Lagendyk, 2009).

2.5 Contemporary Grandparents in Canada (statistics)

The phenomenon of grandparents living with their grandchildren has increased in Canada in the past 30 years. In 1986 there were 150,000 grandparents living in a three-generation home which increased to 208,000 grandparents living in three-generation households in 1996 (Che-Alford & Hamm, 1999). In 1996, there were almost 27,000 Canadian grandparents raising grandchildren in skipped generation families (no middle-generation person present); these grandparents were disproportionately female (59%), of First Nations Heritage (17%) and out of the labour force (57%) (Fuller-Thomson, 2005b). As well, Fuller-Thomson’s (2005a) review of 1996 census data revealed that Indigenous Canadians were over-represented among grandparents raising grandchildren in skipped generation households. Currently, Indigenous grandmothers are
carrying a disproportionate burden of responsibility for their grandchildren, which raises
concerns about how this is impacting them (McKenzie, Bourassa, Kubik, Strathy, & McKenna,
2010).

Statistics Canada reported that between 1991 and 2001, there was a 20% increase in
children living with their grandparents in skipped-generation homes (Fuller-Thomson, 2005a).
An increase is again shown in data from the 2011 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS) and
National Household Survey (NHS) pertaining to people aged 45 and older, which indicated that
there were as many as 600,000 grandparents living with their grandchildren and 72,665
grandparents (12%) living in skipped-generation households (Milan, Laflamme, & Wong, 2015).
The reasons for an absent middle-generation parent were varied and in some cases grandparents
“assume a parental role, providing a valuable emotional and/or financial resource for their
grandchildren” (Milan, Laflamme, & Wong, 2015, p. 3).

Regarding Indigenous grandparents, Milan, Laflamme, and Wong (2015) reported that
those who claimed “an Aboriginal identity and reported Traditional Aboriginal Spirituality had
larger proportions of grandparents living with their grandchildren” (p. 1). They further noted
that in comparison to their non-Indigenous counter-parts, more of “the Aboriginal population
was comprised of grandparents in a skipped generation homes (27%) than the non-Aboriginal
population (11%), although this was more predominant for Métis and First Nations (28% each)
than Inuit (18%)” (p. 5).

According to available Canadian Census information (2016 Census information was not
available at the time of writing), Canada’s Indigenous population is growing faster than the non-
Indigenous population, increasing by 20.1% from 2006 to 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2013).
Population projections estimate that between 2011 and 2036 Canada’s Indigenous population
will grow faster than the non-Indigenous population and in 2036 will account for between 4.6% and 6.1% of the Canadian population compared with 4.1% in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2015). Indigenous population increases may be due to higher fertility rates among Indigenous women and changes in self-reported identification as Indigenous during the life course (Statistics Canada, 2015). With an aging population and an increase in Indigenous people “there could be an even greater proportion of shared grandparent – grandchild homes in the future” (Milan, Laflamme, & Wong, 2015, p. 11). As such, working to understand the experiences of Indigenous grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren requires further attention.

2.6 Contemporary Indigenous Grandmothers/Grandparents

The few studies available that focus on Indigenous grandmothers as primary caregivers of their grandchildren are drawn from reviews of literature, census data, and independent research studies that stem mostly from outside of Canada (namely the United States and Australia). These studies often included the experiences of grandparents – not just grandmothers. The lack of comprehensive information regarding the experience of Indigenous grandmothers in Canada providing primary care to their grandchildren demonstrates the great necessity to understand this phenomenon better.

2.6.1 Maintaining traditions. Indigenous grandmothers have held onto values, old traditions, skills, and languages, and see it as their role to pass these on to the next generation (McKenzie, Bourassa, Kubik, Strathy, & McKenna, 2010). Mooradian, Cross, and Stutzky (2007) studied the ecological factors that were related to the experience of American Indigenous grandparents raising grandchildren and found that “participants valued maintenance of traditional culture in their efforts to parent their grandchildren” (p. 81). The role of Elders within the community was confirmed and grandparents operated “from this traditional perspective in their
efforts to care for their grandchildren” (p. 97). It was also determined that while only a few of the grandparents in these studies had attended residential schools or were in foster care placements, the impacts of these experiences were disruptive to their families, and “it is clear that the assimilation policy reverberates through tribal communities from person to person, and generation to generation” (p. 97).

Robbins, Sherman, Holeman, and Wilson (2005) reviewed available literature to explore the role of American Indigenous grandparents and found that while it was similar to the role of other grandparents who were raising their grandchildren, Indigenous grandparents felt a responsibility to pass on Indigenous knowledge through storytelling, and to provide support for their grandchildren’s participation in ceremonies. Grandparents were concerned about passing down values to their grandchildren.

Grandparent decisions were, at times, affected by historical traumas arising from residential school issues and the removal of children from their homes of origin based on settler-colonial prejudice about cultural differences, causing reluctance to seek and access public resources. However, grandparents were willing to do all that they could to care for their grandchildren and keep them out of the child welfare system (Cross, Day, & Byers, 2010).

Thompson, Cameron, and Fuller-Thomson (2013) studied the “motivations and meanings” (p. 57) that Canadian Indigenous grandparents attached to their grandparenting experiences. They identified common links among most respondents that explained why Indigenous grandparents decided to make a commitment to the socialization of their grandchildren. The five links, in sequence, include: cultural disruption, taking stock of the past, re-examining cultural traditions, accepting the grandparent role as opportunity, and the rewards of engagements with grandchildren. They found that grandparents used their own experiences of
cultural disruption to reinvest in the cultural health and well-being of their grandchildren.

“There is evidence that grandparents once held a position of great respect and utility in First Nations culture. However, the assimilationist practices of the past 150 years have left it unclear how First Nations grandparents see themselves and their role in the 21st century” (p. 56). This study begins to address that gap.

2.7 Key Themes relating to Non-Indigenous Grandparents Raising their Grandchildren

Unfortunately, the paucity of information regarding the experience of contemporary Indigenous grandmothers within the available literature requires a broader view of how grandmothers and grandparents who are raising their grandchildren describe their perceptions of the role. The increase in skipped-generation households has been noted in a number of countries including Canada, the United States, and Australia, and therefore, literature from all three countries was reviewed to gain an understanding of grandparents’ experiences. The prominent themes within the literature relating to grandparents who are primary caregivers to their grandchildren include: reasons for assuming the caregiver role, challenges, losses, benefits of caregiving, concerns for grandchildren, and situated needs for agencies and workers.

2.7.1 Reasons for assuming the role of caregiver. In recognizing the increase of skipped generation homes, it is important to look at the possible reasons why grandparents assume the role as primary caregiver for their grandchildren. Some of the identified reasons that grandparents took custody of their grandchildren were: parent’s addictions, HIV/AIDS, divorce, unemployment, (Goodman, Tan, Ernendes, & Silverstein, 2008) incarceration (Poelmann et al., 2008), mental health issues, domestic violence, illness (Backhouse & Graham, 2012), maltreatment, abandonment, or financial difficulties (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). As well, some grandparents who took on a custodial role did so because they did not want to their children
placed in foster homes (Gladstone & Brown, 2007). Cross, Day and Byers (2010) found in their study that the reasons why grandparents assumed custodial care of grandchildren included: substance abuse by parents, abandonment by parents, incarceration of parents, unemployment for parents, teen pregnancy, lack of day care, and a mental or developmental disorder of one or both of the parents. Grandparents also noted that there were cases where the mothers were in school, or children needed care due to the death of their parents, or because of cultural tradition, they did not want their grandchildren to be raised by others (Cross, Day, & Byers, 2010). However, Letiecq, Bailey, and Kurtz (2007) found that American Indigenous grandparents assumed a caregiving role “because of a crisis in the family and a desire to keep grandchildren out of the foster care system, rather than because of the sole desire to impart cultural knowledge, traditions, and tribal language” (p. 349). Overall, taking on the responsibility of full-time caregiving was a result of one of the “8 D’s”: divorce, desertion (neglect), drugs, death, delivery (teenage pregnancy) diseases, detention, and deployment (relocation for employment) (Edwards & Benson, 2010, pp. 56-57).

Gibson (2000) found that the reasons grandmothers assumed a primary caregiving role also included: wanting to maintain a tradition of kinkeeping, a substantial relationship with their grandchildren, a distrust of child welfare systems, they were seen as the only resource, in part owing to a refusal by the other grandparent to step in, and they had a strong connection to their faith. Kinship is an important aspect of caring for children, particularly among Indigenous communities in Canada, as they rely on grandparents to be primary caregivers of children more than any other cultural group in the country (Fuller-Thomson, 2005). The use of kinship care arrangements is on the rise in Canada through private arrangements with family members or through formal placements with involvement from child welfare authorities. Several provinces
prioritize kinship care, a living arrangement in which child welfare authorities place a child in the care of a family member or person of significant interest (Gough, 2006). Kinship care in Indigenous communities is a valued practice that has been passed down from generation to generation, and benefits children as they can maintain family and cultural connections that might otherwise be severed (Gough, 2006). Wright, Hiebert-Murphy, Mirwaldt, and Muswaggon (2005), in their study of kinship care in Manitoba, reported that many of the kinship caregivers indicated that kinship care was linked to their culture and traditions and they took on the role because they too had been raised by kin and wanted to maintain the practice.

Mutchler, Baker, and Lee (2007) reviewed census data and literature pertaining to American Indigenous grandparents, looking specifically at factors associated with grand-parenting. Grandparents were found to prevent foster care placement when they took on a custodial role for their grandchildren in instances when a parent was imprisoned, abandoned their child, or was declared unfit. Likewise, grandparents all took on responsibility in a shared capacity or temporarily when parents were unable to care for their child in their own homes. They determined that the grandparents most likely to take responsibility for parenting their grandchildren were those who identified strongly with their Indigenous backgrounds.

2.7.2 Challenges. In exploring the experiences of grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren, the literature focused on several key themes related to challenges grandmothers faced that include: changes to physical health and mental health, financial concerns, losses they experience, and a lack of support.

Climo, Terry, and Lay (2002) found in their review of the literature that grandparents described disruptions to their lives including “changes in lifestyle, health, and financial circumstances, friendships and social life” (p. 23). Financial difficulties, poor health and lack of
social and family supports led to increased feelings of burden as well as feelings of increased distress (Carr, Hayslip, & Gray, 2012; Silverstein, 2007). In examining the mental health of Indigenous and white grandparents in a rural area of the United States, Letiecq, Bailey, and Kurtz (2007) found that, overall, Indigenous grandparents reported more depressive systems than their European counterparts. Health difficulties identified by custodial grandparents included stress, anxiety and depression (Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002), and the need for support in these areas. Grandmothers who were in conflict with their grandchildren also had poorer health (Goodman, Tan, Erandes, & Silverstein, 2008). Harnett, Dawe, and Russell (2014) also found that grandparents were noted to experience more personal distress in their role as caregiver, which was related to everyday demands and the severity of behavioural problems of their grandchild. However, central to the well-being of grandmothers and their mental health was the closeness of the relationship between grandmother and grandchild (Goodman, 2012).

Standing, Musil, Beckette, and Warner (2007) found that grandparents described having mixed feelings about their new role as a primary caregiver and identified changes to their personal freedom (increase or decrease), finding strength through spirituality, and feeling concerned for their grandchildren. Other grandparents expressed feelings of loss regarding taking on a primary caregiving role (Weber & Waldrop, 2000; more information provided in the next section). Other grandparents commented on having limited energy, challenges negotiating new family structures and roles, as well as concerns for their grandchildren in what they perceived to be toxic social environments (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006).

As noted, financial challenges constituted another theme noted within the literature. Some grandparents found themselves at the life stage of retirement, where their financial income
had changed, which in turn led to increased stress when they were asked to take on a custodial role of their grandchildren (Bailey, Haynes, & Letiecq, 2013).

2.7.3 Losses. Hayslip and Glover (2008) focused their study on grandparents who took on the role as primary caregiver and found that they suffered more losses than grandparents who were not full-time caregivers of their grandchildren. Those losses invoked feelings of sadness, disappointment, grief (Backhouse & Graham, 2012), loneliness and isolation (Hayslip & Glover, 2008), or anger and frustration when trying to access resources (Shakya, Usta, Eisenberg, Weston, & Liles, 2012; Gladstone & Brown, 2007; Gladstone, Brown, Fitzgerald, 2009; Orb & Davey, 2005).

Grandparents also highlighted the stressors of providing sole care for their grandchildren, which included: coping with loss and grief issues in relation to a lack of connection they had with their children, physical health issues and emotional challenges, lack of daycare, lack of finances, court processes, and educational barriers making it difficult to assist their grandchildren (Cross, Day, & Byers, 2010). Hayslip and Kiminski (2005) found that grandparents may be grieving the loss of their children, through death or incarceration, and also coping with secondary losses linked to those such as their grandchildren’s grief over the same losses. Or, they may feel resentment towards their children because of the burden placed on them (Hayslip & Kiminski, 2005).

The time grandparents had to engage in activities meaningful to them was also highlighted. Custodial grandparents reported a loss of “time” whereby they had less time to engage in retirement activities such as volunteering, traveling, or interacting with their social networks (Edwards & Benson, 2010), which caused further isolation.
2.7.4 Benefits of caregiving. Conversely, positive feelings can also emerge from taking on a primary grandparenting role (Backhouse & Graham, 2012) including feelings such as love, satisfaction, pride, joy, and feeling needed and youthful (Williamson, Softas-Nall, & Miller, 2003). Grandmothers appreciated the time that they had with their grandchildren as well as being able to teach them values and skills (Standing, Musil, Beckette, & Warner, 2007).

For some, grandparenting full-time enhanced their sense of purpose in life and many indicated that they would make the same decision to grandparent full-time again if they were provided the opportunity (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). For others, this experience provided a second chance to parent and improve on their parenting skills as well as the opportunity to serve as role models for their grandchildren (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). In addition, a benefit of taking on a primary caregiving role was that grandchildren were kept out of the foster care system and within the family (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005), thereby increasing cultural connections and reducing chaotic life pathways.

Thompson, Cameron and Fuller-Thompson (2013) interviewed Canadian Indigenous custodial grandparents and found these grandparents “leveraged their own experiences of cultural disruption to reinvest in the cultural health and well-being of their grandchildren (p. 55); “they identified benefits of rejuvenating traditions and grandparent involvement including cultural healing and joy” (p. 55). For the grandparents in their study, cultural disruption, “an event that separates one from the moorings of culture” (p. 61), specifically residential school policy, shaped their beliefs about the need to protect Indigenous “identity at the level of family” (p. 61). The grandparents had also “taken stock of the significant influences in their lives” (p. 62) and considered two key issues around their ambivalence towards Christianity and their position on alcohol. Alcoholism impacted generations of their families and they feared their
grandchildren may also become alcoholics. Grandparents expressed that they had re-examined the cultural traditions they had learned from their own grandparents and “that they learned important values and principles from the grandparents that would sustain them through life” (p. 62). Accepting the role as a primary caregiver was an opportunity for some to have a second chance and “right past wrongs” (p. 66). Several indicated that there were rewards in taking on the role that included having time with their grandchildren, feelings of joy, being proud of their grandchildren’s achievements, and satisfaction that their grandchildren would take pride in their Indigenous identities. These areas all influenced the decisions of the grandparents to take on a caregiving role.

2.7.5 Concerns for grandchildren. Within the literature, grandparents who were primary caregivers have described the different concerns they have for their grandchildren. For instance, grandparents who are raising their grandchildren worry about their grandchildren’s well-being (drug use, violence, sexual behaviour) (Brown et al., 2000) and their futures (Shakya, Usta, Eisenberg, Weston, & Liles, 2012; Orb & Davey, 2005) and want to ensure that they receive a good education (Backhouse & Graham, 2012).

2.7.6 Needs from agencies and workers. Valentine, Jenkins, Bennane, and Cass (2013) found that the Australian grandparents they interviewed needed information from workers about payments, benefits from government agencies, as well as information on parenting, respite and legal services. They also needed information regarding counselling and health services for their grandchildren (Valentine, Jenkins, Bennane, & Cass, 2013). Grandparent caregivers have been known to require the need for treatment services, but have more difficulty accessing them particularly if they are not involved with service providers (Harnett, Dawe, & Russell, 2014).
Negotiating service delivery systems (child welfare, education, legal) presents its own set of challenges for grandparents. Grandmothers may require the assistance of school social workers if grandchildren have learning or behaviour challenges (Franklin, 2000). Developing positive relationships with social workers was seen as necessary when assisting grandparents in their role as primary caregiver because the social worker acted as a resource for grandparents by providing information, support, and advice (Gladstone & Brown, 2007). Grandparents faced a number of tensions in their role, including “feeling responsible for grandchildren; having limited financial resources; feelings toward the middle generation; and relationship with the child welfare agency” (Gladstone & Brown, 2007, p. 55). Therefore, social workers need to be mindful of their role and rigorous in examining their use of social power in engaging grandparents’ needs.

Understanding the legal system and grandparents’ rights was another need that was identified among Australian and New Zealand grandparents (Frow, 2010; Worral, 2009). Grandparents faced costly legal challenges navigating the legal system. Attending court placed a burden on grandparents, thus requiring support, advocacy and financial services from service providers (Frow, 2010; Worral, 2009). Grandparents often needed clear, detailed, written information from service providers about entitlements and levels of support (Pitcher, 2002). Along with these needs, some grandmothers benefitted from parenting education to assist with their new parenting role (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006).

2.8 Conclusion

Grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren is an area that has received attention from the academic community examining a variety of issues impacting Indigenous and other communities, from different perspectives. Themes found within the literature include the
reasons grandmothers assume the role of caregiver, challenges the grandmothers face, losses experienced by grandmothers when they take on a primary caregiving role, the benefits grandmothers receive when they are primary caregivers, the concerns grandmothers have for their grandchildren, and what they need from the agencies and workers that they engage with.

What is lacking is documentation about the specific experiences of Indigenous grandmothers in Canada in a primary care-giving role. Consideration of the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the impact of colonization as underpinnings for present day circumstances cannot be overlooked in determining why Indigenous grandmothers take on a role as primary caregiver for their grandchildren and how they experience that role.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 My research paradigm

My research paradigm for this project is shaped by my worldview. In reflecting on my worldview, I believe there are multiple ways of knowing, that reality is constructed, subjective, and can be interpreted in more than one way. As such, my ontological view emphasizes the subjective, whereby the “nature of reality is socially constructed and the purpose of research is to reflect understanding” (Willis, 2007, p. 95). The meanings of a phenomenon are created by people as they happen and reality is therefore constructed and influenced by people.

In considering my epistemological position, I place myself within a social constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. From this perspective “the core of understanding is learning what people make of the world around them, how people interpret what they encounter, and how they assign meanings and values to events or objects” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 19). Further to this, Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that interpretivists “understand that people look at matters through distinct lenses and reach somewhat different conclusions” (p. 19); in this view, multiple versions of the same event or object can all be true at the same time. “Research is thus a social constructed activity, and the ‘reality’ it tells us about therefore is also socially constructed” (Willis, 2007, p. 96).

As Creswell (2013) aptly notes, “all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in the study” (p. 20). This led to me reflect on being a non-Indigenous researcher with a worldview based in Western ideas and how those values and beliefs guided me throughout this project with Indigenous participants. I have had little exposure to people from other cultures, including those with an Indigenous background, as the areas that I have lived in were predominately non-Indigenous. It is only since attending post-secondary
schools that I started to learn more about other cultures and meet people different than myself. I am open to learning about people from cultures other than my own, including their unique ways of knowing. For instance, Indigenous cultures’ ways of knowing are based in oral tradition, are experiential, and holistic (Castellano, 2000) whereas Western ways of knowing are “scientific,” rational, and linear (Aikenhead & Ogawa, 2007). I recognize that I was raised with Western values and they shape how I conduct research.

Ermine (2007) speaks to creating an ethical space which is an “analogy of a space between two entities, as a space between the Indigenous and Western thought worlds” with each being based in “a district history, knowledge tradition, philosophy, and social and political reality” (p. 194). It involves creating a neutral space for dialogue where participants are equal and engaged in a cooperative manner. “Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, and the unknown” (Ermine, 1995, p. 108). Accordingly, Indigenous participants need a space to share their truths based on their own knowledge and it was not for me to discount their truths about their experiences in my interpretations of the stories they shared. In conducting research with Indigenous grandmothers, this remained at the forefront of my thoughts: how do I honour their ways of knowing when they are different than mine and how do I not impose my worldview?

3.2 Qualitative Research

The research question for this study asks “How do Indigenous grandmothers experience grandmothering when they are raising their grandchildren?” In order to answer the research question and considering my own research paradigm, qualitative research is a good fit. Qualitative research relies on “naturalistic verbal reports” (Smith, 2006, p. 2) with analysis conducted on transcribed texts. It is therefore concerned with interpreting text and assigning
meanings to the texts (Smith, 2006). Qualitative research is often used when the exploration of an issue is needed and the purpose is to understand an issue (Creswell, 2013). “We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants of a study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48).

I chose not to view this research through a theoretical lens such as feminist or critical race theory (Creswell, 2013) as I wanted the meanings from the stories to emerge in their own right without forcing them into pre-constructed western frameworks such as gender or race. This does not mean that I did not consider gender and race as the stories of the grandmothers were analyzed and themes developed; it would be difficult not to, given the participants were Indigenous women, but rather that these lenses would not overshadow the meanings in their stories. Incorporating a theoretical lens into this research feels counter-intuitive to Indigenous research methodologies because of the need to remain open to hear what is being said (Thomas, 2005). Adding a theoretical lens shifts the listener into a different frame of reference whereby meanings of the stories could be overlooked or altered.

3.3 Indigenous Storytelling and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Considerable thought went into selecting the methodologies for this research as the chosen approach would need to be able to answer the research question, “How do Indigenous grandmothers experience grandmothering when they are raising their grandchildren?” and to honour the worldviews of the Indigenous grandmothers participating in the project. Kovach (2009) suggests that when conducting research with Indigenous people, selecting an Indigenous methodology is most appropriate. Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) speaks of the need to use decolonizing methodologies which are less concerned with actual methods but “much more with the context in
which research problems are conceptualized and designed and with the implications of research for its participants and their communities” (p. ix). Similarly, Wilson (2001) suggests that using an Indigenous methodology implies talking about relational accountability, meaning that the researcher is fulfilling his or her relationship with the world around him or her. In considering this position, I recognize that my knowledge system and worldview is different from those of Indigenous peoples, which has caused me to consider how to work from different paradigms while maintaining respect for the participants and myself. Likewise, I wondered how the grandmothers would respond to the methods used. Due to the historical trauma caused by colonization and the mistrust Indigenous peoples may have for research and researchers, (Brunette, Sanders, Butcher, & Salios, 2011) incorporating Indigenous methodologies into research was important (Tuhiway-Smith, 2012).

A ‘two-eyed seeing’ approach to research (Iwama, Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2009) draws on the strengths of Western and Indigenous knowledges. This approach allows researchers “to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together” (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012, p. 335). It is “intended to bridge the divide of power and understanding between Indigenous and Western researcher and processes” (Hall, Dell, Fornssler, Hopkins, & Mushquash, 2015, p. 5) and “aligns with a decolonizing and Indigenous research methodologies” (p. 5). Thus, I chose to use ‘two-eyed seeing’ as a guiding principle, and combined two qualitative approaches (Kovach, 2009); Indigenous Storytelling (Thomas, 2005) for data collection and Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) for data analysis. To gather information for analysis, Indigenous Storytelling was employed, whereby each participant shared, using her own words, how she
made sense of her experience as a grandmother raising her grandchildren. “The aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborne, 2006, p. 51) and IPA studies focus on the meanings that particular experiences and events hold for the participants.

3.3.1 Indigenous storytelling. Storytelling, as a research methodology, “is not about studying that which the researcher deems important, but being open to hear what the storytellers deem as important about their experience” (Thomas, 2005, p. 245). Indigenous storytelling is a means of “gathering knowledge based on oral storytelling and tradition concurrent with an Indigenous paradigm” (Kovach, 2010, p. 40) and allows those sharing the story to do so on their own terms (Thomas, 2005). Thomas (2005) indicated that Indigenous people traditionally came for an oral society and using storytelling in research honours that tradition. These stories can tell a counter-story to what is documented in the history of Indigenous people in Canada, thereby offering a form of resistance to colonialism, which provides an opportunity to create new insights. Documenting stories was uncommon in traditional Indigenous cultures, though it has become more common practice as times change (Thomas, 2005) and the former ways of passing knowledge have deteriorated (Knight, 2001). Knight (2001) notes that documenting stories, therefore, preserves knowledge, though its limitations must be recognized and honoured. As well, documenting stories needs to support the oral tradition by preserving what could become lost, while honouring Indigenous prohibitions about keeping sacred knowledge sacred.

The “foundation of research through the oral tradition is respect” (Knight, 2001, p. 25) and when we listen to the stories of others, we are bearing witness, which is an enormous responsibility as the listener is required to remember details of what is said (Thomas, 2005). That said, “stories have many layers of meaning, giving the listener the responsibility to listen, reflect and then
interpret the message” (MacLean & Wason-Ellam, 2006, p. 9). Storytelling “creates space for the ‘other’ or those voices that have been excluded or erased, to be included in the dominant discourse” (Thomas, 2005, p. 244), providing “an opportunity for [Indigenous peoples] to have their histories documented and included in the written record” (p. 244) which can also “revise history by naming and including their experience” (p. 244). We respect and honour storytellers by listening with open hearts and minds while also detailing their realities (Thomas 2005). Although I am not an Indigenous person, the concepts of creating space, sharing respect, and listening with an open heart are principles I believe in and therefore Indigenous storytelling fits within my worldview and research paradigm.

“Storytelling has a holistic nature, as how the story is told is up to the storytellers – they will tell the story the way they want. Storytellers may opt to share their culture and tradition (spiritual), how events made them feel (emotional), what things looked like, or they physically felt (physical) or how this affected their ways of knowing and being (mental)” (Thomas, 2005, p. 245). Storytelling gives the storyteller the opportunity to share what they choose in their stories; that which they perceive as important and that which they want to be documented (Thomas, 2005). As such, the person telling the story maintains control of their story in this methodology and “the “researcher” becomes the listener or facilitator” (Thomas, 2005, p. 245). There are many possibilities that can come out of storytelling and it is important that the researcher let the stories unfold naturally without attempting to set the direction the story will take (Thomas, 2005).

### 3.3.2 Phenomenology and research with Indigenous people.

Struthers and Peden-McAlpine (2005) suggest that when conducting research with Indigenous people there is “a seamless link between phenomenology and the Indigenous oral tradition” (p. 1264) and that “it is
compatible with studying Indigenous peoples, because it captures oral history in a holistic and culturally acceptable way” (p. 1264). Phenomenology “makes use of experience that is in context, which further safeguards information from being distorted” (Brunette, Sanders, Butcher, & Salios, 2011, p. 280). It focuses on lived experience which is consistent with Indigenous methodologies, and the information gathered through dialogue is also consistent with Indigenous traditions in developing understanding of how we are in the world (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). Baskin (2006) suggests that one’s knowledge is based in culture. Culture is present in phenomenological research as we seek to find meanings within specific environments and these meanings are therefore culturally constructed (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). Interpretative phenomenology allows for interpretation through analysis which follows a circular pattern and is also consistent with an Indigenous worldview (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). A number of research studies with Indigenous communities have used phenomenology as the methodology. For instance, Brunette, Sanders, Butcher, and Salios (2011) studied the lived experiences of researchers working in Indigenous communities; Hagen, Kalishuk, Currie, Solowoniuk, and Nixon (2013) looked at Indigenous women’s experiences of trauma and problem gambling; and, MacIver’s (2012) study considered Aboriginal students’ perspectives on the factors influencing high school completion.

3.3.3 Interpretative phenomenological analysis. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) provides a strong foundation for researchers in terms of describing its origins, methods, and process of data gathering and analysis. IPA examines “how people make sense of their major life experiences” and “is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). It allows researchers to focus on the significance of day-to-day experiences that happen in people’s lives;
especially when something they consider to be important has occurred. People generally live
day-to-day life going through the course of their days fairly unselfconsciously. But, when they
become consciously aware of a defining experience, they can reflect on what the experience is
really like for them; the emotions, memories, and thoughts they carry regarding the experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis “shares the view that human beings are sense-
making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their
attempts to make sense of their experiences” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). IPA also
recognizes that access to experience is always dependent on what participants tell us about that
experience, and that the researcher then needs to interpret that account from the participant in
order to understand their experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). As Thomas (2005)
notes, “all that is written and researched is someone’s interpretation of what happened” (p. 243).
The IPA “researcher is engaged in a double-hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make
sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers, &
Larkin, 2009, p. 3). Unlike other forms of phenomenology, such as Transcendental
Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), IPA does not focus on finding the “essence” of an
phenomenon but instead “has a more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular
experiences as experienced by particular people” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 16).
Therefore, there is no need to develop a single statement or “essence” that captures the
phenomenon. As well, the concept of “bracketing” is viewed differently in IPA. In
Transcendental Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) bracketing is described as a process in which
“the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so the entire research
process is rooted solely on the topic and question” (p. 96). This suggests that we are to set aside
any pre-conceived knowledge or ideas while conducting research. However, in IPA there is
recognition that bracketing is something that “can only partially be achieved” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 25). Researchers cannot unknow what they know, but at times they can focus intently on the research, such as an interview, whereby they are listening carefully to what is being said and not thinking about their pre-conceptions or feelings about what is to come (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Further to this, IPA analysis draws widely from a range of ideas in philosophy (phenomenology, hermeneutics, ideography) and psychology. It “is concerned with the detailed examination of the human lived experience and it aims to conduct this examination in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.32). The examination of the lived experiences of grandmothering is then based on the information contained within the stories that are shared by the participants. Because IPA focuses on the meanings that people create from their experiences and the interpretation of stories, it also fits within my research paradigm.

3.3.4 Research question. Studies using IPA are varied in terms of the research questions used within them. It is “a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social worlds. IPA “is especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty” (Smith & Osborne, 2006, p. 53). The goal of IPA research is to explore a topic as opposed to test a hypothesis and therefore the research question can be stated broadly. The research question for this project, “How do Indigenous grandmothers experience grandmothering when they are raising their grandchildren?” was broadly based (Creswell, 2013) so as not to limit
the grandmothers to providing specific information and to let their stories capture any aspect of
their lived experience that they wanted to include (Thomas, 2005).

3.4 Methods

As described, qualitative methodologies were selected for this research combining both
Indigenous Storytelling and IPA approaches. While they share some common features, each is
unique in terms of the methods used for data collection (Indigenous Storytelling) and analysis
(IPA).

3.4.1 Sample. Six participants who identified as Indigenous grandmothers and had
primary care of a grandchild voluntarily participated in this study. As with other qualitative
methods, sample sizes using Indigenous Storytelling and IPA are small. “IPA is committed to
the detailed examination of the particular case. It wants to know in detail what the experience
for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them”
(Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). The aim of a phenomenological study is to examine
individual stories as opposed to making broad general claims (Smith & Osborne, 2006). For this
study, the participant group was mostly homogenous: those who identified as Indigenous
grandmothers and had primary care of a grandchild. This sample size is consistent with other
studies involving Indigenous people using Indigenous Storytelling, ranging from three to seven
participants (Cruickshank, 1990; Kovach, 2009; Thomas, 2005), and IPA studies that ranged
from six to seven participants (Mark & Lyons, 2010; Nguyen, 2014).

3.4.2 Recruitment. To recruit participants, a gatekeeper was identified. Gatekeeping is
a process by which a researcher can gain access to participants in a research setting (Kawulich,
2011). The use of a gatekeeper in Indigenous research is important as “trust, rapport, and
credibility are all frequently highlighted as being important in facilitating research relationships”
As I did not live in the community where the research was conducted and I was unknown to the participants, the use of a gatekeeper was crucial. This was because within Indigenous communities, relationships of trust are integral to my request to acquire knowledge from the grandmothers. The gatekeeper, an Indigenous grandmother, herself, established and known within the community where the research occurred, recruited five grandmothers to participate in this project, in addition to herself. Purposive snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013) was also used as each grandmother who was interviewed was also asked for their assistance in locating other grandmothers; however, no other participants were identified using this recruitment technique.

3.4.3 Participant consent. The gatekeeper provided me contact information for each Indigenous grandmother who was interested in the project. I contacted each grandmother individually to explain the nature and purpose of the research, to have preliminary discussions about the dissemination of their stories, and to set up a time to meet them. Like Thomas (2005), I met with each grandmother individually in a casual setting of their choice, at a time that was convenient for them. Tobacco was offered to each participant when we met as a “respectful gesture to acknowledge the spirit and to express a sincere desire to learn” (Knight, 2001, pp. 24-25). Prior to hearing their stories, each participant and I verbally discussed the consent form, which included areas such as confidentiality, right to withdraw, and the option to choose a pseudonym (three chose to use a pseudonym); then, we both signed it. The grandmothers knew their stories would be used in my thesis and that they could also decide if there were other ways they wanted their stories shared and with whom. Participants were provided with a copy of the consent form. Participants were provided contact information for a local mental health crisis
line, walk in counseling clinic, and an Elder should any participant have required support during the research process.

3.5.4 **Data collection.** When I met with each grandmother to hear their story, I provided an opening statement inviting each grandmother to share her story about being a grandmother raising her grandchildren. Each grandmother could talk for as long as they chose to (Thomas, 2005). I did not have a list of specific interview questions as I did not want to structure their stories, knowing that if I asked specific questions I would likely receive answers structured by my questions. In this process of inviting each grandmother to tell her story, I was the “learner, listener, recorder, and facilitator” (Thomas, 2005, p. 246). Using this type of informal conversation is similar to an unstructured interview where the researcher has “no presuppositions about what of importance may be learned…” (Patton, 1980, p. 198). While I did have some knowledge of the topic, I knew little about the experience from an Indigenous perspective. I did not have a hypothesis of what I thought participants’ stories would tell me. Rather, I let the process unfold naturally with each grandmother sharing what she wanted to and by not looking at the stories through a theoretical lens. With their permission, the individual interviews with the grandmothers were audio-recorded to assist in preserving “as much of the quality of the interview and the uniqueness of the speaker as possible” (Knight, 2001, p. 27).

3.4.5 **Analysis of data.** I transcribed, verbatim, each story in order to provide me the opportunity to hear the stories again, remember what was said, reflect on how the stories were told, and to begin the interpretation process (Knight, 2001). With IPA studies, trying to understand the meaning of an experience of a participant is essential. “While one is attempting to capture and do justice to the meanings of the respondents to learn about their mental and social world, those meanings are not transparently available – they must be obtained through a
sustained engagement with the text and process of interpretation” (Smith & Osborne, 2006, p. 64). Both the researcher and participant are involved in interpreting the phenomena, which is “particularly important to an Indigenous research study that valued the importance of dialogic conversation between the researcher and participants (McInnes, 2013, pp. 2-3). As Thomas (2005) aptly notes, “all that is written and researched is someone’s interpretation of what happened” (p.243).

The analysis began by starting with one transcript and reading it through several times. A “free textual analysis” (Smith & Osborne, 2006, p. 67) was completed whereby I looked for “similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications, contradictions, associations, connections and summaries” (p. 67). I worked through the entire transcript and then started at the beginning and looked for emerging themes. Initial impressions were then transformed into “concise phrases which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text” (Smith & Osborne, 2006, p. 68). There was no requirement for every statement made by the participant to become a theme. When similar themes appeared, they were given a theme title. The emergent themes were then listed and connections between them were noted. Themes were then clustered based on the connections. Smith and Osborne (2006) note that it is important to continue going back to the original text to ensure that the connections work and to look at the actual words of the participants.

Smith and Osborne (2006) also assert that analysis is iterative. I went back and forth between the transcripts and my interpretations; examining what each participant said while continually checking my interpretations against what was actually articulated. I used a manual method of analysis by copying excerpts of the transcripts onto sticky notes so that they could be moved around as different connections and themes emerged.
I then moved to the next transcript and followed the same process. Similar or new themes emerged, which were noted. I considered what was the same and different between each pair of transcripts. After interpreting each transcript, using the iterative process, a final table of superordinate themes was constructed (Smith & Osborne, 2006). I decided which themes to focus on by prioritizing the data and then reducing the number of themes that were originally noted. I considered the richness of passages that highlighted the themes and did not specifically focus on how often themes emerged. I went back to the transcripts many times throughout the analysis and during the writing up of the key themes.

The analysis continued to expand while the findings were being written up (Smith & Osborne, 2006). The key themes were translated into a narrative account where they were explained and developed into an outline of the meanings of the participants’ experiences. The written narrative was interspersed with extracts from participant transcripts to highlight each theme. Allowing the data to speak for itself by using the actual words of participants allows their stories to emerge and find a voice (Hagen, Kalishuk, Currie, Solowoniuk, & Nixon, 2013; Osborne, 1990) though Smith and Osborne (2006) note that care is required to identify what is participant language versus researcher interpretation. Quotes from the participants were used within the analysis to highlight the themes. This contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility by documenting the grandmothers’ actual words versus my interpretation of their stories.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Credibility

Like Thomas (2005), it was important for me that the stories remained the grandmothers’ and I realized that depending on how I chose to gather information and analyze, I had the power to “shape the final work that I was doing” (p. 248). It was important to me that grandmothers
knew how their stories were being conveyed and that they were comfortable with my interpretations. Because storytelling is an opportunity to account for one’s experience, it was important that each was documented authentically and did not become part of another instance of colonialist research practice where a non-Indigenous person is creating the narrative. I felt an ethical responsibility to retain the grandmothers’ words and meanings. Therefore, after transcribing each story and reviewing each transcript for possible themes and meanings, I wrote a condensed version of each of their stories (Kovach, 2010) highlighting themes that I saw within them. Kovach (2010) argues that it is necessary to give participants the opportunity to review and approve the presentation of their stories in order to “ascertain authentic, ethical representation” (p. 100). As such, each grandmother was provided her transcript (verbatim) and the condensed story for her review. I spoke with each grandmother to ensure that they felt their story was captured accurately and to gather their initial thoughts on my interpretations. The grandmothers did not request any changes within their transcripts and concurred with the themes I had highlighted in their condensed stories. As well, I also shared a draft copy of my analysis with the grandmothers so that they could see how their stories would be used, and provided an opportunity to make changes as needed. In western qualitative approaches, asking for participant feedback is known as member checking and this is done to confirm the validity of the research (Willis, 2007). Again, no significant changes were requested. The themes were fleshed out further as my writing progressed. The grandmothers had another opportunity to review the completed analysis and, once again, did not request any changes. I also spoke with them about the discussion section to ensure that the important aspects of their experiences, in terms of what would be helpful for other grandmothers in similar situations as well as social workers and other helping professionals working with grandmothers, was captured, and passed on. I saw myself as
a facilitator in the sharing of their stories and wanted to ensure they were actively involved in the research process.

At times, it was difficult for the grandmothers to share their stories and it was also difficult for me to hear them; the trauma these grandmothers had endured and how their families are impacted generationally was profound. However, several grandmothers shared with me that they were glad they shared their stories and hoped that others could learn from them. “Sharing stories validates the various experiences of the storytellers, but also has the ability to give others with similar stories the strength, encouragement, and support they need to tell their stories” (Thomas, 2005, p. 252). “These stories need to be created and told. And, we can see how important stories are – they bring the past, the future, and present together for now and for the next seven generations” (Thomas, 2005, p. 253).

3.5.1 Reflective journal. Transparency in qualitative research is essential and researchers are obliged to disclose to others “the data, theory and methodology on which their conclusions rest” (Moravcsik, 2016, p. 48). Transparency is also important “because it enables the readers not only to learn about the trustworthiness of a study, but also to replicate it, or adopt the study’s methods and strategies in their own future studies” (Tuval-Mashiach, 2016, p.3). Further to this, as a non-Indigenous researcher working with an Indigenous population, transparency has additional importance because of the negative history Indigenous populations have had with non-Indigenous researchers and data collected being used for purposes other than intended (Cochran, et al., 2008).

Maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process was important in allowing me to record my own experiences, initial interpretations, reactions, and views, thereby raising awareness about my biases and assumptions (Ortlipp, 2008). I started a journal when I
began thinking about this project, to help me track and remember my thoughts regarding how I came to certain decisions about its different components and to create transparency in my research process. Therefore, not only was I tracking my reflections on the research process and how I came to decisions (for example, the use of two qualitative methodologies to incorporate Indigenous and western worldviews), but also to have ongoing contact with the participants so I could explain to them how I was conducting the research and give them the opportunity to actively participate and provide feedback. This allowed them to be an integral part of the process including the development of the recommendations that came from their stories.

3.5.2 Knowledge transmission. Being accountable to “all my relations” (Wilson, 2001, p. 177), is consistent with the 4 Rs of research: respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility (Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR, 2007). Adhering to the Indigenous ethical guidelines as outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, December 2014) in addition to the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, Possession (OCAP) in conducting ethical research (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014), meant the participants had ongoing opportunities to decide how their stories would be disseminated and with whom they would be shared. Thus, we worked together to ensure that the stories could be dispersed in a way that was meaningful to the participants, providing less opportunity for exploitation (Brunette, Sanders, Butcher, & Salios, 2011). The grandmothers all shared that the reason they chose to share their stories was to help other grandmothers, social workers, and other helping professionals. They said that sharing their stories with me and having them presented in writing was sufficient for them. The grandmothers were pleased that an
interest was taken in their stories, that they had an opportunity to share them, and that others might learn from them. Their thoughts on how what they shared could be helpful for social workers and other helping professionals are included in the Implications for Practice section.

3.6 Limitations

The scope of this project presented several limitations. First, as is often the case with qualitative research, this study used a small number of participants, meaning the results will not be generalizable to an entire population. The lived experiences of Indigenous grandmothers in Canada who are raising their grandchildren has not been well researched and therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether there are similarities and differences compared to Indigenous grandmothers living in other areas of Canada.

Secondly, using two qualitative methodologies presented certain limitations. IPA originates from several different philosophies as well as from psychology and, therefore, the analysis was based on what others have described and my own understandings regarding how to develop a phenomenological study. Working with an Indigenous methodology required my own interpretation of storytelling as it involved an approach outside of my worldview. Keeping an open mind and heart when speaking with the grandmothers and requesting their feedback throughout the process was my way of mitigating interpretation flaws, for which I take full accountability. To further ease the complexities of navigating differing worldviews, the use of the “two-eyed seeing” approach provided validation that both worldviews, mine and the grandmothers’, could be bridged and that engaging the grandmothers in the entire project was appropriate. Throughout the research process I was continually reflecting on my position as a non-Indigenous researcher and made efforts to ensure that the grandmothers were regularly informed of the process, had the opportunity to review their transcripts and analysis, providing
feedback and making any changes they wished to ensure their stories were written in a way that was comfortable for them. Their contributions to the discussion section also ensured that they could provide input that might assist other grandmothers, social workers, or helping professionals.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This project received approval from the University of Regina Ethics Review Board and applied the principles of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, December 2014) and the CIHR Guidelines for Health Research involving Aboriginal People (CIHR, 2007).

This study had low psychological risk to the participants who were being asked to share their experiences as grandmothers. While emotional issues did surface at times as a result of their participation in sharing their stories, they were not long-lasting. Participants were provided access to local supports and resources in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan; a mental health crisis line, a walk in clinic, and a local Elder were available should any participant need assistance. As well, I checked in with the grandmothers on several occasions during the project and they were able to update me on their situations and experiences.

Confidentiality was guaranteed however anonymity was not. This was because the participants may have known one another, given the homogeneity of the group selected and because each participant knew the gatekeeper. Therefore, their identity was known to at least one person other than myself. As well, participants who chose to meet in a group setting to discuss their stories would no longer be anonymous to the other grandmothers. Should the
participants decide at some time to be involved in the dissemination of their stories to various stakeholders, their identities will be made public. Participants were provided the opportunity to use a pseudonym for written documentation and three chose to do so to protect their identities. Participation in this project was voluntary and participants were able to withdraw at any time without reprisal; none did.

As a non-Indigenous researcher conducting research with Indigenous participants, I constantly reflected on my status as a non-Indigenous person researching with Indigenous people and the power that I had to shape their stories through analysis and writing. This was a struggle for me and, because this research, based the principle of “two-eyed seeing” (Iwama, Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2009), combined Indigenous and western methodologies (Kovach, 2010) I knew that care and attention were needed to ensure that participants understood how their stories were analysed, so as not to dishonour their worldview. I took steps throughout the research process to ensure that the grandmother’s understood how their stories were being presented. I kept in contact with the grandmothers after the interviews occurred, in order to build our relationship, and provided each grandmother a copy of her transcript and the analysis so that they could see how the project was unfolding, provide feedback, and make changes as required. It was important to me that their stories and their meanings remained true to the participants’ perspectives, from their own point of view.
CHAPTER 4: Themes

4.1 Introduction

The Indigenous grandmothers involved in this project were gracious in their acceptance of me as a researcher and readily shared their stories of grandmothering with me. Each grandmother came from a different background, with different life experiences, all of which contributed to her decision to take on the role of becoming the primary caregiver for her grandchildren. Their stories contributed to understanding the research question: “How do Indigenous grandmothers experience grandmothering when they are raising their grandchildren?”

4.2 Context

At the time this project occurred, the six Indigenous grandmothers who participated in this project all resided in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Prince Albert is located in central Saskatchewan and has a population of approximately 40,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2006, Prince Albert had the highest concentration of Indigenous people (13,570 or one in three people) of any city in Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2006). The grandmothers who participated in the project ranged in age from 55-70. Four identified themselves as Treaty (Cree) and two were Métis. One was married and five were single (widowed, divorced, unmarried). Three were employed and three collected disability or a pension. Five grandmothers had diabetes. At the time the research was conducted, four were the primary care-givers for one or more children. The other two had previously been the primary caregiver for their grandchildren. The average number of children in their care was four (range of one to seven children) with ages ranging from 16 months to 18 years. Two of the grandmothers had ongoing involvement with child welfare authorities.
4.3 Themes

During analysis of the transcripts using IPA, clusters of themes emerged with four superordinate themes developed: *Reflecting on the past, It’s not always easy, I love my grandchildren, and What I need*. In the discussion that follows, the grandmothers’ words are used to illustrate each theme. At the request of the grandmothers, although transcribed faithfully, their words were not used verbatim; speech idiosyncrasies including double words and other irregular speech patterns were removed to assist in sharing their stories in a clear manner. To maintain the integrity of the grandmother’s stories, some of the quotations used (taken from the transcripts) are lengthy, as each story was poignant and needed to be shared in full to highlight the theme. At other times only a short quote or a summary statement is used to capture a theme. I am accountable for any inaccuracies in wording or interpretation as I have knitted their stories together. I have represented the themes in a visual diagram in Figure 1: Key Themes. The superordinate themes are listed on top of each column with their related themes below. This visual diagram provides a listing of the key themes in a linear manner and is therefore not reflective of the inter-related connectedness among the themes, recognizing that our lived experiences, the meanings we attach, and the lessons learned are related to each other, woven together over time, do not occur in a linear fashion.
4.3.1 Reflecting on the past. The grandmother’s reflected on their pasts and shared stories about their own grandmothers, their parents, their experiences at residential school, and their own substance abuse issues. They also spoke about the issues their adult children face and their own shortcoming as mothers. They noted that these experiences shaped who they are today, have impacted their adult children, and how they are now as grandmothers.

4.3.1.1 Their own grandmothers. The grandmothers shared stories of their own grandmothers. Carol spoke of how her grandmother was an excellent baker; “she made really
tasty bread, and blueberry pies, and cakes from scratch.” Her grandmother taught her how to play card games, laugh, and to have fun. She said her grandmother was fun, loving, and humble. An important lesson Carol’s grandmother taught her was to laugh at herself. Her grandmother had 11 children who survived and lost three others.

Marlene was raised by her grandparents and shared what it was like growing up with them:

My grandma and my grandpa raised me and although I thought they were just a bunch of dumbasses when I was growing up, I think I was about eight years old when I went to residential school and today, when I think about it, I, you know, you’re most formative years, ‘til you’re five years old. Thank god for them because they gave me a base. ... They were the most beautiful people. And I wasn’t around drugs or alcohol. Of course, there wasn’t really drugs. But they gave us a work ethic and we had to go to school every day. There were no free rides, get your ass out of bed and get the hell to school, not in those languages either. My mom would just yell up the stairs and we’d all be, ‘cause we knew better than to piss her off. My grandpa was the most gentle soul on earth. So then, we’d get up and we’d go downstairs and we’d have breakfast and away we’d go to school. And my grandma raised, this is crazy, my grandma raised 27 kids from birth. From birth. And there’s none of this laying around doing nothing. We had a huge garden, we had chickens, we had cows, we had this, everything. And that’s how we survived on the res [reserve], cause at that time they weren’t allowed to be going out off the reserve. My grandma worked hard all her life. My grandpa was the best. My real father passed away when I was 12. But I didn’t really get to know him. I was scared of him. But when you ask me why, I don’t know. I just, probably ‘cause he wasn’t as good as my gramps, my gramps was the best. He never got made at any of us. Like 27 kids from birth, don’t you think you’d be a little burnt out? And a little pissed off at the world? No, not him. It was still “oh I wish I had a cup of tea”; we’d all run and be pushing each other to go get him his tea ‘cause we wanted to make him happy ‘cause we love him so much. And that’s how kind he was, you know? And then my grandma would say, “oh I wish I had a cup of tea” and we’d all run the other way ‘cause she was always asking us to bring her tea. But she was the boss, she was the big cheese. My grandpa was just laid back. I wish I was a little more like that but I’m not.

Maxine also shared a memory of her grandmother:

I had a grandma but I didn’t have her long ‘cause I come from a very large family; there’s 13 of us. I remember the thing that sticks out in my mind with my mom’s mom, is she never had legs. She lost her legs through diabetes. I remember this little old woman in a wheel chair and she used to do everything; bake, and clean her house, do her laundry, and everything, and I used to say to my mom, “how does she do that? She has no legs.” And my mom says “well, that chair is her legs.” So then, I looked at it in
a different way. And she’d bake, and I used to say to her, say to my mom, “where does she get those tiny little brooms from? And mops?” My dad used to saw off the handles and round it off for her so she wouldn’t get slivers. She was a very kind woman.

Margaret also spoke of her grandmother whom she didn’t have the opportunity to see very often:

‘Cause my late auntie was so mean; kept my grandmother away. But she would have a window, and she would call me over and I had to sneak to go to talk to my grandmother. And she would say, give this to your mom, and this is yours. And there was a bag and my auntie would catch me sometimes, and get mad, get mad at me, getting stuck and come and give my mom, say something to my mom and I would, mom, don’t let her talk to you like that, I said, and I say, tell the auntie, just leave us alone. And we should be allowed to see our grandmother.

Barbara shared that she had many grandmothers in her life in the form of Mothers on the Move and other relatives and Elders and helped her when she was young:

And back in the day there, I did have some help by Mothers on the Move. Very late, I think they came in in the 1970s and Mothers on the Move planted gardens, they went to homes were kids where the parents were drinking or whatever and they had abandoned their children, and I was one of them. And they came into our home and they made it a home again. And they were shifting grandmothers. Some would come one day, man, we would have pie, we would have fresh bannock. They looked after us, they also looked after the kids on the bus. They provided lunch, they went to see Council, Chief and Council and asked them; our kids are not getting enough food because parents are not being responsible with their money. So I had a lot of mentors. Elder Gladys was the one that use to come into our home and cook for us, clean for us, geez, there’s so many people, like tons of Elders and I just right in the mix, and my auntie was the one that showed us the feast ways and gave us part of our culture back even though she wasn’t of the Cree Assiniboine. But she still instilled culture in us and that was what instilled my identity; gave me back something where there was so much taken.

**4.3.1.2 Their own parents.** The grandmothers also spoke of their own parents. Marlene indicated she wasn’t raised by her own mom and that when she found out who her mother was she was devastated because her mother was an alcoholic. Barbara indicated that when she was young she looked after her mom and became a parent to her because her mother drank; “cause she was drunk and I washed her clothes, I put her to bed when she was you know and I looked after her when she was hung over, took over the lead role in the household duties; just did
practically everything that a grown woman would do.” Gladys noted that her father physically, emotionally, and mentally abused her mom. She said of violence “we [her sisters] witnessed it of course and we ‘married our father’ and all of us women divorced having suffered from that. So, it’s intergenerational.” She further stated that “we seen a lot of violence when we were young. But I knew my mother and my father still loved me.”

Margaret said “when I lost my mom, that’s just the hardest. I still miss her. I talk to her.” Margaret also stated that “through my life, no matter how hard I tried to please him [dad] I wasn’t good enough. And he would always beat me, for no reason at all.” Maxine fondly remembered her parents stating “I remember things that my mom and dad said too and I have brought it into my children and now I’m trying to do it with my grandchildren.” When she thinks about being a grandmother she recalled what she learned from her parents saying “my mom was a fantastic mom. What would mom say? What would grandma say? Because you always question yourself.”

4.3.1.3 Residential School. Four of the grandmothers had experiences at residential or day schools or had family members who attended. The impacts of these experiences were numerous, carried forward through multiple generations, and affected the grandmothers in their abilities both to parent and to grandmother.

Marlene described her experience at residential school:

…they tried to teach us to do different things and it was like, especially coming back from residential school. Cause they told us, that these guys, that our parents were savages and that they just wanted us to be good little white people, so, anything that they taught us we should just get it out of our brain. And then they said they [parents] don’t love you either. We were little! And they’re saying they don’t love you, that’s why they don’t come to visit. They just don’t want really anything to do with you, and of course, they weren’t coming to visit. But I didn’t find out until later that it was because they weren’t allowed. But there was so much, and the family breakdown. My brother went to Lebret, my oldest brother. And my other went to Onion Lake, and me and my sister went to Beauvalle. So we were separated. And so, whenever we got home, it’s like, don’t
even know who that is anymore. And it’s stayed right to the end. And you look and you think, holy shit, whoever the psychologist was behind how to mess up an entire generation, or two or three, did a fricken good job. This guy was really smart. Ya. It was just like some of the shit I wouldn’t have even thought of doing to a kid?

Marlene felt that residential school took away her ability to parent though also taught her what not to do as a parent. Her residential school experience impacted her but she chose not to let it continue to impact her saying “I can either be a victim or a survivor.”

Carol, being Métis, did not attend residential school but described her experience attending day school when she was young:

I know how it feels. For myself, I was taken away at five years old to go to school, in Ile La Crosse; because we were Métis we weren’t allowed to Beauvalle residential school. So, I can understand them. We never got to see our parents ‘til summertime because it was so isolated up north. Like there was no highway, you have to fly in and out. Yep. I know how they feel when, you know? It was rough, the treatment we got there. But I survived it.

Barbara shared that she did not go to residential school; however, her mother, siblings, and other family members attended:

I was pretty much raised by community because my mother was pre-residential. She went through the residential school system and her mom had passed away when she was four years old. There’s seven of us in my family. Everybody was either placed in home. I was the oldest one and spared by my uncle. But the rest all went and so it was a really hard situation when because I was the oldest one, I was in charge of helping to raise my siblings. So, when they were taken away, part of the 60s scoop, I’m part of the 60s scoop also.

Gladys also spoke about her family’s experience with residential school and the negative impact it had on her family:

My mother and I think my dad or my grandfather, was a product of residential school, ‘cause he could read and write, where my mother went to day school. But there was two branches; my aunt and my uncle were really bad alcoholics and their kids, they put them in residential school. And I did a family tree, all the ones that went into residential school I did in red, and the majority of them were alcoholics and a lot of them died from really violent deaths. Where this side here, it was physical, sexual [abuse], and we survived it but they didn’t. So, we pass on our hurt to our children without ever realizing it, without
ever intending to. And I think a lot of times we don’t even recognize, we don’t even realize that we’re doing it. Or at least I didn’t. I always told my kids “when you guys were young, hell, I couldn’t even be there for myself, at that age still. How could I be there for you?”

4.3.1.4 Their own substance abuse. Along with abuses suffered, several of the grandmothers spoke of their struggles with alcohol in their teen and adult years and the reasons they chose to overcome their addictions. Carol indicated she “stopped drinking cold turkey” 30 years ago when she decided to sort out her life. She described the moment when she made the decision to quit drinking:

One day when I was sitting in Saskatoon by the river bank, on a Sunday. I decided to quit drinking there. I said Lord, I can’t do it on my own, I need your help, and I just prayed and I cried. I knew that to get rid of that alcoholism, and all of the sudden, it’s like I felt warm, like something came through my whole body and then somebody, it was like somebody lifted a page. Everything was bright.

She went to an in-patient addiction treatment centre to assist her in learning how to recover from her addiction. It was important to her to be sober when she was raising her own children and also for her grandchildren.

Barbara also struggled with alcohol over the years, but made a change in her life because she was raising her children and subsequently her grandchildren. She stated about how she and her husband, “we’ll never let our grandchildren see us drunk or drugging. So we started going through sweat ceremonies to help us along that road...we’re sober, we’re healthy."

Margaret indicated that she quit drinking over 20 years ago. “I just got tired of it, not being there for you guys [adult children], and I started having grandchildren and I wanted to be there for them. And so, I quit drinking, I quit smoking, 20 years ago.”

Several of the grandmothers had substance abuse issues that impacted their own ability to parent their children; however, each made a decision to address their substance abuse so they
could be more present in their children’s lives. It was important for them to be sober for their grandchildren so that they might have different lives than their parents.

4.3.1.5 Adult children substance abuse. The effects of the grandmothers’ upbringing impacted their children. Each grandmother spoke of at least one adult child who was addicted to alcohol or drugs. Marlene commented that her niece may have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) based on Marlene’s sister’s own addictions when she was pregnant and that her niece may also have been drinking when pregnant with her nephew [grandson]. She recalled speaking to her grandson’s father who indicated that he caught her grandson’s mother doing drugs “a couple of times.” Margaret spoke of one of her children being a single mom and struggling with alcohol. Because of her addictions, she wasn’t able to raise her children. “She didn’t want them. She didn’t want them at all. So, I raised them.” Speaking of one of her grandsons, she explained that he hardly knows his mom because “she’s really hooked on her needles. She’s a prostitute, she was in crime, she did crime and went to jail...” Carol spoke of the parents of the children she’s raising as “hooked on crack or crystal meth” and also spoke of a mother “doing drugs while she was pregnant” which can create challenges for children. Gladys stated that one of her daughters was “drinking, then got into drugs, then prescribed morphine, then shooting up.” This cycle of drug dependence created many challenges for her daughter including her ability to be a parent. Barbara also spoke of her daughter doing marijuana and how this led to her granddaughter not wanting to live with her mom. The parents of her oldest grand-daughter were both using drugs and as a result, her grand-daughter decided that because her parents were drug addicts, she was going to be that too. Maxine’s daughter has stage four cirrhosis of the liver due to her drinking. Maxine raised her oldest grandson from birth and he has been impacted by not having his mother in his life regularly but also watching her declining health and process of
dying. The issues stemming from the adult children engaging in the abuse of substances has impacted their ability to parent, leading the grandmothers to take over primary care.

**4.3.1.6 Adult children parenting challenges.** Substance abuse by adult children was a primary theme pertaining to why the grandmothers had to step in to care for their grandchildren. Carol stated that she has looked after children because the parents are not able to take care of them; their mothers were alcoholics or drug addicts. Maxine indicated that although her daughter was raised in an alcohol-free home, once her father died she got into the wrong crowd and she started getting into trouble. Gladys and Margaret also spoke about the mothers of the grandchildren as struggling with relationship issues which impacted their ability to parent.

Several of the grandmothers spoke about the fathers of the grandchildren they are raising. Barbara indicated that ‘the dads are not doing much better themselves.” She mentioned that the fathers are using alcohol and drugs as well. The father of one of her granddaughters “hasn’t had a good relationship with our granddaughter” and “her dad is not active in her life; just every once in a while.” Gladys also indicated that “the fathers are absent,” but recognized that there are inter-generational factors present and that “these fathers are not there for their own children because their fathers were not there for them.” The grandmothers’ noted that for those grandchildren who do have a relationship with their parent(s), it isn’t always easy. Gladys spoke of the father of one of her grandsons indicating “but now his dad, who is an alcoholic, wants him to be perfect.” She also struggles with the behaviour of her adult children and her frustrations with their inability to parent; “you don’t do that to your flesh and blood. You don’t push them out the door and hope to God that someone else picks them up because you can’t be bothered to.” Maxine admitted that “even though their mom hasn’t raised them properly, she does love her.”
4.3.1.7 Grandmother’s own shortcomings. Margaret talked about failing as both “a mom and a dad” as she was engaged in using drugs, drinking, and partying when she was parenting. She loved her children but indicated that if she could do it over again, she would be a better parent. She also made a vow that when she had grandchildren, she would be different:

I’m there 24/7 for my grandchildren; which I wasn’t for my kids. And that hurts me. That hurts my kids too. They always throw that in my face that I wasn’t there for them 24/7 but I told them right to their faces, I told them that I’ll do everything I can for my grandchildren, I’ll be there… I said I wish I could turn back the pages of time and do that for you guys, I said maybe then everything wouldn’t be so messed up. I said but I’ll tell you one thing, I’m gonna make sure that my grandchildren are not treated with disrespect from their parents and not looked after and everything.

Gladys indicated that she grew up with a sense of shame about being Indigenous and, reflecting on this, believed this was part of the reason she thinks she “failed miserably” as a parent. She has apologized to her children numerous times for not being there for them when they were growing up. Her son has told her ‘all you got to do is apologize once, you don’t apologize a second time. We’re adults; the onus is on us to heal.” Several grandmothers noted that there are inter-generational traumatic factors present in her children and Gladys stated, “it’s so frustrating because I think everyone in my family is affected; my children, my daughters, their children.” Margaret regrets that she sees the same pattern occurring with her children; “What I did to my son, my oldest son, deserted his family and his kids don’t know where he is.” It is frustrating for the grandmothers to see the challenges continue from one generation to the next.

4.3.2 It’s not always easy. The grandmothers spoke of challenges they faced when they took on the role of grandmothering their grandchildren. There were internal rewards they received from taking on this role; however, they also were concerned how this impacted their health and well-being. They indicated that they were very attached to their grandchildren and the
silence in the home when they left was hard; they felt a loss. As well, making ends meet financially was a challenge for some of the grandmothers.

4.3.2.1 Internal feelings. As noted, the grandmothers were often frustrated with their adult children’s inability to parent, which necessitated that the grandmother take on this role. Carol stated very clearly that she raises children “because they need me.” She also stated that “I feel good about myself. I don’t need no rewards or praise or anything, claiming unwanted children as my own.” Maxine discussed her feelings of her grandchildren being “mine for a little time, and I get to raise them the way I think they should be raised, and hopefully they have a good start; a kickstart to life.” She also explained how she got “another chance to raise these [grandchildren] and when you have grandkids that’s even more special. It’s like having a second chance.”

Others felt that raising grandchildren was their purpose in life. Barbara explained that “all my life I’ve been doing this. We have generations of kids.” Maxine stated that “I think God put me on this earth to look after kids.” Carol said that “This is my story. All my life I’ve looked after children…I’ve been doing this for years.” Marlene also spoke of the inter-generational component of raising children having raised her niece and her great-nephew. Margaret stated from ages “9 to 63 I’ve been looking after someone else’s kids.” While there are rewards that come with the experience of raising grandchildren, there are also implications for the lives of the grandmothers.

4.3.2.2 Grandmother’s health. Diabetes was a common factor with the grandmothers in this study and each understood the importance of taking care of her health. Diabetes is a medical condition that is prevalent among Indigenous women (Turin et al., 2016). Carol said “I owe it to them to be here, look after myself, taking it easy.” She indicated that it was important to “take
time for myself for the one’s here that I have.” Margaret explained that “I never thought about me and I’d wear myself down. I never held back when I was sick or needed help.” Maxine said she needs “to see the doctor and go once a month to a nurse educator. It’s hectic...sometimes I’m really exhausted.” The aging process also takes a toll on the grandmothers’ ability to care. Carol noted that she’s not able to look after babies anymore because she’s not able to lift them up. Maxine also noted that because she is raising a baby and toddlers, her sleep is often disrupted and she lacks energy to run around after them.

4.3.4.3 Grandmother well-being. The grandmothers spoke about the time commitment required in raising their grandchildren and the toll that takes on them. Maxine said that “if one of them needs me, I’m there.” Margaret offered a similar sentiment in that “I’m there 24/7 for my grandchildren.” Barbara spoke of the time she is giving to raising grandchildren. “We got 13 years to go. So hopefully I’ll still be in good health. I’m hoping this keeps me young enough.” Maxine indicated that there are multiple roles to play when raising grandchildren: “You’re the grandma, you’re the grandpa, you’re the mom, you’re the dad; that’s all in one.” In terms of self-care, Margaret stated “I’m not entitled to go out, to enjoy myself. I’m entitled to stay home and it’s very difficult sometimes.” Marlene commented that “some of the resentment I felt... I already raised my kids and I’m putting up with this.” While the grandmother’s indicated that they wouldn’t give up their grandchildren, there were times when their own well-being suffered because of their role as a primary caregiver. Marlene mentioned that it was difficult to even go out for a coffee with friends because she didn’t have anyone to watch her grandson. Maxine indicated that doing embroidery is a relaxing activity for her but she rarely gets the chance to have time to herself to embroider. She also indicated that at times she would like to have a nap to assist in raising her energy level, but that this was also difficult because of the young ages of
her grandchildren and not having anyone who could watch them. As well, several grandmothers were in their retirement years but because there are engaged in raising grandchildren, they cannot enjoy their retirement the same way other grandmothers can, including activities such as traveling.

4.3.2.4 Silence. Despite not always having time for themselves, they miss their grandchildren when they aren’t around. Most of Margaret’s grandchildren have left home now and she commented that “I miss them all. The house is lonely. When they all come in, my house is noisy. I miss that. I wish they were small again.” Gladys stated “and then I go home to an empty apartment and there’s nobody there.” Carol noted that “if it’s too quiet, I hear a pin drop. I’m not comfortable with that.” Maxine explained that she “liked the fact that I’m needed. Being home alone, loneliness, so having kids, that’s good.” Barbara reflected “I think if I was by myself, just me and [my husband], I wouldn’t like it. Very quiet. We’d just be sitting there, crickets every once and a while...”

4.3.2.5 Finances. Each grandmother was in a different situation financially. Marlene made “enough money to take care of him. I don’t need social assistance.” Maxine lives “off a widow’s pension. So, five extra kids in my home, it’s a little harder.” Margaret “limits [her] money, it’s from social services. It’s pretty hard sometimes too and the only thing we can depend on is family allowance of GST.” To make ends meet, the grandmothers found different resources in order to provide for their grandchildren. Gladys spoke of fundraising so she could send her granddaughter to Ecuador. Barbara also fundraised for her grandchildren to assist with paying for cultural activities. Margaret fundraised by selling chocolates and working bingos so that her grandchildren could participate in school and sporting activities. She spoke of the frustrations of not being able to provide everything her grandchildren wanted. Speaking about
sports teams she said “they want money right away [sports teams] and they choose kids that their parents could afford and not us.” Barbara stated that “we still scrimp and scrape with our huge family but it is what it is.” While each grandmother may not have been able to provide everything they would have liked, they always met the basic needs of their grandchildren.

4.3.3 I love my grandchildren. Given the grandmothers’ adult children’s’ inability to parent, they were concerned for the well-being of their grandchildren. They demonstrated the love they have for their grandchildren by using the opportunity of raising their grandchildren to teach them values, skills, and about their culture. They were concerned about the behavioural challenges their children faced and the process of obtaining assessments and treatment. As well, they were concerned about how the effects of being raised without their parents would impact their grandchildren.

4.3.3.1 Well-being of grandchild. Gladys’ granddaughter “was in a program but aged out and didn’t have anywhere to go and didn’t want to go to her mom’s.” She felt a responsibility to her granddaughter to ensure she had a safe place to go. Gladys also stated she took on the role of raising her grandchildren “because they’re my grandchildren; I love them. I want to see them do well. I want to encourage them.” Barbara explained that “we didn’t have a good life but I didn’t want my grandchildren to have a life like I did.” Marlene described her reasoning as “I wanted to give him a chance. And I knew that he wouldn’t have one with his mother.” Carol indicated that her granddaughter “wasn’t wanted by her mom” and therefore she took on the role of raising her. There were concerns about grandchildren being raised in foster care and Barbara stated “I could never see them in care.” For her this was not an option. She explained that “they [Child and Family Services] make you sign a piece of paper when you get your grandchild. You go through a PSI [Person of Sufficient Interest] for them. Like they’re
PSId out to us until they’re 18” meaning she will be raising children for many years to come. She chose this because it was important for her “to stand up and say no, you’re [Child and Family Services] not taking my grandkids. I’m not letting you traumatize my grandchildren. Maxine said, “I didn’t want to fight for him through the welfare system, so, I just took custody of him when he was 10 months old. Now he’s 15.” Margaret, when speaking of how she came to raise her grandchildren, indicated that “the crisis centre didn’t want to take them to social services so they brought them [grandsons] here.” She said “I said I want them permanent. I said I want to fight for them. I want legal aid and all that. Those boys are mine.” Marlene’s experience was that “Child Welfare asked me to raise him. I wanted a document with everyone’s signature.” And when “she [mother] took him back and I had no choice. So, I got a lawyer and we started working on it. And every day was horrible.” She spoke about custody issues between two provinces indicating “It [custody] has to be approved in court. We ended up going to court here [Saskatchewan] and right away they gave us custody because we’d have him forever. You then have to go to court in Alberta to get custody [because that’s where the mother took him]. The grandmothers were concerned about the well-being of their grandchildren, particularly about what might happen if they were placed in foster-care.

4.3.3.2 Teaching. The grandmothers explained the importance of teaching their grandchildren both values and skills. Carol said that “after I’m gone they’ll remember things” thereby passing her knowledge to the next generation. Maxine shared a similar view, that “when I’m no longer on this earth, I hope there is something I have taught you that sticks out in their mind. That would be the most rewarding thing.” Likewise, Barbara stated about her grandchildren that, “when grandma comes to your house, I want to see some of the things that
I’ve been teaching you.” Margaret’s belief is that “if you’re gonna be close to your grandchildren you’ve got to show them stuff; you can’t just give them money.”

Carol felt it important to teach her grandchildren to always take care of other people, as she had been taught by her parents. Maxine focused on teaching the “tools of life,” the value of education, and her belief that if you put your mind to it, you can do it. Barbara also indicated that she and her husband “encourage education as much as we can. We encourage cultural activities as much as we can” and “we teach the boys to respect women. Never hit a woman.” Marlene spoke of being “raised to respect your elders and you do what you’re told,” which is a value she has instilled in her children and grandchildren.

Barbara tries to teach her grandchildren everything that she knows how to do including how to do beadwork and run a business. She also teaches them about responsibilities at home. Margaret taught her grandchildren not to use alcohol and drugs as it causes trouble. She noted the challenges in this because of peer pressure, but indicated she wouldn’t give up on her grandchildren and that communication with them was very important in terms of teaching them and being a support for them. Marlene also spoke of the importance of role-modeling positive behaviours, stating that her grandson “never seen any physical fights here. He never seen alcohol or drugs in the house, ever.”

Gladys noticed that when her granddaughter returned from a trip to Ecuador she decided there was more to life than alcohol and drugs. Providing her granddaughter the opportunity to experience the world was an important life lesson. She said she’s “trying to show them that there’s another way of living. It’s not about struggling. It’s not about being a victim. There are things they can change and that’s what we’re trying to instill.” Margaret stated she “raised [her grandchildren] to be clean people; respect people and the culture. The singing, the dancing, the
Sundances, the Round Dances, the Pow Wow. I brought that to them.” Regarding substances, Margaret affirmed that “you don’t need alcohol and drugs to have a good time,” something she tries to instill in her grandchildren.

The grandmothers also taught their grandchildren boundaries. Gladys commented that “there’s rules in my house. You don’t do drugs, no alcohol. If you’re going to stay with me, you have to toe the line.” As well, she stated that “this is my house; only people that I know and that I trust come into my house.” Carol agreed that “they have to follow rules, there’s rules…and respect elders.” Maxine shared the importance of her grandchildren being on a schedule; eating, bathing, television, and bedtime. She also stated that “you can’t give in because if you do, the kids are going to have run of the house,” which is why it’s important to teach boundaries.

4.3.3.3 Traditions. The grandmothers also spoke of Indigenous traditions. Maxine stated “I try to keep their traditions for them. I talk about their traditions.” Margaret commented that “I always believe in my culture and I always took my grandsons and granddaughter to sweats and they really enjoyed it.” Marlene talked about her grandson learning to smudge and his curiosity about traditions. Barbara’s family lives a traditional Indigenous lifestyle and when speaking of her grandson shared that “we gave him the most important job in our house, in our family, which is smudging in the morning, smudging in the evening, and he’s allowed to touch the drums. So, he’s got an enormous responsibility.” When speaking of one her granddaughters, Barbara stated:

She takes her regalia seriously, no one can wear it. And if you’ve been using drugs or alcohol, you can expect a speech, very loud speech, “don’t you dare touch my stuff, make sure that you’re doing this and that, do you think you should be around regalia?” She’s so protective of her culture; her identity is what she protects the most.

Marlene teaches traditional Indigenous dance to youth in her community and Barbara’s grandchildren were raised as dancers and tour with the Pow Wow circuit. Barbara spoke of her granddaughter whom she describes as “a beautiful dancer,” and a grandson who:
doesn’t participate in dancing. He does every once in a while but he’s very traditional though. Also, his hair’s way down to his butt. Only members in our family, the female side, are allowed to braid his hair. He won’t let anyone else touch it. In fact, he guards his hair so much, when he wears a bunnyhug and he puts his braid inside so no one’s bothering his hair. To him, that connection is his, that’s who he is. He has a connection to mother earth.

Margaret struggled financially at times to be able attend Pow Wows but understands the importance of culture:

…and I started fundraising so we could travel to Pow Wows, so my grandson would come with us and he’d be working; he’d be doing odd jobs around there, the campgrounds, had extra money. And then my granddaughter would dance. She dances jiggle dress or fancy dancer and she danced ever since she was three, she started doing that.

The grandmothers did not deny their grandchildren’s traditions, religion, or culture, but supported it in the best ways they could. Even those who were not traditional themselves, having not been raised traditionally, but religiously, did not deny whatever their grandchildren needed. Carol explained that, being Métis, she was not exposed to cultural ceremonies or traditions during her childhood:

… up north where I come from, we don’t have any of these Pow Wows, traditional. I never knew any of that until I went to university in Saskatoon and met other students from different reserves. And even when I went to that [addiction] centre I learned about Sundance ceremonies and all that. I never got to see any of that because of my mother was a heavy duty Catholic. None of the traditional Indian ceremonies were allowed in our lives. I don’t even know if she had any of that.

4.3.3.4 Grandchildren diagnosis. The grandmothers shared that some of their grandchildren had difficulties that required assessments, diagnosis, and treatment. Carol stated that some of her grandchildren had difficulty reading and required assessments for learning disabilities. Another of her grandchildren had behavioural problems, was assessed, and put on medication. She knew he was smart and just needed some assistance in focusing. Gladys’ grandson had been labeled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) but she knew
he was capable of more. She said of her grandson, “I think he’s been abused by every man in my daughter’s life. A tortured soul that poor kid.” Margaret has raised grandchildren who had diagnoses of Autism, FASD, and ADHD. She shared that she “had to find out how to go about helping both of them, getting them assessed, and going through the proper channels to get help for them.” Margaret is “struggling with [her] granddaughter. She has autism. I’m seeking help. I want to talk to people, tell me how to treat her. What’s the right way to talk to an autistic child?” Marlene talked about trying for years to get her grandson assessed. “We’ve gotten to a point where now they’re going to assess him. And this was over a year that we started the paperwork… to get him some counselling; to get some testing done or something. Three years I ran back and forth.” The length of time it can take to have assessments completed can be frustrating. Marlene is certain her grandson has FASD but they “can’t diagnose FASD without the mother confirming whether she used alcohol/drugs while pregnant.” This means that supports and resources are not available to assist the grandchildren. Carol speculates that it is because of drug use (by mothers and grandchildren) that so many children have difficult issues such as schizophrenia and ADHD.

4.3.3.5 Effects on grandchildren. Gladys was concerned about her adult children’s behaviour and that “they don’t take our advice and then shit happens, and the damage is done, and then we’re left to pick up the pieces as grandmothers.” The impact of parental behaviours on their children is difficult because the grandchildren aren’t always able to understand the complexities of the situations. Gladys indicated of her grandchildren that “they’re not ok. These kids still want a mom and they still want a dad; they still want to know that mom loves them more than she does the fucking drug.”
Marlene shared about her grandson: “His dad was on a pedestal up here but he’s disappointed him so many times” and that his mom “scarred him for life” by taking him away from Marlene when he was two years old. She is concerned for her grandson and wonders “what happened when he was with him mom? If he sees a drunk person he just loses it.” She recognizes that his mom has her own challenges, believing she is FASD and because she “gave birth when she was 14 years old.” Marlene’s grandson struggled in both daycare and school as he had “a hard time adjusting” and was not behaving. She “started getting calls from pre-school and it ended up all the way to grade 5. They asked him to leave school.”

Maxine struggles with her daughter at times, who is in and out of her grandchildren’s lives. She says that “it’s difficult when she’s here; it’s more stressful. Her daughter disrupts routines and tries to override what Maxine says to her grandchildren. Her daughter promises her children things but does not carry through and this hurts them. That is why Maxine doesn’t promise them anything. Maxie stated “I love her but I don’t like the things she does.” Both Maxine and Marlene commented on how they need to accommodate the parents as much as their grandchildren which can be frustrating.

4.3.4 What I need. While it was often easier on the grandmothers when the adult children did not have a regular role in their grandchildren’s lives, because that was often disruptive and confusing to the grandchildren, the grandmothers also recognized that their grandchildren were often attached to their mothers and missed them. Despite these and other challenges present in the grandmother’s lives, they believed they were doing the best they could and shared their thoughts on the supports and resources that were and were not available to them.

4.3.4.1 Best I can do. Despite the challenges, the grandmothers make the necessary effort, under the circumstances. Maxine indicated “I’m doing the best I got with whatever I
have…we struggle. We do the best we can.” Carol also stated “I try to do my best. Don’t know how they’ll turn out. Don’t let it stress me. Can’t save the world. Just live with it, I move on.” Barbara stated “I’m doing my best. I’ve carried them pretty much through.” Margaret commented that “I have them all. I take care of them. I do the best I possibly can for them.” Both Marlene and Maxine also spoke of other grandmothers and felt everyone was doing the best they could. Marlene commented “I think about these kokums [whose parents went to residential school] and I’m thinking to myself, their parents, they came out to be parents and they had no clue how to be a parent. So, you just kind of look at that and you think, well for me, I’m so damn lucky.” She also reflected that “other grandmothers, what they do, their children are FAS, they’ve got that double guilt to carry. My heart bleeds even more for people that don’t know what they’re doing. But just trying to do the best they can.” Maxine reflected about her own situation and that of others stating:

I wish that people, as in the other grandparents, didn’t have it as rough as what they do. Because, I don’t have it as rough as they do. I know I don’t, right? Because they have so many disadvantages for them as it is. Being First Nations, and speaking their language, and not understanding. And, and it’s hard, and I wish that they didn’t have it as hard because they’re, already some of them are already in their 60s and 70s and still watching grandkids. How fair is that to them? And I mean, I’m older, but not that old, but, I have a different situation. And I just wish there was something out there where they could go to.

4.3.4.2 Support. The grandmothers spoke of the support they both receive and don’t receive from individuals and agencies they are in contact with as a result of raising their grandchildren. Several grandmothers shared they found there was a lack of understanding from agencies about their situations, which caused them frustration.

Carol noted that she received positive support from school counselors. Margaret shared that it was a teacher who assisted in connecting her to a mental health agency in order to have her grandson referred to a specialist for assessment. Margaret also indicated she was “blessed
with good social workers; social workers that helped [her].” Marlene also spoke highly of teachers, saying “and those people tried so hard. I gotta give it to them, they tried hard; they tried everything they could.”

There were also frustrations mentioned by grandmothers in terms of findings supports. Gladys said, “I’m fighting with doctors, I’m fighting with social services; they say there’s nothing we can do.” Margaret also shared that she was not receiving support from either social services or Chief and Council because she didn’t live on the reserve. Marlene sometimes felt frustrated with her situation as well, stating, “it was getting to the point where I was just like, who’s gonna help me?”

Maxine indicated she often had contact with the school and while positive at times, felt that teachers shouldn’t judge; they should find out what’s going on in families before jumping to conclusions and calling Child and Family Services:

They [grandchildren] complain, the school gets a hold of social workers, there’s an investigation, these people don’t understand. How fair is that to them? Just don’t phone social services and they’re taken away and you know, how does that make... to me it doesn’t make it any better. You’re taking that child away from the mother… isn’t there already. You’re taking that child away from the grandparent. They have already, when they’re trusting the grandmother or the grandparents and then taken away. What are you really doing for the child? Really?

Barbara reflected on her experiences with social services and felt there was a lack of understanding by social workers about her situation:

…but social services, they do try, they have very young workers. Some of them don’t have any kids of their own or they don’t know what it’s like to be in care… All they know is that the system pays the grandparents to watch the kids, kind of like a babysitting service when it’s not. It’s not like that. And I tell them that.
Barbara further explained that “Social Services, they do help, but like I said, there’s barely any understanding. They do try, it’s not to say that they don’t try, but we get the odd one that doesn’t understand.”

Maxine shared a similar concern about a lack of understanding stating “don’t assume because I’m Métis that I’m good for nothing and I don’t know how take care of my family, because I can.” Barbara also shared that:

… you have the government like Social Services, not understanding too much about cultural. Book, too much book. And some do attend ceremonies and whatnot, but there’s also that cultural thing they don’t know enough about in here. And there’s a lot of talk about the book, and you gotta lot of talk, some talk to you the way we talk, and you have to totally understand and research somebody’s behaviour, why they’re acting the way they act.

Maxine also spoke of why she believes relationships with social workers can be challenging. She says:

And, a lot of people, I’m not saying everybody, but a lot of people especially the younger generation or some older generations, when they hear “social worker” they are intimidated. Because the first thing they think of a social worker is “they’re coming to take my children.” And 99% of the time, that’s what happens.

4.3.4.3 Resources. The grandmothers had mixed experiences in being able to find and access resources that could assist them. Margaret stated “I’m one of them out there that uses resources. There’s lots of resources, you got to learn to look for them.” She was specifically interested in training to help her understand the diagnoses her grandchildren received. “I did some training. I went to workshops for FASD. I still want more training.” Barbara also used the services provided by Child and Family Services, often financial, to assist in providing her grandchildren with Pow Wow outfits, guitar lessons, or the opportunity to play hockey.

Maxine, on the other hand, in her experience, found that there were limited resources available. “What is out there for grandparents looking after their grandchildren? Nothing.”
Marlene indicated that in her experience “there’s absolutely no services for grandmothers. If you go, I didn’t want any help from, from social services, just to stop the cycle.” As a result of not wanting help from Social Services, there was little available to her. Gladys also talked about wanting the cycle of dependence to end and feeling frustrated that it may not happen for several generations. “I think it’s sad when we become dependent on somebody or even a system.”

Maxine indicated that it would have been helpful to receive milk coupons or a food box. Margaret would have liked financial assistance so that she could enroll her grandchildren in hockey and other activities. Marlene would have liked respite. Barbara shared that in her opinion:

… the struggle for grandparents today is there is not enough um help in the way of housing, in the way of um a support system, traditional support systems. There’s no grannie corners that you can go, am I missing something here no, what can help me better, to understand cause there’s the way we grew up, like, old style way, with no running water and everything, there was no internet and that. So, there’s nothing over here that; there’s no mesh with the hi-tech world with everything else.

4.4. Conclusion

The grandmothers’ stories tell of the lives they have led, the reasons they decided to take on the role of being the primary caregiver for their grandchildren, and the rewards and challenges of taking on this role. Each story is unique though common themes were present in their stories, which provides insight as to how these grandmothers have experienced grandmothering. Considering their stories individually and in terms of the common themes provides an opportunity for social workers and other helping professionals to consider how they might support Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren.
CHAPTER 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study seeks to answer the question: “How do Indigenous grandmothers experience grandmothering when they are raising their grandchildren?” Its purpose is to contribute to the knowledge base regarding Indigenous grandmothers in Canada who take on a primary parental role and to inform and shape policy and programs to better support grandmothers in this position.

The grandmother’s provided rich descriptions through stories of their lived experiences as Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren. During the grandmother’s reflections as they told their stories, my own reflection on their stories during analysis, and in our follow-up conversations, everyone had the opportunity to provide their thoughts and comments on how their stories could be used to assist professionals who work with Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren.

The following discussion connects the super-ordinate themes back to the existing literature and highlights the unique experiences of Indigenous grandmothers who are primary caregivers to their grandchildren. Implications for practice, future research, and my personal reflections are also discussed.

5.1.1 Reflecting on the past. The grandmothers reflected on how their pasts affected them as both parents and as grandmothers (and for some, as great-grandmothers). They recognized that their life-histories shaped who they are now and the choices they have made in their lives. The effects of colonization echoed in their stories, including the intergenerational impacts that residential and day schools had on their families; it is clear that the effects of colonization in Canada continue to be felt by Indigenous peoples.

The effects of colonization on generations of Indigenous people are reflected within the literature (Emberley, 2007; Grant, 2004; Miller, 2012; Milloy, 1999) and in the stories of the
grandmothers. The grandmothers spoke of being separated from their families; grandparents, parents, and siblings from a young age. They spoke of how they didn’t see their families for long periods of time and when they did see each other, it felt like they were strangers. They suffered abuses by those who ran the schools and many developed addictions to cope with their painful childhood experiences.

In families where multiple generations attended residential or day school, family breakdown was prominent and parenting skills were not passed down to the subsequent generation. Each generation has had to relearn parenting skills and subsequently grandparenting skills. Reflecting on the positive Elders they had in their lives, the grandmothers recalled what they had been taught and how those teachings materialized when they became grandmothers. The experience of other Indigenous women who attended residential schools was similar; some had better experiences than others, though many described the injustices and abuse they suffered (Grant, 2004). They also struggled when they returned to their communities; reintegrating back into their families and their own personal coping. Many turned to substances to cope which led to further challenges in terms of being able to parent. Similarly, some of the grandmothers involved in this research struggled as mothers because of their addictions. They found it difficult to take care of themselves and their children. Many Indigenous families, as a result of these colonial practices (residential schools), “are facing situations of crisis and ill health, such as drug or alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, and incarceration” (McKenzie, Bourazza, Kubik, Strathy, & McKenna, 2010, p. 1). The grandmothers involved in the research each made the choice to be a survivor and end their dependence on substances so that they could be there for their children and work to end the cycles of addictions and abuse; this was easier for some than others.
The grandmothers involved in this research also recalled memories of their own parents and grandparents. They recounted positive memories of their grandparents and what they learned from them. Other Indigenous women have also recounted similar positive stories (Campbell, 1973; Grant, 2004). The support the grandmothers received from their grandparents was appreciated and the lessons they learned from them have stayed with them throughout their lives. The grandmothers also recalled the struggles they had with their own parents who were also dealing with their own pasts and at times, substance abuse issues.

Like other Indigenous grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren (Hill, 2016), the grandmothers who participated in my thesis research identified the issues their adult children had with substance abuse as a real struggle in terms of both why they are raising the grandchildren and the effects that parental substance abuse has on their grandchildren. Each grandmother had at least one adult child that struggled with addictions and this was the main reason they were unable to care for their own children (Weber & Waldrop, 2000). Some grandmothers blamed themselves or life circumstances for the reasons their children turned to alcohol and drugs. They felt that if they had been better parents that their adult children would have different lives.

The struggles between these grandmothers and their adult children, often related to finances, resentment, and interference in the grandmothers’ parenting style, are also documented in the literature (Climo, Patterson, & Lay, 2002). Many of the adult children did not provide any financial assistance to the grandmothers to help them in raising the grandchildren. The Child Tax Benefit was often claimed by the adult child and not passed on to the grandmother. As well, the adult child, though not able to care for their children, resented the grandmothers for taking on the parenting role. This was demonstrated in a variety of ways such as name calling, not speaking to their children, or calling Child and Family Services to make complaints. Further to
this, adult children interfered with the grandmothers’ raising of the grandchildren, particularly when they had regular or semi-regular access to their children. This was demonstrated by attempting to override the grandmother’s rules in the home, questioning discipline, or disrupting the structure and routine established by the grandmother. The grandmothers noted that the behaviour of their adult children was often confusing for the grandchildren leaving them feeling hurt or unwanted.

Grandmothers took on this role because of concerns they had for the well-being of their grandchildren and for their adult children. However, they were often placed in difficult positions when trying to mediate the feelings of the adult children and grandchildren. Like other grandmothers (Dunne & Kettler, 2008), the grandmothers in my study were concerned for the health and well-being of their adult children, but also about the impact that their substance abuse and other behaviours had on the grandchildren, which caused further stress in their lives; wondering and worrying if their adult children would be ok. Despite the grandmothers attempting to assist their adult children in a variety of ways, such as addictions treatment, providing them a place to live, offering support when they were in troubled relationships, and providing financial support, most adult children were not able to resolve their issues and reclaim their children. It is important to recognize the struggles that grandmothers had with their adult children and how the stress that may arise can negatively impact both grandmother and grandchildren (Weber & Waldrop, 2000).

Interestingly, several of the grandmothers commented during my discussions with them, that they were curious if paternal grandmothers were also engaged in caregiving the way they were. Each of the grandmother’s participating in this research was caring for their daughters’ children. They spoke about the fathers of their grandchildren who were not present in their
grandchildren’s lives and speculated why this might be, including that the fathers may not have had positive parental role models in their lives. They felt that their daughters were treated poorly by the men who fathered their children. This suggests that gender role is a factor in why the mothers are left to care for their children alone and why grandmothers take on this role. Though Indigenous grandmothers have often been involved in raising grandchildren, it was also the entire communities that assisted. There does appear to be inequality in this phenomenon in the sense that mothers are being left with the task of raising their children instead of sharing the responsibility with the fathers and, in turn, grandmothers also take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. This is an area that requires further investigation.

Reflecting on their lived experiences as Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren, drew out thoughtful analysis of how the past has shaped all of their futures. Ever present were the memories of their grandmothers, parents, and the personal struggles they overcame, which impacted their decisions both to raise their grandchildren and about how they would raise them. It is important for the grandmothers that those histories are acknowledged and that professionals understand the history of colonization in Canada in order to appreciate the grandmothers’ situations and why things are the way they are.

5.1.2 It’s not always easy. The grandmothers spoke of the variety of challenges they face with their own health and well-being, finances, and the losses associated with raising their grandchildren. These challenges are well documented within the literature (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Reeve, 2003; Letiecq, Bailey, & Kurtz, 2007; Purcal, Brennan, Cass, & Jenkins, 2014; Smith, Cichy, & Montoro-Rodriguez, 2015) though rarely in relation to Indigenous grandmothers, specifically.
The aging process takes a toll on one’s body as Carol commented regarding her ability to care for babies and toddlers; similar sentiments were shared by other Indigenous women. Castellano (1989) noted that her own mother often took care of her children but at a point had to stop caring for toddlers as she could not keep up to them, though she always enjoyed minding the babies. The physical process of aging and life course stages suggests that grandmothers may struggle when raising grandchildren; particularly young children (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Add into this health concerns, such as diabetes, which also require care and attention and, can cause greater stress on the grandmother; trying to care for self and others can be difficult.

At the same time, the grandmothers’ own well-being was secondary to that of their grandchildren. Grandmothers mentioned they had little time for socializing or going out with their own friends. As well, they had little time to engage in self-care activities such as embroidery, visiting, or beading, stating that time for themselves was sparse. They were busy meeting the needs of their grandchildren and were not always able to take time to look after themselves, including when they were ill and struggling to take care of their own health.

As well, some of the grandchildren were in the grandmother’s care for many years, while a few were in and out of the grandmother’s daily lives for differing lengths of time. The grandmothers would have them for a period, return them to the adult children, and receive them back again. Sometimes the adult children would refuse to let the grandmother see the grandchild and other times the grandchild grew up and left home. In each case there was a sense of loss framed by the silence remained after the grandchildren left. The busyness, the youthfulness, and constant movement in the house was missed when it was no longer there. When the children returned to their parents or were old enough to move out on their own, a feeling of emptiness
occurred and the grandmothers missed the close relationship they had built with their grandchildren (Standing, Musil, Beckette, & Warne, 2007).

The challenges faced by the grandmothers in terms of their own health and well-being are concerning given that if they are not healthy they may be unable to care for their grandchildren, which puts the grandchildren’s well-being at risk. Time to oneself and self-care are important for all caregivers, including grandmothers.

Also of concern were the financial implications of taking on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. Each grandmother was in a different life stage (employed, retired (on a pension), or receiving disability) meaning each had access to differing amounts of money each month. Regardless, learning to budget for additional costs associated with having grandchildren in the home stretched their finances. The grandmothers managed to make ends meet and the basic needs of the grandchildren were met. However, some grandmothers felt guilty that they were not able to provide beyond the basic needs such as bikes, electronics, or an evening out at the movies or bowling. If grandmothers were functioning in private care arrangements without being attached to Child and Family Services or Social Services, there was no additional money coming in each month. This created stress for the grandmothers who wanted to provide their grandchildren with the basic needs but also gifts, luxury items (electronics, mobile phones), and outings.

5.1.3 I love my grandchildren. The grandmothers were clear that they wanted their grandchildren to have the best life possible and wanted to do everything they could to ensure they had a good start. They also stated that the role provided many rewards for them. Some of the grandmothers had cared for many grandchildren throughout their lives and some saw raising grandchildren as their purpose in life; to ensure children were wanted, cared for, and had
opportunities for a life better than their own and the lives of their adult children. The extent that the grandmothers were willing to go because of their love for the children in their care often meant sacrificing their own well-being at times in lieu of their grandchildren’s. It was because they loved their grandchildren that they took on the role as caregiver, providing love, teachings, and a safe environment.

Some of the grandmothers saw the opportunity to raise the grandchildren as a second chance to do things differently than they did with their adult children which is similar to other grandmothers (Thompson, Cameron, & Fuller-Thompson, 2013). The internal rewards they received in taking on this role was enough for them because it was about their grandchildren having a place to be, to feel loved, and cared for. It was customary within Indigenous cultures that grandmothers were actively engaged in teaching children both life lessons and ceremony. The grandmothers in this project were no different in that teaching their grandchildren was viewed as part of their role. Life lessons and skills were seen as essential in helping their grandchildren grow. Teaching values and manners were equally important.

As well, assisting their grandchildren in understanding their culture or religion, when appropriate, was also part of their teaching role. Each grandmother worked to maintain respect of their own culture or religion while also maintaining that of the adult children so as not to overstep their role. Like other Indigenous grandchildren (Robbins, Sherman, Holeman, & Wilson, 2005), those grandchildren who were engaged with their culture and living a traditional lifestyle were provided opportunities to participate in ceremony while others were provided information when they asked. Using other supports such as schools or Elders assisted the cultural learning of the grandchildren (Thompson, Cameron, & Fuller-Thompson, 2013). All the grandmothers agreed that education was important so that their grandchildren could go on to lead
healthy and productive lives. The grandmothers felt that providing opportunities for their grandchildren to learn skills (traditional crafts, business, and sports) was valuable in enhancing their grandchildren’s quality of life. The role of teaching their grandchildren was significant for the grandmothers. Being able to pass their knowledge and wisdom to the next generation with the hope that their life lessons will be remembered and used by their grandchildren in future provided an internal reward that they had something to give that was worth giving.

These grandmothers, similar to other grandmothers (Hill, 2016), also wanted to ensure that their grandchildren had a safe environment to live in; free from drugs, alcohol, and abuse. It was important to them that the grandchildren had structure in their lives, attended school, and participated in extra-curricular activities; they had the best interests of their grandchildren in mind. As well, each grandmother wanted to ensure that their grandchildren did not end up in foster care under the protection of Child and Family Services, believing it was better for the grandchildren to be with them than outside of the family. While Child and Family Services was involved in the lives of three of the grandmothers, as a Person of Significant Interest (PSI), the social service role usually equated to a yearly check-in to ensure the needs of the grandchildren were being met. It was important to the grandmothers that the inter-generational cycle of trauma as a result of colonization ended with them and that their grandchildren did not follow in the footsteps of their parents. This was another reason why some of the grandmothers did not want to rely on Social Services (for financial supports) as they believe it becomes another cycle of dependence. However, the support of Social Services was required at times in order to meet the needs of the grandchildren. This was dependent upon where each grandmother was in her life and her financial state (employed/on pension/receiving disability supports).
The well-being of the grandchildren was also challenging in terms of addressing the unique needs of their grandchildren (behavioural/cognitive challenges) (Weber & Waldrop, 2000) and working through issues such as loss of parents. The grandmothers sought out resources to help them understand the specific needs of the grandchildren (FASD, ADHD, autism, abuse, trauma) but found that waitlists were long and resources few. Finding people to help them understand how they could help their grandchildren was important so that they could give their grandchildren the supports they needed.

Understanding that grandmothers have the best interests of the grandchildren in mind and believe they are doing the best they can is noteworthy. The grandmothers choose to take on this role because of the love they have for their grandchildren, regardless of the implications it may have on their own well-being.

**5.1.4 What I need.** Each grandmother believed she was doing the best she could in terms of negotiating with her adult children, government systems, working with what she had financially, and access to supports and resources. Each felt that there were other grandmothers who had it worse than she did. While each grandmother’s situation may not have been ideal, they persevered in order to keep their grandchildren in their care, so as not to lose them to another system.

In Saskatchewan, the “child welfare system is providing fragmented, inconsistent, and insufficient resources to [Indigenous] grandmothers caring for grandchildren” (McKenzie, Bourazza, Kubik, Strathy, & McKenna, 2010, p. 1). The Indigenous grandmothers and others were “not provided with sufficient and consistent financial support from the child welfare system [and] community services and supports” (McKenzie et al., 2010, p. 1). Furthermore, the feelings of fear and distrust of the child welfare system are felt by many Indigenous grandmothers.
(McKenzie et al., 2010). In considering these factors, one can recognize that changes to the child welfare system are needed to support Indigenous grandmothers in order to work with them in constructive ways when they take on the role of parenting their grandchildren.

**5.1.5 Summary of discussion.** Overall, the grandmothers who participated in this research shared some similar experiences with other grandmothers who were raising their grandchildren. The grandmothers reflected on their past experiences recognizing how they have shaped who they have become today and how it may have impacted on their adult children. The impacts of colonization were present in their stories and each overcame challenges in their lives so that they can be positive supports for their grandchildren. While at times they might struggle with their own health, finances, accessing resources, because they love their grandchildren they are willing to make sacrifices. They want their children to feel loved and to grow up to have healthy and productive lives. Passing on cultural traditions was important for several of the grandmothers and teaching life skills and lessons was seen as an important role that the grandmothers have. The grandmothers believe that improved understanding of their situations by social workers and other helping professions would assist them in the role that they have taken on.

**5.2 Implications for Practice**

I was reminded, when speaking with the grandmothers about how their stories might be helpful to social workers and other helping professionals, that although grandmothers shared some common experiences and history, each is unique in her circumstances. It is therefore important to consider each grandmother’s experiences and circumstances individually and, although all identified as Indigenous, not to group them together, because they are different. That said, having an appreciation for and understanding of Indigenous and colonial history in
Canada, and specifically in the geographical areas where one is working, can provide context to social workers engaging with specific grandmothers’ circumstances.

One grandmother indicated it would be helpful if social workers and other helping professionals learned about Indigenous culture, in the communities they served, not only by reading about it but also by experiencing it (attending ceremony). She indicated that if people are afraid of something (meaning fear of the unknown) that it is even more important that they ask questions and seek understanding.

Social workers, in accordance with the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005) have a duty to take into account the differences that exist among individuals and families which means having an understanding and appreciation for cultural differences. Understanding the impacts of colonization and how Indigenous people are affected is important in helping to understand their lived experience and how they have become who they are (Garran & Werkmeister Rozas, 2013; Harms et al., 2011). Cultural competence as outlined by Dean (2001) “involves learning about the history and shared characteristics of different groups and using this knowledge to create bridges and increase understanding with individual clients and families” (p. 625). Further to this, understanding how colonization has impacted both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and how we perceive each other is crucial in developing meaningful relationships. This point is highlighted in the Calls to Action compiled by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) which states that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations should be educated and trained on the impacts of residential schools and that decision-makers must take into account the impact that the residential school system had on children and their caregivers.
Having a deeper knowledge and an understanding of the Indigenous grandmothers’ experiences, including an awareness of inter-family dynamics of skipped generation families and of Indigenous cultures, can assist social workers and other helping professionals who are working with Indigenous grandmothers, by providing meaningful context regarding their situations. Working with Indigenous people requires respect for and an understanding of their histories and that there are challenges unique to Indigenous peoples because of colonization (Vicary & Bishop, 2005). One grandmother commented that social workers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, do not understand Indigenous history and need to be open to learning about it.

Listening to the needs of the grandmothers and offering assistance is also required. One grandmother commented that Indigenous grandmothers are proud and won’t often ask for assistance and therefore it is important that social workers listen, assess, and offer support. As well, being empathetic to Indigenous grandmothers is also important. Recognizing that they are may be in a position because they felt like they did not have a choice, given the alternatives, and are doing the best they can while working through the challenges of this transition is important. Indigenous grandmothers may be grieving the choices their own children have made and the role they may have had in their adult children’s current situations and, at the same time, are also doing their best to meet the needs of the grandchildren. As this can be an unexpected situation and can cause challenges for grandmothers, patience and kindness is required when working with grandmothers who are adjusting to their role. As social workers and helping professionals, we need to take time to listen.

Several grandmothers felt a lack of understanding by agencies that could be assisting them, not unlike other Indigenous women who have worked with social workers (Gladstone &
Brown, 2007). For instance, one grandmother spoke of the issues she had when trying to access the food bank in terms of not having the grandchildren’s health cards, which are required. Another spoke of trying to register her grandchildren for community sports teams but was unable to do so because she did not have the team fees in time as she was waiting on another agency to provide them. It is the grandchildren that lose out in these situations. The grandmothers indicated a general lack of understanding by other people of their experiences and the challenges they face in raising their grandchildren.

Some of the grandmothers did not want to be involved with Social Services or Child Welfare for a variety of reasons; they want to break the cycle of children being raised by other families or they did not want someone checking in on their lives. This created challenges because of the limited resources available to them if they were not connected to a government agency (Goodman, Potts, & Paztor, 2007). If Child Welfare was involved, there may have been more resources available (similar to those provided a foster parent) including financial supports, respite, and assessments/treatment for grandchildren. However, it was not always easy to access these resources. One grandmother told me that she did request financial assistance to support her grandchildren’s attendance at cultural activities, but her request was denied. She felt she was being discriminated against as the social worker did not appear to understand the importance of the request. Thus, a lack of knowledge and understanding by social workers may cause frustration for grandmothers when they attempt to access resources.

Lack of funding for Indigenous grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren was a commonly expressed theme. The Indigenous grandmothers who made private arrangements with their adult children did not receive financial benefits which was, at times, challenging in both meeting basic needs and also providing their grandchildren with outings, presents, vacations, or
extra-curricular activities. These grandmothers fell through the cracks because they were no different than anyone raising a child, except that they were often in a different life stage than most parents and could not access the same resources. Developing resources, including an alternative funding strategy, such as government financial aid, specifically for grandmothers who are full-time caregivers would greatly assist them in terms of meeting the needs of their grandchildren.

Like other grandmothers, Indigenous grandmothers are not the “parents” in a legal sense, are often aging, have limited finances, and are balancing the needs of the grandchildren with their own capacities and histories (Mutchler, Baker, & Lee, 2007). Working with Indigenous grandmothers is not the same as working with parents because the connection between grandparent and child is different. While these grandmothers do take on a parental role, the distinction of being a grandmother is often maintained. The unique challenges that Indigenous grandmothers face are becoming more apparent and social workers who understand the special role of Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren will be better able to advocate with and on behalf of these grandmothers. Understandably, all organizations have policies and protocols that staff must work within. Yet, having an understanding of what each Indigenous grandmother requires is an important step in supporting them in the role they have taken on. Listening to the grandmothers, hearing what they need, and offering support are all crucial in developing a working relationship that provides meaningful support.

5.3 Future Research

The findings from this thesis add to a body of literature that is presently lacking, specifically in Canada, regarding the experiences of Indigenous grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren. Additional research from other parts of Canada would increase the
knowledge of how other Indigenous grandmothers experience their roles. Research on the impact of gender roles and the implications they may have on Indigenous mothers and grandmothers could further inform policy and programs. As well, research to measure the cultural competence of social workers may be useful in understanding how social workers engage with Indigenous grandmothers and if more knowledge acquisition and experiential learning is needed, particularly in light of the recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015).

More research on the “two-eyed seeing” approach would be beneficial for non-Indigenous social workers working with Indigenous populations. Being able to bridge the gap between cultures by focusing on the positives of each, might alleviate some of the tensions that are felt by Indigenous people working with non-Indigenous people.

Further to this, consideration to other services, such as such as an alternative governmental funding source, that could be made available to support grandmothers who do not want to engage with the social welfare systems, to help with the costs associated with raising children, would be beneficial to grandmothers. Also, research focusing on the experiences of both the adult children and grandchildren of Indigenous grandmothers could advance this research area in terms of understanding the triad and the needs of each, including what it means to the adult children to use their parents as long-term care-givers for their children.

5.4 Personal Reflections

The decision to undertake research about Indigenous grandmothers was not one that I had initially anticipated. The idea was presented to me by a professor who personally knew an Indigenous grandmother, Marlene, who wanted to tell her story. Having an interest in learning about Indigenous people within a supportive learning environment with people who could provide guidance, it was still with some trepidation that I took on this project.
Having learned about the various protocols that are required when researching with Indigenous people, knowing that there are mixed feelings in academia and in community about non-Indigenous people conducting research with Indigenous populations, and wondering if I would be accepted, made the project seem overwhelming in the beginning. However, I had the confidence of the people around me, so I moved forward.

Having a gatekeeper (Marlene) was critical in this undertaking. Without her, I don’t know if I would have found participants for this research. She was instrumental in what she called “rounding up the kokums” and her vouching for me was crucial. Marlene and I spoke numerous times while I was working on my proposal; I always thought of this as her project and I was assisting in facilitating and I wanted to do well by her and the grandmothers. I did not want to be another non-Indigenous researcher who ‘took the data and ran’. Each time I spoke with Marlene I learned more about Indigenous protocols, grandmothers, and community. Once I started moving forward, the protocols for ethical research with Indigenous people were not as intimidating as I thought. I also recognized that I was working with individuals who resided in the same community but did not have to seek approvals from a Band Council which could have presented challenges. The University of Regina Research Ethics Board requires those conducting research with Indigenous populations to consider several specific areas when designing their research project, which included: how to engage the community, customs and codes to be observed, consideration of a research agreement, and how participants contribute to the interpretation of data and their dissemination. Careful consideration was made regarding the above noted areas in order to ensure I was conducting ethical research.

I also had to spend time thinking through the terminology I would use (Indigenous versus Aboriginal, grandmother versus kokum) as well as how to reconcile western versus Indigenous
worldviews and methodologies that would be congruent with both. A lot of planning was required in the research design and choosing two methodologies, one Indigenous and one western, assisted me in ensuring the worldviews of both the participants and me were honoured. The available literature on “two-eyed seeing” was helpful in this process. I followed the methods of both methodologies, Indigenous Storytelling and IPA, but also made them my own. In this way, I was able to hear the stories of the grandmothers and interpret them in meaningful ways. Respect, creating space, and listening with an open heart are principles I believe in and practiced throughout the research process. The grandmothers had the opportunity to share whatever they chose about the topic without having to answer specific questions. I was open to hearing their perspectives and setting aside my own pre-conceptions of this phenomenon. Providing my own interpretation and having the grandmothers review same was essential in creating transparency. I feel I was able to stay true to my own research paradigm and was respectful of the grandmothers’ worldviews throughout the research process.

Building relationships with the grandmothers was essential in the research process as were ongoing via phone calls and visits. The grandmothers were gracious in meeting with me and honest in sharing their stories. I learned that research takes time. On several occasions, I made the trip to Prince Albert, having confirmed a meeting time the night before, only to find out when I arrived that something had come up and the grandmother(s) were not able to meet with me; rescheduling of meetings was frequent. Further to this, several attempts were made to organize a sharing circle so that all the grandmothers could meet each other. Despite numerous attempts, a sharing circle could not be arranged at a time that all the grandmothers could attend. If planning for sharing circles or other larger group meetings, time is required and potentially a larger group of participants, so there are more people to draw from to increase turnout. One must
also respect that participants may not want to participate in sharing circles, for reasons such as they are not part of their worldview or belief system or because they wish to remain anonymous.  

Because I had been invited into the grandmothers’ lives, built relationships with, and felt connected to them, it was important to me that I checked and rechecked that they were comfortable with how I was presenting their stories. I wanted to use their words to ensure that their voices came through. I also sought validation from them regarding themes. I knew my voice would also come through but wanted to make sure theirs was not lost in the process; I wanted to be an ally.  

As mentioned, I was reminded that we all have unique stories and though I speak of Indigenous people as a group; they all have different life experiences, views, values, and beliefs. While I knew on an intellectual level that we cannot lump Indigenous people together because they share a similar cultural history, spending time with the grandmothers and hearing their stories provided me a deeper level of awareness of the importance of hearing everyone’s story. Each of the grandmother’s view their life as a set of circumstances that has brought them to where they are. This is not unique; everyone creates meanings from the circumstances they encounter. However, being able to sit with the Indigenous grandmothers, share coffee or a meal, and to witness both their pain and resilience was an eye-opening experience and key learning point for me. As Barbara had indicated, it’s important for social workers to have experiential learning and working directly with the grandmothers provided this. When working with Indigenous clients, it is easy to focus on the task at hand, but taking the time to get to know clients on a deeper level can benefit both client and worker. This is something I will strive for in my social work practice.
I have been changed because of this research. My worldview has changed because I was invited to bear witness to the stories of these grandmothers. They have taught me patience, required me to look at my own beliefs about Indigenous people, and reminded me about my own privilege and how I may be viewed as a social worker. For this I am grateful.

5.5 Conclusion

Indigenous grandmothers have always been involved in raising grandchildren. However, little is known about how Indigenous grandmothers in Canada currently experience their role of raising their grandchildren. This project was exploratory in nature and employed Indigenous Storytelling and IPA qualitative methodologies to examine the topic.

The role of an Indigenous grandmother in this endeavour is multi-faceted. Willingly taking on this role because of concerns for the well-being of the grandchildren can, at times, place the grandmothers’ own health and well-being at risk and also has financial implications. The strain of negotiating with adult children can be difficult on the grandmother and the grandchildren as adult children are often struggling with their own addictions and relationship issues. Recalling the experiences of their own childhoods, the grandmothers considered who was involved in raising them, and what lessons they chose to keep, and how they have moved on from their pasts.

Social workers, and other helping professionals, should be aware of how colonization has impacted generations of Indigenous families and how grandmothers are working to end the cycle of trauma caused by colonization that has existed for years. However, recognizing that each grandmother’s experience is unique is also key in understanding their needs and providing assistance. Understanding that being a full-time grandmother is different than how society typically views grandmothering is essential as well as recognizing that specialized support is
needed for Indigenous grandmothers who take on this role, in terms of access to culturally relevant resources, financial aid, and community and social supports. Indigenous grandmothers take on this role because their adult children are unable to take care of their children and the grandmothers do not want to lose their grandchildren to the child welfare system. There are benefits to all parties (family and government) when grandmothers take on this role and they should be respected for doing so.

Future research in this area may include reviewing the cultural competence of social workers, including education about residential schools, implications of gender roles as to why grandmothers take on a primary caregiving roles, the use of “two-eyed seeing” in social work practice, possibilities for alternative governmental funding sources, and opportunities for the adult children and grandchildren of Indigenous grandmothers to learn about the needs of each will all increase awareness and understanding of this phenomenon.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Poster

You are invited to participate in a research project regarding the role of Indigenous Grandmothers whom are raising their grandchildren

Margie Brown is student at the University of Regina currently completing her Masters of Social Work degree. As a graduate student in Social Work interested in the lives of Indigenous people, she would like to learn more about the experiences of Indigenous grandmothers raising their grandchildren and the implications this may have on policies and services.

Below is more information about the project. If you are interested in participating or have questions about participating, please contact Margie at brown1ma@uregina.ca.

Project title: The Lived Experiences of Indigenous Grandmothers whom are raising their Grandchildren

Researcher: Margie Brown
Faculty of Social Work (graduate student)
University of Regina
Email: brown1ma@uregina.ca

Supervisor: Randy Johner
Faculty of Social Work
University of Regina
Email: randy.johner@uregina.ca

Purpose and objective of research:

▪ To explore the role of Indigenous grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.
▪ To provide an opportunity for grandmothers to share their stories to raise awareness of their experiences in raising their grandchildren and advocate within their community.

Your role within the research:

▪ You will participate in a 1-2 hour interview with Margie to share your stories about your role as a grandmother raising your grandchildren.
▪ You are invited to attend a 1-2 hour Sharing Circle at the end of the project to hear the findings and explore the ways they would like their stories shared within their community.

It is not anticipated that any legal repercussions will arise from participation in this project. However, should custody of your grandchild be a concern or if you have questions, you can contact Prince Albert Legal Aid (306-953-2850).
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Project Title: The Lived Experiences of Indigenous Grandmothers who are raising their Grandchildren

Researcher: Margie Brown
Faculty of Social Work (graduate student)
University of Regina
Email: brown1ma@uregina.ca

Supervisor: Randy Johner
Faculty of Social Work
University of Regina
Email: randy.johner@uregina.ca

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

- The purpose of this study is to gain understanding about the how Indigenous grandmothers experience their role as a grandmother when they are raising their grandchildren. Data obtained will also be used for the researcher’s thesis and the possibility exists that it may be used in journal articles, presentations, or media interviews.
- The objective of the project is to contribute to the existing knowledge regarding Indigenous grandmothers in Canada whom are raising their grandchildren and will also inform and shape policies and programs that could support these grandmothers. This information will be relevant to social workers and other helping professionals who have associations with Indigenous grandmothers.

Procedures:

- You will participate in a 1-2 hour interview to share your experiences about your role in raising your grandchildren. The interview will be arranged at a location that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, word-for-word, to ensure your story is captured accurately.
- You will be invited to attend a 1-2 hour Sharing Circle at the end of the project to discuss the findings and have be provided the opportunity to decide with whom you would like your stories shared with. You will also be invited to share your stories with the other grandmothers at a Sharing Circle at the end of the project and discuss how your stories can be shared with others.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.
Potential Risks:

- There are no known potential risks associated with participating in this project. However, each participant will need to decide if sharing their story could cause feelings of emotional distress for them. As well, participants will have the right to choose if they would like to use their real name or an alternate name for this project; recognizing that some participants may have concerns due to possible negative repercussions or social consequences. Participants will have the right to end the interview at any time.
- The name and contact information of a local Elder will be made available to you for you to contact should you become distressed during your participation in this project along with a local mental health distress line telephone number.
- It is not anticipated that any legal repercussions will arise from participation in this project. However, should custody of your grandchild become a concern, participants can contact Prince Albert Legal Aid (306-953-2850).

Potential Benefits:

- Participants will be able to share stories of their experiences of raising their grandchildren with other grandmothers and potentially other members of the community including organizations/agencies that may benefit from hearing your stories which participants will decide upon at the closing Sharing Circle. The results of these interviews will also be used to write a thesis about the role of Indigenous grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren which may further raise awareness about the experiences that Indigenous grandmothers have.

Compensation:

- Grandmothers participating will receive a traditional tobacco and nominal gift certificate as a thank you for your participation.

Confidentiality:

- Personal data obtained as part of this project will be kept confidential. Participants can choose if they would like their name or an alternate name used in reports or publications and can choose to remain anonymous.
- Audio-recordings and transcripts of the interviews will be kept for 5 years. At that time, they will be destroyed.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with and whether you would like to participate in the Sharing Circle. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position [e.g. employment, access to services] or how you will be treated.
- Should you wish to withdraw, please contact Margie at via email at brown1ma@uregina.ca. Upon withdrawal from the project your personal data will be destroyed.
- Your right to withdrawal from this project will apply until November 30, 2016. After this date, it is possible that some results have been analyzed, written up and/or presented and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.
Follow up:

- To obtain results from the study, please contact Margie via email at brown1ma@uregina.ca

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact Margie Brown, the researcher, using the information at the top of page 1;
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board on (insert date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (306-585-4986 or research.ethics@uregina.ca).

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

______________________________      _______________________
Name of Participant                  Signature                  Date

______________________________
Researcher’s Signature                Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix C: University of Regina Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

University of Regina
Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

Investigator(s): Margie Brown
Department: Faculty of Social Work
Supervisor: Brigitte Krieg
Title: The Lived Experiences of Indigenous Grandmothers whom are raising their Grandchildren

APPROVED ON: June 28, 2016 RENEWAL DATE: June 28, 2017

APPROVAL OF:
Application of Behavioural Research Ethics Review
Letter of Contact
Recruitment Letter
Consent Form

FULL BOARD MEETING
The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.uregina.ca/research/for-faculty-staff/ethics-compliance/human/forms1/ethics-forms.html.

Dr. Larena Hoeber, Chair
University of Regina Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:
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University of Regina
Research and Innovation Centre 109
Regina, SK S4S 0A2
Telephone (306) 585-4775
Fax (306) 585-4895
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