

TOWARD CULTURAL SAFETY:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPT FOR SOCIAL
WORK EDUCATION WITH CANADIAN
ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

EVELINE J. MILLIKEN





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**TOWARD CULTURAL SAFETY:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPT
FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
WITH CANADIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES**

by

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**A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

“Cultural safety,” a concept originating in healthcare settings in Aotearoa/New Zealand, is explored with Aboriginal social work graduates in a Canadian context.

Cultural safety is defined as:

that state of being in which the [*individual*] knows emotionally that her/his personal wellbeing, as well as social and cultural frames of reference, are acknowledged - even if not fully understood. Furthermore, she/he is given active reason to feel hopeful that her/his needs and those of her/his family members and kin will be accorded dignity and respect. (Fulcher, 1998, p. 333)

The research site was the University of Manitoba’s Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP). Given a history of painful experiences within mainstream Canadian educational institutions, this study adopted an empowerment anti-oppressive perspective. Qualitative participatory research approaches and grounded theory methods were used. Data were gathered through conversations with thirteen graduates and non-graduates about the meaning, presence, or absence of cultural safety in their social work education; what contributed to their sense of cultural safety; and what might have added to that sense. Themes arising from individual conversations were reviewed and augmented by two participant talking circles. An Advisory Group of Aboriginal social work instructors provided cultural guidance throughout the study.

The concept of cultural safety was found to be useful for assessing the relationships between people of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture in this social work education setting. The concept helped graduates to name and locate nuances in relationships that otherwise went unnamed. Participants identified three experiences of unsafety which they faced regularly: they live in two worlds with a consequent

partializing of their experience; they live with the pervasive, pernicious, and persistent shadow of racism; and they live in a state of constant vigilance in which various forms of silence play key protective roles and means of resistance. Conversely, participants described three dynamics contributing to cultural safety. These were the value of an inclusive spirituality, the importance of valuing individuals as whole persons, and the priority of relationships in social work classrooms. Implications and recommendations for shifting mind-sets, faculty hiring and preparation, student-faculty boundaries, curricula, student intakes, and non-academic supports are suggested.

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A ten year doctoral process requires the assistance of many important people. There are far too many in this “village” of my life to name each one, so I offer grateful thanks to all who have assisted me along this journey, named or not.

Two women, who embody the best of participatory action in academia, research, and practice agreed to help me. My supervisor, Joan Pennell, first considered the challenge, in true feminist style, to shift from primary role of colleague and friend, to being teacher and supervisor. Her rigorously careful and ethical carrying out of this dance of boundaries has been a graduate level course in itself. Joan’s unconditional support, ready access, insightful questions, comments, and high standards have made this process not only possible, but a privilege. A woman busy in her own medical field and career, committee member Sharon Macdonald has helped in ways too numerous to mention. Sharon has said “yes” to all of my requests, whether it was to invigilate comprehensive exams, offer support when I needed emergency surgery in England, or being the Winnipeg presence to push me to “get the thing done.”

Co-supervisor, Ken Barter’s return to Newfoundland occurred as I was leaving that campus for home. Yet, he agreed to be my contact, support, and important link to Memorial University of Newfoundland (M.U.N.). His North-western Ontario experience (my home territory) and care-full responses are appreciated.

Kim Clare has been my colleague, Director, fellow M.U.N.-student, and friend. Her constant support, from getting on the plane with me as I left my family to go to M.U.N., to many thoughtful discussions, to positive everyday encouragement, has been

enormously helpful. Another colleague, Mary Altpeter, has been encouragement personified.

Yvonne Pompana's support was crucial in allowing me to take on this research. Her ongoing support through the Advisory Group, pushing, and challenging me to stretch further, has contributed hugely to the integrity of this research. Advisory Group member Marie Land's perspective as a graduate, and later as a teaching colleague at ICSWP, has offered a unique and valuable resource. Gwen Gosek has not been affiliated with ICSWP and yet she agreed to offer her time, insights, and compassionate views to assist me and through this research.

Many thanks go to my doctoral examining committee, Valli Kalkei Kanuha, Nancy Sullivan, and Janet Fitzpatrick. Their careful, perceptive questions and comments deepened my awareness of the socially constructed nature of this project.

My family members have lived with this "project" for 10 years. My partner, Gordon Taylor, has offered unconditional support through flood (1997); emergency surgery (2004) and subsequent limitations; extra parenting duties (e.g., sewing bee costumes); and daily help while I was away or sequestered behind a computer screen. He has been my sounding board, transcriber, I.T. guy, and far too many other roles to mention. I simply could not have done this Ph.D. without him. My children, Katherine and Hilary, probably don't remember a time when I wasn't working on this Ph.D.! They, also, have been enormously encouraging and supportive. Their perfect transitions through the various developmental stages speak to how amazing they are. Both are the

kind of student I would like to be. Their habits and talents inspire me. To all of these, I extend my heart felt thank you.

There is one more group to acknowledge. Research participants took time out of busy lives, agreed to go along with something in hope that the process would help others. When I wanted to give up, their courage sustained me.

The benefit of participatory action research is that those people who have been historically silent or silenced reclaim their voice through a partnership with the researcher. Aboriginal people are more than capable of telling their own stories and speaking their own message to the non-Aboriginal world. Still, participants in this study indicated their trust in me to retell their stories in a good way to help non-Aboriginal people learn how to relate to Aboriginal culture in a social work education context. It is in that spirit that this information is presented: "I believe that . . . because you are non-native you would have more of a voice . . . from a professor perspective. But I trust you wholeheartedly and . . . I trust that things will change" (C2, P.12, L.37-41). Making reference to the former statement, another participant confirmed that view:

You can take this message farther than our voices can take it, individually. Now you're taking a strong message that is put together by a group of people. But I believe even that group of people would not be able to push this message as far, if it wasn't, excuse me for saying, the white person pushing it too. Right? . . . You know this is an issue that needs to be dealt with. . . . You're here because . . . you can push it in that direction. (C2, P.12, L. 53 – P.13, L.13)

As noted by the participants, I am not an Aboriginal person, and to receive such trust is an honour and a humbling gift. It should be recognized as a sad reality that Aboriginal students might still feel that the message can go further in the care of a non-

Aboriginal researcher. Acknowledging the privileges which I have received, this dissertation is my effort to carry that trust as well as I can, on their behalf.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACFTS	Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social
Advisory, P.#, L.#	Transcript of Advisory Group, Page #, Line #
ACWI	Aboriginal Child Welfare Initiative
AHRDCC	Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada
AJI	Aboriginal Justice Inquiry
B.S.W.	Bachelor of Social Work
C.#, P.#, L.#	Transcript reference of Talking Circle #, Page #, Line #
CAI	(Winnipeg) Core Area Initiative
CASSW	Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work
CASWE	Canadian Association of Social work Education (formerly CASSW)
CAUT	Canadian Association of University Teachers
CSC	Construction Sector Council
CSWE	Council on Social Work Education
CWI	Child Welfare Initiative
DIAND	Department of Indian Affairs
ICSWP	Inner City Social Work Program
ICEHR	Inter-disciplinary Committee Ethics in Human Research Committee
LICO	Low income cut-off
M.S.W.	Master of Social Work
NASW	National Association of Social Workers
PSCD	Post-Secondary Career Development

RCAP (Canadian) Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

T.#, P.#, L.# Individual conversation transcript #, Page #, Line #

WEC Winnipeg Education Centre

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“At the Annual General Meeting . . . when I saw her [*social work professor*] . . . I just wanted to fall into her arms I was so exhausted . . . I just felt like saying, ‘I just want to come home’” (T.10; P.6; L.3-5).¹ This statement by an Aboriginal graduate of the University of Manitoba Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP) hints at the existence and importance of the practice of cultural safety at this Winnipeg program site.² This statement also suggests how important a culturally safe education environment or “home” is for Aboriginal social work students preparing for practice.

This research endeavoured to discover the meaning and relevance of the concept of cultural safety to former Aboriginal social work students in a Canadian context. Cultural safety was a means of opening up conversation in which graduates could reflect on their education program. This concept was originally derived from a healthcare environment in Aotearoa/New Zealand.³ In pursuing the general purpose of exploring the meaning and relevance of this concept, factors contributing to cultural safety for these individuals were identified. A subsequent, more specific purpose of this study was to discover whether the concept of cultural safety is applicable to a Canadian Bachelor of Social Work program that educates Aboriginal students (among others). Based upon this research, recommendations to create more effective and supportive educational environments for Aboriginal social work students have been developed.

Defined and analyzed in more detail below, cultural safety refers to “actions which recognize, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity needs of [*Aboriginal people*] and safely meet their needs, expectations, and rights” (Polaschek, 1998, p. 452). The history of Canadian educational experiences for Aboriginal people in general suggests that educational institutions have not tended to produce culturally safe environments. This lack of attention to unique needs for cultural identity has caused significant problems.

The overarching framework of this study is an empowerment perspective (Simon, 1994) informed by “doing anti-oppressive practice” (Baines, 2007). Research, as well as education, with Aboriginal students requires awareness of Aboriginal theory, especially because of the dynamics and consequences of colonization and decolonization. Approaches to understanding Aboriginal people must be careful to employ respectful, non-co-opting practices (Piquemal, 2000). Hence, this study utilized a qualitative, participatory research approach. The methodology draws on grounded theory methods to ensure that the voices heard are those of Aboriginal participants.

The research site was the University of Manitoba’s Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP) which is housed at the William Norrie Centre, also known as the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC). The ICSWP encourages the enrollment and retention of current residents of the inner city by developing an accessible community; providing a supportive program which values their life experiences, including experience as clients; building on students’ knowledge of their own culture and language; and adding relevant social work theory and professional skills.

Relevance of the Study

The aim of this study was to understand better the meaning of cultural safety and its relevance for Aboriginal social work students. The study was based on the premise that Aboriginal communities are best served by social workers who understand the worldview, history, and knowledge(s) of those communities.

The concept of cultural safety describes a context needed to facilitate helpful working relationships between people of two cultures, one dominant and one oppressed. It provides language that gives a more distinct emphasis to the issues involved in the meeting of cultures, issues that are critically important for educators in social work. The terminology of cultural safety seems to suggest a mind-set shift that is required, without which well-intentioned educators and practitioners may stumble. Such language signals the direction and energy needed to further build bridges of respect for the advancement of effective social work. Hence, confirming the meaning, relevance, and dynamics of the concept of cultural safety from a Canadian Aboriginal point of view is important if the term is to be used within social work education and practice settings.

Input from Aboriginal social work graduates as to what factors contribute to cultural safety provides direction for planning effective social work education. Clearer and more helpful expectations of how faculty may approach students and relate to them, the content of curricula, and the value of non-academic supports were indicated. Implications for hiring of faculty were suggested. Cultural safety, in fact, could be an

organizing principle to guide the development of social work education programs for Aboriginal students.

The Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) (2000) *Standards for Accreditation* called for a commitment to recruit students from diverse backgrounds, including Aboriginal groups.⁴ Specifically, Standard 4.8 says:

In student recruitment, schools shall seek to reflect the diversity of the populations they serve. Evidence of an acknowledged need for entrance into the social work profession of various ethnic, cultural and racial and other diverse populations that are presently under-represented and under-served should be identified in patterns of recruitment, admissions, financial aid, supportive services and retention designed to achieve the continued diversification of the student body. (p. 7)

In 1981, nineteen years before the publication of the above mentioned standard, the ICSW Program was created to address two important issues: removing barriers to achieving a university education and creating an educational system that would provide the opportunity for more Aboriginal people to receive professional social work education in order to return to their communities to provide service. Given this constituency to be served, it is essential that social work educators understand what contributes to and detracts from the Aboriginal student constituency's sense of cultural safety.

The need for Aboriginal social work practitioners has been well-documented (Colorado, 1988; Hart, 1999; Morrissette, McKenzie, & Morrissette, 1993). Colonization, as discussed below, has directly and indirectly undermined traditional Aboriginal social values and structures. Decolonization, while reasserting indigenous worldviews, spiritualities, sense of authority, community institutions, and economic

processes, brings more choice and perhaps uncertainty to Aboriginal people seeking to make their way in the Canadian context. Amid the plethora of confusing authorities and visions, it is not surprising that Aboriginal people experience an increased share of social suffering as compared to non-Aboriginal people.

That suffering, and a consequent need for social work support, exists in many areas including education, employment, justice, and health (Trocme, Della, & Blackstock, 2003). Leaving the emotional and social issues faced by Aboriginal students for the next chapter, the difficulties Aboriginal people have within the educational system are significant. The grade level completed is a factor which signals relative success or challenge in the workforce. For example, according to government figures (Canada, 2006), completing Grade Nine is often considered an indicator of functional literacy; Grade Eleven completion is an achievement that correlates to an upturn in earning potential in the workplace; Grade Twelve completion is a common requirement for new job applications (p. 45). Beyond this, post-secondary education is a significant expectation among corporate employers:

The Conference Board of Canada reports that “corporations expect about 92% of new employees to have at least completed secondary education; 23% should have community college diplomas and 24% university degrees.” This is a conservative estimate. The conventional wisdom is that 70% of new positions will require post-secondary education or training. (Canada, 2006, p. 45)

While the level of primary and secondary education of Manitoba’s Aboriginal people is improving, it still trails that of the general population. For example, between 1966 and 2001, the percentage of Aboriginal youth (15-29) who have less than a Grade Nine education dropped from 12.4% to 8.7%; however, only 1.6% of the non-

Aboriginal population in the same category had not completed Grade Nine (Canada, 2006, p. 45). Further, with respect to Grade Twelve:

Overall, 44.1% of Aboriginal people aged 15+ had completed Grade 12 at the time of the 2001 Census, compared to 64.5% of the non-Aboriginal population. This is up from 38.2 % in 1996 and 33.3% in 1991, showing steady and significant improvement in high school completion. (p. 45)

With respect to University education, “Far fewer Manitoba Aboriginal people attend university, and fewer still complete. Only 4% of Aboriginal people in Manitoba aged 15 plus have completed a university degree (2.4% on-reserve) compared to 14.2% of the non-Aboriginal population” (p. 46). As the statisticians note, “The current educational profile of the Aboriginal population does not remotely resemble emerging labour market requirements” (p. 46).

In the area of the economy, labour force statistics reveal Aboriginal people experience significant disadvantages. “Aboriginal unemployment rates are higher at all levels of education. . . . Even among the relatively few Aboriginal university graduates, the unemployment rate is 9.8% — two and one-half times the rate for non-Aboriginal alumnae” (Hallett, Nemeth, Stevens, & Stewart, 2000, p. 70). Unemployment rates for Aboriginal people appear to be higher than average and chronic:

Among Status Indians aged 15+ and residing in Winnipeg, less than 30% were employed at the time of the Census . . . That was almost five times the unemployment rate of non-Aboriginal people. For Status Indians in Winnipeg, there was definite evidence of a “discouraged worker” effect in 1996, as evidenced by the low labour market participation rate. (p. 73)

The consequences of this lower participation in the dominant economy has meant increased dependence on income assistance and increased levels of poverty:

Because of lower employment rates, Aboriginal people are six times more likely to be dependent on government transfer payments, especially social assistance. . . . The Census provides no evidence that the incomes on reserve are either more or less adequate than among Status Indians in Winnipeg. In both settings, median incomes are extremely low by Canadian standards and a majority of families and individuals subsist on incomes below an equivalent of the Statistics Canada LICO [*low income cut-off*]. (p. 78, 85)

Aboriginal people who move into cities are more likely to live in the inner city (Clatworthy, 1996, 2000; Distasio et al., 2004). As Silver (2006, p. 16) notes:

In Winnipeg – although this is somewhat less the case in other western cities – Aboriginal people are disproportionately located in the inner city (Hanselmann, 2001; Kazemipur and Halli, 1999), attracted there by lower housing prices and the presence of other members of their family and community. . . . Inner-city residents, and in particular Aboriginal residents, experience lower incomes, higher rates of unemployment, higher rates of poverty a higher incidence of single parenthood and domestic violence, and lower (although rising) levels of educational attainment than is the case for cities as a whole. (Lezubski, Silver, & Black, 2000; Hanselmann, 2001; Mendelson, 2004; Statistics Canada, June 13, 2005). (See also Maxim, Keane, & White, 2003:86; La Prairie & Stenning, 2003: 185; Richards, 2001; Kazemipur & Halli, 1999)

Moving to the inner city is not just a response to poverty. It also may be a response to racism. “In Winnipeg, Aboriginal people frequently make their choice of neighbourhood . . . on the basis of its being a refuge from the racism to which they know their children would be exposed beyond the bounds of the inner city” (Silver, 2006, p. 18).

The consequence of this choice is to segregate society somewhat along racial lines. “Aboriginal peoples’ being disproportionately spatially located in Winnipeg’s inner city means that many non-Aboriginal Winnipeg residents, and especially those living in suburban areas, have no personal contact whatsoever with Aboriginal people” (Silver, 2006, p. 17).

Likewise, within the justice system, Aboriginal people are also more likely to experience difficulty (see, for example: La Prairie & Stenning, 2003) as the Manitoba Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991) pointed out. The AJI was a comprehensive Provincial Commission on the state of justice experienced by Aboriginal people following two high profile murder cases and the resulting bitter acrimony between Aboriginal peoples and the justice system. That study found that Aboriginal adults are six times more likely to be incarcerated as are non-Aboriginals, experience 25% more charges, and are half as likely to be granted bail (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 64). On average, Aboriginal people were 1.3 times as likely to be held in pre-trial detention, with the pre-trial detention intervals being longer for Aboriginal women (2.4 times) and youth (nearly three times). While a variety of factors can be identified that work against Aboriginal people in court (such as frequent remands, high, non-reimbursed costs of travel from remote communities, legal aid only for charges that could lead to imprisonment or loss of employment, more frequent rejection from jury panels, and the lack of jury trials in all but six Manitoba communities) (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 65), nevertheless, that these factors negatively impact an identifiable racial community suggests “systemic discrimination.” The AJI defined systemic discrimination as “the application of a standard or criterion, or the use of a ‘standard practice,’ [which] creates an adverse impact upon an identifiable group that is not consciously intended” (as quoted in Hallett et al., 2000, p. 64).

Perhaps most persuasive of all are statistics dealing with Aboriginal health. Census figures (Hallett et al., 2000) reveal that death rates for Aboriginal people are

higher across all age cohorts under 65. Most significantly, in 1993, Aboriginal people aged 15 to 39 died at a rate three times higher than the Canadian average. For children aged five to fifteen, the Aboriginal death rate was two and a half times higher. For children aged one to four years, the Aboriginal mortality rate was four times the national rate (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 35):

For First Nations, most infant deaths occur after 28 days, when infants and their mothers have left the urban hospital and re-entered the home community and the home. The degree to which the increased infant mortality rate after 28 days is due to access to health services in often-isolated home communities, or to conditions in the home, is not known. (p. 36)

Diabetes, rare in Aboriginal communities before 1945, since 1970 has been “recognized as a serious emerging health problem . . . [which] has now reached epidemic proportions” (Hallett et al., 2000, 39). Aboriginal people are over-represented in groups at high risk for HIV infection, including intravenous drug users, sex trade workers, and inmates (p. 42). At one time, Canadians were scandalized by the rate of tuberculosis among Indigenous populations. In 1907, the Bryce Report (as cited in Canada, 1996b, footnote 162) noted the death toll for the 1,537 children in his survey of fifteen schools was 24 per cent, and this figure might have risen to 42 per cent if the children had been tracked for three years. While Census Canada reports that the incidence of tuberculosis has dropped steadily and dramatically, “this is still about seven times the non-Aboriginal rate” (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 42). One study of an infectious diarrheal disease among children found Aboriginal children experienced the disease at 29 times the rate noted in non-Aboriginal communities: “This was linked to

sewage and waste disposal inadequacies, as well as poverty and crowded housing” (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 43).

Census Canada (as quoted in Hallett et al., 2000), however, notes the most significant category of death as “Injury and Poisoning”:

The medical category “Injury and Poisoning” essentially includes all causes of death besides illness. Causes of death included in this category are: motor vehicle accidents and suicides . . . accidental poisoning and overdoses, drowning, fire, homicide, and “other” (e.g., suffocation, exposure, falls, firearms, industrial accidents and aircraft crashes). . . . For First Nations people from one to 45 years of age, injury and poisoning are by far the main causes of death. The injury and poisoning death rate for First Nations is 3.8 times the national rate, and there has been little change in this ratio since the mid-1980s. (p. 30)

Of particular concern are suicide rates that not only have remained constant since 1980; the rate of suicide is also the most significant difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cause of death. Suicide among Aboriginal males aged 15-24 (1989-1993) was five times the national rate for all males in this age group; for Aboriginal females of the same age range, the rate of suicide was seven times the national rate. Perhaps most shocking of all, “since 1980, First Nations suicide rates have increased by 45% among children aged 14 and under, an age group for whom suicide is virtually unrecorded among non-Aboriginal Canadians” (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 39).

The connection of this suffering to social turmoil was made explicitly in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996a, 1996b). This report:

linked youth suicide, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse to cultural alienation or stress. This is caused by: . . . loss of identity, loss of control over living conditions, restricted economic opportunity, suppression of beliefs and

spirituality, weakening of social institutions, displacement of political institutions, pervasive breakdown of cultural values and diminished esteem, discrimination and institutional racism and their internalized effects, and voluntary or involuntary adoption of elements of an external culture and loss of identity. (Hallett et al., 2000, p. 38)

The disproportionate pattern of Aboriginal peoples' suffering suggests both the social roots of these concerns and the need for social workers familiar with Aboriginal concerns to provide service and advocacy in support of positive, systemic change. Consequently, there is growing recognition from within schools of social work (Morrisette et al., 1993) that it is Aboriginal graduates of social work programs who are needed to transform social work delivery to more appropriate "Aboriginal social work." The demand for social work from an Aboriginal perspective and Aboriginal workers is rapidly growing, and this, in turn, creates a strong demand for Aboriginal social work education.⁵

This need for Aboriginal social workers was recognized in the report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) of Manitoba (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991). It is no longer considered acceptable to have only non-Aboriginal providers for Aboriginal service receivers. Several far-reaching recommendations were made by the AJI, including the establishment of a separate child welfare system for Aboriginal families. The current government of Manitoba has acted on that recommendation. New provincial legislation, proclaimed in November 2003, has established four separate child welfare authorities: The First Nations of Northern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority, The First Nations of Southern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority, The Métis Child and Family Community Services Authority and The

General Authority. These have been given the mandate for delivery of child welfare services to Aboriginal groups. According to the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics (Manitoba, 2003/04; see also Jaccoud & Brassard, 2003), more than 70% of the children in care in the child welfare system as of March 31, 2004 are Aboriginal; most of those cases are under the care of the Northern, Southern, or Métis authorities. Each of these three authorities seeks to hire its own Aboriginal child welfare workers. A Southern Authority Case Management Specialist, M. Lavallee (personal communication, January 25, 2005), identified that the Southern Authority employs 365 social workers in seven agencies. Lavallee commented, "As of today we need to second or hire 100 more to cover the 1,400 child welfare files being transferred. You aren't graduating enough for our needs."

Bala (2004) also notes that "Aboriginal children are apprehended and taken into care at more than three times the rate of other Canadian children. In some Western provinces, more than half of the children in care are Aboriginal children" (p. 25). While the Child Welfare system can be expected to be the largest employer of Aboriginal social workers, systems such as education, health, treatment facilities, and corrections can be expected to be eager to hire Aboriginal social workers.

A higher rate of population growth among Aboriginal people multiplies the importance of these issues:

Aboriginal children accounted for one in four of all Manitoba children under 15 years. The median age for Aboriginal people is about 23 as compared to about 39 in the non-Aboriginal population. This difference has some serious and immediate labour market implications. (Manitoba, n.d., n.p.)

Across Canada, the Aboriginal population has been growing and urbanizing rapidly. “Both are phenomena of the second half of the twentieth century . . . in the first half of the century the Aboriginal population grew at one-fifth the rate of the total population; in the second half of the century, the Aboriginal population grew at three and one half times the rate of the total population” (Silver, 2006, p. 14). This is a growth rate of 1.9% versus a projected rate of 0.3% for the non-Aboriginal population (Manitoba, 1997, p. 3). The Aboriginal population of Winnipeg alone is projected to increase by 69.4% in this 25 year time period (1992-2017) (Manitoba, 1997, p. 3). In fact, the 2005 Manitoba Bureau of Statistics reports that the growth of the Aboriginal population has been much faster than predicted: it grew by 6.6% between 2001 and 2004 and is expected to grow 30% by the year 2017 (Manitoba, 2005, p. 3).

Aboriginal population increase, however, must not be seen as being merely or primarily a growing source of social needs. Rather, the growth and concentration of Aboriginal people is recognized as being a significant engine for economic and cultural development, and hence a positive opportunity for universities:

Winnipeg has the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada – 55,755 according to the 2001 Census of Canada – and arguably has the largest and most vibrant set of urban organizations created by and run by and for urban Aboriginal people of any city in Canada. A reasonable argument can be made that it is in Winnipeg in particular that urban Aboriginal people will carve out and create for themselves a new and better future, rooted in Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices and forged and shaped by their struggles with harsh inner-city realities. (Silver, 2006, p. 11)

“Aboriginal people will comprise a growing proportion of the working age population at a time when skilled labour shortages in selected industries are anticipated” (Loewen et al., 2005, in Silver, 2006, p. 15). Mendelson (2004) noted that

“to no small degree, the Aboriginal children who are today in Manitoba and Saskatchewan homes, child care centres, and schools represent the economic future of the two provinces” (p. 38).

Banks, labour organizations, business employers, government officials, and academics are all recognizing that universities are well advised to make ready for an influx of Aboriginal students:

We must focus on Aboriginal students - on community-based learning, on employment and on language and culture. The Aboriginal population is the fastest growing segment of Canada's workforce. More than half of this population is under 25. About 400,000 Aboriginal young people are poised to enter the job market over the next 20 years. Promising job opportunities and careers will encourage Aboriginal students to stay in school and help them make the transition from school to work. (Coffey, 2006, n.p.)

With more than 62,000 construction workers retiring within the next 10 years, a new study points to a major opportunity for Aboriginal youth. That's according to *A Study of Aboriginal Participation in the Construction Industry* commissioned by the Construction Sector Council (CSC) and the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada (AHRDCC). . . . “Aboriginal youth were identified in earlier CSC research as an important untapped labour source for the industry,” says CSC Executive Director George Gritziotis, “and now this study is telling us that there are lots of opportunities to connect them with construction work. It's a perfect fit, and one we intend to ensure is mutually beneficial. . . . There's a big need to need to replenish the construction workforce in the years ahead, and opening the doors of a vital industry to Aboriginal youth is good for Canada,” he says. (Sparks, 2005, n.p.)

Employers, particularly in booming economies, are beginning to turn to Aboriginal people to add to the workforce, particularly in areas of skilled labour positions, to meet the growing needs of the economy. A current Calgary employment fair (Senger, 2007), in one of its articles of interest, noted this trend:

The concern with skilled labour means employers are going to have to get creative with their hiring practices. Todd Hirsch [*business C.E.O.*] identified training and employing Aboriginal peoples, and encouraging older workers to

remain in the workforce on accommodated schedules as two strategies to meet labour shortages. (n.p.)

Whether it is in traditional northern resource extraction industries (petroleum, mining, and forestry), mega-construction projects (Vancouver Olympic Games, hydro-electric dam construction) or basic public services, declining rural populations also have become the focus for those who would seek to develop the needed skilled labour.

Jago (2004) says:

The threat of labour shortages is general throughout the north, whether the issue is trades people, technicians, teachers, nurses, physicians, or other key personnel. . . . In an economy where post-secondary education is fast becoming the basic requirement for most new jobs, and where the proportion of Aboriginal students is well above the provincial average, improved educational outcomes for northern B.C. students, including First Nations, is essential if the north is to prepare its own youth fully to participate in the emerging northern economy. (pp. 6-7)

The current level of demand for social work with an Aboriginal perspective is expected to grow. In addition, the growth of Aboriginal population generally and the growing demand for skilled Aboriginal employees particularly suggest there will be not only an increase in the demand for Aboriginal employees, but also there will be a growing need for education for Aboriginal people in many university faculties. It is clear that universities would do well to not only prepare to accept these students into existing programs but further, to become proactive in developing programs that explicitly seek to be attractive to Aboriginal young people.

The interest of educational institutions, including universities, in offering educational programs to Aboriginal people is very high. A 1988 Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) document (King, 1988) notes an increase in the

number of Aboriginal students enrolling in post-secondary education. In 1977, 3,500 students were registered in Canada; by 1987 that number had increased to 12,000. The February 1998 report of the University of Manitoba Task Force on Strategic Planning notes, "This University does not take as strong measures to attract Aboriginal students as it should" (p. 39). It goes on to say, "The way to attract a still larger proportion of Manitoba's Aboriginal students may be by providing services that help increase the comfort level of these students" (p. 39). The report contains a proposal to develop a plan to become the "university of first choice" for Aboriginal students in Manitoba and across Canada (p. 40).

Hence, for a variety of reasons, a significant demographic increase of Aboriginal students can be expected to be heading toward university education. Because of their community focus, worldview, and interest in healing the effects of colonization, many of them are interested in social work. M. Lambert, Program Administrator, Aboriginal Focus Programs, noted an increase both in the number of Aboriginal students seeking university education in programs like the First Nations Wellness Program and in the desire of stakeholders for degree programs. She observed that "before 1997 we only offered certificate programs, but now most people are looking for a degree. We took over social work from the Distance Education Department for a number of years and ran programs in several Aboriginal communities" (M. Lambert, personal communication, April 27, 2005). This need for social workers has been documented by other researchers. Aboriginal communities are being assisted in their aims toward self-government by social workers who are taking

on leadership roles in Aboriginal service agencies (Maunder & Maracle, 1997; Silver, 2000).

The existence of this need for degree programs does not necessarily mean that the educational response will recognize the transformation required to provide for culturally safe programming. What would constitute appropriate “Aboriginal education” is not yet clear. Even the concept of Aboriginal education for social work practice has a variety of meanings and is variously defined by Aboriginal scholars from different Aboriginal and Métis traditions. Neither the presence of an Aboriginal social work instructor nor a room of Aboriginal social work students necessarily signals that Aboriginal social work education is occurring.

Ramsden (1990) has argued that “as long as [*Indigenous*] people perceive the health service as alien and not meeting our needs in service, treatment, and attitude it is . . . a dangerous place to be” (p. 18). Aboriginal social work authors (Hart, 1999; Morrisette et al., 1993; Sinclair, 2004) have expressed a similar notion, that social work education has not been a hospitable place for them. A recent review of graduation rates “found that 39.6% of Aboriginal students leave the ICSWP before completion . . . (as compared with) 7.7% of those in the “other” category. These numbers offer cause for concern and may point to weaknesses in the program in sufficiently addressing the needs of Aboriginal students” (Clare, 2003, p. 29). Pettipas (1994) has identified the results of residential school education and its ongoing, intergenerational long term effects:

For the students who did manage to complete their school terms, there was little to look forward to either in white society or on their home reserves. Because of

the poor quality of education and the racial prejudice of white employers, there were few employment opportunities for graduates beyond the seasonal casual jobs already open to their parents. (p. 81)

Methodology of the Study

The present study set out to explore whether the concept of a culturally safe educational environment would help to define elements of appropriate Aboriginal educational models. It was believed that Aboriginal students would be best placed to evaluate their social work education experience using this lens of cultural safety, and to indicate directions for program development. To do this, the current study employed a qualitative approach that sought to explore the importance of the concept of cultural safety from the perspective of Aboriginal graduates who were reflecting on their social work education at the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Social Work's Inner City Bachelor of Social Work Program (ICSWP). Specifically, the study addressed three questions from the vantage point of Aboriginal graduates of the ICSWP, where the term "Aboriginal" refers to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada and includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit persons, regardless of registered or non-registered status. These three questions were:

- 1) What might you mean by the phrase "cultural safety"?
- 2) In what, if any, ways does the concept of cultural safety (derived from a healthcare environment in Aotearoa/New Zealand) apply to a Canadian Bachelor of Social Work program that educates Aboriginal students and students of other backgrounds?
- 3) How can the need for cultural safety guide the development of social work education programs for Aboriginal students and students of other backgrounds?

Data were gathered through conversations with a sample of thirteen former students of the ICSWP about their views on what contributed to and detracted from their sense of cultural safety in their undergraduate social work education at the ICSWP. Ten of these research participants were graduates of the ICSWP. The remaining three were individuals who began their Bachelor of Social Work education at the ICSWP but left the program after successfully completing at least one year of study. The latter three participants were included in the individual conversation component of the research in order to probe the existence of a possible bias in the study, that is, whether those who left the program did so for the reason of a lack of cultural safety. These non-graduating students were also consulted to obtain their views on their sense of cultural safety within their educational experience. An Advisory Group of Aboriginal social work instructors provided guidance for the development of the research process and the interpretation of the conversational data and the meaning of themes. In addition to interviews, participants were invited to a group discussion or talking circle to hear the initial themes which emerged from individual interviews so they could respond to and add further clarification and reflection within a group setting. One of the Advisory Group members was present with participants in the talking circles that took place.

Personal Commitment to the Study

I am committed to this exploration for a number of reasons. I have taught at the ICSWP since 1987. I have been inspired significantly by the strength and courage of students entering the Bachelor of Social Work (B.S.W.) program and have been

impressed by the commitment of graduates who have gone on to change the face of the social work profession. Staff, students, and community members have worked continuously to try to ensure that, within the parameters of a mainstream university setting, the program is relevant, effective, and responsive to community needs.

Several evaluations (Hikel, 1994; Isitt, Gunn, & Brennand, 1989), a Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work Accreditation Report (2006), and anecdotal accounts have affirmed the positive contribution of the ICSW Program, while suggesting areas for improvement. However, prior to this study, graduates had not been consulted in a systematic way to relay their thoughts and thereby continue to contribute to program development. Hence, this research from the beginning has had the intent to honour the presence and capacity of Aboriginal students and to discover with them whether the concept of cultural safety can be useful to incorporate and guide social work education at the ICSWP.

Second, this study has provided me, as a long time instructor, with an opportunity to “step back” and consider the ICSWP from a new perspective. A change of role from instructor to student also provided an opportunity to research and reconsider my involvement within this community, identifying assumptions, biases, and misconceptions through the perspective of the students. Reinharz (1997) has written about understanding the self (or selves) in research fieldwork. Using her analysis that “self” is the key fieldwork tool, she notes, “I also had to understand who I was not in the field” (p. 5).

As the primary researcher in this study, therefore, it is appropriate to identify the intersecting selves that I bring to the study. I am a long time member (20 years) of the ICSWP social work education community. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a person who, as a student, came to a B.S.W. program from a semi-isolated northern community and who therefore has “outsider” experience with the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Social Work. I am someone who was not from a mainstream Winnipeg community. I am not an ICSWP student or graduate. Finally, I am not Aboriginal.

Despite, or perhaps through, my long association with the ICSWP, I have come to recognize the limitations of my experience as a non-Aboriginal professor among Aboriginal students. Therefore, it has been important to have this study guided by valued colleagues who are social work instructors of Aboriginal descent; these have acted as members of the Advisory Group who have assisted me in framing and implementing the study. Advisory Group members did not ask me to insert their particular viewpoints. Rather, they responded to specific questions I had which I thought needed clarification. They supported me in creating and presenting my own story of what I learned through this process. They helped me perceive multiple layers and colours of meaning through the prism of their own experience of their indigenous group.

When I posed the question of my non-Aboriginal status to the Advisory Group, they responded by saying: “It is important to be open and honest about who you are. Knowing yourself and being comfortable with that is key” (Advisory Group communication, April 2005). They reminded me that Aboriginal identity itself is a fluid

concept. Recognition of how participants identify themselves in terms of Aboriginal identity is important, and there is recognition that they may have changed how they identify themselves since participation in the ICSW Program. This Advisory Group has provided a crucial perspective to discern which responses were fluid, personal, and variable, and which responses were relevant to the theme of cultural safety.

One might well wonder whether my being non-Aboriginal influenced the answers participants gave. Would the same answers have been given to an Aboriginal investigator? Did the fact that I taught most of the participants influence the outcome of the study negatively? It can be surmised that individuals who felt uncomfortable with me might have declined to participate in this study. As a consequence, it was not surprising that all of the participants knew me. Given an Aboriginal worldview of a community-based culture, however, it was probable that responses would be made only to one who was already known and to some degree trusted. Whether different answers would have been given to an Aboriginal researcher will be determined only by conducting subsequent research.

That said, this research was seen to be desirable given its potential to open up conversation within mainstream social work education discourses to reconsider their own assumptions. This research is intended to be part of a strategy to address a particular problem, concern or situation; thus it is action-oriented and political in nature as well as intent” (Archibald & Crnkovich, 1995, p. 107). The challenge has been to keep vigilant to ensure that insensitive practices are avoided.

Overview of the Dissertation

In the literature review that is Chapter Two, the theoretical underpinnings of the research are outlined, the concept of cultural safety is defined, and Aboriginal social work in Canada is discussed. A description of the ICSWP in this section, including its location, goals, philosophy of education, and other salient features, sets the context for the study. Finally, findings from a preliminary study of cultural safety carried out in 2002 at the ICSWP are presented.

Chapter Three of this document describes the research design. A qualitative and participatory research methodology, consistent with an empowerment perspective, is laid out; the role of an advisory group made up of Aboriginal social work instructors is summarized and explained; and the research questions, along with key definitions, are identified. The research site is described, the number of research participants is identified, and rationale for the selection process and criteria are identified. Methods of data collection, encompassing conversations and traditional group circles, are discussed; provisions for data storage and data analysis are described; and ethical considerations and issues concerning validity of findings are spelled out. Next presented are a discussion of the effectiveness of the processes of the study and how to evaluate the value of qualitative findings, as compared to quantitative data. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of the study are reviewed.

Chapter Four shares the voices of the participants as they describe their experiences and the factors they believed contribute to cultural safety. Participants voice their recommendations for creating culturally safe B.S.W. programs. This chapter

attempts to convey the blend of many voices, as topics are identified from comments given in the initial conversations, and themes clarified after the talking circle and commentary provided by the Advisory Group. Chapter Five analyses six themes that emerged, three negative and three positive. A theory of what makes for culturally safe social work education in a Canadian B.S.W. setting is then presented. Finally, in Chapter Six, the research purposes are reviewed with a view to recommendations for enrichment of the practice of social work education. These attend to issues of hiring, curricula, non-academic supports, intake of students, and teaching methods.

CHAPTER 2: CULTURE AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This chapter outlines the literature describing the issues of culture as it relates to social work education. The section on theoretical frameworks reviews the study's overarching empowerment viewpoint. This is followed by a consideration of materials related to the Canadian Aboriginal experience of colonization and decolonization. Of particular importance is the subsequent discussion of the difference between high and low context cultures. Thus prepared, consideration is given to defining the concept of cultural safety. The discussion then turns increasingly toward the context of this study. Following reflection upon the literature dealing with Aboriginal social work practice and the presence of cultural dominance within social work education, the research location at the Inner City Social Work Program is described. Finally, a preliminary study of cultural safety at ICSWP is considered.

Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the empowerment framework for this research, defines empowerment, relates empowerment to cultural safety, and defines cultural safety and other key terms. Given the history of the colonization of First Nations territories, the experience of being over-researched by outsiders, and the sense that cultural safety is a concept to be self-determined, a theory of empowerment was chosen to guide the study's focus and methodology. Empowerment theory is a perspective that has arisen

from disadvantaged groups seeking to redress historical injustices. Gutiérrez (2001)

writes:

Empowerment is a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations. Empowerment theory and practice have roots in community organization methods, adult education techniques, feminist theory, and political psychology. (p. 210)

Empowerment is not something that can be transmitted from one person to another. Instead, it is a process and a context that people co-create. Gutiérrez suggests that the goals of empowerment are to gain a sense of personal power, engage in group consciousness-raising, reduce self-blame, and become an active participant in social change. The empowerment framework shares with anti-oppressive theory a recognition that oppression leads to internalizing self-hate and reflecting this hatred onto others like oneself, thus creating lateralized oppression (Kumsa, 2007).

The goals of feminist research are corollaries to those Gutiérrez listed:

To establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative. . . . The overt ideological goal of [*this*] research . . . is to correct both the invisibility and distortion of [*participant*] experience in ways relevant to ending [*participant's*] unequal social position. (Lather, 1991, p. 71)

Ristock and Pennell (1996) consider empowerment from the point of view of feminist researchers: “Empowerment as an approach to community research means thinking consciously about power relationships, cultural context, and social action. It is an approach to building knowledge that seeks to change the conditions of people's lives, both individually and collectively” (p. 2). Rappaport (1990) asserts that empowerment research is “committed to identifying, facilitating or creating contexts in which

heretofore silent and isolated people, those who are outsiders in various settings, organizations and committees, gain understanding, voice and influence over decisions that affect their lives” (p. 51). Hence, the empowerment framework described by these various authors is appropriate for shaping methods of research that are consistent with encouraging the self-expression of this particular non-dominant community (Aboriginal persons). Empowerment is the result desired both of the particular methodology used (participatory grounded research) and of the outcome of the research in general (facilitating education that informs this population’s decisions and amplifies its own voices).

Colonization and Decolonization

Any discussion of issues related to Aboriginal people must take into consideration the experience of colonization which has had a devastating effect on multiple generations of Aboriginal persons. The bruising contact between cultures has occurred in many social dimensions, including education. In “Building a path to a better future: Urban Aboriginal people,” Silver (2006) describes the wide-ranging nature of the colonization dynamic:

The characteristic form of colonialism, then, is a racial and economic hierarchy with an ideology that claims the superiority of the race and culture of the colonizer. This national ideology pervades colonial society and its institutions, such as schools, cultural agencies, the church and media . . . the ideology becomes an inseparable part of perceived reality. (p. 19)

Silver goes on to explain that the effects of colonization, therefore, do not influence Aboriginal people just externally. In addition, the experience is so pervasive and constant that internalization also occurs:

Aboriginal people themselves come to believe the pervasive notion that they are inferior. This is common among oppressed people. “In fact, this process happens so frequently that it has a name, *internalized oppression*” (Tatum 1999: 6). Or, as Howard Adams (1999: Introduction) puts it, many Aboriginal people “have internalized a colonized consciousness.” (p. 19)

Michael Hart, a professor of social work who identifies himself as an Aboriginal person, describes the process along similar lines:

Once Aboriginal persons internalize the colonization processes, we feel confused and powerless. . . . We may implode with overwhelming feelings of sadness or explode with feelings of anger. Some try to escape this state through alcohol, drugs, and/or other forms of self-abuse. (2002, p. 27)

A respondent in research conducted by Silver (2006) describes the internalized legacy of residential schools and its effects, as follows:

We were more or less orphans and we got punished if there was anything that we did that resembled Native spiritual culture or traditional practices. All those things were evil and had to be completely eradicated. An imposition of values on another culture, that's what it was . . . the havoc that Native people experienced in their early adult life . . . was very severe. . . . Two-thirds of my life have been severely affected, negatively affected, as a result of being a survivor of this system. I hated people. I hated white people. I hated churches. I hated God. I hated government. These things I hated because they destroyed my life, brought it to a standstill . . . no hope, a useless existence with no future in mind and all I had was bitterness and anger. (p. 21)

It is reasonable to expect that Aboriginal persons seeking to enter a faculty of social work could bring with them such internalization and the effects of colonization on their psyche and behaviour.

The experience of being an oppressed minority has meant that Aboriginal people may come to social work education with differing assessments of their educational undertaking. On the one hand, there is recognition that people who have

experienced oppression should be represented as service providers within these systems. Yet, these same people have historically not been placed in those roles:

Social welfare services in Canada are overwhelmingly directed at the poor and at single-parent women, Native people, and increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees, yet these individuals are underrepresented as professional service providers and lack key policy-making authority. This contradiction is an important issue in professional social work education, where the ideology of community control and empowerment ought to include measures to redress such inequities in participation. (McKenzie & Mitchinson, 1989, p. 112)

On the other hand, education has often been an occasion for pain, oppression, and silencing for many. Battiste (2000) describes how the policies of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIAND) “invaded the Aboriginal home. It inappropriately politicized the educational process. It defined education as transforming the mind of Aboriginal youth rather than educating it” (p. viii). The result of this action is that:

Aboriginal peoples began to see educators, like their missionary predecessors, as nothing more than racists, patriarchs, and oppressors who hid behind fine-sounding words or ideology. In effect, education did little except equip Aboriginal youth with resentment and cynicism and erode human consciousness within Aboriginal communities. (Battiste, 2000, p. viii)

Aboriginal social workers who have attended mainstream university programs have generally found these conventional environments to require self-contortions, adaptations, and the silencing of their own ways. Some have described the experience as follows:

The unwritten rules of the dominant society's ethnocentric learning institutions require that we all speak English, that we write research papers and exams based on very specific criteria framed outside of our Indigenous worldviews and that learning must be classroom based. The materials that we learn are determined by other people's perception of what we need to know, even if these are largely unrelated to the purposes of our studies or life experiences. (Bennett & Blackstock, 2002, p. 31)

Several authors (Bailey, 2000; Battiste & Youngblood, 2000; Kirby & McKenna, 1989) have noted that the expectations of universities require Aboriginal students to depart from their own ways to participate in these institutions of higher learning:

Western learning institutions, and the research agendas they develop, do not mirror who we are as First Nations people because the structures, content, processes and staff within these institutions are primarily controlled by members of the dominant society who consciously or unconsciously continue to reinforce the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems. (Bennett & Blackstock, 2002, p. 31)

It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that Aboriginal people are statistically under-represented in these academic settings.

Yet, there is participation by Aboriginal people in mainstream universities and there is resistance to colonizing forms of education. The attempts to regain traditional knowledge, history, practices, and languages and to decolonize are ongoing and determined. "Most Aboriginal people want to be a part of Canadian society in a positive and productive way, but they do not want to give up being Aboriginal to do so" (Silver, 2006, p. 25). Absolon and Herbert (1997) stress:

It is imperative, therefore, that theories used in working with First Nations communities acknowledge or include the roots of oppression, the history of colonization and racial oppression, First Nations distinct worldviews, and the geographic disparity and distinct nature of First Nations across Canada. (p. 210)

With more understanding of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, it remains at least a possibility for Aboriginal students to find a de-colonizing education experience at mainstream universities.

High and Low Context Cultures

In his now classic work, *Beyond Culture*, Hall (1976) identified one such difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture as the difference between low and high context cultures. The assumptions, worldviews, and dynamics of these types of cultures are significantly different: low context are cultures oriented around bodies of rules, while high context cultures are organized primarily around relationships. The worldview of Aboriginal communities is very much based in a high context culture, whereas most educational institutions operate within a low context worldview. The two worldviews are so different that misunderstandings and clashes are virtually inevitable. Predictably, the resolution of those clashes has favoured the low context mainstream way.

In low context cultures, legal terms define relationships, and rules are defined by written agreements: job descriptions, terms of reference, rules of order, contracts, and so on. These rules frequently need review and may change as quickly as ink dries on paper. Meaning and relationships are highly flexible. By contrast, in high context cultures, harmonious relationships are seen to be more important than rules. The good of the community supersedes that of the individual. Whereas the low context culture defines relationship by roles, job descriptions, and contracts, high context cultures define relationship by status and traditions. Safety in a low context culture would derive from adherence to contracts and the protection of those expectations by judicial authorities. Conversely, in a high context culture, safety would derive from the depth of

relationship persons had within community. Safety comes from awareness of the community, shared values, and familiar and expected traditions.

As a result, ambiguity and silence are valued more in a high context culture than in a low context society, in that through the former, relationships are allowed to develop and be explored. Trust is allowed to grow organically rather than to be artificially created or cut off by a desire for decisive action. Sarris (1993) writes about a Pomo woman's strategy when a university professor wanted to interview her. "I watched. I listened. I let him show who he was. The White people, they're not like us. They show fast" (p. 68).

Ambiguity and silence also can be used to provide an insulating distance between cultures. Sarris, feeling uncomfortable when asked to be an interpreter between two cultures, demonstrates the use of silence to protect himself: "I became Indian. I ignored her. Silence, the Indian's best weapon, an aunt of mine once said. Be an Indian, cut yourself off with silence, anyway you can. Don't talk. Don't give yourself away" (p. 81).

The reduction of relationship (and therefore of one's sense of safety) that is experienced by moving from a high to low context culture has implications for the sharing of information between cultures:

Representatives of the dominant culture exploring the resistance of a subjugated people are likely to see little more than what those people choose or can afford to show them. So it must be remembered that the method and the narrative format of any such study or account . . . written or not, will compromise the experience of the movement in given ways. The possibility of open cross cultural communication, productive for both cultures, usually will be strained even in safer, post-colonial, and more comfortably pluralistic contexts, by the history of domination and subjugation and the persistent patterns of intercultural communication associated with that history. (Sarris, 1993, p. 63)

Sarris (1993) writes that people in his community commented that the old stories told by his aunt to university researchers were stories that none of them had ever heard before. In a subtle way his aunt was exposing and tricking the arrogance of low context academics. What could be learned of Aboriginal teachings in so brief an encounter (i.e., so thin a relationship) was so minimal, that nonsense was made up and shared instead. Sarris suggests that much of what has been written about Aboriginal people had been leg-pulling. Outsiders are taken advantage of because of their arrogance; academics can be played for fools. Sadly, though, there is an unexpected backlash to this jest. The dominant culture's rendering of these stories (real or not) becomes the "truth" for other academics and the dominant society. Caricatures proliferate.

In a high context culture, rules are defined by and within relationships. It takes a long time to learn social context for behaviour. However, once known, there does not need to be a lot of discussion to explain behaviour that is slow to change. A practical illustration of this relational impact can be seen in work situations where people have worked together for a long time. With much experience, such colleagues have learned to read each other's body language and emotional cues. They don't always have to hear people's ideas spoken out loud. Therefore, people who come only in part-time are at a disadvantage.

The importance of relationship may find a parallel in women's experience. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) note:

For many women, the "real" and valued lessons learned did not necessarily grow out of their academic work, but in relationships with friends and teachers, life crises and community involvement. Indeed, we observed that women often feel alienated in academic settings and experience "formal" education as either peripheral or irrelevant to their central interests and development. (p. 4)

Not only are Aboriginal women affected by their indigenized identity, but also by their gendered identity. These identities intersect with other categorizations such as generation and sexuality, thus setting them at multiple jeopardy.

The content of the rules themselves, and expectations around leadership, decision making, organization of work, understanding of time and space and status in a low context culture will be very different than in a high context culture, as will the sense of cultural safety. So, while it is necessary, for the sake of this research, to attempt to define what is meant by the concept of cultural safety, such a definition remains provisional until tempered by the lived experience of cultural safety as described by a high context group such as Aboriginal students within the social work education system.

Cultural Safety

The juxtaposition of the words “cultural” and “safety” in the term cultural safety is unusual. The implication of aligning the two terms requires reflection. While the two words have significant meaning separately, it is the combination of terms that is of interest. One might begin by clarifying the meaning of the terms separately.

On its own, the term “safety” may be the more clearly understood. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2002, “safety”) defines safety as:

1. a. The state of being safe; exemption from hurt or injury; freedom from danger. Phr. *in safety*; b. Salvation (of the soul). *Obs.*; c. *with (the) safety of*: without damage to, preserving unhurt. *Obs.*; d. Sometimes *pl.* = the safety of more than one person.

These definitions recognize the common connotation of a state of being which avoids harm, prevents unwanted pain, and is understood in a holistic way. “Freedom

from danger” implies an emotional as well as physical consequence to safety; one might expect a reduction of anxiety to accompany this “freedom from danger.” “Salvation (of the soul),” while eliciting a painful reminder of the Christian Church’s role in colonization and assimilation (residential schools), nevertheless, suggests that safety may also be perceived as a spiritual issue. The relevance of safety to a group, as well as to individuals, is also clearly stated in the final entry (d).

The notion of “preserving unhurt” suggests that safety, at some level, is frequently preventive rather than reactive in nature. While it may seem that responding to many years of painful relationships is reactive, preparation to avoid repeating the experience is also proactive and preventive. A negative experience (e.g., a deadly tsunami) might motivate a response (construction of a warning network); the initiative of construction is a positive step taken in advance of another disaster, to keep groups safe from injury, to forestall, prevent or reduce future hardships. The OED lists thirty-eight implements, from “safety belts” to “safety zones,” that illustrate the commitment to put positive creations in place in advance, to avoid the possibility of the hurt that might occur if action is not taken (OED, 2002, “safety”).

The concept of safety is discussed widely also within social work practice literature. Such literature speaks to a variety of issues such as helping clients establish safety plans in situations of family violence (Walker, 1979), workplace safety/privacy for social workers in rural areas (Green, 2003), neighbourhood safety (Ewalt, 1997), and safety and security of clients on social assistance (Anderson, Halter, & Gryzlak, 2002).

In their discussion of group work, Garvin and Reed (1994) name “sociological safety” as a quality which must be afforded all members. They define this as:

a climate . . . in which members have some assurance that differences will be respected and a commitment to identifying and addressing potentially disadvantaging dynamics will be important, especially for those who are culturally different from the majority of group members, or have experienced oppression on some dimension that is relevant for the group. (p. 175)

Sociological safety moves the conversation closer to that of cultural safety. This term at least makes a group’s safety an explicit issue. Culture is explicitly included within the scope of the concept. It is appropriate to turn now to the first term in the concept cultural safety.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2002, “culture”) culture is derived and progresses from general agricultural activity, through the training of a species (including people), to the eventual accumulation of the benefits of those activities and disciplines as they pertain to a group of people. For example, the OED definitions for culture include:

2. a. The action or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage, husbandry; 3. a. The cultivating or rearing of a plant or crop; (and eventually the training of a human being); 3. d. The training of the human body, *obs.*; 4. *fig.* The cultivating or development (of the mind, faculties, manners, etc.); improvement or refinement by education and training; a. *absol.* The training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners; the condition of being thus trained and refined; the intellectual side of civilization; b. (*with a and pl.*) A particular form or type of intellectual development. Also, the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people, esp. at a certain stage of its development or history.

This etymology provokes the sense that culture truly is the ground out of which one arises, a deep-rooted reality that is the product of years of accumulated cultivation.

An obscure and rare usage, the first definition identified before the paragraph quoted

above, links culture to “1. Worship; reverential homage,” which again is suggestive of the importance of both spirituality and land for Aboriginal people.

Barker (2003), in the *Social Work Dictionary*, defines culture as: “The customs, habits, skills, technology, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behaviour of a group of people in a specific time period” (p. 47). This definition of culture is enriched by reference in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000) to include “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought” (online, ¶. 1).

As Khan (1982) [quoted in Fulcher, 1998, p. 323] has noted, culture has to do with some sense of “home” and “my people.” The place that a person learns to call home and the community one learns to call my people have a particular history and political-economic background. The memory of these histories continues to influence that sense of culture over time. Consequently, culture in this study refers to those shifting “totalities” which are the homes for the various graduates of the ICSWP. They are “shifting” totalities because culture is not a fossilized relic, but a constantly evolving reality (Polaschek, 1998).

These homes, however, need not be huge. That culture can refer to smaller segments of society has seemed implicit. Culture may describe the predominating attitudes and behaviours that characterize the functioning of a group or organization. Cultural safety in the social work practice or education environment, therefore, need not refer to only large scale, political, historical, economic, and social issues as they relate to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as a whole. Cultural safety also refers to

the issues as they appear in the smaller microcosmic environments of a meeting room, a classroom, a school, a faculty or a university.

The concept of culture is frequently referenced in the field of social work practice and social work education (McGoldrick, 1982; Pinderhughes, 1989; Schlesinger & Devore, 1995). In the major reference to culture in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, “Ethnic Sensitive Practice,” Schlesinger and Devore (1995) describe this practice:

Practice must be attuned to the values and dispositions related to clients’ ethnic group membership and social class position. Attention to the oppression of members of racial and ethnic groups is an essential component of ethnic sensitive practice and guides the identification of practice models that are thought to be the most consonant with the approach developed. (p. 903)

Schlesinger and Devore (1995) go on to say: “Culture or way of life is one of the components of that [*ethnic*] experience – other critical elements of that experience are social class status and minority status (p. 903). Significantly, however, they state that “ethnic sensitive practice . . . introduces *no new practice principles or approaches; rather it involves the adaptation of prevailing social work principles and skills to take account of the ethnic reality*” [*italics added for emphasis*] (p. 904).

The joining of the two terms into “cultural safety” is first recorded as being used by Maori healthcare workers in the 1980s (Castello, 1994; Ramsden, 1997; Fulcher, 1998; Polaschek, 1998). This phrase was used to describe and analyze a crucial experience that Maori nurses felt was missing for Indigenous persons in the mainstream system of healthcare in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Castello (1994), referring to the small numbers of Maori nursing students who were graduating, said, "One can only conclude that these Maori women were exceptional in entering and succeeding within a system that gave no credit to cultural heritage and backgrounds, and which held negative attitudes about the nature of Maori women" (p. 21). Ramsden noted that the Nursing Oath asks persons to care for patients "irrespective" of race and creed; she felt the system "had no concept or ideology "respective" of Maori culture" (Castello, 1994, p. 22). The nursing profession in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been struggling with this issue since the late 1980s and while there is still controversy (Conroy, 2003; Jeffs, 2001; Saxon, 1995), they have succeeded in putting cultural safety into the curriculum for nursing education and practice (Ramsden, 1997).

Polaschek (1998) names "cultural safety" as the goal that Indigenous service providers in Aotearoa/New Zealand have for their own people. Acknowledging that Indigenous people have been treated with less than appropriate service for years, Polaschek (1998), Ramsden (1997), and others (Garrod, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Jeffs 2001; Joyce, 1996; Sherrard, 1991; Tupara, 2001) named the many experiences they describe as issues of cultural safety in an effort to repair the situation within health services. Ramsden found that feeling safe enough to be oneself (including who one is culturally) was a key determinant of effective participation in health services delivery (Ramsden, 1990).

Irihapeti Ramsden is credited with being the mother of the cultural safety movement. In her 2002 dissertation, "Cultural Safety and Nursing Education in

Aotearoa and Te Waipounamu,” Ramsden outlined the development of the concept of cultural safety in Aotearoa/New Zealand, from the naming of the concept in 1988 to the introduction of cultural safety into the educational curriculum for nurses in 1992.

Changes in the Aotearoa/New Zealand healthcare system in the early 1990s allowed the spread of the influence of the concept of cultural safety beyond nursing to other government departments. The mid-nineties saw cultural safety attracting media attention and public controversy as the status quo “pushed back.” Various authors (Sherrard, 1991; Jeffs, 2001; Conroy, 2003; Hughes, 2003) have argued that cultural safety is a political distraction promoted by the Maori people which undermines the medical focus of nursing. Political pressure resulted in Ramsden and others being called to testify before parliamentary committees and the New Zealand Council of Nurses. Demands for social justice (e.g., Saxon, 1995) and calls for changes in teaching practices were heard by the committees, and the Nursing Council established guidelines enshrining cultural safety in nursing education in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Ramsden’s concern that cultural safety include safety for kin was noted by Leon Fulcher (1998). Fulcher sees cultural safety as:

that state of being in which the [*individual*] knows emotionally that her/his personal wellbeing, as well as social and cultural frames of reference, are acknowledged - even if not fully understood. Furthermore, she/he is given active reason to feel hopeful that her/his needs and those of her/his family members and kin will be accorded dignity and respect. (p. 333)

More recently, North American researchers have begun to use this concept. Pennell (2005a), in her exploration of family group conferencing, defined cultural safety as:

a context in which family members [*students, others*] can speak in their own language, express their own values, and use their own experiences and traditions to resolve issues. . . . Cultural safety looks behind what practitioners [*educators*] do, to how clients [*students*] from a different culture experience the service. It is the outcome against which to measure the worker's cultural competence. (p. 34)

The concept of cultural safety, therefore, invites a shift in attitude toward the empowerment of service receivers to decide whether or not they feel safe in the social work relationship and to define in what circumstances such safety exists and how far that safety extends. This is a crucial element in defining cultural safety; it is those who receive the service, rather than those who provide the service, who define what is safe.

Pennell and Anderson (2005) have further explored this shift of the locus of expertise as it occurs through family group conferencing. The goal of the particular environment required by family group conferencing is to “develop a hospitable context” (p. 71). According to them, the purpose of the many techniques used to create a welcome space is to “move the family to the centre of the planning” (p. xiii). As a result, the participants (family members) then “can apply their insider knowledge and long term commitment to develop a plan that works . . . they need to feel at home and to speak in their own words” (Pennell, 2005a, p. 33). These seem to be directions similar to the values necessary for cultural safety to exist within the social work practice education curricula.

Lynam and Young (2000) have used the language of cultural safety as it pertains to Canadian research environments. They say, “Cultural safety . . . is intended to ensure safety as a standard of professional practice” (p. 7). Greenwood, Wright, and Nielsen (2006) identify that as researchers and educators working in the area of cultural

safety, “Cultural safety is absolutely about identity, and this is where we focus our teaching and practice” (p. 214). They further say that the “focus for us was unambiguously on racial politics . . . cultural safety has become a cloak for considering all forms of oppression and discrimination” (p. 213). Marion Gray and Kathryn McPherson (2005), adapting the concept to the field of Occupational Therapy, note that the cultural safety process “entails a journey across a continuum of understanding historical issues, power relationships, the . . . professional’s own attitudes, and the consequent influence of these factors on the delivery of . . . services” (p. 36).

Whether this concept is meaningful in the Canadian context with Aboriginal social work students was the query that motivated the further study undertaken here. For the sake of this study, Fulcher’s previously cited definition of cultural safety was presented to research participants because it reflected the values of interconnection and kinship, and the definition incorporated a holistic approach in inquiring about one’s emotional experience.

Aboriginal Social Work Practice in Canada

This section describes Aboriginal social work practice in Canada generally as it relates to empowerment and cultural safety. In prior decades, social workers have tried to attend to the difficulty of cultural friction in social work environments, grasping after a preliminary form of cultural safety, using a variety of different terms. During this time, the attempt has been made to move from fearful distrust, misunderstanding, silence, and assimilation, to naming, acknowledging and attempting to include different cultures. The writers creating these concepts were on the way to making a difference.

Their hope was that equality would ensue as educators and practitioners struggled with issues, inclusion, respect, and sensitivity. Social work literature in the past has committed to “recognizing” and “respecting” Indigenous culture. The cultural safety definition goes further to actively “nurturing” cultural identity. Those writing about cultural safety (Fulcher, 1998; Polaschek, 1998; Ramsden, 1997) distinguish between this phrase and previous descriptions of the intention of goodwill between mainstream service providers and oppressed groups. In order to provide a sense of the development of inter-cultural social work terms and a critique of what has seemed “only nice words,” it is helpful to examine the various terms.

The phrase, “cultural sensitivity,” had the benefit of inviting awareness of cultural difference. While a necessary step, this term is not sufficient. This phrase has seemed to imply that the service provider becomes aware that the client is of a culture other than that of the dominant group, minimally makes note of that fact, and tries to accommodate for alternate beliefs and practices. “As a profession, social work can do many things with ‘awareness’ of critical issues, such as racism, including nothing” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 52). This critique of mere sensitivity is supported by Dominelli (1998): The term awareness alone “lacks political substance and is sociologically naïve” (p. 13).

The notion of a “trans-cultural model” speaks of scanning horizontally across and beyond cultures. It approaches cultures with respect and looks for similarities and commonalties. In so doing, it seems to suggest that one all-inclusive model of social work might be appropriate across differing cultures. This model also has limitations in

that it fails to recognize “the influential social structures within which all such interactions take place” (Polaschek, 1997, p. 453). It fails to take into account the myriad of differences and inequities that occur between different cultural groups. Not all cultural groups have experienced the same level of oppression. Similarly, terms like cross-cultural (dealing with or comparing two or more different cultures) or multiculturalism suggest the need to recognize the variety of cultures within society, each with their own unique characteristics, as [*being*] of equal value . . . [*which*] ignores the differences in power (Polaschek, 1997, p. 453).

Within social work practice texts (Compton & Galaway, 1999; Heinonen & Spearman, 2001; Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 1993) there are suggestions for working in “culturally appropriate” ways. While this terminology sounds respectful and attractive, again it would appear to be insufficient for several reasons. Often such language implies that the decision to consider and evaluate difference is within the power and discretion of the worker. This language continues to suggest that social work practitioners may stand outside of the relationship and control the determination of what is appropriate. Greene (1998) reminds us that “far too often, practitioners may perceive norms and cultural patterns that vary as cultural deficits rather than differences they need to understand” (p. 85). The results of structural barriers are often perceived by practitioners, professions and institutions as indicators of individual deficits, such as, for example, when students find it hard to deal with an unfamiliar learning environment. This lack of safety often results in vigilance, isolation, and absenteeism which can lead to poor academic standing (Greene, 1998;

Sinclair, 2004). Similarly, when an Aboriginal person will not testify in court against another; the mainstream culture may interpret this behaviour as an individual deficit [*obstruction of justice*] rather than recognize it as an Aboriginal cultural pattern (Ross, 1992). Such misperceptions, in fact, say more about a lack of awareness in the dominant practitioners than in the Indigenous persons. To be sure, the invitation to be “culturally appropriate” invites social work practitioners to examine themselves. For example, MacIntosh’s essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1990), helpfully raises awareness of the many benefits enjoyed by White members of the social work profession that are assumed, but hardly universal. However, the focus of what is culturally appropriate must move beyond “us” to listening to the culture of “the other.”⁶

Another concern about the phrase “culturally appropriate” is that this language lacks a reference to measurement. People may believe they know what is culturally appropriate based on limited exposure to the practices of others such as Aboriginals. Thus, practitioners might rush to embrace “exotic” practices such as smudging, talking circles, and sweat lodges. Such actions may be well-meaning, but are an affront to generations of tradition and training in how sacred practices are to be conducted. LaDue (1994) addresses this phenomenon in the title of her article, “Coyote Returns: Twenty Sweats Does not an Indian Expert Make.” Some people may believe that to be culturally appropriate means to employ those behaviours whenever any Aboriginal person is present. For example, “I see we have an Aboriginal person in the class. Let’s smudge.” This view makes assumptions about a person’s values and beliefs, based

upon appearance. Aboriginal persons are no more likely to be all the same than are all Caucasian people.

Social work educators and practitioners may believe they are being “culturally appropriate” when they enthusiastically introduce/use an Aboriginal practice within a partially Aboriginal audience, or adopt an Aboriginal practice for a non-Aboriginal audience without the preparation or understanding that would be required by the Aboriginal culture itself. Wheeler (2002) identified this common tendency of the dominant culture to pick select pieces out of their Aboriginal context, when he wrote:

There is a growing sense in the global community that Indigenous philosophies and practices have a lot going for them. People are caring for the environment and looking at more holistic approaches to life . . . In order to operate in the mainstream, Aboriginal people are forced to adopt more and more non-Aboriginal ways and it affects how we treat the land, each other and how we tell our stories. The mainstream, perhaps fearing for its own survival, continues to pick at Aboriginal knowledge and practice for its own use. (p. D-1)

It might seem that the talking circle, for example, can be employed by non-Aboriginal leaders easily. However, one might take up the practice without awareness that an Aboriginal leader with knowledge of and commitment to traditional Aboriginal culture should always be present at a talking circle. Social work educator and Advisory Group member for this study, M. Lands (personal communication, May 24, 2002), stated that an appropriate leader is “one who thinks in the language and ways of the culture.” It is all too easy to claim to be culturally appropriate and to insert one high-context practice into a mainstream low-context situation, which remains otherwise unchanged, without the cultural context that makes sense of this Indigenous

“technique.” To know if something is “culturally appropriate,” one has to have a wide and deep knowledge of, not just a superficial acquaintance with, the culture.

“Ethnic sensitivity” is another term used with respect to the inter-cultural relationship with similar limitations. Ethnicity is a term that refers to a mixture of issues. It may encompass religious values, cultural practice, shared histories, and indeed genealogical ancestry. The term “ethnic sensitivity” has been used to signal the need to be aware of and attend to cultural practices and beliefs that may differ from the habits of the mainstream majority. A concern with respect to this terminology is that social workers may be acting from ignorance of what those values and customs are. A lack of direct knowledge may lead to practice based on stereotypes. What is a custom and practice for one community may not be significant for another group sharing that ethnicity.

Further, language like “ethnic sensitivity” may be insufficient to cause different action if the issue of the imbalance of power between cultures is left unaddressed and unchallenged. If there is no partnership between the cultures, the issue of safety is left implicit, if it has been recognized at all. For example, the terms described above, like cultural sensitivity and cultural appropriateness, seem to be developed from the perspective of the service provider(s) rather than from those of the service receiver(s). The dominant culture educator or practitioner can retreat to the established practice of the agency/institution if she/he feels uncomfortable, let alone unsafe. Therefore, she/he may not consider the issue of safety for members of the oppressed group.

Sociological safety, as mentioned above, moves the conversation closer to that of cultural safety. This term at least makes a group's safety an explicit issue. Culture is explicitly included within the scope of the concept. However, any power differential between cultures is not addressed sufficiently. "Addressing potentially disadvantaging dynamics" does not recognize sufficiently the pervasive and persistent impact of colonization; the dynamics are far more than "potential." There remains a significant gap between having "some assurance differences will be respected" and the essential imperative of action to redress those dynamics. Finally, as with the previously mentioned terms, the concept of sociological safety remains vague about who decides that the circumstances are safe enough.

"Cultural competence" is another phrase frequently used in the negotiation of social work and social work education across cultures. Cultural competence means having enough of an understanding of the main tenets and history of a culture so as to be able to work within that culture in a way that is congruent with the customs and practices of that group. This concept moves toward cultural safety by including issues of knowledge, attitude, and action.

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) (2001) *Standards for Cultural Competence for Social Workers* defines "cultural competence" as:

the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enable the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Operationally defined, cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes (Davis & Donald, 1997). Competence in cross-cultural functioning means learning new patterns of behaviour and effectively applying them in appropriate settings. (¶. 6)

The NASW (2001) further says:

- 1) Social workers should understand culture and its functions in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.
- (2) Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.
- (3) Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability. (¶. 7)

The wording of these standards notes that social workers “should” attend to these issues but, again, the decisions and judgments about these actions reside with the social worker. Cultural competence is about the knowledge of the social worker whereas cultural safety requires the assessment of those who are receiving the service.

Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carleton-LaNey, and Weil (2004) note that in their scan of the literature (e.g., Browne, Brodrick, & Fong, 1993; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Weaver & Wodarski, 1995), cultural competence is often seen as having the following four components: knowledge of the client's cultural context, including history and worldview; practitioner awareness of her or his own assumptions,

values, and biases; application of appropriate interventions and skills; advocating for social change (p. 292).

Cultural competence is an important stepping stone that addresses the need for attitudinal shifts and for action. It is approaching some of the concerns of oppressed groups. However, the focus of cultural competence continues to be the practitioner's skill set rather than the definition and perception of safety as identified by the recipient.

Finally, a relatively new term appearing in social work literature is "ethno-relativism," a term presumably distinct from ethno-centricity. Krajewski-Jaime, Brown, Ziefert, and Kaufman (1996) define ethno-relativism as "the ability not only to accept and respect cultural differences, but also the empathetic ability to shift to another cultural worldview" (p. 16). Ethno-relativism signals that the social worker must increase awareness of her/his own culture and at the same time be open to learning and understanding the diversity of experiences, values, beliefs and practices of clients. Social workers from the dominant culture should recognize that the social work profession and curriculum have had Eurocentric western culture foundations and therefore social workers must seek to challenge themselves to be open to other truths. Marie Lacroix (2003) notes: "Ethno-relativism is achieved, therefore, by stepping back from what we know to be true and by listening to what we are saying, doing, and feeling in the context. It means tuning in to the other's reality and how the person may be perceiving the situation" (p. 30). This term and definition continue to signal the good will which social workers from the dominant worldview intend and their commitment to connect with members of communities other than their own.

However, once again, the same questions remain. How does one shift to a different worldview if one has not been raised in that other worldview? How does an outsider (to a culture) gain sufficient knowledge about a second, or third, or nth cultural viewpoint to make that shift? Who decides that one has a sufficiently accurate perspective of that worldview to make the shift necessary to be considered ethno-relative? Is it possible for a social worker to make that shift when the presuppositions of that other worldview may be diametrically opposed to those with which the social worker is familiar? Cultural competence and ethno-relativism strive to be helpful definitions in the abstract, but in the absence of a paradigm shift embedded in and communicated by the concept, it remains only, in my view, an ideal. In the end, this term continues to leave the definition and evaluation of the cultural transition in the hands of the representative of the dominant culture, who continues to do the accepting and respecting and shifting to another cultural view.

The concept of “cultural safety,” on the other hand, seems to offer some benefits not found in the previously used terminology. The previous terms indicate awareness of cultural difference and even friction. However, in all of them control remains with the dominant group member. Cultural safety goes beyond these other terms in at least three ways.

First, the inclusion of nurturing in the description of cultural safety, provided in Ramsden (1990), Fulcher (1998), and Polaschek (1998), seems to move the social work educator (as well as the social work practitioner and many other helping professionals) into a different relationship with others. Respect (to show honour, esteem, express

regard and consideration) can be offered from a distance. One can verbally state and intellectually believe in concepts like “respect” but, at an unconscious level, remain distant, dominant, and controlling. A change of behaviour or relationship on the part of educators would still be required in order to be culturally safe. Values and behaviours between high and low context cultures can be so diametrically opposed that even as one assumes one is being polite within the mores of one’s own ways, one may be violating the customs of the other.

Changing one’s conceptual framework or intellectual perspective to include another without a change of behaviour or relationship is insufficient. Nurturing another, on the other hand, requires action and moving “into” support, and demands a change in attitude and behaviour. Implicit in nurturing is a call to engage and to understand and support the other. To nurture requires hands-on, committed and ongoing action and interaction. To participate in nurturing another’s cultural safety presupposes and requires recognition and respect of cultural values. In order to know what needs, expectations, and rights exist, the nurturing one must learn about another’s cultural identity, recognize its uniqueness, and respect its worth. Nurturing then goes a step further: to actively support, to listen and to try to understand the need of the other, within the context of that culture.

Recognition and respect alone do not necessarily require putting one’s self on the line; nurturing involves risk. Social work practitioners and educators will recognize their own discomfort and the vulnerability of relinquishing control and moving from a dominant position to one that is not dominant, and, therefore, unknown and

unpredictable. To leave the place of certainty for uncertainty feels, and is, risky. To move from one's own worldview into another's is "uncharted territory." This definition of cultural safety (Fulcher, 1998) challenges the profession to give up some established ways of practice which are comfortable to the practitioner.

Joining the word "safety" to "culture" seems to be a second helpful improvement offered by this definition. The term safety generally connotes freedom from harm or danger and, as such, resonates deeply with social workers. Social work practitioners understand that for safety to exist between practitioner and client, the social worker must get involved, understand, and participate, which means developing trust and relationship. To make a commitment to someone's safety is more than an intellectual exercise, it is a holistic one. Safety implies a number of levels of response. It is about commitment that is consistent, congruent, and pervasive. These values are intrinsic to social work as it is applied in the dominant Eurocentric culture.

Attaching the word safety to the discussion of culture sends a strong signal that in issues of cultural dialogue, the dominant culture is perceived as dangerous and threatening. In the past, however, safety was separated from the concept of culture in social work education. Safety was assumed to be offered by helpers from the dominant perspective. However, this assumption caused harm by independently assessing safety as it was then understood, only from the dominant worldview. Hence the benefit of taking children to residential schools was "obvious" to the dominant culture, while the cost to and safety issues perceived by the Aboriginal communities clearly were not so

obvious. Minimally, mutual agreement defining “what is safe” is necessary. The most vulnerable persons need to be able to define for themselves what feels like safety.

Finally, working from the Indigenous service receiver’s perspective, whether that service is healthcare, social work education, or social services, in talking about cultural safety, one moves from talking in “nice words” about culture to perceiving the inequality expressed when one culture dominates another. “Until the effects of . . . inequality in power between groups in society are addressed we cannot ensure that the needs of persons from minority cultures will be met” (Polaschek, 1997, p. 252). In the term “cultural safety,” on the other hand, the measurement reference is implied in the term safety. Safety is a measure that can be assessed only from the perspective of the Indigenous service receiver, not the dominant culture practitioner. The practice of “cultural safety” demands a humble question, “Does this feel safe to you?” and the subsequent silence in which to hear an answer.

Cultural Dominance Embedded in Social Work Education

In the past, social workers and social policy makers of the dominant culture generally thought their actions were justified in their treatment of Aboriginal people (Hart, 2002; McKenzie & Hudson, 1985). However, social work practitioners frequently did not understand and often made little effort to be respectful of the richness of other cultures’ histories, languages, and beliefs. Consequently, social work practice not only failed to nurture but, in fact, harmed clients by denying them the right to be who they were.

Freire (1990) notes that “the social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action” (p. 5). Sinclair (2004) further states, “The Aboriginal person becomes a virtual non-entity in institutions that marginalize Aboriginal thought and reality through the neglect and erroneous authoring of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, languages, and colonial history” (p. 51):

Social workers risk falling into the trap of believing that just because they are social workers they are, therefore, non-racist and non-oppressive because the profession has a code of ethics to guide practice and because social work institutions proclaim they are committed to this ideology. (p. 52)

Moreover, Hardy and Mawhiney (1999) have noted that “social work practice has been historically limited by its Eurocentric assumptions and values” (p. 360). Mainstream models of “teaching” also have been challenged by feminist and empowerment models (Caplan, 1994; Carr, 2000; Van Voorhis, 1998). Aboriginal scholars are giving voice to the divergent ways of knowing and teaching that spring from their worldviews (Absolon, 1993; Colorado, 1988; Fitznor, 2002; Hart, 1999, 2002). deMontigny (1992) wrote: “The organizational demand to produce grades, evaluations, reports, and even graduates, silenced a form of education based on wisdom, individual progress, connection to one’s people, spirituality, and respect” (p. 77).

The history of harm inflicted by European-based education upon Aboriginal students in Canada has deep roots (Sinclair, Bala, Lillies, & Blackstock, 2004, p. 202). For over 100 years the Canadian Government and its church partners removed children from their parents and families to attend residential schools, usually at a great distance from their home communities. Students were forbidden to speak their own language

and to practice their own cultures. They were put into a foreign environment in which Aboriginal culture was not only kept at a distance but also frequently was demeaned. By government policy, children were disconnected from their elders and therefore from the transmission of their culture which normally was passed orally from generation to generation. In the absence of familial protection, these Aboriginal children were often subject to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Two months per year children returned to their parents and communities, confused about their identity and unable to connect with the society which should have felt like home. The importance of the negative impact of the residential school system cannot easily be overstated. An article in the *Montreal Star*, describing the Bryce report of 1907 (as quoted in Canada, 1996b, footnote 162), bears shocking witness to this devastation: "Even war seldom shows as large a percentage of fatalities as does the education system we have imposed upon our Indian wards."⁷ Its effect on community relationships, wisdom passed by oral tradition, Aboriginal pride, and trust of the mainstream educational system is not limited to the generation immediately involved.

The experience of residential schools illustrates precisely the dangers of a dominant culture assuming that it has sufficient knowledge to determine what parts of Aboriginal culture could be neglected and that it has benevolent enough purposes to impose its own cultural pattern instead. Numerous groups have made public the long term/intergenerational effects of residential school experience through videos, art exhibits, theatre, and conferences (Highway, 1988, 1989, 1998). The flood of lawsuits

and damage claims against the Federal Government hint at the damage caused by a culturally insensitive residential school system which operated from the early 1900s.

Sinclair et al. (2004) assert that where the school system left off, the child welfare system continued to wreak havoc on Aboriginal families and communities. The “Sixties Scoop” (Johnson, 1983) is a phrase used to describe a tragic time in social work history when Aboriginal children were removed in large numbers from their homes and communities. Many were adopted by families all around the world (Fournier & Crey, 1997). The sense of grief and loss continue to the present as communities are still working toward repatriation of community members. The experience of the Sixties Scoop of Aboriginal people in the social work system confirms that cultural insensitivity has continued (Sinclair, 2004, p. 205).

From this context of colonization, two issues arise for Aboriginal people considering education for social work practice. First, the painful association with education and with social workers creates a dilemma for Aboriginal people who want to practice social work in their communities: How can one work for organizations which are based on a worldview that has been so hurtful in the past? Students of Aboriginal descent who come to schools of social work will have memories of many of these negative experiences in school and social systems. In order for them to be able to develop the necessary skill of use of self for social work practice, they must feel culturally safe.

Second, the social, economic, and academic consequences of colonization erect barriers to obtaining a university education which cause many prospective Aboriginal

students to stumble even as they courageously pursue their goals. The existence of university programs to provide access to social work education signals recognition of the ongoing difficulties that Aboriginal students face in completing high school and gaining admission to university programming. Zapf et al. (2003) outline the University of Calgary's attempt to create a new model for social work education with Aboriginal people. This effort includes geographic accessibility by offering weekend courses through tribal and community colleges and the use of local Elders and healers to connect curriculum to regional history, issues, and traditional healing practices.

A variety of authors have reflected on issues of Canadian Aboriginal experience in social work education and how to overcome the negative effects of colonization and racism. Sinclair (2004) discusses the deficiencies of current cross-cultural approaches to decolonize pedagogy and outlines the importance of incorporating Aboriginal-colonization history within the social work education curriculum. Without the inclusion of this history and without the rediscovery of Aboriginal epistemology and worldview, this education will not move toward cultural safety for Aboriginal people. Bruyere (1999) writes about the importance of addressing colonization in social work practice with Aboriginal people. Colorado (1988) was one of the first Aboriginal scholars to write about the concept of Aboriginal science and research methods.

Absolon (1993) outlined traditions and methods of Aboriginal social work, including the recommendation of teaching the Medicine Wheel as a tool for healing within social work practice. Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) outline Aboriginal theory using a Cree Medicine Wheel as a guide for healing [Figure 1]. They rely on the

teachings of Elders to offer an overview of healing principles and methods. Their purpose is to inform the social work profession about an alternate treatment approach and to promote respect of a worldview that is unfamiliar to most non-Aboriginal social workers.

Morrisette et al. (1993) began to sketch an Aboriginal model of social work practice which is inclusive of cultural knowledge and traditional practices, stressing the importance of understanding one's culture and practice and emphasizing that the connection with culture leads to empowerment and healing. In 2003, they expanded on their previous writing to look at creating guidelines for respectful social work practice with Canadians of Aboriginal background.

McCormick's (1995) research identifies that healing past hurts is a necessary interconnection for Aboriginal people in education programs. Stevenson (1999) also looks at the use of circles as a powerful healing method. Connors and Maidman (2001) indicate the importance of creating wellness for all individual family members to ensure Aboriginal community wellness. Hart (1999, 2002) articulates an Aboriginal approach to helping that speaks about balance and harmony.

To date, there has been minimal exploration of the concept of cultural safety, *per se*, in Canada. Rebecca Hagey (2000) of the School of Nursing at the University of Toronto has written an article entitled: "Cultural safety: Honouring traditional ways of life." The article introduces the concept of cultural safety and goes on to describe how an Anishanabe Elder works at a drop-in centre at the University of Toronto. Wendy Young (1999) interviewed 35 students of Nipissing University/Canadore College, and

the results are published in her article entitled: “Aboriginal students speak about acceptance, sharing, awareness, and support: A participatory approach to change at a university and community college.” Her participants shared experiences related to feeling accepted and supported but did not make reference to the terminology of cultural safety. Young did not identify the faculty of study of her participants. This research seeks to explore the concept more directly with Aboriginal social work students in Canada. It is to the context of this research that the discussion now turns.

The Inner City Social Work Program of the University of Manitoba

During the 1970s, the deterioration of inner city buildings, infrastructure, and community life in Winnipeg was recognized. Three levels of government plus interested community partners met to address the issues. An inner city “core area” agreement and funding were the result. Essential to this three-way agreement was recognition that education was a primary need. To respond to that need, the “Access Model” was created to assist inner city residents who would otherwise face major barriers to obtain a university level education. The Access Model that evolved not only included opportunities for educational access but also provided an integrated system of financial, academic, and personal supports. The Access programs were administered under the province’s Post-Secondary Career Development (PSCD) branch within the Department of Education and Training. A multi-purpose, five-year, seventy-five million dollar program, entitled The Tripartite Core Area Initiative (CAI) (Canada, Manitoba, & Winnipeg, 1981) brought together federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government to make funding options available, beginning in 1981, to address

problems of social and economic decay and under-development in Winnipeg's older "core area" or inner city neighbourhoods.

At that time, the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba created the Inner City Social Work (ICSW) Program to strengthen its commitment to the concept of accessibility through the initiation of several projects with the goal of "substantially increasing social work education to people not normally part of the School's student body (Natives, immigrants, the poor, etc.)" (Bracken, 1985, p. 64). Specifically, the ICSW Program was originally designed "to admit into post-secondary studies those Manitobans facing specific participation barriers so significant that, without the program, they would have little or no chance of success" (Hikel, 1994, p. 14).

The stated goals of the Tripartite core agreement to initiate an inner-city Bachelor of Social Work degree coincide with "the belief, endorsed by economists, that higher education [*is*] a key to economic productivity [*that*] would yield higher rates of economic returns for both individuals and society than other forms of investment" (Anisef, 1985, p. 1). A second rationale was "social justice" or the provision of "equality of opportunity." Funders believed that "schools (especially universities) offered a direct route to increased social mobility. Improving accessibility to higher education was seen as a major means of improving the economic prospects of disadvantaged social, cultural and regional groups" (Anisef, 1985, p. 1).

Throughout the twenty-six year history, from its inception to the present, the ICSWP students have come from a variety of marginalized groups. The ICSWP

remains an Access program for students who have faced academic, social and financial barriers to attaining a university education. Of accepted students, each year 50% are of Aboriginal descent, 25% are immigrants/refugees from countries facing civil strife, and 25% are others who are generally single parent mothers who have lived with violence, poverty, and perhaps addictions (Bracken, 1991, p. 73).

While funders have placed value on the economic outcomes of the program, social workers see the aims of the ICSWP as fostering social development. Paiva (1982) notes:

Social development has two interrelated dimensions: the first is the development of the capacity of people to work continuously for their welfare and that of society's; the second is the alteration or development of a society's institutions so that human needs are met at all levels, especially at the lowest level, through a process of improving the relationships between people and socio-economic institutions. (p. 4)

Various authors see the ICSWP as promoting economic development in Winnipeg. Social work graduates of the ICSWP are “changing the face” of the social work profession, particularly in Winnipeg's inner city (Clare, 1997, p. 8). The program, housed in a facility called the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC), is also recognized by the public. In *Solutions that Work: Fighting Poverty in Winnipeg's Inner City*, Silver (2000) writes: “WEC plays a crucial role in re-building the inner city from within. Many of the most skilled and dynamic administrators/organizers with inner city organizations are graduates of WEC” (p. 141). A Winnipeg Free Press headline on October 24, 1997, announced: “Graduate List Offers Proof Course Helps Inner City,” and the article went on to say that “The Winnipeg Education Centre's graduate list reads like a Who's Who of local inner city educators and social workers” (Mauder &

Maracle, p. A-6). The program has also attracted interest from national and international academic and social work practice colleagues from Brazil, China, Germany, Mexico, Russia, and Ukraine. Colleagues who have visited the program have shown particular interest in components of cultural inclusion.

The literature suggests that there is need to further explore the interface between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the field of social work practice. The concept of cultural safety suggests a way of approaching that border in a way that may be helpful. It is a perspective that the ICSWP has pursued, if only intuitively, rather than explicitly. To date, there has been little research, however, to document the impact of the program. Clare (2003, p. 30) has noted the lack of “a systematic collection of information regarding the degree to which the ICSWP may be addressing the social development needs of the communities” that it purports to serve. Anecdotal sharing suggests that it is important to research the ways issues of culture and diversity are addressed at curriculum and program levels. One preliminary study of cultural safety at the ICSWP has been conducted (Milliken, 2002) in which the concepts of “safety within,” “safety around,” and “toward safety throughout” were identified. It was expected that research into cultural safety from the perspective of Aboriginal social work graduates would provide greater insight into the relevance of cultural safety for social work practice education, and whether the apparent promise of empowerment was, in fact, perceived by participants in the program.

Preliminary Study of Cultural Safety at the ICSWP

A preliminary study of the ICSWP was carried out as a portion of this researcher's doctoral internship in 2002 (Milliken, 2002). In this prior study, the concept of cultural safety was introduced to an Advisory Group comprised of three Aboriginal social work educators. In response to descriptions of cultural safety from New Zealand writers, Advisory Group members were inspired to reflect upon and share examples of their own experiences of not feeling culturally safe during their educational journeys.

Members discussed their experience of safety or lack of safety in university education, specifically social work education. With emotion, the members of the Advisory Group described unsafe and disrespectful experiences they had survived in undergraduate education. As we discussed together the various responses to different experiences, categories of descriptions emerged which delineated the concept of safety and its connection with culture. The following three dimensions of cultural safety emerged from these discussions.

The first dimension of cultural safety is one of "safety within," which is an internal sense of personal safety experienced within the individual. This safety may be connected to such various issues as self-esteem, psychological wellness, a sense of being grounded within the personal contexts in which people live: one's body, one's family, one's community. This sense of safety connects with cultural safety insofar as one has considered one's cultural history and traditions and has been able to come to one's own peace with the place of that culture in one's life. Without this type of safety,

no amount of effort in the other dimensions of safety will overcome the sense of a lack of “safety within.”

Feeling unsafe within is experienced by people who are not healed from issues of violence or abandonment and who carry the effects of that abuse within them. These scars and wounds continue to have influence, as the individuals recreate the chaos that has been part of their life. It is for this reason that the ICSWP screens candidates carefully, seeking to assess whether candidates have done healing work. All students will experience stresses through their educational journeys and will face the challenge of engaging with others in the community. If they do not feel safe anywhere, they will not feel safe in this program. As Maslow (1968) indicated, safety follows physical needs, both of which must be attended to before one can aspire to the higher issues of self-esteem and belonging, and self-actualization. Horsman (1999), in her book *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education*, confirms the notion that feeling unsafe makes it difficult for students to learn.

The ICSWP intentionally seeks to address this kind of safety. Virtually all of the students in this program have faced barriers and grappled with personal issues. Consequently, peer groups have helped people normalize and take responsibility to address their own wounds. Counselling is presented as normative rather than exceptional. It is a line item in the ICSWP budget, not for unusual occurrences, not for extra assistance, but as an essential and expected component of social work education. McCormick (1995), whose research indicated that healing was an essential component

of education for Aboriginal healers, supports this approach. Healing work is portrayed not as a sign of weakness but as a usual stepping stone toward success.

The second dimension of cultural safety discerned by that preliminary study was identified as “safety around.” This would be the sense of safety experienced among individuals at the ICSWP. This is the type of safety that is most obviously and usually addressed by social work practitioners/educators/institutions that seek to protect students from external threats. Some safety systems, like lights and locks, are physical. Some are psychological or philosophical: basic courtesy or codes of behaviour contribute to an expectation of respect, tolerance, boundaries, and contributes to this dimension of safety. Some of the “safety around” systems are social. The provision of 24 hour security staff is an example of this. In all these examples, the community contributes to this sense of “safety around.”

When students participate in the ICSW Program (as in most educational environments), “safety around” is an assumed expectation. It would seem that students experience some degree of “cultural safety around” as they find their expectation supported that people will treat each other with respect, and may seek their education in an environment where no one will hit them, swear at them, mock them, or break into the classroom and threaten them.

While many might assume that these standards of safety are universally available, at least in Canada, the practice of them is not equally applied. Previous research (Milliken & Pompana, 1996) indicated that physical security was compromised in elementary and secondary schooling, when Aboriginal students were a

minority in non-reserve schools. Advisory Group members also spoke about their experiences of being unsafe in mainstream schools. In society, males and females are treated differently. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirited, and people of colour experience greater jeopardy than Caucasian, heterosexual persons. The concept of intersecting inequalities (Jiwani, 2001) suggests that discrimination, and therefore a sense of “unsafety,” is cumulative. The more jeopardized characteristics one person exhibits, the more frequently that person is likely to experience discrimination. If safety systems are not applied equally or at all, “safety around” does not exist. Though one may be “kind,” patronizing attitudes, with or without awareness, erase the goodwill. Formal manners in formal circumstances can belie another set of manners in less public situations (Bruning, 2006).

Cultural “safety around” means adopting and pursuing such safety for all as a predominating attitude and a quality of behaviours within a group or organization that extends beyond the immediate institutional environment. As Fulcher (1998) asserts, cultural safety includes respecting kin, those people identified as “my people.” The ICSW Program does this, at least in part, by attending directly and intentionally to the building of relationships and community. “Family Nights” are held at the beginning of the first year term, so that members of the student’s network of family and friends may come to see where and with whom the student will be taking classes. By involving and welcoming these people who are important to the students, it is hoped that each student will feel an interconnection between home and school life.

The third dimension of cultural safety assumes a more proactive role and was suggested in the preliminary study by the phrase “toward safety throughout.” This dimension of safety goes beyond what is required and attends to what would be welcoming and inclusive. The culture brought by the Indigenous student is valued. Students bring their life, cultural, and community experience to the educational community and, in effect, teach faculty; however, the onus is not on the student to teach program staff or other students about their culture. It is expected that staff have educated themselves about the issues. In addition, community consultants are recruited to share their expertise at the ICSW Program.

It is this type of “safety throughout” that is explored when one asks the questions: “Is the ICSWP a safe place to acknowledge one’s culture? Is one’s culture respected?” While the goal of the program is social work education, the ICSWP makes a commitment to the creation of community and takes on the responsibility to build hospitality and relationship. While not previously aware of the Aotearoa/New Zealand concept of cultural safety, program staff members at the ICSW Program seemed to be sensitive to issues of oppression and, at an unspoken level, monitored whether the ICSWP was a safe enough place to acknowledge and practice one’s culture. It seemed that as the culture of other people was respected, the institution sought to build bridges, alliances, and relationships toward those communities.

Previous research has indicated that this sense of safety is not fully in place at the ICSWP (Milliken & Pompana, 1996). Despite the ICSWP’s best efforts to be a culturally safe environment, the Aboriginal advisors consulting on past and current

research indicated that there was room for improvement. While the ICSWP attempts to be inclusive, it was recognized that there was need for further understanding and improvement in the learning environment. This study seeks to gain insights from graduates to help ICSWP implement measures toward cultural safety for Aboriginal students.

In order to ameliorate some of the past effects of colonization, the ICSWP has attempted to assist students to attain a sense of empowerment with a broad range of supports. It would seem from reading and preliminary discussions among the ICSWP faculty and other Aboriginal participants in the program that the concept of cultural safety points to a positive direction for Aboriginal social work education. The research design seeks to examine this perception in a disciplined way.

CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by introducing the feminist perspective that underpins the empowerment framework of this research. The rationale for using a qualitative methodology, the importance of participatory processes, the recognition of the otherness of the researcher to the group of participants, and the value of guidance offered by an advisory group are then discussed. Ethical issues for cross-cultural research, which are particularly significant in this instance, are considered. Methodology related to the implementation of the research is outlined. This includes the selection and contacting of participants and an aggregate description of these co-researchers; key terms are defined and research questions and conversational processes are developed as are the processes of gathering conversational remarks, transcripts, circle discussions, and Advisory Group reflections. The means used to record and manage the responses from research conversations, talking circles, and Advisory Group gatherings are described. The chapter concludes with a review of the appropriateness of the research methodology.

Research Methodology

Empowerment. Feminist authors inform the empowerment perspective on which this study is grounded (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996; Schaeff, 1981; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). They affirm the principle of respectfully including those with whom one is conducting research and creating new understandings with community groups (Bishop, 1994; Gutiérrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Those who have

suffered oppression due to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other marginalizing factors understand the experience of oppression and exclusion and are best equipped to describe that experience. While the foci of these oppressions differ and have unique features, there is a common bond of understanding the experience of the oppression.

Qualitative Research. Qualitative research is amenable to studying experiences of oppression and exclusion:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world . . . This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, pp. 4-5)

“What qualitative research can offer is a theory of social action grounded on the experiences - the worldview - of those likely to be affected by a policy decision or thought to be part of the problem” (Walker, 1985, p. 19). The qualitative approach does not assume the categories or themes of importance to be studied but rather attends to the definitions and priorities of participants describing their own experience (Riessman, 1993).

Exploration of the concept of cultural safety with Aboriginal participants should give any non-Aboriginal researcher pause to consider the motivation and purpose of doing this study. Research with Aboriginal people requires sensitivity to Aboriginal theory, especially as related to the history and issues of colonization and de-colonization. Karen Martin (2001) writes:

Aboriginal writers (Huggins, 1998; Dodson, 1995; Rigney, 1999; van den Berg, 1998) argue that the extent of research conducted in Aboriginal Lands and on Aboriginal people since the British invasion in the late 1770's, is so vast that it makes us one of the most researched group of people on earth . . . In social science areas such as health, education and criminology we are over-researched and little wonder this has generated mistrust, animosity and resistance from many Aboriginal people. (p. 1)

Similarly, Bennett and Blackstock (2002) assert:

Correcting colonial practices takes more than good will and commitment - it requires an ongoing and active critical analysis on behalf of professionals in order to ensure that social work research, policy and practice works in partnership with Aboriginal peoples to affirm and promote their ways of caring for children, youth and community. Active engagement and understanding requires the development of an Indigenous research infrastructure that ensures that Aboriginal peoples are the beneficiaries, and not simply the subjects, of research. Indigenous knowledge and practices must be accepted as valid in their own right and respectfully included in our deliberations, dialogue and practice as social workers. (p. 30)

As a result, researching the concept of cultural safety requires an approach that is empowering of the participants. To implement this approach, this research process was participatory in that it invited the reflection and voice of the participants and their engagement in a process in which they were the co-researchers as well as the participants. To respect issues of transmission accuracy and ownership of Aboriginal cultural wisdom, results collected were reviewed with participants, both individually and within a group circle. To be empowering, the research attempted to be constructivist, developing theory that arises out of the participant experience, analysis, and reflections. An element of this approach was the inclusion of an Aboriginal Advisory Group, whose members were invited to participate from the formation of the proposal through the interpretation of the themes. Finally, to be empowering, grounded

theory methods were used to provide a means to re-articulate the experience and descriptions of the participants.

Constructivist Theory. Constructivist theory suggests that all knowledge is created through the description of personal experiences mediated through social interaction. It is in the process of communicating and agreeing upon meaning that knowledge is constructed. This philosophy would suggest that a non-Aboriginal person, growing up in a relatively privileged, urban community experiences life through the context of that society and tends to socially reflect upon that experience with others of the same society. The description of reality generated by those persons is a constructed reality, a framework or paradigm that reflects those individual experiences and social conversations. Similarly, an Aboriginal person growing up on a remote reserve, who experiences life on a northern trapline and the five dollar payout of Treaty Day, constructs another paradigm through interaction with that community. What is perceived as knowledge or truth by each is a construction based on conversation and community.

To create a knowledge base that includes diverse experiences and cultures requires a sharing of the experiences and conversations. “A constructivist approach necessitates a relationship with respondents in which they can cast their stories in their terms. It means listening to their stories with openness to feeling and experience” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 275).

As has been noted, Aboriginal people have suffered from being “written about” for decades; there has been a lack of shared construction of the description and meaning

of Aboriginal experience and context. The “knowledge” base was created by outsiders. This research invited Aboriginal graduates and non-graduates to tell their stories and through this process, construct a picture of their experience for action within educational systems. It was hoped that by exploring the concept of cultural safety together, something new and more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal students would be envisioned. The challenge for developing this more responsive knowledge base has been to listen carefully to the description of experiences of an “other” well enough that what is understood and repeated faithfully reflects what the person means (Hertz, 1997; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). For that reason, the constant comparative (grounded theory) approach to research was chosen for this study.

Constant Comparative Method. Charmaz (2003) notes that “it isn’t until participants are asked to describe experiences that these concepts take on shape and meaning. They are re-constructions of experiences; they are not the original experience itself” (p. 258):

A constructivist grounded theory recognizes the interactive nature of both the data collection and analysis, resolves recent criticism of the method, and reconciles positivist assumptions and postmodern critiques. Moreover, the grounded theorist’s analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story; it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer. The story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed. We can claim only to have interpreted a reality, as we understood both our own experience and our subject’s portrayal of theirs. (Charmaz, 2003, p. 271)

Charmaz (2003) outlines the process for constructivist grounded theory research:

the constant comparative method of grounded theory means (a) comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, experiences), (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different

points in time, (c) comparing incident with incident, (d) comparing data with category, and (e) comparing a category with other categories. (p. 260)

Research, using the constant comparative method (grounded theory) was employed to discover the factors that contribute to or detract from the sense of cultural safety for the ICSWP B.S.W. graduates as they learn social work skills. Strauss and Corbin (1990) contend that theory is discovered. According to Robrecht (1995), grounded theory is:

an extension of a person's natural analytic processes. As a story or problem is revealed to the researcher, the dimensions of the problem have no form until the researcher takes a perspective on the information. Each perspective gives a different configuration to the data; it tells a different story. The perspective chosen to represent the theoretical explanation is a dimension included within the account. (p. 174)

Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe grounded theory as a “discovery of theory from data” (p. 1). It is theory constructed from data through analytic interpretations and discoveries. Glaser (1978) clarifies this view by stating that theory must have fit and relevance; it must work (explain, predict, interpret what is happening) and be modified as ever-emerging notions from the data arise (p. 4). Charmaz (2003) views the method as an interpretive construction: “A constructivist grounded theory fosters the development of qualitative traditions through the study of experience from the standpoint of those who live it” (p. 270).

Aboriginal scholars, such as Absolon (1993), note that using grounded theory for research on issues related to Aboriginal people is appropriate, as one is researching, re-connecting knowledge that previously has been passed on orally. Aboriginal people are the knowers, holding the information; they are not subjects to be “researched

about,” a social field where a colonial theory is tested and applied to subjects’ experience. The purpose of grounded theory methods is to discover the experience together with the knowers.

Participatory Research. In order for this research to empower and enrich rather than write “about” Aboriginal social worker students’ experiences, the graduates had to be partners in this venture, not subjects. Ristock and Pennell (1996) indicate:

Participatory action research seeks to create useable knowledge by involving the researched as researchers in social analysis and action . . . in the case of oppressed peoples, such research establishes a new relationship to knowledge in which marginalized people are encouraged to develop their views and are affirmed as authoritative sources of knowledge. (p. 11)

A certain amount of relationship is required even in advance of the study. Participatory research “takes place in a context. To understand findings, workers need to know about the cultures and resources of the community, host and partner agencies, and participating families” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996, p. 112).

Maguire (1987) notes that the three main features of participatory research are: collective joining with people for social change, development of critical consciousness, and transformation of power structures and relationships. The conditions Pennell (2005b) outlines for family group conferencing apply to participatory research: “Social workers know that in advance of holding any group, the group’s purpose, composition, and structure must be determined and its members prepared to take part in a safe and effective manner” (p. 13). “If research conclusions are to be valid, research participants must understand what is being asked of them, and they must feel safe enough to say what they think, rather than what they think others want to hear” (Pennell, 2005c, p.

111). Hence, it seemed not only useful, but indeed, necessary, to have a significant relationship of trust built up in advance of the research meetings. In such contexts, there would be a need for disclosure of purpose and a high level of confidence in the relationship with the researcher, so as to reveal and discuss not only issues that might be personally painful for the graduate-participant, but also issues of conflict with the researcher's dominant cultural legacy/privileges that might load the conversation with further layers of risk and vulnerability.

The curricular content and teaching methods at the ICSWP have attended explicitly to issues of social change, development of critical consciousness, and discussion of issues of power. Graduates have been invited regularly and consistently to continue to be part of the ICSWP community and participate in aspects of ICSW programming such as student selection, honorary board and committee membership, lecturer, and field instructor. Hence, an invitation to former students to participate in this research seemed to meet the criterion of collective joining, and would not seem out of the ordinary experience of their B.S.W. education. An invitation to speak about their experiences at the ICSWP for the purpose of providing feedback on the environment at the ICSWP continued this pattern of participation. As graduates, participants were not in the directly vulnerable position of students to be graded; it was expected that they might feel freer to offer criticisms and recommendations for change than when they were students. By joining with these former student participants, I was seeking to facilitate the community capacity of this constituency where "community capacity refers to the individual abilities, organizational strengths, and social bonds within a

community that can be applied to resolving collective concerns and advancing the welfare of the whole (Pennell, 2005d, p. 74).

Ethical Considerations

Consent Forms and Ethical Conduct. Informed consent is the bedrock standard for ethical research with human participants. Application was made to the Memorial University of Newfoundland Inter-disciplinary Committee Ethics in Human Research Committee (ICEHR) to conduct this research and approval received (Appendix A). As set out in the ICEHR requirements, a consent form (Appendix B) assured participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were further assured that they did not have to answer any questions with which they felt uncomfortable. Care was taken to explain clearly the purpose of the research so that participants were well aware of the ramifications, in order that their consent was based on full information.

Respondents were informed of the parameters of the study. No information about the respondents was gathered from sources other than themselves; Aboriginal status was self-declared in program application forms. No coercion or inducements were used. No deception was involved. There was no known threat to personal safety. All respondents were legally able to give valid consent to participate. No personal health information was requested.

The author sought to ensure ethical analysis and reporting through the processes outlined above. Respondents were assured that their individual conversation comments would remain anonymous and any information shared would not identify them by name

or gender, in the case of the one male respondent. The researcher endeavoured to protect participants' privacy in that information gathered was kept in a locked cabinet. Information and tapes would be kept secure until after the dissertation was accepted and defended. Names and information of the Committee supervisor and other Committee members were included in mailing materials so that respondents would be able to contact them. Respondents were offered a summary of the dissertation findings if they wished to read it. Eleven participants requested a summary. A complete copy of the dissertation will be given to the ICSWP library and thus be accessible to participants. Feedback and debriefing mechanisms were built into the study; respondents were informed that if they felt the need to deal with discomfort arising in the course of the conversations, a debriefing session with an Aboriginal social worker, at no cost to the participant(s), was available.

Dual Relationships. The ethical issue of dual relationships had two dimensions. Overtly supervisory relationships were not permitted. As graduates, none of the participants could be B.S.W. students. The names of graduates who were currently Master's students, or who currently taught at the ICSWP were excluded from the research selection process.

The nature of this study, however, in which connections with research participants from the ICSWP was presumed, meant that some form of dual relationships necessarily existed. The nature of inner city work meant that the researcher and participants might be involved in common projects or attend the same community events. Graduates are working in leadership roles in the community. Future contact is

possible. There are expectations of both graduates and faculty of “giving back” to the community, of providing a helping hand to those who follow. Some participants in the study at some point could become field instructors, might sit on ICSWP or community committees with me, or, in the future, ask the researcher to be their M.S.W. supervisor. Indeed, this was not a double, blind study conducted by strangers; the researcher knew all of the participants and had taught several of them. While some might consider this to be a negative factor, Charmaz (2003) acknowledges that some dual relationships are helpful:

One shot interviewing lends itself to a partial, sanitized view of an experience, cleaned up for public discourse. The very structure of an interview may preclude private thoughts and feelings from emerging. Such a structure reinforces whatever proclivities a respondent has to tell only the public version of the story. Researchers’ sustained involvement with research participants lessens these problems. (p. 275)

Elaine Congress (2001) reported on attitudes toward dual relationships in an American National Survey of social workers. Congress learned that the Codes of Ethics of both the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) deal with exploitation and sexual relationships. However, the reality of collaborative relationships and mentoring means that there always will be dual relationships with students and instructors, and graduates and former instructors. For example, teaching and research assistants are chosen from a pool of social work students. “Employing a social work student as a research assistant is a common practice and is usually viewed as an ethical dual relationship” (Congress, 2001, p. 229). Congress also raises the issue of cultural norms. In high context cultures, the establishment of relationship is a prerequisite to sharing thoughts and feelings.

The findings of the Congress study support the notion that social workers recognize that there will be dual relationships due to the collaborative nature of the work. That said, the issues of power and culture had to be considered carefully in this venture. The profession's Code of Ethics was used to guide this researcher's practice. This research fell within the accepted dual relationship norms in that the researcher was not in a direct oversight relationship with any of the participants. During the research and in the immediate future, the only relationship with participants would be of a voluntary and collaborative nature.

Aboriginal Guidance. As the researcher is a non-Aboriginal person who was seeking to learn from Aboriginal participants, other ethical issues were recognized as potentially arising and steps were taken to avoid these. To reduce the possibility of cultural misappropriation or misinterpretation, a variety of safeguards were included in the research process. Participants were invited individually to review a transcript of their conversation with the researcher. At that point they were able to clarify, add to, or remove details until they are satisfied that the written content reflected what they meant to say about the subject. The participants were then invited to sign off on the accuracy of the transcript (Appendix C).

Further, participants were invited to hear and respond collectively to a short report of the themes (in collective form, not identifying individuals) that seemed to arise from the individual conversations (Rubin & Babbie, 1997, p. 58). Once again, opportunity was provided, with the support of others, to clarify, add to, or revoke their statement, or to clarify interpretations of the same. Given the emphasis on creating

community and connection, these ethical considerations were considered crucial to maintaining safety for participants.

To foster an approach respectful of Aboriginal values and avoid the painful patterns of colonization experienced in Canadian history, an Aboriginal Advisory Group participated in the research process from early in the development of this study. This Advisory Group reviewed the design of the proposal, the construction of the questions, and the interpretation of transcript excerpts; attended the talking circle reviews; and finally reviewed the report of findings.

The three Aboriginal social work instructors who formed the Advisory Group for this study were invited to provide guidance in my preliminary study of cultural safety described previously. These three women agreed to continue to be advisors for the dissertation study. Two of the members taught or had taught at the ICSWP. The third taught at the main (Fort Garry) Campus of the University of Manitoba. One member had been teaching for twelve years, another for ten years. One (a graduate of the ICSW Program) had taught for four years. Tribal affiliations were Dakota Assiniboine, Ojibway, and Cree Nations. Two had a Master of Social Work (M.S.W.) degree, and one of these was a Ph.D. candidate. The third was a candidate in an M.S.W. program. Two were able to speak their Aboriginal language, and all three were actively involved in practicing their culture. They attended ceremonies, related to Elders, and said their teaching was informed by traditional Aboriginal values and concepts.

Though my colleagues knew me and had worked with me for many years, there was still a need to recognize that the divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

experiences and worldview is real. I had had enough experience in working within Aboriginal communities to respect that difference:

Aboriginal people are aware of the dichotomy that exists between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worldviews; they interact with this on a daily basis. The challenge for non-Aboriginal people is to become equally aware of this dichotomy and to respond by promoting needed changes in institutional forms and practices. (Morrissette et al., 1993, p. 107)

One experience of working with the Aboriginal Advisory Group illustrates well how easily one might still stumble over differing or unclear cultural assumptions. Even with such awareness, I initially did a clumsy job of noting and marking the change of status from “colleague” to “advisor” with group members. I asked whether it was appropriate to offer them tobacco before inviting them to share their knowledge with me. Group members shared a range of thoughts on what their traditions said about tobacco offering. There was discussion about the protocols of offering tobacco and that the traditions are different in each community.

The advisors noted the diversity and fluidity of Aboriginal self-identification that needed to be respected in the design of this study. The amount and content of cultural and spiritual identity among Aboriginal students (and leaders) in the ICSW Program was highly diverse. Some students had a strong, well-formed sense of their own Aboriginal identity, while others had only recently discovered their Aboriginal roots. Some practiced their Aboriginal cultures. Others had self-identified as “Aboriginal” on the program application form, but otherwise had no active connection to Aboriginal practices. Some students strongly self-identified with their Aboriginal culture, though they did not have legal status as First Nations band members. For

example, some students did not have Treaty Status, because a treaty had not been signed with their people. Yet, these latter persons nevertheless were registered as members of an Indian band. For some, Aboriginal practice involved participation in traditional ceremonies such as the practice of daily smudging (ritual burning of various medicines), regular participation in sweat lodges for cleansing and healing, and guidance from an Elder. Others were practicing Christians who would not participate in such processes.

The Advisory Group agreed that offering tobacco was a signal of respect for the knowledge the person carried and was a symbol of appreciation for sharing their knowledge with another. The advisors commented that one could offer tobacco and it would be up to the participants to decide whether to accept it or not. Further, after honouring me by hearing about my research and asking direct questions about my intentions, these colleagues followed the traditional way of thinking carefully about my request. “Cultural protocols do not permit [*the Elder*] to share information without being asked. Even if approached in an appropriate manner . . . s/he may not accept” (Colorado, 1988, p. 57). From the discussion that followed, I understood that they had “detected a sincerity and true desire on the person’s part to learn” (Colorado, 1988, p. 57), and therefore would assist me. One member noted that I always brought food to share with them and this was also an offering. My practice of offering food had been a consistent element of my classroom protocol as well.

Early conversations with the Advisory Group members were helpful in providing first-person accounts of their experiences of a lack of cultural safety. The

preliminary exploration also identified the diverse levels of safety for consideration in attempting to study cultural safety with Aboriginal participants. In meeting with the Advisory Group to review my thinking and writing, I presented a preview of the questions I planned to use in the conversations with the participants and asked for their response and input. Advisory Group members discussed their own experiences of unsafety and of trying to use their cultural knowledge as a resource in their own educational experience. Positive and negative examples were shared of how their use of cultural knowledge in papers and presentations was received. Advisory members recommended resources I might find useful in conducting this research. When presenting preliminary thoughts about cultural safety at a conference, an Advisory Group member co-presented. One member assisted by answering the research questions herself to test them, to see if the answers given would be helpful. According to guidance and recommendations from the Advisory Group, the three research questions were revised to the format listed in the introductory chapter.

A discussion with the Aboriginal Advisory Group (May 6, 2006) indicated there were a number of principles which should be heeded in this research to show respect of Aboriginal culture. The Advisory Group indicated the following five issues:

- (1) There needs to be recognition that Aboriginal people are the experts on themselves, on their people and their communities, and they can create for themselves the ways of healing. Aboriginal people do not need others to speak for them.
- (2) There needs to be recognition given that honours the risk Aboriginal people are taking when they attend university, given the racism and exclusion of their previous experience in dominant culture schools. Appropriate description recognizes the courage it takes to come back to a dominant culture educational institution.

- (3) Aboriginal grandparents have favoured education for a long time; it was a strong value within their communities that went back generations. However, there was a sense that education had to be genuine; it had to support Aboriginal culture, rather than divide the learner from her/his own community. If education was irrelevant, it would lead to a split between what the grandparents have taught about the importance of education. Education from dominant institutions currently is not as honoured in our communities as people publicly profess; it is a concern that Aboriginal students are not learning the right things. Education must be relevant to Aboriginal people and create real social justice for First Nations communities. Relevant education that fits Aboriginal individuals and community is exciting.
- (4) It is important to identify the institutional structure as the problem, not the Aboriginal people. This was understood to refer not only to issues of cultural safety, but many of the educational challenges which come with Aboriginal students.
- (5) The respect shown to Aboriginal peoples needs to be thorough. Therefore, an author venturing into this writing is advised to watch for the “little” things, such as the use of language; and for “related” things, such as how you act outside of class, how you treat students in the community.

None of the values came as a surprise. Indeed, looking back from the perspective of the completed conversations, these principles foreshadowed, and dovetailed with, the themes and theory that arose from the data.

The Aboriginal Advisory Group continued to be needed in the further development of this research. This Group provided an important cultural check and balance upon the development of the questions, and the process of gathering data. The Advisory Group also provided an important presence in the talking circles. To encourage an empowering process, respondents were invited to participate in a circle discussion of preliminary findings, supervised by one of these Aboriginal leaders.

While “the talking circle” is a traditional Aboriginal process, properly constituted, it was also one that fit with group gatherings of non-traditional Aboriginal people.

Advisory Group members indicated the benefit of hearing/reading excerpts from the talking circle transcripts. The context of some surrounding conversation provided necessary perspective with which to evaluate the themes being presented. Hearing discussion of issues in their own words and expressions brought the meaningfulness of concepts alive. The preliminary report, stripped of identifying details, was discussed with the Aboriginal Advisory Group. The purpose of this meeting was to continue receiving the guidance of this Group at the final stage of the research.

The Advisory Group was needed also at the stage of interpreting the meaning of participant responses, grounding interpretation in an Aboriginal worldview. In order for a project on Aboriginal cultural safety to have the integrity of the concept, interpretations had to be supervised by Aboriginal people. These Aboriginal social work educators brought the capacity to ensure that issues of high and low context cultures were properly translated. In addition, as traditional Aboriginal culture has a strong spiritual component that is interpreted properly only from within, the perspective of such an Advisory Group at the analysis stage was essential. The content of themes that arose from the conversations, therefore, is richer and truer thanks to the guidance of Aboriginal social work instructors acting in this advisory capacity.

The input of the Advisory Group was needed, finally, for the completion of this study. Members read the dissertation draft and final copy to ensure the expression of Aboriginal voices remained clear. I believe the Advisory Group members held me to

that goal and their presence with me on this journey provided me with a sense of security in that regard.

Research Questions

This study was a qualitative inquiry which explored the meaning and relevance of the concept of cultural safety as experienced by Aboriginal graduates in their social work education at the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Social Work's Inner City Bachelor of Social Work Program. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions from the perspective of Aboriginal graduates of the ICSWP:

- (1) What might you mean by the phrase "cultural safety"?
- (2) In what, if any, ways does the concept of cultural safety (derived from a healthcare environment in Aotearoa/New Zealand) apply to a Canadian Bachelor of Social Work program that educates Aboriginal students and students of other backgrounds? For example, participants might comment on:
 - a. Whether or not participants considered cultural safety to have been a relevant factor in their educational experience in the ICSWP;
 - b. Why cultural safety was or was not relevant to them.
- (3) How can the need for cultural safety guide the development of social work education programs for Aboriginal students and students of other backgrounds?

To get at these notions, the participants were asked the following questions:

- (1) When you hear the term cultural safety, what does this concept mean to you?
- (2) What role did cultural safety play in your educational experience at the ICSWP?
- (3) How did you know you were safe?
- (4) As you think about it now, are there things that would have helped you to feel more culturally safe?
- (5) What do you think other Aboriginal graduates might say about their sense of cultural safety at the ICSWP?

Various follow-up probes, related to each research question, had been prepared and were available to elicit further details, if necessary (see Appendix D). A particularly

helpful probe for question two was: “What contributed to or detracted from your sense of cultural safety?”

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Safety. Cultural safety, for the sake of this study was defined as:

that state of being in which the [*individual*] knows emotionally that her/his personal wellbeing, as well as social and cultural frames of reference, are acknowledged - even if not fully understood. Furthermore, she/he is given active reason to feel hopeful that her/his needs and those of her/his family members and kin will be accorded dignity and respect. (Fulcher, 1998, p. 333)

This definition promotes three attitudes or acknowledgements. First, it promotes recognition of the historical injustices and colonization experiences which have affected multiple generations. Second, this definition invites acknowledgement that the social work profession (among others) has culpability in mistreatment and misunderstanding of Aboriginal people. Third, this definition suggests a shift in attitudes, so that the power to define the existence or what contributes to a sense of safety lies with those from the minority culture group, not the professionals.

Aboriginal People. For the purposes of this study, Aboriginal people were identified as Canadian First Nations (Status or non-Status), Métis, or Inuit. Excluded from this participant pool were immigrants who are Indigenous persons in other nations, such as Mayans from Mexico, for example.

The distinction between Status and non-Status Aboriginal people is helpfully defined by Sinclair, Bala, Lilles, and Blackstock (2004):

Indians who are recognized as having a “Status” (or rights) under *The Indian Act* (1985), and other legislation, are almost all members of a particular “band.” A band is a political unit, though its members share a common Aboriginal

culture and often close family ties. Generally, one band is responsible for each reserve, though in some cases, two or more reserves are joined into a single band. . . . There are several hundred thousand Canadians who have an Aboriginal heritage but who do not have a formal status or legal recognition under *The Indian Act*. Many of these non-Status individuals are Métis. The term historically applied to individuals of mixed Aboriginal and French ancestry . . . but now it is used more loosely to refer to those of mixed Aboriginal and White ancestry. (pp. 218-219)

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 recognizes that “Aboriginal people of Canada include the Métis” (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 219). The Inuit who live in northern Canada are not governed by *The Indian Act of 1985* and are not organized into bands, but they have the same inherent constitutional rights as First Nation people and have access to many of the programs that are afforded to Status Indians (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 220).

Research Site

The Inner City Social Work Program is a branch of the University of Manitoba, School of Social Work. It has offered a Bachelor of Social Work (B.S.W.) program since 1981. The ICSWP is physically located off-campus in a building named “The William Norrie Centre” but is more informally and widely known as the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC). The program shares space with a University of Winnipeg Inner City Teacher Education Program. (The building name “WEC” was often used in the conversations to refer to the ICSW Program. Students in the transcripts referred to “being at WEC” rather than using the more formal title of the Inner City Social Work Program).

As was mentioned above, the ICSWP serves students who come from a variety of marginalized groups, all of whom have faced significant academic, social, and financial barriers to attaining a university education. Of the accepted students, 50% are of Aboriginal descent, 25% are immigrants/refugees from war-torn countries, and 25% are generally single parent mothers who have lived with violence, poverty, and perhaps addictions. In order to overcome the barriers to education these might otherwise have to face, such as the consequences to colonization, the Access ICSW Program offers numerous supports for mature students.

The ICSWP was created in 1981, and the first cohort of eighteen students began their B.S.W. education at the WEC campus of the University of Manitoba. Government funding originally was provided for both tuition and living expenses, so students could focus on studies rather than on part-time jobs necessary for survival. Students admitted in September 2005, made up the twenty-fifth intake.

In 1989, when the Provincial government cut student funding, prospective students voiced concern during their selection interviews about the amount of student loan debt, added to their challenges of basic family support, which they would have to incur for four years of education. Staff initiated a variety of responses to deal with the funding gap, including developing internship partnerships with community agencies, continued lobbying for additional Access positions and staff bursaries. In 1999, as a response to that concern, a part-time program was established. In the part-time program, students have six years to complete courses, which are made available during evenings and on weekends.

The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (1991) recommended that responsibility for Aboriginal child welfare be returned to Aboriginal communities. The Government, led by Premier Gary Doer (May 1, 2003), requested that the ICSWP deliver the Aboriginal Child Welfare Initiative (ACWI) Program. Therefore, in 2003, this third program was added to the ICSWP series of offerings. The ACWI Program adapts the Bachelor of Social Work degree curriculum to include more content on Aboriginal child welfare issues and Aboriginal social work methods of teaching. It continues the tradition of cohort models and is made up entirely of people of Aboriginal origin.

Over the ten years from 1993 to 2003, a total of 217 students were admitted. The reported graduation rates were 74% in 1989, 70.4% in 1994, and 71% in 2003. Over 50% of those admitted were of Aboriginal heritage and 88% of the ICSWP graduates have been employed in full-time social work positions. Almost 90% of students are women (Clare, 2003, p. 26).

This study drew participants from the 20 years (1985-2004) of graduates from the full-time program only. The reasons for this selection criterion is explained below.

Research Participants

Number. This research project invited 13 former ICSWP students to take part in the study. Ten were Aboriginal students who graduated from the ICSW Program over the last 20 years, and three were Aboriginal students who experienced at least a year of the program but, for whatever reason, chose not to continue. The reason for using these two groups was that all participants had experience as Aboriginal students in the ICSWP. It was thought that the non-graduating respondents, who began the program

and did well enough academically to progress beyond first year, may have had important contributions to make regarding their sense of cultural safety. Prior to admission to the ICSWP, these students were screened in the same careful manner as the students who graduated, and were seen as being potentially successful candidates with the capacity to complete the program. Further, these students had completed a year of the ICSWP, and so had demonstrated their capacity for university study. Hence, those who left before graduating needed to be canvassed to ascertain whether issues of cultural safety contributed to their departure. By having non-graduating students share their experiences, there was additional opportunity to identify issues or experiences which may have had some influence on their departure from the program. It was considered possible that those who left did so for reasons of a lack of cultural safety, while those remaining in the program did not have such experience.

The number of participants was thirteen: twelve were female and one was male. Four self-reported their status as Métis and nine as First Nations. Participants indicated their current work sites as follows: ten worked in urban locations and three in northern or rural sites. Areas of current practice included mental health, community, addictions, healthcare, child welfare, education, and justice. Comments are not attributed to graduates or non-graduates in order to preserve anonymity within this report.

Selection Criteria. The participants in this study all were from the full-time program. There had been only one cohort of graduates from the part-time program at the time of the research conversations. Hence confidentiality could not have been ensured if part-time students had been included.

Ten graduates were drawn from a stratified sample covering the period from 1985, the year of the first graduating class, to 2004, when the most recent group graduated. Two participants were selected respectively from the 1985-1990 time period and two selected from the 1990-1994 period. Three participants were selected respectively from each of the more recent time periods of 1995-1999 and 2000-2004.

It was anticipated that memories of the program would be more distant for the first graduates (who were students 20 years ago) than for more recent graduates. As well, there had been changes in staffing and curriculum. It was expected that there could be different experiences reflected in the responses and that this might elicit themes across the strata. This selection process, therefore, was intended to ensure that participants reflected a wide range of experience of the program, rather than just the experiences of those in a single cluster of years. Participants were not stratified according to Aboriginal categories such as Status, non-Status, or Métis, because this degree of definition was not gathered on registration forms.

Therefore, there were several inclusion criteria for the ten graduates. Participants had to be Aboriginal; had to have graduated from the full-time ICSW Program from 1985 through 2004; had to have given current contact information to the ICSWP; had to not have an ongoing relationship with the researcher as an M.S.W. student or colleague; and had to agree to participate in this study. The criteria for excluding graduates from the study were that they could not be non-Aboriginal graduates from the ICSWP; Aboriginal graduates from other social work programs; current Master's students whom the researcher supervised or taught; graduates who had

not given contact information; graduates outside of the interval of years 1985-2004; and those who declined to participate.

The selection criteria for the three persons who withdrew from the ICSWP were that these participants had to be Aboriginal; had to have been admitted to the full-time ICSW Program; had to have attended for at least one academic year; had to have left current contact information with the ICSW Program; and had to have withdrawn from the program and not been reinstated. Participants, therefore, would have been admitted and then exited the program between 1985 and 2004. Former students who would be excluded from the three-person component were non-graduates who withdrew before taking any courses; those who did not complete a full complement of courses for one year; people for whom there is no contact information; those whose schooling took place outside of the interval between 1985 and 2004; and those who declined to participate. Once again, none of these participants could be in a supervisory or collegial relationship with the researcher.

Selection Process. On the intake form, applicants to the ICSWP had the opportunity to self-declare as Aboriginal. The Director had access to the list of graduates who identified themselves as Aboriginal. A preliminary analysis of the graduate list identified that, over that 20 year time period, there were 268 graduates, 125 of whom identified that they were of Aboriginal descent. A list of Aboriginal students who withdrew during the same time period was similarly compiled. From these cohorts the Centre identified 89 non-graduates, and of these 25 were Aboriginal

(with at least a year of study) with up-to-date contact information and therefore were eligible to participate.

A letter was sent to the Director of the ICSWP (Appendix E) explaining the purpose and method of my research project and asking if staff would assist the research by reviewing applications to the program and making a list of self-identified Aboriginal applicants who entered and successfully completed the program. Of those who had given contact information to the ICSWP office, the Director agreed to select randomly ten graduates and three non-graduates to whom a letter was sent from me inviting participation in this study. If a contacted person declined to participate, the Director selected another name for contact, until ten graduates agreed and followed through on participating. The same process was followed to select and interview three people who had withdrawn from the program before graduation.

The Director of the ICSWP agreed to send a letter from the researcher (Appendix F) to the pool of initially willing, potential participants. This letter briefly outlined the nature of the research and asked the graduates if they would be willing to participate in a conversation and possible group discussion of preliminary findings. By referring to a possible group discussion, the study allowed for the circumstance in which individuals might choose to participate in the conversation but opt out of the circle group. Those who wished to participate contacted the researcher directly. Those who do not wish to participate had the option of contacting the Director of the ICSWP, contacting me, or not replying. Participants were asked to reply to me by a specified date, noted in the invitation, two weeks after the mailing of the letter. The Director was

asked to follow the same process to identify, select, contact, and invite the participation of three people of Aboriginal descent (Appendix G) who entered, but did not complete the program. This sub-sample was limited to three because the primary focus was on graduates. The inclusion of three non-graduates allowed for several perspectives on whether the experience of cultural safety for non-graduates differed from that of graduates.

Seven people who were selected from the initial draw of thirteen did not participate. One person declined to participate due to stress leave and reducing commitments. Two did not respond to the invitation. Two letters were returned undeliverable. Two persons agreed to participate, but after multiple attempts to find a convenient time to meet, decided to withdraw from participation. One of these persons moved to another province. Additional names were drawn, until a full complement of ten graduates and three non-graduates was arranged.

Upon receipt of replies from those willing to participate, arrangements were made to meet with these participants. The researcher contacted each willing participant by phone and mail, informing them of the nature and process of the study (Appendix H). Included in the mailed portion of this contact were the interview questions (Appendix D) and consent forms (Appendix B). During the phone conversation, a time and a place to meet were negotiated.

Data Collection, Management and Analysis

Three steps were used in data collection: Participants first met in research conversation individually. They had had time in advance to reflect on the questions to

be asked, having received interview questions as part of the package confirming their participation. Those participants who shared their reflections individually were invited to make a second contribution to the data through conversations in a talking circle group with other participants. As the researcher presented preliminary themes drawn from the analysis of individual transcripts, the participants in the circle were invited to participate in discussion and comment. According to the constant comparative method, the researcher moved between data collection and analysis. Hence, it was expected that new or clarifying information would be added to the data in this way, which, in fact, was the case. In order to facilitate as much participation as possible, circles were offered on two separate occasions for the graduate participants. All ten graduates were able to commit to be present. Finally, the themes drawn from information gleaned from the research conversations and talking circles were presented for reflection to members of the Aboriginal Advisory Group. Once again additional data were added through the Advisory Group's commentary. The methods of conversation, the talking circles, and repeated involvement of participants in these various conversations sought to provide participants with the opportunity to oversee and influence the analysis and interpretation of their contributions to this study. Based on their comments, below, participants seemed to experience this process as both empowering and culturally safe.

Individual Conversations. The word "conversation," as opposed to the word "interview," was used to signal that there was a two-way relationship at play rather than a process where the researcher held the power and asked a passive respondent to answer questions. The word conversation seemed to fit more appropriately with a high

context notion of the relationship between two (or more) participants. The word conversation signalled a more collegial relationship of joint exploration of the concept.

When I met with each individual participant, I reviewed the consent form again, with the aim of making sure that it was understood and completed. I ensured that written permission to tape record the session was discussed and received. They had been informed of this previously. (Appendix B). In general, as we met, graduates were invited to think about their experience at the ICSWP to see whether the concept of cultural safety was meaningful when used to reflect upon the experience of Aboriginal students at the ICSW Program, what such language meant in the ICSWP educational context, and what aspects of the experience at the ICSWP contributed to or detracted from their sense of cultural safety. The open-ended questions were given to the participants in both written and verbal form, as a guideline for the conversation. As the goal was to allow participants to construct for themselves a sense of the relevance of cultural safety from their experiences, I introduced the study with a minimal preamble. This was to avoid imposing a “correct” or “preferred” definition of cultural safety to be supported or opposed. That preamble read as follows:

Some Indigenous Maori people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, who worked in health services, felt that they and their kin were not getting appropriate care that respected their cultural worldview and norms. They started thinking about what it would look like if institutions and service providers created an environment where Maori people felt more “at home.” These Maori nurses began to ask and imagine what would need to be present for them to have a sense of feeling safe enough. They started to identify and outline the things that would have to be in place to establish a minimum standard of safety. They recognized there were some values that they brought from their own culture that were not being attended to. Because those components that felt natural to them were missing, they didn’t feel safe. So they coined the concept of “cultural safety,” putting

those two words together, connecting values from their cultural worldview and a sense of being safe.

Five main open-ended conversation questions were presented:

- (1) When you hear the term cultural safety, what does this concept mean to you?
- (2) What role did cultural safety play in your educational experience at the ICSWP?
- (3) How did you know you were safe?
- (4) As you think about it now, are there things that would have helped you to feel more culturally safe?
- (5) What do you think other Aboriginal graduates might say about their sense of cultural safety at the ICSWP?

Question 5 sought to attend to the possibility of responses being skewed by “social desirability” influence, wherein people tell a researcher what they think the researcher wants to hear. Through this question, participants were invited to externalize negative comments by attributing them to others.

Following the introductory preamble, participants were invited to respond to the questions in turn. When there were instances requiring clarification or needing elaboration, I intervened and probed for further depth (Appendix D). A common follow up question was “What contributed to, and what detracted from, your sense of cultural safety?”

It was expected that each research conversation would require up to ninety minutes. In fact, they ranged from the shortest of about 1 hour and 15 minutes to the longest of more than two hours. Before the tape was turned on, there were catch-up conversations to get reacquainted. Some of the graduates I had not seen for several years, and others I had seen more recently.

At the conclusion of the conversation, I checked to see if the participants had any questions about the conversation or the research process which would follow. I reminded them that an assistant who had signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix I) would be transcribing the tapes to written form, and that participants would have an opportunity to review, change, and comment on their transcribed interviews to confirm accuracy.

Tape and Transcript Management and Storage. Each research participant conversation was taped by audio recording. Each talking circle was taped by audio recording and because the larger number of voices made identification of speaker difficult from audio recording alone, circle conversations were documented also by video recording. Instead of names, a number connected each tape to the identity of a participant. Once the interview or talking circle or advisory meeting was completed, the tape and transcript were identified to record when the interview took place and when the check-off (Appendix C) was completed. Transcripts, simultaneously numbered and dated, were kept in both hard copy and electronic form. A confidential list identifying each participant and a corresponding number was kept in a separate locked cabinet.

A transcriber, who had signed a confidentiality agreement, transcribed the tapes for individual interviews, talking circles, and the Advisory Group review. Transcripts of interviews, circles, and Advisory Group input were labeled consistently, noting the number representing the respondents and the dates of the interviews. To maintain clarity of identification, date, and order of materials, each tape was transcribed to a separate electronic file, with participant number, date, and automated numbering of

lines and pagination recorded within the document footer. This was done to ensure each page of the transcript was accurately identified.

Transcripts of conversations were kept in a fashion to maintain the linkages from raw data to grounded theory (e.g., Figure 2). Transcripts were developed using word processing software, and were saved without comment, into a preliminary electronic file and paper format. Transcripts were saved and printed to a second file so that comments from the first read-through could be added to the margins. In their original form, the transcribed material was limited to the left half of each line on the page and kept independent from the right half of each line. By so doing, comments added in subsequent iterations of read-throughs did not affect the location of transcribed words on a line or pagination of transcribed texts. Hence, regardless of read-through iteration, the participants' original comments remained fixed in their location by page and line.

The transcripts with first read-through comments were then copied and saved to a third file. These transcripts were read through for a second time, with additional comments and initial categories identified. Once again, these transcripts, with comments and categories were copied and then saved to a fourth file, and read through for further refinement and clarification. Each of these files form part of an audit trail, illustrating the development of categories and themes. Notes from the final iteration, comments, categories, and refinements were taken to the talking circle with participants to discuss.

As far as the talking circle data are concerned, the practice of individuals speaking in sequence was followed. The traditional custom of circle confidentiality was requested and permission to record the session was sought (Appendix J). Respondents' participation was predicated on their acceptance and respect of this custom. A transcript of the talking circle was prepared subsequently in the same manner as outlined for the individual sessions (Figure 2). During discussions with Advisory Group members, the researcher's report of themes arising from materials collected to date was shared. If a member wanted to see the transcript of a particular quote, they were shown particular pages where numbers associated with speakers were used to replace names, to preserve confidentiality.

Check-Offs. After the individual research conversations were transcribed, arrangements were made for the participants to read the transcript of their conversation. Each participant was sent a copy of the transcript of their conversation. Participants were invited to read through the transcript and share further reflections, revise comments to reflect more clearly their experience, or even change wording. Three participants suggested minor changes. After making any changes requested by the participant, Appendix C was signed by each participant. In addition to the task of checking their transcript for veracity, the "check-off meeting" also gave the researcher an opportunity to stay connected with the participants over the duration of the data collection process. Similarly, participants in the talking circles were offered the opportunity to review their own comments (only) made within the circle. Respondents

believed that they were sufficiently present to remember what their contribution had been and none of the participants requested this transcript.

Reading for Themes: Data Analysis. After conducting the in-depth conversations, and confirmation of transcripts, I read for themes and reflected on patterns arising within the interviews. The conversations which took place during the check-off meetings were noted on the transcripts and used to assist in developing themes, as participants re-emphasized certain points as being important to them.

Pennell, in Ristock and Pennell (1996), wrote of "speaking with" the data source and identified seven steps (p. 86), which I took to be the process of reading for themes, the model for my procedure. Adapting her words to my study design, the following series of steps were followed:

- (1) creating units of data, which means to listen closely to what the research participants are saying, verbally and in the transcript;
- (2) comparing the statements of the first several participants and beginning to name the topics;
- (3) noticing interesting or recurring patterns among the topics that began to emerge from all of the transcripts read, and re-read a second and third time;
- (4) giving a name to each recurring pattern or theme;
- (5) checking each theme through a fourth reading of the transcripts and talking circles;
- (6) clarifying each theme against the other themes being developed; and the transcripts of the talking circles, reviewing individual transcripts and talking circle transcripts again; and
- (7) reshaping the themes to fit the participants' statements.

Conversations took place; transcripts were prepared; check-offs were obtained; and data coding and development of categories began as soon as transcripts became available. Each transcript was read as soon as it was prepared.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) identify three types of coding to be used throughout the data analysis process in grounded theory: open, axial, and selected. Open coding is used when the researcher develops concepts that express the meaning of the words, thoughts, and phrases used in the raw data; and then begins to form the concepts into abstract categories by reviewing the data within the transcripts. Words and phrases used by the participants are examined to begin to develop theory about the phenomenon under study. To that end, transcripts were reviewed, preliminary categories were formed, data coded, categories developed, and themes that appeared to be emerging were identified. Open coding would correspond to steps 1-4 above.

The next three steps (5-7) listed moved through the process Corbin and Strauss call axial coding: the continued development of the dimensions of the categories that emerged in the open coding. Interactions or associations between categories were assessed. Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe axial coding as the process in which the researcher begins “relating categories to their subcategories . . . linking a category at the level of properties and dimensions” (p. 123). Out of this process, questions are developed that “relate the categories and the [*researcher*] then returns to the data and looks for evidence, incidents, and events that support or refute the questions, thereby verifying the data” (Creswell, 1998, p. 209).

Transcripts were reviewed and compared against the themes to ensure that they represented participants’ views. A discussion was held with Advisory Group members as to the preliminary themes arising from the data to ensure that culturally accurate interpretations were being made. An Advisory Group member who is a graduate of the

ICSW Program co-presented some of the thinking at a national R.A.C.E. Conference in Regina (May, 2006). She assisted in further refining my thinking, as she helped find ways to explain the research information to others. Throughout these discussions, this researcher was writing memos. Strauss and Corbin (1998) identify that memos are “written records of analysis that may vary in type and form” (p. 217).

At this point key categories were identified in the process of selective coding. After a fourth careful read-through of data, category, and theme coding, a list of seven themes emerged which appeared to encompass the main themes that were identified by participants. Theoretical saturation appeared to be reached, in that no new themes or concepts appeared to be emerging from the data. A handout outlining these themes was prepared for the talking circle.

This summary material was then presented to participants who had agreed to take part in the talking circle process. The conversations from the talking circle were taped and transcribed. An offer was made that individuals could see the transcript of their own words, if they so wished. Talking circle procedures do not allow for one person to review written documentation of another participant’s comments in the talking circle. Once again, the researcher analyzed the data through a continuing process of comparing data with possible themes. Data were studied and analyzed, and categories and themes arising from the data were further developed. The researcher looked for discussion points that supported or refuted themes presented (Creswell, 1998, p. 209). Based on the comments that emerged from the talking circle, the themes were reviewed and revised to reflect further refinement that had been gained through

the collective process. An Advisory Group member facilitated the talking circle and served as a check on culturally appropriate interpretation of themes.

I continued to ask the Advisory Group to assist me in interpreting observations and reviewing themes (not transcripts) with them. This remained important because I am “other” to the group with whom the research was being done. After the transcripts were reviewed for themes, a meeting was convened with the Advisory Group to present what I had understood to be major themes. Examples from the transcripts were used to support the emerging themes. Advisory members had the opportunity to discuss their questions, challenges, and concurrence. As we discussed the content, ideas were synthesized and any interpretations I made were available to be challenged.

Thereafter, theory development, or the process Strauss and Corbin (1998) call selective coding began. In this process, “the researcher identifies a ‘story line’ and writes a story that integrates the [*themes*] in the axial coding model” (Creswell, 1998, p. 57). This theory development is described in Chapter 5.

Talking Circles. The mainstream process for group discussion in qualitative research studies is a focus group. Einsiedel (1996) describes focus groups as gatherings of individuals who get together to discuss and share ideas for the purpose of exploration and learning, not consensus. He describes how the synergy of group interaction and the group setting fosters “increased feelings of security and, thus, greater disclosure from participants” (p. 7). Focus groups “provide valuable insight into perceptions, feelings, attitudes, which is vital for understanding wants, needs, motivations and barriers and other psychological factors key to effective programming” (p. 7). It is thought that

hearing comments from others may help participants find their own voice, refine their own thinking, and confirm the accuracy of the findings.

Talking circles were considered to be a more culturally appropriate means of group discussion in this study. The use of a circle is a traditional way of bringing a community of people together to discuss issues for the common good of the community. A key epistemological underpinning of the talking circle in the Aboriginal worldview is the concept of “all my relations” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 54). This practice is an embodied reminder that each one’s actions are always interconnected with others and have an impact not only for oneself but on the community. Fitznor (2002) writes about the power of the circle for data gathering with Aboriginal people. The Advisory Group confirmed that the use of a circle to gather data from research participants would be desirable. Besides being culturally harmonious, the possibility existed that research participants could be stimulated by the stories of others to delve more deeply into their own experiences of cultural safety/non-safety within their educational experience. That seemed to be the case as comments from the talking circles in Chapter 4 and 5 show.

The use of a talking circle was a familiar practice for most of the participants and provided comfort and a sense of safety in sharing similar experiences. Participants might be hesitant to speak about issues of lack of cultural safety, so it was hoped that being in a small group with others would bolster their courage. “The concept of sitting in a circle, sharing stories, and learning from one another is akin to equalizing power differences, finding mutuality, and creating safety in a group setting” (Absolon & Herbert, 1997, p. 209).

The collective nature of the circle allowed for participants to feel support from others, to reduce isolation, to work together with others to generate ideas, and to build on the thoughts of others. The collective nature of the circle also allowed for critical comments as people could find more courage to say, "That's true for me too." Support from others creates a place of safety. "Authenticity challenges us to examine our situation with honesty and courage, and to have truth inform practice in a manner that gives dignity and integrity back to the people" (Absolon & Herbert, 1997, p. 211). The Advisory Group suggested that, as the talking circle is a traditional approach from the Aboriginal worldview, an Aboriginal person with experience and permission to tend such a gathering should be present. Thus, an Advisory Group member was invited to both circles, to welcome participants, open the circle, outline the protocol for the talking circle, and provide a supportive presence throughout the process.

The spirit is the centre of all traditional Aboriginal activities. Traditionally, the circle is opened with a prayer, and a sweetgrass or sage smudge, which is offered to cleanse the space and to center participants. Participants use the smudge to cleanse their thoughts, open their eyes for vision, ears for hearing, mouth for speaking truth and for their heart to be receptive. The sacred and historical significance of the talking circle and its honouring of Aboriginal customs as emphasized by the Advisory Group.

All ten graduate participants were invited to participate in one of two talking circles in order to meet with other graduates to discuss the collective findings. During the conversations, all three non-graduates expressed discouragement about not graduating, which was interpreted as suggesting they preferred not to have their

identities revealed by appearing in the talking circle. This was checked with the Advisory Group, who agreed that inviting graduates only would be appropriate. Six of the ten graduate participants attended the first talking circle. Three attended the second talking circle. The tenth person, who was to attend the second talking circle, had a last minute work crisis that prevented participation.

At the talking circles, participants were introduced to each other, and all shared in a meal provided by the researcher. A social time preceded the talking circle. After dinner, chairs were arranged in a circle. One Advisory Group member was introduced as the facilitator of the talking circle. She outlined and discussed the guidelines and procedures for the talking circle process. Participants signed a consent form agreeing to the video and audio taping of the conversation and the transcribing of the discussion. Participants were given a handout of the draft themes. After the check-offs of their individual transcripts by the individuals, emerging themes were identified and briefly summarized, and a preliminary report (in aggregate style, not identifying individuals) of emerging themes was circulated among participants.

Both the overarching research questions and the conversation questions were posted around the room to provide a visual reminder of the purpose of the research and the conversations that had taken place. The research questions were reviewed. The questions that had been discussed in individual conversations were restated.

The participants received a handout outlining the preliminary themes. The purpose of the talking circle was presented as an opportunity for participants to confirm, clarify, challenge, and/or enhance the themes presented. The question

summarizing this purpose, reiterated by the facilitator several times during the circle was: “Does this ring true to your experience?”

The protocol for the talking circle was as tradition dictates. Each person was invited, in sequence around the circle, to speak uninterrupted, to the issue under consideration. Members of the circle were reminded not to challenge, comment, or speak out of turn. Each member was given opportunity to state her/his own views and thoughts, accepting that other participants each would say what they needed to say for themselves. As a result, this talking circle, like all others, signaled that there was equality of participation. All members had an equal right to speak and be heard. There was no hierarchy.

The group members were then invited to confirm, clarify, or challenge the theme presented by responding to the question: “Does this ring true to your experience?” Participation was optional, and following the traditional values of circles, it was asked that information shared in the circle be kept confidential within the circle. That said, participation was spirited at both participant talking circles and at the Advisory Group circle.

To contribute to accuracy of transcription, though a deviation from traditional Aboriginal practice, I again sought written permission (Appendix J) from all participants to tape the talking circle. Those present were assured that the tapes were to be used for transcription purposes only. The comments of all the participants were recorded in both audio and video formats. Taping in both formats helped resolve transcribing uncertainties in those instances when the audio tape playback was too quiet

or garbled. Subsequently, participants were offered an opportunity to review their individual comments from the transcript of the circle. This transcript became an additional source of data to be analyzed and to provide insight, depth, and discovery.

I met with the Advisory Group on May 6, 2006, to ensure that the planned process and questions were suitable. Conversations with participants occurred in the following two month period. Transcripts were typed, and check-offs occurred in the following six weeks, with the first talking circle taking place September 20, 2006. Further transcription, read-throughs and organization for subsequent circles took place over the fall and winter months. The Advisory Group was able to meet for this discussion on May 23, 2007. One final talking circle, with all but one of the remaining conversation participants, took place on June 7, 2007. In each case, food was prepared, social conversation preceded the talking circle, a review of the purpose and the questions asked was presented, and the talking circle protocol repeated.

Review of the Research Methodology

At this point it seems appropriate to assess the quality of the information thus gathered, so as to determine the subsequent strength of conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 6. To that end, evaluated first is the issue of the researcher being non-Aboriginal. Next, the trustworthiness of these qualitative data is considered along with the thickness of description in the audit trail. Then, the contribution of non-graduating research participants is reviewed as a mechanism to explore a potential positive bias on the part of graduates. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of the research process are considered.

Non-Aboriginal Researcher. One might ask whether my being non-Aboriginal influenced the answers participants gave and whether the same answers would have been given to an Aboriginal investigator. Given the Aboriginal reality of being a community-based culture (see the discussion of high and low context cultures in Chapter 2), it was probable that meaningful responses would be made only to one who was known already and to some degree trusted. Whether different answers would have been given to an Aboriginal researcher can be determined only by conducting such subsequent research.

The methods of conversation, the talking circle, and repeated involvement of participants in these various conversations sought to ensure that participants had oversight of and influence over the analysis and interpretation of their contributions to this study. It was hoped that this was experienced as both empowering and culturally safe. The response of students seemed to indicate that this was so:

It doesn't make a difference for me, because I know you. I mean, if I didn't know you, maybe it would have made a difference. . . . Because you are able to see it from a different perspective, you know, so I'm glad that you are who you are! . . . I trust you wholeheartedly and I have since our IPCS [*Interpersonal Communications Skills*] class. And I trust you and I trust that things will change [*as a result of your research*]. . . . The relationship that we have goes back a number of years, and it's always been one of respect. So, to me, I don't look at what the person looks like. I look at how they treat me. It's all about respect; you, you earn respect by treating people with respect. . . . Now you're taking a strong message that is put together by a group of people. . . . And so for me, no, it didn't, no effect, whether you're . . . it's not about being Aboriginal, it's about the person you are as an individual, period. (C. 2, P.12, L.23 – P.13, L.13)

Trustworthiness of Findings. In quantitative research the concepts of reliability and validity are assessed to determine the strength of conclusions drawn from the data. In qualitative research from a constructivist perspective, empirical, quantitative

measures of reliability and validity are replaced by the concept of trustworthiness of findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have outlined four characteristics of trustworthiness that help an audience sense the trustworthiness of post-positivist research: these are truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (p. 290). As explained below, this study utilizes the first three characteristics of trustworthiness, but not the fourth, of neutrality. First, truth-value contributes to trustworthiness by demonstrating the correspondence between the findings of an inquiry and the contributions of the participating respondents. This relates to the credibility of the study. Second, trustworthiness is enhanced when applicability is demonstrated. Applicability has to do with whether and to what extent the findings may relate to other contexts and different participants. Applicability relates to the transferability of the findings. Third, consistency of findings enhances the trustworthiness of findings. Consistency has to do with whether the findings would occur again if other, but similar, groups in similar circumstances participated in the same process. One could say that consistent findings are dependable. Fourth, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) neutrality is demonstrated when the “biases, motivations, interests or perspectives” of the researcher do not determine the findings (p. 290). In this study, the researcher is not neutral in that a stance countering oppression is overtly adopted. From the stance, the researcher acknowledges commitments, while also identifying particular perspectives emerging from multiple and shifting identities.

In order to develop these types of trustworthiness, a series of steps were built into the research design and process. To explore these various steps, and therefore the

trustworthiness of these findings, each of the four characteristics of trustworthiness are explored in further detail below.

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify a number of “activities increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced” in qualitative research (p. 301). First, they speak of the importance of prolonged engagement and trust-building as contributing to credibility. A prolonged period of engagement enables the qualitative inquirer to learn the context and build trust. They say, “The investigator who has received the agreement of the respondent groups on the credibility of his or her work has established a strong beachhead toward convincing readers and critics of the authenticity of the work” (p. 315).

Building trust is a key part of engagement, which encourages the participants to feel confident in sharing. If the inquirer does not begin as an accepted member of the group or agency being studied, some of the more subtle nuances of the community may be missed. Engagement includes getting to know the community well enough to understand what the local language and traditions are, so to speak.

This relationship of participants and the researcher was established over twenty years of work at the ICSWP. Connection with students continued beyond the four years of study in their cohort, as graduates were often approached to speak in classes, supervise internships, and consult with the ICSWP staff. Relationships often continued throughout advanced degrees, where faculty may be asked to serve as thesis or practicum advisors or committee members. This engagement was confirmed through the previously described Advisory Group’s response to my offer of tobacco. If

participants agreed to meet with me, one might presume that they felt safe enough to participate.

Secondly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) view triangulation as enhancing credibility. Triangulation refers to gathering information from a variety of sources on the same area of focus. Triangulation attends to the issue of credibility by seeking meaning from multiple participant sources. A preliminary source of data has been the writings of Aboriginal authors in the literature review. Further, this study provided some measure of triangulation through the interviewing of several respondents in separate, taped individual conversations. Further separation of data sources was introduced through the diversity of perspective: some respondents reflected a graduate perspective; some reflected a non-graduate perspective. This diversity was enhanced through the inclusion of respondents who experienced study at the ICSWP during different time periods.

Member-checking, third, also contributes to credibility. Members of the study had the opportunity to check the transcripts to confirm that what was transcribed was what they meant to say. This adds to the credibility of the study by affirming the accuracy of the recording process. Participants, in the circle process, also had the opportunity to review the report of preliminary findings and, thus, confirm the interpretations of the meanings they had hoped to convey. The member-checking introduced an independent (to the interviewer) check and balance or corrective influence on the researcher, enriching the sense that the observations and interpretations could be taken as credible. While transcript reviews primarily served the purpose of member-checking, it was possible that, in the correction of transcripts, further data

could be shared in a written format. Further written contributions however were not made. More significant additional gleanings of data occurred through the talking circle as individuals had the opportunity to make further statements in response to both their individual conversations, to the preliminary report of categories in process, and to the statements made by others in the circle.

External checking, another activity contributing to credibility, refers to reviewing responses with respondents and person(s) outside the respondent group. In this study, external checking was provided through the talking circle and Advisory Group conversations. When the aggregated themes from all the transcripts were presented to the group meetings, members were able to assess the findings on an individual level; and then in discussion at the group level, they had the opportunity to clarify and enrich the description. Individual statements and perceptions made in the circle or reviewed by the Advisory Group were, thereby, checked from an external perspective. If there were unusual or contradictory findings, the group discussion was able to explore, evaluate, and elucidate the meaning of those anomalous findings. There was an opportunity to affirm other themes that participants had not mentioned themselves. Participants were able to decide whether these themes “rang true” for their experience, even if initially they did not articulate that theme explicitly in their own individual conversation. The Advisory Group served as another check on credibility as group members were able to challenge findings that they saw as relating to a bias or an erroneous interpretation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest an external check on the inquiry process through peer debriefing (as with the Advisory Group) as a way of

contributing to greater credibility. Through this process the bases for the researcher's interpretations were clarified and the researcher was thus pushed to be more fully aware of attitudes and the process of the research. There was an opportunity to test and clarify the themes emerging and to be able to defend one's findings.

It was expected that the description of experiences of safety or lack of safety by participants could be heavily laden with emotion, making accurate interpretation of content and meaning more difficult. In fact, there was an intensity of emotion shared, lightened by frequent shared laughter. The peer setting of the talking circle helped to ensure that such powerful content was neither over- nor under-valued. As the experience of safety or lack of safety was discussed, people could reconnect to experiences and emotions of being unsafe. Without an opportunity to debrief those experiences and conversations, the researcher could have been prone to over-identify with the emotionality and render the research less reliable. Additionally, for the sake of the participants, being able to talk in a supportive group helped people to feel less alone; several spoke of having their experiences validated through this process.

Transferability. External validity in the empirical sense is not possible in constructivist research. The intent instead was to set out a working premise of the relations which exist and to describe the time and context in which they are meaningful. The working premise was that graduates would be able to identify elements of their educational experiences that felt culturally safe or unsafe, and that, in a program where elements of cultural safety were present, the quality of culturally safe educational experiences would be recognized by graduates. Hence, Lincoln and Guba (1985)

suggest that the transferability of a study's findings cannot so much be proven as be supported in constructivist research.

Consequently, constructivist research seeks to provide a sufficiently "thick description" to enable a reader to reach a conclusion. The goal in such research is to obtain the widest range of information possible and to develop a data base of description from which it becomes possible for others to recognize transferability in their reading of the findings. Hence, this research was not intended to be generalized to a larger population; rather, its purpose was to develop theory around cultural safety from the perspective of these former Aboriginal social work students. The purpose was to begin an exploration of this concept or to create thick description and have beginning conversations to discover the usefulness of this concept for social work education with Canadian Aboriginal people. It will be the reader, not the researcher, who determines the extent of transferability on the basis of the thick description provided by the researcher.

Dependability. Dependability refers to the possibility of obtaining the same findings through repeated replication of the study with different but similar groups of respondents. As it was with transferability, so too, dependability cannot be proven in qualitative research:

Since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter. If it is possible using the techniques outlined in relation to credibility to show that a study has that quality, it ought not to be necessary to demonstrate dependability separately. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316)

In other words, theoretically, if the findings are credible, one might assume dependability. While additional efforts might be made to augment, if not guarantee, this quality, those additional efforts were considered impractical. Qualitative parallels to approaches used in quantitative analysis could be adapted to enhance dependability. Overlapping methods of data gathering parallel the benefits of triangulation as contributing to credibility. The stepwise replication of a study, with two researchers, each interviewing half the respondents, is technically possible; however such an effort cannot guarantee dependability. Two similar groups, with separate research facilitators, could feasibly and for very legitimate reasons go in very different directions during interviewing and circle conversations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317).

Audit Trail: Thickness of Description. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the benefits and activity of an inquiry audit trail (pp. 318-325). An inquiry audit trail can contribute to the trustworthiness of a study by attesting both to the dependability of the process and findings, and also by confirming the even-handedness of the researcher. Through an audit trail a reviewer could affirm for herself/himself the appropriateness of methodological shifts, that all data are accounted for, that items challenging categories have been included in analysis, that early closure and premature judgments have been resisted, and that the researcher has not predetermined outcomes and has not been co-opted in the process. The trustworthiness of the study is, thereby, increased.

The audit trail maintained in this study includes first the raw data (the taping of individual conversations and group sessions provide one further element of accuracy). "Recorded materials provide a kind of benchmark against which later data analysis and

interpretation (the critiques) could be tested for adequacy” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 313). The audit trail also includes data reduction and analysis products, such as notes and commentary on interviews, circles, or Advisory Group gatherings. The audit trail includes the notes used to reconstruct the data and create report materials, showing the development of themes, definitions, relationships, categories, interpretations, inferences, and in the end, the final report. Process notes and materials related to the researcher’s intentions, including the proposal, and a reflexive journal, documenting such things as the inquirer’s personal reflections, expectations, hunches, and predictions add to this trail.

As described previously, an audit trail was kept, since in this study it was undesirable to introduce a separate auditor to the conversations and circle discussions. In the end, the audit trail is available to attest to the appropriateness of analytical techniques; the clarity, explanatory structure, and data fit of category labels; the quality of interpretation and the consideration of possible alternative interpretations; and the grounding of the findings in data. All these contribute to the trustworthiness of the study.

The credibility of data provided from multiple sources and the degree to which data and analysis are checked, when added to the thickness of description, suggest, rather than prove, that the findings of the study have some measure of transferability or meaningfulness beyond the actual participants. The presence of an audit helps to support that the findings were aptly described, could be recognized by another researcher, and faithfully represent the data and logically support the categories and

themes identified. In short, the audit trail offers the possibility of some degree of confirmability. Hence, as mentioned above, by showing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, three of the four characteristics of trustworthiness (truth value; applicability; consistency, but not neutrality), outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 290) were supported.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study Design. The research design was structured in a manner appropriate to the questions pursued and to the identity of the participants. It allowed for participants to define the concept, an opportunity that is consistent with the sense that the concept must be articulated by the service recipients. There was a relationship between the participants and the ICSW Program, which speaks to the issue of earned trust essential in high-context culture.

From beginning to end, the research was developed with guidance from committed colleagues who were Aboriginal social work instructors. As a consequence, care to remove unconscious incidents of bias was taken: from understanding the concept in the beginning, to the design of questions, to the manner of interviewing and interpreting data. The method of data collection involved a high level of respect for Aboriginal processes and ownership. It is hoped that the respect shown for participant observations was a positive empowerment experience for participants. The check-off system, especially the talking circle review, fit with a general Aboriginal model, and provided multiple opportunities for accuracy review and enrichment of data at the collection and interpretation stages.

The number of participants in this study was relatively small, derived from a relatively small sample of participants who resided or worked in a restricted geographical area. The majority of participants lived and worked in or near Winnipeg. In most instances, those working in their own communities and who resided outside the city, still maintained Winnipeg offices.

To deepen the insights of this study, it would be useful to canvass multiple graduate categories to obtain a sense of what elements of response are unique to each group and what elements are common across groups. This research project was undertaken as part of an academic process for a doctoral dissertation, which meant there were time and resource constraints. It would be useful to invite many graduates to share their experiences, but repetition of the process was beyond the scope of this research. Certainly, further iterations of this study might be undertaken in the future.

As has been mentioned above, the fact that I am a non-Aboriginal researcher remains an important factor. Much has been written about the need for Aboriginal people to be researching and writing about their own issues. I thought carefully about this issue and sought guidance from Aboriginal colleagues and friends. In the end, the decision was made to pursue this study, as this research was considered important in my place of work. I have taken care to ensure guidance from Aboriginal colleagues, and my hope is that the participants and other students will gain from this experience. The majority of the participants had obtained an undergraduate degree and have been encouraged to conduct their own research. The hope is that participation gave

respondents an experience of research and role modeling and the encouragement to pursue further studies.

CHAPTER 4:

THE VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

As the previous chapter highlighted, the constant comparative research method involves reading transcripts of data, line by line, in an attempt to understand the experiences as described by participants. In each of several readings, the researcher added memos to the transcripts, noting the significant thoughts, and observing language that seemed particularly meaningful in context (coding). The researcher then noted relatedness of this coding and gathered clusters of these together to form concepts or “topics” that shared a similar focus. After careful review and comparison, these topics gradually began to coalesce to form denser categories or “themes” which further associated ideas or issues of similar meaning. Eventually, the dynamics of the relationships between these themes were suggested and refined to form the theory that articulates those dynamics and relationships.

This chapter presents examples of topics present in the participant responses to the five research questions that were discussed with each individual in one-with-one conversations and subsequently reviewed in talking circles. This material is presented below, arranged first by research question, and then by topics that arose in response. The participants seemed to answer the research questions with sincerity and candor. As they worked to describe in positive language what cultural safety meant to them, they usually turned to personal narratives to illustrate their points. These narratives frequently made reference to previous life experience that had not been culturally safe.

Consequently, each research question also generated responses that contained topics that silhouette cultural safety by describing its absence.

Within the expected limits of the readers' willingness to read, as much transcript material as possible has been included in this chapter. This allows the voices of the participants to be heard directly, first to appreciate the significance of the sharing that has occurred. This research reveals the wisdom and pain of the participants. In addition, the participant voices provide the authority and significance to the themes and theory described later in this document. If power goes to those who speak, it is crucial that readers recognize that the speakers here primarily are the Aboriginal co-researchers of this project.

Non-graduating Research Participants.

The voices of the thirteen research participants are considered together rather than separated by whether or not they graduated from ICSWP. This was because the non-graduating participants did not appear to diverge from the graduates in their experience of cultural safety at the program. Non-graduating students found the ICSWP to be relatively culturally safe. The decisions to withdraw were made because of personal issues outside of the reach of the school. For one, personal healing (seeking a greater sense of safety within) was needed if there was to be educational benefit. "You can't concentrate if you've got a crisis going on in your head" (T.10, P.6, L.19). For another the issue was developing the maturity and discipline to continue:

I was feeling that that I had to work on myself. It was basically, "Me, me, me."
It had nothing to do with being culturally unsafe. . . . I didn't feel that at all. It's

just like, “Are you ready for this?” It was quite a challenge. (T.10, P.11, L.44 – P.12, L.4)

I wasn’t ready. . . . I was still young. . . . I hadn’t experienced enough. But in my mind I experienced a lot. . . . But the experience that I had wasn’t what was needed. I think I still needed some maturity to go through. Basically, I needed to grow up a little. I never ever wanted to admit that. Never did. (T.6, P.4, L.37-47)

For two non-graduates, personal and family related issues were cited:

Then of course life happens, and things come up. So that’s probably why I didn’t finish. ’Cause I went through lots of stuff. Like I was in a really bad depression. One of my close siblings died. And I was in a really bad depression probably for about a year. (T.13, P.6, L.10-14)

And the other thing I struggled with a lot; a lot of the course content focused on family and unity . . . and people skills. And a lot of these things I spent three and a half years here and I spent three and a half years behind a book. And almost treating my family second. So there was an internal struggle with that. I’m learning how to teach other people how to put their family first. But for four years of my life, I have to put my family second. . . . It didn’t make sense. (T.6, P.5, L.14-28)

Despite repeated probes to determine whether there had been sufficient support at the ICSWP, this student remained clear that the issues were beyond the supports of the program:

[RESEARCHER:]WERE THE SUPPORTS YOU NEEDED HERE? Yeah. If I chose to use them. HOW COULD THE SCHOOL HAVE HELPED YOU? I don’t know if they could? Okay, because even you could, somebody could say to me, “I’m here to help.” “Okay, that’s nice.” Am I ready to admit I need help? No. And I’m probably not the only one who is like that. You can offer a whole lot of things, but it’s up to that person to take them. I don’t think I was ready to even admit that I needed help. (T.6, P.5, L.44-50)

But even the process of leaving the program turned out to be a positive experience:

Even though I was very upset the day they gave me that letter . . . but it was a good thing and it came out of . . . it was something I knew was going to happen . . . never wanted to admit to it. Am I ready to come back again and finish it? No. (T.6, P.5, L.2-6)

Indeed, the program had been so supportive that it was with a great deal of sorrow that one of the students withdrew: “I felt like I went through a grieving process . . . like a part of me died: my dreams . . . and my spirit” (T.10, P.5, L.45-46).

Question 1 – What the Concept of Cultural Safety Means?

The first question participants were asked was: “When you hear the term ‘cultural safety’, what does this concept mean to you?” While participants were informed of the subject of the research and had heard a preamble related to cultural safety, the concept was a new one for all respondents. Cultural safety was not a lens through which they had previously viewed and assessed their social work education experience:

I never actively thought of it . . . but it’s like every time I knew when I would come into WEC, even just physically into the building, it felt fine. I felt good. I felt safe. I felt I can come in there and talk with people. I can come in there and be myself . . . hanging out in the parking lot, or being in a classroom or doing studies with a study group or things like that . . . and it was all about safety . . . there was never a question of feeling unsafe. (T.9, P.1, L.22-37)

As a result, responses to the first question were more abstract and diffused than they were to later questions.

Nevertheless, perhaps due to this lack of predetermination of the meaning of cultural safety, a wide variety of topics arose in response to the question of what cultural safety meant to them. These included “spirituality,” “identity,” “whole person,” “respect,” “rights,” “voice,” “freedom,” and “valuing.” As cultural safety is a state of being not completely achieved, participants often answered the research questions by making reference to previous experiences that contrasted their expectations of cultural

safety. Hence, some negative-sounding topics emerged that served to silhouette the concept and are referred to below as illustrations of “cultural unsafety:” “identity loss,” “silencing,” “disconnection from culture,” and “two worlds.”

As Aboriginal writers have previously identified (McCormick, 1995; Hart, 1999), the topic of spirituality was a frequent starting place for many participants in this study. The freedom to consult an Elder; to engage in spiritual practices like smudging, sharing circles, and prayer; and to attend ceremonies particularly identifiable as Aboriginal were mentioned as participants attempted their own definitions of cultural safety. Various participants phrased the point as follows: “So there has to be, I have to have authority, to do what I need to do [*smudge*]. . . . So it’s the Spirit for sure . . . the first thing. And I think that’s always supposed to come first” (T.12, P.1, L.28; P. 2, L.28-31). “Yeah, that’s another course I was in and I loved it there too ’cause we smudged and prayed every day and got to . . . it was safe! . . . It was empowering” (T.2, P.3, L.36-38). Another participant declared:

If I was to be culturally safe, I’d be allowed to bring sage to work and burn it but I’m not because of the fire hazard thing, or whatever, so . . . like there’s always blocks, or whatever I find, so I can’t use my own culture in my work. (T.13, P.1, L.10-13)

Within the responses to this first research question, the topic of identity also was suggested strongly. This topic included a number of dimensions such as being oneself without fear and being free of stereotypes. Positively speaking, cultural safety was signaled by pride in one’s Aboriginal identity. However, this issue of identity was often phrased as freedom to be oneself aside from negative experiences: freedom from fear, freedom from retribution. The definitions which participants gave reflected the desire to

live in that condition where one was not disparaged for one's identity, where instead one was respected, encouraged, and affirmed as a person. "What comes first to mind is . . . able to practice their culture and their own ways within a setting that doesn't try to tell them to do it otherwise" (T.9, P.1, L.5-8). Others said similar things:

For me personally the term "cultural safety" means to be able to feel safe in . . . in an environment where you're able to express yourself emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically, like I guess the four aspects of who we are as Aboriginal people. (T.2, P.1, L.15-18)⁸

When I hear the phrase "cultural safety," the first thing I think about is . . . feeling free to be yourself, without fear of how other people are going to react to you, because they may not agree with you. In terms of "cultural" safety, being able to identify who I am culturally, being able to identify who I am within myself, and in my daily life, my environment . . . and being able to put it out there, and wear it on the front of me as something that I'm proud of . . . not being worried that someone may see it and kind of use it against me. (T.4, P.1, L.11-20)

Cultural safety is being able to be yourself, who you are and not fear of somebody attacking you because of who you are. That's what cultural safety . . . like I'm Aboriginal, and I want to . . . I . . . I'm proud to be and I don't want someone attacking me because I'm Aboriginal. (T.8, P.1, L.12-15)

Several commented that one was culturally safe when one was free to be oneself regardless of how one chose to self-define. Part of this sense of identity was to be able to value all the aspects of identity and to not have to suppress any. Consequently the topic "whole person" was coded:

To be able to express yourself emotionally whether it's through tears or happiness or joy to share that . . . to share that feeling and knowing that you can do that in safe place and just to be yourself . . . spiritually . . . in all those four domains. (T2, P.1, L.23-26)

Related to this is the issue of stereotyping: the reduction of a person to aspects of identity. One did not need to reflect any particular stereotype, whether that be the

exotic-traditional-Indian stereotype, the down-and-out-in-poverty stereotype, or the getting-everything-free stereotype, for example:

Basically there's still people out there that see Aboriginal they see the people that are drunk on Main Street, they see the ones that are on welfare . . . you know, having kids, and to me it's, and I think part of that has been my driving force to prove to society there is, there is, this isn't the only picture of Aboriginal people. And I feel that over the years WEC has really helped put that . . . to define that and to be and to say, "It's okay to be Aboriginal. There's nothing wrong with it." And you can be educated, you can be . . . as they would say a "contributing member of society." (T.9, P.4, L.4-11)

To assume that there is one way to be Aboriginal is to participate in stereotyping. This freedom to be oneself reflected a desire to be recognized for all one's multi-faceted qualities. Cultural safety, it was thought, would insist upon actively recognizing the diversity among Aboriginal people, and the freedom to practice that culture in diverse ways of their own choosing:

I would like people to respect the decisions that I've made . . . in terms of culture . . . So spirituality, if I choose to follow a tradition . . . or do I go for a Christian faith . . . or can I amalgamate the two with them . . . so to me it would just be having other people around me respect the decisions that I've made . . . and also . . . giving them the respect back. (T.6, P.1, L.13-19)

Another topic that arose in the attempt to define cultural safety was "respect." The word respect was frequently presented, both as a quality existing within persons (a noun) and as the act of acceptance between persons (a verb). Description of not being judged, listened to, showing deference for elders, and being recognized as having gifts to share enriched this sense of respect:

I think it [*cultural safety*] would mean, or what that would look like to me, if you believe in your traditional roots or traditional background, then you are free to . . . to do that and express that for you without feeling judged or without people telling you that, you know, "that's wrong," or you know, "that's not the way," or whatever that looks like. (T.11, P.1, L.8-13)

Just, having an environment where people can walk in and it's like, like I said, where they just feel that acceptance, it doesn't matter what, you know what shade their skin colour is . . . or any of that . . . it's just . . . just treating them as people . . . and treating them with respect . . . like I said, one part of that would be . . . by having like I mentioned with the sharing circles. (T.9, P.6, L.45-51)

Closely related to the respect between persons was the topic of rights. Respect for treaty rights, mentioned by two of the participants, seemed to be a practical subset of the desire to be respected as Aboriginal people. "Right away, I think of having my rights protected . . . as an Aboriginal person" (T.10, P.1, L.4-6). Participants who had their rights both understood and honoured considered that to be a state of cultural safety. This included not having to defend or explain those legal rights or spiritual practices and not having to explain the effects of colonization or to have to challenge racist behaviour:

I feel like I'm being trampled on, my rights are not being upheld. Like I'm not being respected, and taken seriously . . . Like, I'm being belittled by someone. It's like, "Well, you can't say that stuff. . . . That's not right!" "How can you say it's not right when it feels right to me?" And if I can have the freedom to use it, then I'll feel safe, and that what to me is cultural safety . . . that I can talk about whatever I need to talk about, openly and without criticism, or [*be able to say,*] "Hey you, you stop that right now! You don't talk like that." (T.13, P.1, L.28-41)

A number of other topics were embedded in many of the same conversations and quotations as listed above.⁹ A review of those excerpts shows that the issue of cultural safety frequently is made manifest as one is engaged in self-expression, in speaking about identity, respect, and rights. Phrases relating to speech, such as "express myself," "talk about," and "say that stuff," suggested that the topic of voice was significant:

I was culturally safe to be able to express that because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to talk about it openly, so just being in the course . . . it was more, I don't know how to explain it . . . but more okay to talk about it? (T.2, P.3, L.18-20)

It would include like being able to talk freely about my culture without people getting offended, or people taking offense at what I'm saying, 'cause I've gone through it in my life that when I talk about culture, people go, "Oh, we're on that Indian thing again, aren't we?" (T.13, P.1, L.17-21)

Similarly, the concept of freedom was also attached to several previous topics.

Participants considered persons to be culturally safe who were free to practice their chosen spirituality, who were free to exhibit their own identity, who were free to express their own voice. Woven through the topics of spirituality, respect, identity, and community is the topic of valuing. When the culture and individual and community are respected, value is recognized in the persons who represent that culture, and in the gifts they have to offer:

When I think about cultural safety, I think to me again [*it*] would be . . . that people have the ability to be themselves in any given situation . . . to feel that they have something to offer, in whatever given situation, to feel that whatever they do have to offer that it's valued. And, you know . . . there are some of these stereotypical judgments whatever that are left out of it. (T.3, P.1, L.19-23)

As the research conversation focused on the definition of the concept of cultural safety, participants often illustrated their responses with events from their own lives. Many of these responses arose out of negative experiences, resulting in topics that describe the absence of cultural safety. Hence the topic of cultural unsafety entered the preliminary coding, with various other descriptive terms like "childhood" and "own-home" attached. The significance of these first few narratives of cultural unsafety

would become clearer as subsequent research questions elicited many more examples of cultural unsafety.

Childhood experiences of cultural unsafety were described:

It was dangerous at that time, when I was a little girl, at that time. My granny was in hiding. My grandpa was in hiding. . . . When the Indian agent was in town, they packed up and left in their canoe and took my mom as a little girl away into the woods, far, far away where the Indian agent wouldn't find her. My mom never went to school a day in her life. My mom does not speak English. My Mom does not know her numbers to play bingo. And you know what? I used to be ashamed of that when I was younger. (T.1, P.3, L.34-35 - P.4, L.8-15)

Sometimes painful experiences occurred in one's own home, at the instigation of a non-Aboriginal parent. "There was a lot of racial tensions in my home as a child. Like my dad would egg on my sister who was fair-skinned, to make fun of my sister who was the darkest out of all of us" (T.13, P.3, L.13-28). This was confirmed again in the first talking circle review. "We were regularly called 'dirty Indians'. We were the Indians, me and my brother and sister and my Mom. You know, and he [*the Caucasian father*] was the white king, and we were just the Indians" (C.1, P.29, L.15-18).

A loss of one's own identity as an Aboriginal person was indicated as part of childhood experience. Though a person was Aboriginal by race, what Aboriginal meant to the parents and culture of that participant, was not emphasized to the child. "Cultural wasn't a piece . . . for me . . . It was something that I had to find. Something I had to learn . . . and identify in myself as . . . an Aboriginal person" (T.7, P.1, L.10-12).

The effect, revealed by the participants, was a disconnection from the individuals themselves and their own culture. Consider this statement of startling self-discovery:

I only realized I was Aboriginal when I was 15 or 16 years old. And, it was quite entertaining to my mother when I discovered that “whoa, I am Aboriginal,” even though my mom’s all “been there.” It just never dawned on me. I wasn’t raised by my mom. I was raised by my non-Aboriginal side. And then all of a sudden one day it hit me; it was like, “I am an Indian. Go figure!” (T.6, P.2, L.34-39)

Some participants were taught by their kin to avoid Aboriginal traditions:

For me, in my youth I had witnessed the traditional way of life with my, watching my grandparents, but I was not told, I was not to talk about it, I was just to put it asi[de] . . . to forget that you saw that. Well, this is this, and this is what it does. This is what my granny used to say . . . but she would not teach me . . . She didn’t . . . she didn’t teach me and I am sorry that I didn’t give her that. (T.1, P.13, L.31-37)

Another participant mentioned being guided by parents to avoid Aboriginal spiritual rituals:

And, they used to do . . . to do cultural . . . pow-wows and that when they came to Winnipeg. I never knew that out in the community, and my mom used to tell us, “Stay away from that.” (T.5, P.2, L.28-30)

Experiences of this unsafety were not all in the past. Various participants described experiences of continuing to feel vulnerable or hurt by the behaviour of others responding to the participant’s Aboriginal identity. Sometimes experiences of unsafety occurred in the homes of playmates:

My kids have come home and said, “I . . . I . . . couldn’t go because the Mom found out . . .” like one of her friends, my daughter’s friends found out we’re Aboriginal . . . my daughter’s very fair, so I don’t know if she assumed she was not Aboriginal. But she met . . . they met us, like I went to pick up my daughter at school. And so she was uninvited to a party after. So that really hurt her. It was really awful. It really hurt her. (T.8, P.1, L.33-39)

One was, perhaps unconsciously, but powerfully put down at a recent gathering of professionals:

I, not very long ago . . . I went to a meeting. I shook a hand of a, when you go in, you know, you shake hands and . . . the man wiped his hand on his pants . . . after I shook his hand . . . and he . . . and I don't know if that was intentional, if he noticed it . . . but you, you know, it's like, and then he, was very condescending you know, with his attitude. So I kind of figured, well . . . as much as it's not stated, like it's hidden, it's still there. (T.8, P.1, L.46-52)

The link in definition between cultural safety and voice was made inversely as participants spoke about negative experiences when they tried to speak about their culture. Participants described responses that pushed back at them, which were coded here as silencing:

They've been so acclimatized to the system, and the health or in the judicial system, you see it all over the place . . . they just automatically follow the rules, do what they are told, and if something happens to them . . . then . . . they are socialized to be silent as Aboriginal people. (T.10, P.1, L.32-36)

A variety of responses to the term "culture" indicated a disconnection from culture. Participants report being taught by their kin to avoid things Aboriginal, such as their language:

We lost, I can say to . . . culture, language; mom and dad didn't feel it was important for us to keep our language because we wouldn't need it. Because everything in the world is English . . . runs and do English. [RESEARCHER: DID YOUR PARENTS SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE?] Yeah, amongst themselves they did. But when we were present it was always English, but when they had company it was their language that they spoke and we had to get away from the company and not listen to what was said, so we had to go and make ourselves, keep ourselves busy and active while they had company so it was to get away from hearing the language. That is what I assumed anyway. You know, but because we never did learn it. (T.5, P.2, L.5-16)

In one statement about keeping a distance from Aboriginal culture, the participant three times mentioned "not talking" about Aboriginal ways:

My grandmother, who's a medicine woman, and that was set aside a long time ago, [*said*]: "don't talk about it." And why my grandpa sat with a lot of men and shared a pipe; I was not supposed to talk about it . . . Why my granny burned

things . . . all kinds . . . any time in the mornings . . . when it smelled funny, and we went digging with her into the deep woods and took things out and not to talk about it. No. I'm talking about it now and I'm proud of it. (T.1, P.3, L.22-31)

Gradually this disrespect of culture became internalized. Participants reported being alienated from other Aboriginal people, or of feeling isolated themselves:

Because of the lifestyle, because of what I've seen in my past . . . it takes me a while to believe in Aboriginal people. Isn't that sad? That . . . it is sad. That's a sad thing to say . . . And, I don't feel . . . like, I'm Aboriginal, do I fit in? Would I fit in? Would I get picked on? If I say something about how I grew up, will I be attacked about it? You know. There's so much stereotyping about Aboriginal people and you think, "Okay, are they going to think the same about me?" Am I going to have to fight through those stereotypical views? (T.8, P.1, L.27-32)

Eventually the disconnection was so complete that they found themselves separating from others. It is seen as a measure of healing that this split could be overcome once again:

If I saw an Aboriginal person walking down the street, intoxicated or holding a sniff cloth, I would turn my nose down on them, and would not acknowledge that person. Today I can walk, and I can hold my head up high, and say, "hi" without that shame there anymore, and recognize this is a person who had parents, or who has parents who may have suffered residential school or the effects of residential school, . . . and didn't have the ability . . . to love and nurture their child or have the teaching that they wanted to carry on throughout their life . . . because it was ripped from them. (T.7, P.5, L.36-44)

Participants indicated that they found themselves coping with the lack of sense of belonging in destructive ways. "The only culture we knew was the culture of alcohol, and drugs, and abuse . . . and then there was mental disabilities along the way too . . . So, there really wasn't something to hang on to that was prideful" (T.7, P.1, L.21-24).

There was a sense (and topic) that two worldviews were active in their lives. There were explicit descriptions of learning two different spiritualities. "Actually, I was

taught both. I was taught Christianity, and the medicines, and the teachings. . . . And I still practice the medicines for healing. They talk about bad medicine, good medicine. The medicine I have is for healing” (T.10, P.3, L.43-46). There was recognition of not only having to learn the language of two cultures, but also of having to deal with the political pressures each implied:

Some people will use this term like, “Well, I’m an apple,” they say. “I’m red on the outside, but I’m white on the inside.” So to me it’s like it doesn’t . . . to me I don’t take a . . . it doesn’t bother me so much, ’cause it’s like you know, really I am . . . this is the way I was raised, but there this is still who I am . . . like, I’m not one way or the other . . . like I take from my culture what I feel comfortable and safe with . . . and I take from other cultures what I enjoy and what I feel makes me feel safe . . . and practice them in my life if that’s what I choose to do. (T.9, P.6, L.29-36)

In the instance of hiding from the Indian Agent just mentioned, it was clear that there were two worldviews at work that did not comfortably co-exist.

In all, a significant number of topics describing cultural safety emerged from the participants’ efforts to express the meaning of the concept. Sorting through these topics, and identifying patterns and themes would eventually follow. In terms of the chronology of the conversations, however, the participants then moved on to their experience of seeking education to become social work practitioners.

Question 2 – What Was Your Experience of Cultural Safety at the ICSWP?

The second question asked of participants was: “What role did cultural safety play in your educational experience at the ICSWP?” The probe, “What contributed to and detracted from that sense of cultural safety at the ICSWP?” was a frequent follow-up question. Compared to Question 1, as this question focused on personal experience, the responses of the participants became more conversational. Participant responses to

these queries spread in a number of directions. The responses to this query took time, as participants attempted to incorporate the term “cultural safety” into their replies. Further, the conversational approach to this research meant that this question was answered more indirectly, and the gist of a reply was often embedded in a longer, more personal, narrative.

The follow-up probe, “What contributed to or detracted from your sense of being culturally safe?” elicited more detailed responses. Various topics arose in response to the question about the role of cultural safety at the ICSWP. These included “felt good,” “identity,” “relationship,” “vigilance,” “accessibility,” “respect” and “valuing,” “shared identity,” “own culture curriculum,” “awakening,” “diversity,” and “flexibility.” A number of other experiences were identified that detracted from the sense of cultural safety. These were coded as the topics of “failure to protect,” “unintended triggers,” “individualistic approaches,” and more “unsafety.” Nevertheless, the kinds of things that contributed to cultural safety formed the majority of responses. A brief discussion of these topics follows. Topics already mentioned that were reinforced in responses to Question 2, included voice and spirituality.

The bulk of the responses indicated that the experience of cultural safety at the ICSWP felt good. Some participants mentioned that they felt culturally safe or safer in this educational program than in any other they had experienced. “I don’t think we had any, I had any safe sense . . . and I don’t think I got it until . . . probably about [*the year I was at the ICSWP*]” (T.7, P.2, L.43-46). This perception was described in almost visceral terms. “But when I returned to WEC, I had . . . a sigh of relief go through me,

not only here but throughout my body” (T.1, P.5, L.22-28). “It was just the nurturing environment that created that . . . so, yeah . . . I mean I always felt good every time I walked in . . . in the WEC doors” (T.9, P.1, L.53-55). I always felt this was a safe place to be. I really liked coming to school here . . . I liked . . . both years I was with . . . very culturally dynamic and . . . and we’re all at different levels. (T.6, P.3, L.53 – 56). While the purpose of this research was not to determine if this particular social work program was considered culturally safe, these responses support the working hypothesis: that graduates would be able to identify what elements of their educational experience felt culturally safe or unsafe, and whether elements of cultural safety were present or absent.

The topic of identity, previously noted, was enriched by responses to the second question. The freedom to be oneself was distinguished from the dominant North American culture’s sense of individualism. For participants in this study, the freedom to be oneself was understood to be free from that stereotype also. For Aboriginal participants, freedom to be is not only for oneself but also for one’s kin and one’s own community. Hence, participants spoke of their yearning for cultural safety in reference to this wider circle:

Extended family is a very big part of . . . it’s a very big part of who we are as a people. It’s like not that I have two children . . . I have five children . . . because my grandkids are [*part of*] the house . . . they kind of become like my own. (T.3, P.5, L.18-25)

Yeah, all our extended family, like, you know . . . it’s not . . . our family . . . our family is just not my brothers and sisters; it’s my cousins and . . . My family is just not my husband and kids, it’s my grandchildren, my two grandchildren, it’s my cousins, my nieces and nephews, my brothers and sisters, my cousins and

my aunts and uncles. That's my family . . . It's not layers . . . you know . . . it's a whole. (T.8, P.3, L.40-45)

A new topic of relationship arose strongly out of Question 2. Language of support, trust, being known, and connection seem to support this concept. The depth of perceived safety frequently was connected to the support of relationships. The in-depth personal and ongoing relationships created with peers in the cohort model was frequently cited:

I think it's, uh . . . there are so many students . . . I know at WEC, it's promoted on the smaller, on the smaller . . . [RESEARCHER: COHORTS] . . . Yeah, and the effort that the instructors take, of knowing each student . . . Even after how many cohorts went through, you still feel a sense of belonging. . . . 'Cause, when we went for the open house, we all went from here. I went, "Oh, there's so and so!" And, you know, I was talking and hugging everybody. And a few of the others said, "I wish I would've gone here." Like, "How do you know this person?" Like, "Well, 'cause I went to school here. And they were two years ahead of me." But you still knew them . . . so that sense of community was there and it was just . . . it's nice. You know, it's still, it's still just like going back home, back home to that home you had at that time and always being welcome. So that's nice. (T.8, P.6, L.40-55 - P.8, L. 26-33)

Relationships with staff and faculty in the ICSWP were frequently noted as contributing to the sense of safety. These relationships with faculty in particular were seen as surprising and beyond usual expectations in a university setting:

I love, I used to just go into the main office and just chat with [*staff name*]. I felt very comfortable with her, and she is just right down to earth, right? But you know, her helpers you know, they are Aboriginal or of other cultures, you know, I just . . . the acceptance was so powerful. Seeing that made me comfortable. (T.1, P.12, L.28-33)

Even the professors were, I thought, we got along well with them. Like we all got to know each other, and I think if we went on campus I don't think we would have, it wouldn't have been there. . . . I think that was what really kept me there, too . . . was being able to go along with our group, when we got in there, one year, and to be there for four years, you get to know people. (T.5, P.5, L.1-9)

For many, however, the growth in relationship was not automatic or assumed. Relationships developed slowly and gradually, usually after a significant period of vigilance and careful assessment of the trustworthiness of others:

Being new and feeling around . . . and, you know, thinking, “Okay, where am I safe, where am I not safe?” And “who can I trust?” Basically . . . it did become a safe environment . . . and sort of after, when you knew what people were about or sort of what being in classes together and . . . you know, when people state their opinions on stuff . . . and you sort of knew where you were at and where people were at . . . and so . . . as we sort of bonded together in that sense. . . . Then it became safe. (T.11, P.4, L.1-7)

The sense of needing to be vigilant was not only needed around educators. It was expressed as a need brought even to one’s own class-year cohort:

I’m very careful at who I express what to, and in the manner I express it . . . so I’m very aware of the fact that when I talk to people or . . . when I see people and that is how it was when I was when I was going to school with that . . . I would only I would only really express it to certain individuals. (T.11, P.4, L.23-26)

Once relationship was developed, however, its effect was profound and long lasting. The description of the relationships fit the high context quality of being ongoing and continuing. One respondent summarized the quality by noting: “I knew I could always phone whoever was at WEC and talk to them. And I did it a couple of times, you know, even though it wasn’t their responsibility anymore, they still let me vent” (T.4, P.8, L.5-8):

The encouragement didn’t only have to come from ourselves. It came from your year group and it came from the instructors, and it came from just wanting to be at WEC. It was like even if you didn’t have a class you hung around WEC anyways, because it was like, at least there you can chat with somebody who’s on, who understands what you’re going through as a student, ’cause it’s a lot of work. I mean . . . that’s a huge commitment. And . . . but I think just doing what they do is a-okay. (T.9, P.9, L.7-14)

The openness was there, and, you know, the staff . . . you know, like it's just great, like today, like ten years later, I can meet up with any of the staff and they know my name. You know they know me . . . they, like, you know, I see them, and you know, it's just really nice. It's like coming home. (T.8, P.8, L. 17-23)

One quality of these relationships with faculty and staff involved accessibility.

Students appreciated that they did not have to make an appointment; it was considered acceptable simply to drop in. "Just having the environment, purification, smudging you do every day, the open door policy, you can come chat anytime you need to" (T.2, P.1, L.48-50):

You could be yourself and relate to them. You know. And they had time for you. They didn't rush off here and there. And if you wanted to meet with them and talk with them, they gave you the time. (T.5, P.5, L.55 – P.6, L.3)

As with research Question 1, respect and valuing people were topics that commonly arose in response to the "experience at the ICSWP" question. Respect for Aboriginal people, valuing individuals as having an identity that added to the community underpinned the nurture that enabled positive participant experiences. Such valuing was described as active and intentional nurturing. The depth of this valuing was memorably described by the participants. "They're respected and I'm sure they feel safe when they come through the door. . . . 'You know, you treat us like family' " (T.10, P.7, L. 11-17). Further emphasis on the issue of respect is found in the following:

For years I was that invisible Indian, because that's how I felt. I wasn't I wasn't cared for as a child . . . I didn't belong anywhere . . . that's how I felt . . . like I grew up in the child welfare system . . . I just felt . . . nobody wanted me . . . and I was just poor little wee kid. So it really helped me come to terms with that. Like started like with WEC and realizing I don't have to be what people expect me to be or categorize me to be. It's like, "I can be something different." And I think coming to WEC that really nurtured that . . . made me stronger. (T.9, P.4, L.21-28)

I think my experience at WEC . . . really nurtured my, my belief, because I was always treated with respect, from the staff and fellow students at WEC . . . because they really tried to promote a positive identity of who each individual student was, whether they were from a Latin American country or from the Sudan or whatever. They really kind of nurtured who you were . . . going to the community development concepts of . . . building capacity . . . they knew who this person is . . . and they are always going to be that way, so they . . . you have to be proud. And wear that with pride . . . you gotta lead by example. And I think WEC was really ahead of themselves at that point. (T.4, P.2, L.19-44)

Valuing persons seemed to refer to one's whole being. Cultural safety was not merely an interesting intellectual issue transcending the individual; it related to the core of one's being:

I always loved getting on that bus every morning. Because I knew that no matter what my world was like, when I walked in there [*the ICSWP*], I was seen as someone special. And I believe that everybody else was given that experience, you know. (T.4, P.5, L.17-19)

Faculty believed in the capacity of students enough to support them through discouragements to completion of the course:

But the professors at WEC encouraged that . . . and one of the things that I heard throughout the years that I was here is . . . “We chose you, because we knew you could do it.” So . . . that always felt good. You know, somebody that believed in me and other students to give that . . . to continue that hope . . . on that education . . . So yeah, I felt always safe. (T.7, P.8, L.24-29)

Valuing persons was perceived to be the conscious intention of the program, and the underlying infrastructure:

One time I went to go see [*the Director*] about something and she was trying to find a professor to teach this certain course . . . even that process, you know, is looked at as, at who would be the best professor to teach it . . . it's not only that the students get picked to come here . . . it's the professors that get picked to come here and teach as well and who would fit. And to me that was just like, “Wow, I thought it was just anybody that could come and do the course.” And for me to see that . . . it wasn't only us, it was them too . . . that felt good. (T.11, P.8, L.51 – P.9, L.6)

Such valuing was not only shown by affirming positive qualities and reinforcing achievement. Valuing also was recognized in the challenges made toward participants. A number of references were made to encounters where the students were encouraged to struggle on when they were ready to give up:

One day I walked into [*Professor's*] office, and I said, "I quit, and I'm not coming back." And [*Professor*] goes "[*name*], why don't you just lay on the couch for awhile . . . Have a rest. Then go home. And if you still want to quit tomorrow, come and see me." [*Professor*] says, "Then I'll help you quit." Of course, you know . . . I said, "Well, I'm not going to quit today, maybe tomorrow." And [*Professor*] goes, "Okay." You know, so it went like that for a little while, but, you know what? You just felt comfortable going to the instructors. It wasn't threatening. (T.8, P.5, L.9-29)

One student made the link to holding oneself and others accountable to a code of behaviour:

'Cause right now it's unacceptable. You can't say, you know, "Are you hung over?" . . . You can't say that. But that's what I mean about cultural safety is that things would become more strict. And I think that's what we are missing sometimes. . . . the element of responsibility. You know that people would have to be responsible for their whole beings . . . not just their paperwork, and getting there on time. That's only one part. (T.12, P.3, L.3-11)

This sense of valuing the whole person was contrary to some previous educational experiences. In secondary schools, some Aboriginal students had been passed to the next grade without regard for the difficulty they were having in achieving grade expectations. Those teachers seemed to be more concerned about moving the student on than to ensure she was well equipped for the next grade:

I mean, here I am thinking I'm a dummy, and "Oh, what's wrong with me?" And, and the old flash-back of being in school . . . being told, "Oh, you're a dummy, you're a dummy, you can't learn" . . . and, you know what? Being passed from one grade to the next only because I'm age appropriate and then getting into grade seven, eight, nine, and absolutely not even being able to read,

or the, you know, no education to build upon, and finally I get to grade ten, I'm completely lost. (T.4, P.4, L.52- P.5, L.2)

A variation on the topic of identity recurred as contributing to the experience of cultural safety in the participants' social work education. However, this variant topic was coded as "shared identity" or "Aboriginal majority." This topic differed from the positive valuing of an individual's Aboriginal identity in that it referred to appreciation for the physical presence of many other people who shared an Aboriginal identity. "Most of the time I was always with the Aboriginal students. That's where I was comfortable. I never really talked to the non-Aboriginal students. Chose not to" (T.6, P.2, L.42-45). On the main campus the experience was different: "Well, I think back to the part time courses or the mainstream all white people, and I don't remember seeing one Aboriginal person in that class . . . it was intimidating" (T.2, P.7, L.14-24):

Prior to going to WEC, I did some courses at the [University] for teaching. . . . There were Aboriginal students there, but, not a whole lot. You know how, when you go, I don't know, when I go into a room and you see an Aboriginal person, you zero on that person . . . it's familiar . . . not that the other people are threatening to you, but you feel a sense of . . . you know, it's familiar. . . . I'll go and talk to that person first. I didn't feel that sense of belonging there. (T.8, P.4, L.24-37)

Because there was a lot of other Aboriginal people here also . . . so . . . you talk to some of them . . . and you learn more about . . . smudging or . . . the medicines, and . . . you kind of gain strength just by talking . . . especially about the spirituality. (T.10, P.3, L.33-36)

The experience and dynamics of social work education changed for these students when they were in classrooms where Aboriginal people formed the majority, rather than the minority, of students. In such a student body, commonality of experiences was expected and provided a head-start toward safe community. "I think

just knowing that someone from the same background and culture as you to be there to support and encourage” (T.2, P.8, L.14-15).

It was in this context that the sense of voice was strengthened, confidence increased, and greater risks taken in the participatory style of social work education:

I guess just knowing that I wasn't alone, because there were other Aboriginal students, who thought the same way that I did. And we could relate to one another and empathize with one another and, you know, like, writing in my journals and sharing those personal experiences . . . like that was helpful, and knowing that somebody else is learning about our people . . . so, and hopefully gaining a better perspective of how hard our people had it. . . . Being in the full time program then there's more Aboriginal people and then, “Oh, I can finally be myself a little bit.” (T.2, P. 3, L. 24-30 - P.7, L. 28-30)

This concept of shared identity was also enhanced for participants when they saw Aboriginal faculty as role models whose presence dispelled the sense of limits upon Aboriginal identity and achievement:

Well, feeling safe in the sense that I knew that there was somebody that I could go to that there was a professor that I could go to that had an Aboriginal background. . . . and I knew that was safe to me . . . that seeing an Aboriginal person . . . be accomplished in that sense was important to me . . . and that thinking “Hey, you know what? If that person can do it then I could too.” (T.11, P.2, L.22-24)

Later in the interviews, in response to the summary review question, “Anything else?” the sense of support arising from the physical presence of Aboriginal faculty was confirmed:

If I'm walking down the hall and I see Aboriginal professors . . . I say, “Yeah, You've opened your doors to us, thank God. Somebody has accepted us. We are not . . . dumb or stupid; we are not all drunken Indians; we are not savages. (T.1, P. 12, L. 35-39)

However, the colour of skin in itself was neither a guarantee of, nor a barrier to, relationship. A person's memories or another's untrustworthy behaviour could impede relationship:

Because of the lifestyle, because of what I've seen in my past . . . it takes me a while to believe in Aboriginal people. Isn't that sad? That . . . is sad. That's a sad thing to say. And I think it's part of the whole colonization process. (T.7, P.10, L.20-27)

The discovery of common experiences of economic or social hardships could bridge differences in race:

We were able to . . . I guess share with one another about our traditions about where we came from, the experiences, and so on . . . and in sharing there was lot of similarities, with me and with . . . with the others as well, because we had a lot of different cultures you know, Vietnamese, and you had the French, and you had the white, status, and non-status. We were able to identify with one another. (T.5, P.5, L.41-46)

Another topic that participants identified as contributing to cultural safety at the ICSWP was one's own culture in the curricula. This refers to course content that described a culture and life experience with which Aboriginal students could readily identify. Course work and readings associated with Aboriginal perspectives were often cited as encouraging individuals to connect to their own culture, spiritual practices, and history:

It was nice learning about the Aboriginal perspectives, the class that I was . . . it was intensive, as well, but that was a lot of reading. I learned a lot more about the history of Aboriginal people, and . . . [RESEARCHER: AND YOU FOUND THAT STRENGTHENING?] Yeah, especially, the healing, the Medicine Wheel, how it can be used in so many different ways, the teachings. (T.10, P.4, L. 6-11)

[RESEARCHER: AT WEC?] . . . Yeah, I felt safe there. But, as I was there, I was just learning my cultural, so I wasn't . . . like now I can talk to an extent about my culture . . . I know it. But at the time I didn't have that, I was just

learning . . . about my culture . . . just starting to go to sweats, and just learning to pray, and things like that. (T.13, P.3, L.13-28)

The material that was so appreciated had an importance beyond mere information. The appreciated course content seemed to reintegrate ignored aspects of their experience and enabled students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, to either claim their Aboriginal identity or to understand the cultural relationships between them in terms of the history of colonization and de-colonization:

Cultural safety has always been inbred in me, inbred, it has always been a part of me, and . . . but it needed some awakening aspects throughout my life and that included WEC. When I, as a . . . I think in my thirties that I entered WEC, and I got to enter a course called Aboriginal History . . . you know, from an Aboriginal perspective . . . but when I heard [name] teach that, I, I . . . just so full of pride, just listening to that . . . about, you know, this guy is telling me something that I had to hide. (T.1, P.4, L.35-44)

At WEC it was a very empowering place for me as well . . . spiritually, emotionally. [Previously] there was no connection . . . so I wasn't myself as an Aboriginal person. . . I loved the Aboriginal perspectives course because there we got to smudge, so I could feel connection spiritually through that course. (T.2, P.2, L.6-22)

Related to this sense of more culturally relevant curricula was the topic of awakening. Learning one's people's own stories, incorporating familiar spiritual practices, taking into consideration the issues and consequences of colonization served as an eye-opener, that woke people up to a new positive sense of identity, and to explain the dynamics and feelings participants had experienced. Affirmation of Aboriginal history and culture made sense of their lives, and the lives of their peers:

I don't believe I was practicing culture, like I was, I just started to learn a lot of, I started to learn about some of my own history, when I was in university . . . So for me it was a real eye-opener. I think what really . . . really . . . what it did for me was validate some of what I was maybe feeling or what I, what some of the

things I had experienced growing up . . . it really validates who I am, a lot of who I am and what my people experienced. (T.3, P.3, L.8-19)

These relevant curricula also helped graduates overcome their own unconscious assumptions and stereotypes about themselves. Participants said they came to awareness of the differences among the various Aboriginal constituencies:

And there was a lot of the cultural pieces that I didn't know about, that I learned about going there. You know, and even thinking about culture, and worldview, and stuff like that . . . I never thought about that . . . so it was really good . . . it was . . . you think about how different people think. And you think, "Well, they're Aboriginal and we all think the same." Like, even going in there, like I thought, "Well, we all must practice the same." . . . But we don't. And that's opened my eyes to that. (T.8, P.8, L. 7-14)

Awakening to one's own cultural heritage, however, was not an easy claiming of a new identity. Rather, it was an awakening that was linked to a sense of identity already present and perhaps hidden within the student. The resistance to stereotyping that went along with this awakening suggests a link to the topic of identity mentioned in response to Question 1:

It doesn't necessarily mean you have to become . . . you know . . . traditional, like some people, some native Aboriginal people try to impose this . . . okay . . . you should have your hair long, you shouldn't wear make up . . . you should wear braids . . . and you know, I don't need to be like that. You can be your own person and still have all those beliefs. (T.10, P.4, L. 11-15)

The topic of diversity arose in this context. Once again, it seemed that when Aboriginal culture was valued and when Aboriginal people were valued and present in significant numbers, there was an increased capacity to reach out. The commonalities with other non-dominant cultures were seen as bridges of relationship:

I opened my eyes up to it and a lot of things just . . . like even with my Aboriginal peers . . . we all believed different. We all practiced things

differently. So learning that, and then, understanding it's okay to be where I am, it's okay for them to be where they are. (T.6, P.4, L.3-4)

Being there with other First Nations people and even different cultures apart from First Nations . . . like we all became like a family . . . and like the closeness, and being able to talk openly about our backgrounds and relating one and another, like a lot of similarities. (T.5, P.4, L.45-53)

I know I think it was, was just it became a big part of . . . the growth that happens in WEC, there's a lot of growth, the curriculum is not only . . . the curriculum grows because of what they are picking up from . . . from the students from other cultures. (T.1, P.8, L.15-18)

The less institutional climate of the ICSWP helped participants to avoid repeating the pain that they had often known in other educational experiences. The topic flexibility was used to represent the various ways in which the ICSWP sought to shape the program around the needs of an Aboriginal student demographic. Smaller class sizes contributed to a sense of intimacy, fostering a greater sense of relationship. "And I think that there again too, maybe some of that safety came because we were a smaller group. . . . We had a pretty strong, a pretty tight bond" (T.3, P.3, L.38-45).

A less rigid approach to time was appreciated by participants. This flexibility included intentionally structuring course timetables (9:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.) that respected students' needs to work around their children's schooling and structuring term breaks to respect public school system holidays:

They supported me, they were patient with me. When I was having difficulties, and all of life's troubles were all on the edge . . . and I got deadlines and phone the professor, and [*I would*] say, "You know what, this is the situation" . . . [*And she would say*] "Hey, no problem; we'll give you another week. You know, but we can't let it continue. So, do you think a week will do it? If not, then these are some of the other options available to us." Always looking for options, with the focus on a solution. And the solution was, "How do we get [*student*] through this?" (T.4, P.4, L. 39-49)

Flexibility was also appreciated in providing alternative exam processes and assignment deadlines to ease the transition to university expectations:

And then it came time, it became time for the first exam. And I was just kind of “Wooo, woo” getting kind of worked up and everything like that. He just said to me, “Listen, you know what? Do you want to do an oral exam?” You know, and I said, “That’s great!” (T.4, P.4, L.15-22)

This flexibility was likened to relationships with family and community. What had been present in elementary school and at another university setting was considered inconsistent with the student’s learning style:

As to when I was at . . . when I had . . . when I went to the University of [name] for a little while for some courses, it wasn’t like that . . . it was like as I had feared . . . You know, rows and rows of . . . students . . . listening to a professor talking . . . and you have to take notes. And I said, “I can’t learn this way.” I said, “It’s not my way of learning.” (T.8, P.5, L.37-41)

When this expectation of university did not appear at the ICSWP, Aboriginal participants felt more at home, more “in community.” Participants perceived a willingness to structure education in another way that was more familiar and comfortable to the student:

I thought university . . . you have these pictures in your head of this big hall and all these students in seats, rows and rows. How could it possibly, how could the professor, the instructor, whatever, possibly know each of their students? And I was just amazed at how the sense of family and community is at WEC and being able to . . . and like your cultural, your cultural safety is promoted. . . . It’s like, you know . . . “Tell me about how you grew up? Let’s share that.” . . . It’s . . . an open forum for sharing who you are. (T.8, P.5, L.29-37)

The attention to relationship at the ICSWP was held up as something unexpected and appreciated in educational experience. “WEC, when I first went, I didn’t know what to expect, and then we went for orientation . . . I was amazed! I was amazed” (T.8, P.5, L.5-7).

Though the bulk of the responses celebrated the sense of cultural safety at the ICSWP, the program was not considered completely culturally safe. Some of the responses to Question 2 suggested topics that indicated conditions of cultural unsafety. Three explicit concepts included “responsibility to protect,” “unintended triggers,” and “individualistic” education settings. However, as with Question 1, the description of participants’ lives provided further insight into unsafety, “not my way,” that, by contrast, added to understanding of cultural safety. We turn to these topics and a variety of occurrences and one systemic situation where cultural safety was felt to be absent.

Responsibility (or failure) to protect was a topic that received attention from a number of students. Where the breakdown of friendships among three students caused the year cohort to splinter into “sides,” participants remembered feeling socially unsafe because, in the following student’s view, professors did not take up the responsibility to act:

We sort of had to figure it out for ourselves. If I remember correctly, there was nobody . . . the professors weren’t addressing the problem, even though they knew there was a problem . . . it just was sort of left . . . and then at that point each person sort of gravitated to their own little group, whatever that was. And it sort of dissipated after that . . . and that’s sort of the way it ended. (T.11, P.2, L.49-54)

This pattern echoed one student’s previous educational experience when teachers failed to see her suffering or to protect Aboriginal students:

You know, in school though, was not a good experience, experience of pretty negative stuff as a kid going to school . . . but the teachers themselves back then it was probably in the sixties . . . they didn’t do enough I believe back then to protect . . . to protect us . . . myself for sure. So I experienced racism . . . those are pretty hard things. (T.3, P.2, L.32-39)

Another respondent commented on a similar situation but in this case, indicated that faculty took action to protect students:

Just that one incident, and the fact that it was dealt with right away. It wasn't just . . . "Okay, you guys are gonna have to settle this on your own time." And that it was dealt with and actually we were forced to sit together and, you know, clear the air . . . or whatever. (T.10, P.3, L.3-6)

A third student, speaking about inappropriate racial comments in class, confirmed the view that faculty members need to act to establish the environment of safety. The instructor, who signaled that racial slights, slurs, or stereotypes would not be tolerated, helped to create an environment in which Aboriginal students could feel protected and safe. "And that people get called on stuff right away. You know if somebody makes a comment about somebody . . . you know, that they should be called on it" (T.12, P.9, L.1-2).

The topic of unintended triggers indicated a second dynamic of cultural unsafety. A research participant reported feeling unsafe due to a teacher's loud voice, which prompted memories of prior negative school experiences. This reference seemed to be linked negatively to issues of voice (being silenced), relationship (dominance not mutuality), and flexibility (being absent, control):

I don't trust all the faculty members at WEC, I mean there's very few that I will go and turn to and talk to . . . I mean there are some that I'm just too scared of and I won't go talk to them . . . if that makes sense . . . because there was one particular prof. I didn't feel safe, but that was because [*the professor*] had a loud voice . . . So I was . . . growing up in a violent home, loud voices triggered me. (T.7, P.6, L.32-38)

Another instance of unintended triggers leading to cultural unsafety was the attention given to sacred objects. This issue relates unintended offences caused by well-

meaning faculty attempting to introduce and explore the meaning of another culture's symbols:

Maybe I'll tell you about when I wasn't feeling culturally safe . . . Is that when people would show films of people, 'cause, you know, one of the, one of the things that we're taught . . . that's what I mean about this strictness, is that you're not supposed to photograph smudge bowls and pipes . . . you're not supposed to. . . . I was really hurt, so was my other classmate there, we were very, very hurt . . . and when that happened, that didn't feel safe at all . . . and it just felt like cheapen . . . cheapened, even though the person, whoever was doing that was trying to do their best they could, to show something. . . . I don't feel safe, when someone tries to do it for me, for us, you know, for Aboriginal people. (T.12, P.7, L.44-55)

The third topic of cultural unsafety, identified as individualistic approaches relates to a systemic pattern of education that tended to be uncomfortable for Aboriginal students. The experience of seeking an education on the main campus of a university (several of which were identified) was overwhelming and paralyzing. Respondents said that size, complexity, and processes of main campuses were unfamiliar and left them feeling alone and isolated. Mention was made repeatedly that campus settings were "big" and "complex," while they themselves felt "little," "lost," and "alone" in response. This language might well be understood as the shadow side of the topic of relationship. This language indicated the sense of a lack of relationship and the expectation that campus systems had to be negotiated alone:

And one of the things that I felt unsafe, was when I had . . . some of my courses at the U. of [name], I felt lost. I felt like it was such a big place to be and people looked at me, I was just an Indian. I felt like a little low down Indian, when I was there. (T.1, P.5, L.22-28)

And when . . . I moved even from there to the city, I really had a difficult time in adjusting, because the system, the school system is entirely different from what I was accustomed to . . . And the difference and the shock when I went to (city) . . . I was lost . . . I didn't feel safe. Yeah. Because you were out there . . .

and what if you got lost, who was going to help you find your way back, sort of thing. . . . It was just too big. (T.5, P.1, L.19-24)

But, the only time that I kind of . . . retreated back into myself was in the final year . . . when I had to go on campus . . . and thank God I didn't have to go there that much . . . you were that little minnow in that big huge pond. It was the size of the place, it was the . . . it was just massive . . . you went into a class, and even though it was still small classes like WEC, it was still a small group of people, but you didn't know these people. You didn't . . . have that . . . group morale that you did when you were at WEC . . . but yeah that's the only time I can honestly say, over the four years of doing my education . . . that was the only time there was some question of feeling safe . . . Campus is a big place. (T.9, P.5, L.2-8)

Further examples of unsafety were shared in this portion of the conversations.

Cultural unsafety existed in the Sixties Scoop and in institutions into which Aboriginal children had been gathered for their care, such as hospitals and the Children's Aid

Society:

I grew up in the Children's Hospital . . . I was born in [*the community*] but I grew up here. And I felt very unsafe. I didn't think it was culturally . . . I didn't think culture at the time. But I felt very unsafe. I was unsafe everywhere I went, until I got home with my grandparents and they took care of me and I felt very safe. (T.1, P.9, L.32-37)

Culturally unsafe experiences happened in the workplace as students tried to find work in the retail sector. This was one of the few times the word "racist" was used:

I worked at The Bay in the cosmetic department. That was one of my first jobs in the city. And I was 20-21 or 22 and I worked there I think about 6 hours a day. And my supervisor there said to me, "I know you are Indian, but can you tell people that you are Italian?" It felt awful, but I did what she said because I needed the money. And I worked there three months until I couldn't do it any more. Couldn't put up with it. You know I see people that were . . . my colour or that were Aboriginal, that knew me maybe, or I knew them. . . . She didn't want me to talk with them . . . She was quite . . . I think . . . she was racist. (T.1, P.11, L.26-40)

Culturally unsafe experiences were described as happening in classes that the participants were taking on another campus:

The attitudes are different. I had one. A girl in a class, in [*professor's names*] class, and she said, "Where do you live? Do you live on Main Street?" I said, "No, I . . ." wherever, whatever address I was living in. She said, "Oh, 'cause I always see natives on Main Street, so I thought that's where you lived." I said, "What year are you in school? . . . Not all Aboriginal people live on Main Street." (T.8, P.6, L.5-17)

I can't even remember what course it was (main campus) . . . and the professor asked me what study group I wanted to be in . . . He's pushing me to get into a study group . . . so he introduces me and they say, . . . "WEC? What is that?" So I start explaining, and then . . . "Oh, who pays for that?" She was asking me all these questions, not about me . . . it made me feel like I was . . . was the . . . I was the poor relative who was all of a sudden come to eat at their table. (T.4, P. 6, L. 47-55)

Question 3 – How Did You Know?

The third question asked participants to identify the markers of safety: "How did you know you were safe?" By this point, participants were beginning to repeat and deepen their description of previously identified topics. The topics of voice, respect, identity, relationship, awakening, shared identity, valuing whole persons, and diversity were again present in the transcripts. "Healing" and "powerful teaching" appeared as two new topics, that seemed to relate to both awakening and shared identity. Identity loss emerged again, along with two new topics related to unsafety: "shame" and "loss." Finally, to return to the positive, a topic entitled "resilience" was coded, referring to the strength of the participants. These several topics will be discussed briefly so as to illustrate additional emphases that arose here.

Question 3 drew responses with varying emphases relating to having one's own voice and feeling accepted. These were not separate issues, however; they were linked

dynamics. “When I felt safe . . . you know, when I could talk, and . . . what else . . . I don’t know . . . I felt like it was honoured” (T.12, P.8, L.8-9).

The notion that voice was important to participants seemed to connect directly to the initial definition of freedom to be oneself and to speak about one’s experience without fear. When one felt culturally unsafe, one was unlikely to share feelings and ideas:

I’d still have to learn more about it because . . . I don’t always know when people are being racist . . . I don’t always know, because for me it’s that adapting thing . . . that was my own individual self again, conforming. . . . If it was inappropriate, I wouldn’t say it was inappropriate, I would just let it go because I didn’t have a voice. (T.7, P.9, L.9-18)

When one felt culturally safe, one was more likely to share feelings and ideas:

I was culturally safe to be able to express that because otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to talk about it openly, so just being in the course . . . it was more, I don’t know how to explain it . . . but more okay to talk about it? (T.2, P.3, L.18-20)

You know . . . sort of my sense, was that I think it’s okay to talk to this person about, you know about ceremonies or stuff like that . . . and I knew it was alright . . . but with other people, it was different in the sense that there was no understanding of what that was about or . . . or their belief system was strong in them that I felt that I couldn’t express freely about what I was about. (T.11, P.4, L.16-21)

Different words were sometimes used to provide variation to those topics. “Honouring” was used as a synonym for the topic of respect. When the individual felt respected, honoured, accepted, or nurtured for whom they were – Aboriginal persons – the sense of cultural safety was assumed. “And with classism and racism, they really do go hand in hand. I never felt that here at WEC” (T.7, P.8, L.42-43). “So that’s how I felt safe, ’cause I felt accepted” (T.13, P. 4, L.10):

I remember being at WEC and always feeling like . . . this is a good place. I'm happy here. People respect me here. I've always had a sense of that, that people respected me and looked at me as being equal, not look down on me. (T.13, P.5, L.10-12)

I felt accepted and understood all the time, at all times . . . from the staff and the students my, my co- . . . my peers. I felt accepted and understood by all; I understood that the systems could continue on with the impact, that impacted on my culture; I understood, I began to understand the genocide of my, my people. (T.1, P.9, L.14-22)

That this feeling of acceptance was related to culture is revealed in the growth of pride in participants' Aboriginal heritage or identity. As they and their non-Aboriginal peers learned more of Aboriginal culture and history, the internal feeling of acceptance or pride in Aboriginal ways, food/feasts, sharing, and community signalled a growth in cultural safety:

Culturally, again, I have to go back to Aboriginal Perspectives course; although I sensed there was discomfort from . . . can I say "White girls"? But I felt connected . . . you know . . . somewhat like a reconnection . . . and it was empowering to learn more about, you know . . . plus for them I somewhat already know about all that all the barriers and whatever . . . but just . . . for them to hear it was good to know that, yes . . . like they learned something from it. (T.2, P.3, L.5-12)

A series of comments made in response to this research question once again revealed the significance of relationship to these participants. In the first, the presence of relationship was linked with easy expression of opinions (the topic of voice), and the absence of relationship was linked to a feeling that these students were reduced from multi-dimensional beings to having only one thing on their minds: learning (which suggests the topic of whole persons):

One of my friends and she's Aboriginal, too . . . took her B.S.W. on campus . . . and she had to come to WEC to take this one course that was being offered here . . . and she loved it here . . . She says, "Oh my God, you mean you guys

actually discuss topics, and talk about things in a group?” and “Oh, my God, the professors know your name!” It was like that kind of thing and she’s like, “Oh, over there it’s so different,” she says, and “You’re even lucky if the professor knows your name,” and she said, “It feels so cold there,” you know. And so . . . obviously, we’re doing something right here. . . . and I said, “Well, you see,” I said, “that’s exactly why I knew . . . I couldn’t survive at campus.” And even the times that we ended taking courses on campus I hated it . . . it took every ounce of my energy to get through there because it was so noisy, it was so big, it didn’t feel comfortable, and it was like going into an institution where . . . you didn’t feel anything and it was like you are here just for one purpose and one purpose only. (T.11, P.8, L.21-36)

In the next comment, the importance of relationship was linked to a sense of community and family, which are key values in a high context culture:

When we went for the open house . . . I went, “Oh, there’s so and so!” And, you know, I was talking and hugging everybody. And a few of the others said, “I wish I would’ve went here.” Like, “How do you know this person?” “Well, ’cause I went to school here. And they were two years ahead of me.” But you still knew them . . . so that sense of community was there . . . it’s still just like going . . . back home to that home you had at that time and always being welcome. (T.8, P.8, L.17-33)

In this third quotation, the value of relationship over curriculum was stated, and the value of collaborating adult learners was affirmed over that of the distancing professional educator-student relationship:

What . . . it wasn’t the curriculum that brought that out more, and reinforced it and nurtured it; it was just the people who did it. I’m a firm believer in relationship; relationships are the most important things that we have in our lives . . . the relationships that I personally had with the staff of WEC was more of a friendship than an educator-student relationship. Looking back to my relationships with the education system, as a child . . . they were very negative, but this, at WEC was not negative, it was positive. . . . They nurtured what was inside of me. . . . They see what was inside of me and they allowed me to bring that out in front and encouraged me to do that. So . . . for me it wasn’t necessarily curriculum, it was more the staff people . . . the people who allowed that to happen. (T.4, P.9, L. 6-18)

The topic of awakening appeared again in response to Question 3. As the Advisory Group had pointed out, educational material that did justice to Aboriginal experience and identity was considered exciting:

The way that I've found to honour myself a lot was that [*professor's name*] . . . he was the best one, he really woke me up, he really gave me a sense of "wow!" information about who Indians really are. (T.12, P.3, L.30-40)

It is interesting to note, again, that awakening is not to one's individual self only, but to one's identity within Aboriginal history and culture. Such awakening helped link the self with other Aboriginal people, and normalized the prior experiences the participant had experienced:

I think there was just a lot of individual awareness, insight that happened for me, and it's like, "Oh! Well, that makes sense now!" You know, you read something, or you have class discussion, and you realize, "My goodness, this isn't just me!" (T.7, P.4, L.46-53)

Where the Aboriginal student population was significant and Aboriginal culture could be discussed without fear, the feeling of healing also signalled the lessening of the "culture of colonization," which was also experienced as a "culture of shame" or "culture of drugs and abuse":

Because there was a lot of other Aboriginal people here also . . . so . . . you talk to some of them . . . and you learn more about . . . smudging or . . . the medicines and . . . you kind of gain strength just by talking . . . especially about the spirituality . . . It kind of helps to heal, 'cause you don't want to have any negative feelings, 'cause it's no good . . . it'll eat away at you. (T.10, P.3, L.34-40)

The discovery of Aboriginal wisdom was felt by some as a powerful teaching, which was coded as a topic in response to Question 3. Discussion of medicines, sacred songs, history, and Elders were described as having a powerful effect on the

participants. This included a growing sense of pride in one's identity, the relevance of the curriculum, and perhaps an awakening of some kind. By noting that this took place within an environment in which the majority of students were Aboriginal also confirmed the sense that shared identity was a factor again:

I'd say . . . we were allowed to express ourselves . . . so that was very safe . . . but everyone didn't have to agree . . . you know, with me . . . or with us . . . but we still could say it. And it was a good place to say it. It felt safe to say it . . . And, you know, what was good too, I think, that we still accepted those people if they didn't agree with us. So I think that taught us to be, to be individuals and . . . to accept where people are at, each other is at . . . so that was a powerful teaching . . . and I think that . . . and I think it's very brave when institutions or individuals allow for things to happen. (T.12, P.5, L.7-18)

When I heard [*name*] teach that, I, I [*was*] just so full of pride, just listening to that . . . about, you know, this [*person*] is telling me something that I had to hide, you know, that I was aware of when my grandparents talked with me about the people . . . I remember songs . . . I don't remember my grandmother's medicines. When I listened in the class room where there was a majority of us were Aboriginal and learning more about our people from, from that perspective, an Aboriginal perspective made more sense. (T.1, P.4, L.42 – P.5, L.11)

The research participants responded that they knew they were culturally safe when they were valued as whole people. They understood that phrase from the point of view of Aboriginal spirituality:

There again with that course we were dealing with all those four domains, the mental, spiritual, physical, emotional . . . like it was almost like . . . you felt whole . . . like I'm a whole person. I'm not just a student or . . . not just learning for . . . I don't know how to explain it but . . . I felt whole. (T.2, P.3, L.41-44)

That sense of safety extended widely enough that participants even felt safe sharing the foods with which they might be culturally identified:

I think a lot of our foods are different . . . and like, you feel comfortable when you are having your own food . . . and, you know, not . . . to be the word ashamed or whatever it is to bring your food out. . . . you know, this is what we

eat and this is how we eat it . . . so I'd like them to enjoy my bannock, and my deer meat . . . rabbit stew . . . whatever. (T.5, P.7, L.30-45)

You know like I want to eat blueberries, and strawberries, and some kind of meat. You know, like that's what my body needs, eh? . . . I want us to eat together. And we find a way to share food and all that. (T.12, P.2, L.36-40)

Conversely, a sense of unsafety prevailed where the person was reduced to merely a portion of the whole:

I really feel that sometimes the university main campus is more concerned about putting the graduates out, instead of putting them out healthy and ready to face the world. Whereas, with WEC, it's more about the quality of the graduates, not the grade point average . . . I mean, but is this person going to go out there and do what they want to do? Are they prepared for it? . . . So to me that's the difference. (T.4, P.7, L. 17)

For the participants, cultural safety seemed to mean that not only were they accepted as individuals within a community; they were accepted so that what they had could be shared with others not only within, but beyond the same racial community. Consequently, in the preliminary coding there was also an emphasis of appreciating diversity and other cultures:

It's not just Aboriginal culture, but even having more of a multicultural perspective . . . like looking at . . . you know, the Jewish faith . . . looking at the Filipino . . . like their cultures . . . I find it very important. . . . There's times, like, where it comes up, and where you kind of, "Oh . . . I'm intrigued by this." I want to know, because for me it's important to treat that person with respect and at least have an understanding . . . have the basic knowledge of their background . . . yeah . . . what is important to them! . . . But a big part of that is just to treat the other groups with respect. (T.9, P.7, 1-21)

Perhaps, because of the renewal of relationship through conversation, the sharing during this part of the conversation became deeper. The link between unsafety and identity loss was made explicit with respect to language and experience of education in a residential school:

And we were not to talk Cree anywhere. We were not allowed to. One time a couple of friends were walking up the stairs to our rooms and down the hall, and we were laughing and talking in Cree, and a supervisor came out and witnessed it, we just kind of kept quiet, and we looked at her kind of guilty, that we got caught . . . and then she just attacked us. The bigger one of us, she attacked and then [name] just went at it with her; [name] was just very angry; [name] was my friend. And another friend she was bigger than me. . . . When Miss [name], attacked this girl; they just went at it . . . three of them, and I just stood to the side watching in horror you know. At the time they did not want us to be Indian . . . they did not want us to be talking it. (T.1, P. 11, L.1-18)

Shame was an element of this unsafety that appeared often enough to be considered a topic on its own. Shame here was understood to be the painful feeling of not being good enough in one's identity. "When I was younger I reacted to racism and it took a lot out of me when I reacted; it caused anger, a lot of upset, some tears" (T.1, P.3, L.15-16). "I don't know, like, Aboriginal, what I've heard is . . . we all have the same story. There's a lot of us out there who carry that deep-rooted shame" (T.7, P.11, L.5-8). "[*There*] was a new awareness that the self-hatred that I carried all my life, [*that*] had an impact in my ability" (T.7, P.7, L.3-8). Yet, it was recognized that this sense of shame was a learned response:

When I started looking at who I am as an Aboriginal person, there was a lot of shame in that, a lot of shame that wasn't mine . . . it was all imposed on me . . . and I took it . . . I took it like Velcro . . . and let it stick to me all my life . . . I carried these feelings all my life but never knew or had a name for it. I just knew I didn't feel good. (T.7, P.3, L.53 - P.4, L.1-4)

The educational environment may present difficulties for Aboriginal students about which even the most adept instructor may be unaware. Elements of the curriculum in school also may cause echoes of previous hurts:

Even though we were talking about a book, it's like you knew . . . there was triggers there, there were going to be triggers for students and I know at times some other . . . students, where it was too much of a trigger . . . like it just either

they quit or they just couldn't . . . didn't cope well within the class. (T.9, P.5, L.42-49)

Despite personal histories fraught with painful experiences of unsafety, of a lack of support within previous educational environments, and of scarring emotional encounters, the participants showed astonishing personal resilience. Even one of the strongest participants, who described having a strongly supportive Aboriginal upbringing, strong family supports, and a strong individual identity, nevertheless wound up in foster care, walking in two worlds, and daily experiencing racism. They doubted themselves and second-guessed their decision to enter university. Yet, they nevertheless continued to pursue their education at a dominant culture educational system in which they expected such behaviour to continue:

Learning more about, as I say, about how social work is, you know, can I really do this, can I really be a social [*worker*], that was a struggle I had every few times . . . All too often I think a lot of us feel that way that we can't really, we can't really do it. But as time went on . . . I felt more and more comfortable being in WEC. (T.1, P.6, L.11-16)

Though they did not necessarily see success right away, and though some needed more healing than others along the way, these students pressed on toward their goals. "My first course, and I think I only got a C and I maintained Bs and As . . . [RESEARCHER: BUT YOU KEPT GOING!] Yeah, yeah I kept going! My final year, I got 4.5" (T.2, P.7, L.37-39).

Question 4 – What Would Have Increased Cultural Safety?

Participants were asked as a fourth question, "As you think about it now, are there things that would have helped you to feel more culturally safe?" This question not only allowed participants to make specific suggestions, but it also allowed for any

further critiques to be made in an indirect way. The topics that arose here were “place,” “value individual,” “flexibility,” “community,” “one’s own curriculum,” “rights,” “spirituality,” and “spiritual issues.”

Ironically, in reflecting on what more could have helped, some participants again answered with a contrasting reflection and noted that something already done (the relocation of the program to a place more central in the inner city) had been significant. “It’s in the neighbourhood it’s close to home” (T.7, P.7, L.3-8). For a number of participants, the convenience of location was also important:

When I saw it there and when I heard it was going to Selkirk Avenue, finally it is coming right into the community; that is great, that is very culturally safe, it’s appropriate. You know, Chester I know is that way, I used to take a bus to go to school, and I felt okay going there, but bringing it home, having it at home was just great. I know I lived in that area, but this . . . where my people are is my home. (T1, P.6, LI. 20-26)

I often wonder if this [*new Selkirk Ave*] building came about 10 years ago, if I would have done better. Okay. The old building was so, institutional . . . very institutional . . . and I fight institution. I do. And it was dingy. This building is . . . so much differently and its location . . . I’m a north-ender, always will be loved the north end . . . tried to move out of the north end, didn’t work very well . . . [RESEARCHER: SO IT FEELS MORE FAMILIAR TO BE HERE.] Safer! And it’s funny because we are on Selkirk. I like Selkirk. I have no problem walking up and down Selkirk . . . I think I probably would have done better here. . . . It’s in the neighbourhood it’s close to home . . . the other thing is . . . is where my children went to daycare . . . and my child still goes to daycare. I was nice and close to them . . . at the drop of a dime if I needed to be there it was five minutes away. It is five minutes away from here, walking! At that time, I didn’t drive, I didn’t have a vehicle. And it was quite a bus ride . . . Two buses! And then, yeah, location is a big thing. (T.6, P.7, L.1-17)

Given the importance of place noted by McCormick (1995), this feature was also noted as a topic.

While much of the experience at the ICSWP was considered relatively culturally safe, several responses expressed the sense of “more of what is being done now.” These tended to reaffirm topics already identified, such as valuing the individual, curricula related to one’s own culture and spirituality. References to closeness, warmth, welcome, and supports in the transcripts related to the topics of “nurturing” and “valuing” individuals. The topic of valuing the individual included encouragement to be more proactive in recognizing the anxiety of Aboriginal newcomers to the school, and initiating that sense of valuing with greater closeness, warmth, and welcome:

I guess in general it’s just the environment, and the closeness and the warmth that you feel when you come into a place . . . I know that people extended . . . their warmth and . . . and try and make you feel that you are with them . . . I found that as being . . . being a good part of it . . . is like you are almost right away, like “What’s your name? Like, you know, “Where are you from?” Get to open up. Already feeling welcome. Being able to talk about it . . . and knowing somebody by their first name . . . on a first name basis. Yeah, that was good too. (T.5, P.9, L.13-22)

It was suggested that more bridging of cultural relations would be achieved by placing an explicit emphasis on the value of cultural diversity at the beginning of the program. “Yeah, you know, if it happens right at the onset, I think would take . . . eliminate a lot of the anxiety, and the frustration of people dropping out or wanting to give up, and not continue” (T.5, P.7, L. 20-23).

In recognition of the difference between the ICSWP and previous educational milieus, another participant recommended more “flexibility,” a more gradual implementation of the expectations and standards of university studies:

I know you have to have set a date and time in order to accomplish some things . . . otherwise you don’t accomplish what you set out to accomplish if you don’t have that . . . to me there was just too much, too fast at the beginning . . . you

know, and I wish we could have done it . . . take a little bit slower at the beginning. (T.5, P. 4, L. 2-6)

A variation on the topic of relationship arose with the language of community.

There was a sense presented by some that cultural safety cannot be achieved on an individualistic basis. Rather, it is a more encompassing reality that takes a community to develop:

[*Cultural safety*] . . . is certainly not something just one person can do . . . but I think, knowing that there's programs like WEC that promote safety and promote culture . . . that will continue to . . . seek out or branch out people who will think that and . . . and . . . I mean, they'll do good. (T.9, P.8, L.41-44)

I think, just the thought that when you were studying there, you can always, you've got somebody there that can help you. You don't feel lost, like, "It's going to be okay, there's a class that's going to get out there . . . and do what you can if you've got a problem, try to work it out, then come see me." . . . Whether it was family or emotional or death in the family or any kind of issue that came up. . . . I think it was because there was support. There was all this support all around you. And other students you could talk to that had shared the same goals you wanted the same beliefs, the study groups, people always ready to, you know, help in some way. (T.10, P.6, L.8-16 - L.33-37)

The topic of curriculum reoccurred in response to Question 4. Inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in all courses was repeatedly indicated as a welcome direction:

Native Studies [*course title*] was a small portion of what was needed, I feel in the School of Social Work. There's more to Native Studies than just that one course . . . So I think it could be more enhanced . . . too, because there's other things other than . . . other than what is being taught in that one course. (T.5, P.6, L.45-49)

More Aboriginal curricula, specifically with respect to the concept of rights, were also suggested. Entire courses expressly related to such justice issues as law and statistics about Aboriginal treaty entitlement, Aboriginal treatment in the judicial system, and issues of Aboriginal incarceration were thought by some to be desirable:

I just attended that one course that was Aboriginal Perspectives. It would have been nice to have more . . . I don't know if there was a class . . . or on laws . . . I know they had . . . they had the big Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, that Sinclair, whatever, one, too, but it would have been nice to have more about the laws . . . Because I always believe that to empower somebody it's good to know a lot of the facts . . . to let them know more of their rights . . . something you can take with you. (T.10, P.5, L.8-14)

Faculty were encouraged to augment the curriculum with more preparation for the “real world” of social work agencies and practice. “It's more about the quality of the graduates, not the grade point average. I mean, is this person going to go out there and do what they want to do? Are they prepared for it?” (T.4, P.7, L.18-22) To be left vulnerable to future challenges was not considered safe-making:

For me . . . it just shows the diversity of people. And again I learned that in my workforce. You know, school said to “prepare for it.” But I went out there naïve, thinking everybody was doing the same thing and wanting the same thing for people. But I quickly learned people had different ideas, different agendas, power, and control, and, you know . . . I was very appalled when I first started. (T.7, P.10, L.2-11)

A variety of specific suggestions were also offered, with the most frequent comments clustering around support of Aboriginal spirituality. Suggestions of employing more Elders, adding movement, ceremonies, sharing circles, and sweat lodge experiences related clearly to the topic of spirituality. While some of these supports had been made available at various points in the history of the ICSWP, as occasional practice, regular inclusion of spiritual practice as part of the fabric of the environment or culture of the program was desired.

More frequent use of Aboriginal ceremonies was mentioned and the presence of an Elder was desired not merely as a purveyor of religious or cultural information. The Elder had a multi-dimensional importance, signaling the value of culture, modeling the

possibilities of Aboriginal achievement, reassuring the students emotionally, and thus facilitating the educational purpose:

And I feel if they had, if they brought in the Elders at the beginning, you know, to . . . to be there and to be part of the teaching would be helpful, not only to our culture but to others. (T.5, P.6, L.53 - P.7, L.4)

I think it would be having access to an Elder . . . to go talk to them. . . . It calms you down. And plus you also know the person can identify with your beliefs, and what you are going through. The grandmothers and grandfathers are really important. (T.10, P.4, L.21-31)

More of the ceremonies that were that are available to the students now, that I think there is now . . . I think that would have helped my education be a little bit more easier . . . I think if there was more teaching with our Elders . . . I know that certainly would help more because, you know, they offer guidance . . . you know, and they offer strength and they give you courage to do the things you do. (T.11, P.7, L.48-53)

Similarly, more frequent access to spiritual practices such as smudging, prayer, teaching of medicines, dance, sweat lodges, pow-wows, and talking circles were variously mentioned as spiritual issues desirable in contributing to cultural safety. “Well, I think if there was opportunities to go to a sweat lodge, I probably would have jumped on it . . . if there was opportunities to go to pow-wows, or ceremonies, or anything like that” (T.13, P.5, L.48-51). Several participants affirmed this value:

I think what could have happened more was that . . . I think we should have had smudging more . . . like when we first start like when you first start your day, you know, I think that could have happened a lot more. (T.11, P.4, L.31-33)

I think if there was maybe more opportunity to have done more open sharing circles . . . as a group . . . maybe that might, I mean, we, like I said, we did . . . some of that came out in the classes. (T.9, P.5, L.38-49)

What’s powerful, in the traditional way . . . is dancing. And yeah, there’s pow-wow dancing, of course, but any kind of dancing . . . You know, I think that there really needs to be more movement in school. (T.12, P.9, L.8-19)

A recommendation for more movement, and not just “sitting around being academic,” was offered as a contribution to cultural safety for Aboriginal people within the educational setting. “To change our curriculum around to their liking, to feel more comfortable . . . like, you know, who wants to be in a classroom doing academics all day long?” (T.1, P.2, L.10-12). This notion fits within the spirituality topic or the concept of valuing the whole person, which includes the physical. Education, it was suggested, should not rest on the premise of disassociating one’s intellectual faculty from the realms of nature, spirit, and emotion.

Question 5 – What Others Might Say About Cultural Safety?

The final question invited participants to tap into other memories or perspectives by asking: “What do you think other Aboriginal graduates might say about their sense of cultural safety at the ICSWP?” Of all the responses, this question elicited the briefest reflections. By the end of the interview, both researcher and participants may have felt as though they had explored the issue sufficiently by means of the previous four questions. In addition to this, the value of respecting the rights of other individuals was frequently cited as participants indicated that they “could not speak for others.” Once that proviso had been given, however, the participants briefly indicated responses around three topics: “personal issues,” “balancing school and family,” and “individual issues.” Responses to a closing question (“Anything else?”) elicited comments on the value of visual symbols and Aboriginal art.

While answers were often prefaced with respect for the integrity of every other person (not being able to speak for others), most indicated that for the most part, they thought others felt safe:

I don't know because I don't know their experience. I don't know their trials and tribulations that they had gone through. I don't know the oppression that they had gone through. I don't know the poverty. I don't know any of that, so I can't say . . . what their thoughts would be on that. I think it would be up to the individual themselves if they want to risk . . . their vulnerability 'cause I think school is about risking vulnerability. (T.7, P.9, L.24-30)

Having honoured the rights of the individual to identify for themselves what their reasons for not finishing at the ICSWP were, participants provided little response identifying their own sense of why others might have left the program. It was sensed that those who left did so for personal issues. The issue at stake was not cultural safety but the intra-psychoic safety (safety within) that people feel within themselves:

I do believe that for the people that do leave, it's . . . I feel, from my opinion, it's probably not about WEC itself . . . I think its that they're not ready for it as much as you try to . . . that person wants to be or tries to be. (T.9, P.9, L.1-3)

And I think if students are, you know, really into drugs, and alcohol, and stuff like that, you know, that . . . they really need to be called on that. I mean we've seen students leave because of . . . the . . . addiction problems. (T.12, P.4, L.50-54)

Another possible reason proposed for leaving the program had to do with "safety around." Family or community problems were considered so pressing to require the student to withdraw:

And the other thing I struggled with a lot. A lot of the course content focused on family and unity . . . and people skills. And a lot of these things I spent three and a half years here and I spent three and a half years behind a book. And almost treating my family second. (T.6, P.5, L.14-17)

In no case did either graduates or non-graduates indicate that they thought a lack of cultural safety was behind a withdrawal.

After asking all five research questions, conversations wound to a casual close. A final, open-ended question, frequently inserted, was worded along the lines of: “Would you like to say anything else about this subject?” When asked what else might be looked for, mention was made of other possible topics such as the importance of visual symbols, like portraits of Aboriginal graduates or Aboriginal art, or the financial support available during the initial years of the program. To be sure, in conversations where these notions arose, participants politely agreed to the positive quality of these efforts, but indicated other issues were more important. “Well, I think maybe what speaks out when I’m in a building, is I see the artwork, or whatever’s hanging from the ceiling, or whatever’s hanging around, or whomever’s hanging around” (T.1, P.16, L.14-17). Another graduate affirmed art saying, “Yeah, yeah, that would . . . be very . . . ‘they accept First Nations here’ ” (T.5, P.8, L.1-9). While participants seemed to appreciate such comments, issues of décor did not seem to be the first priority:

I think when I see like, the Aboriginal art . . . that helps . . . that helps. Is it something that’s in my blood that’s screaming out . . . the Indian blood in me, because that’s something we will hear out there? Is that me feeling . . . “yeah, that we are proudful people”? And that’s what I’ve come to, that we are proudful people. And yeah, that’s comforting for me. (T.7, P. 10, L. 14-19)

During axial coding, this topic was eventually subsumed within the larger theme of finding one’s own community represented at the school.

Government funding was another practical support that had been structured into the support resources during the first few years of the ICSW Program:

I think the funding issue is the main one because there are a lot of people who can't get funding for it because their family isn't in the band, isn't elected that year, or whatever, you know, or basically working part time and going to school part time, you know, makes it . . . and I think the systemic problem is there. And I don't think it's so much about the identity of the person. You know, you got to . . . I think you have to start looking at how can we make some pockets of money available for the individual who is absolutely . . . has the potential to be the best worker, but doesn't have the resources or the supports to start the process, you know. (T.4, P.9, L.50 – P10. L.7)

However, in all these conversations, the additional topics did not dominate the conversations. The sense of their answers was that far more frequent and appreciated than words or symbols was the actual behavioural effort put toward creating a culturally safe environment.

Development of Themes

Responses to the five research questions often were made through anecdotal narratives in which particular topic words took on the deeper layers of meaning provided by the context. As the conversations took place, were transcribed, read, and reread, a variety of themes seemed to surface. Further, a variety of topics appeared across all five questions. These topics seemed to condense around seven themes that were initially described and circulated at the talking circles as follows:

- (1) A shadow of racism/stereotyping and dominant culture colonization is pervasive, persistent, and pernicious (harmful). These affect one's mind-set when embarking on education. It takes courage to face that yet again. In many ways, when coming to university, you expected to have to fight that again, and all of you have developed skill at that. To feel culturally safe within this context minimally means you don't have to explain or defend your Treaty Rights or the historic importance of your Métis culture. The effects of colonization (including residential school horrors, child welfare, Sixties Scoop, injustices in the justice system) are understood and known as historic facts. You don't have to debate the negative impact on your people. Instead, energy can be spent on setting things right. This phenomenon is not

only in the past, but racism for children and grandchildren still occurs (before was more upfront; now incidents are more subtle).

- (2) Experience of living in two worlds and having to be vigilant about where I can talk about what is important and meaningful to me and where I can't. This experience includes everything from having to/choosing to be silent about Aboriginal culture/teachings/medicines to denying Aboriginal heritage/claiming other ethnicity (either as protection or being told to by others). Own family may try to protect by being silent because it has been dangerous to be Aboriginal, not only in the past, but racism for children/grandchildren still occurs (before it was more upfront, now incidents more subtle). Fluency in several cultures should be acknowledged and valued.
- (3) At the ICSWP there was a sense of being surrounded by similar others, of feeling nurtured, accepted, and "not alone." Participants felt they were part of a group that was "all in it together." Conversely, a variety of participants described the experience that study at the main campus meant a return to an environment of isolation, racism, "superior" acting folks, "having to explain," feeling different, having to be the one who presented alternate views and defend Treaty Rights, and the effects of colonization.
- (4) Many people bring a personal history of resisting the attempts of systems to change them. Examples of this resistance came from a variety of areas: child welfare - being in care (some horrific experiences of abuse in care, some describe ambivalence as their foster home offered safety from the chaotic situation at home but they felt disloyal); justice (profiling, lack of understanding); education systems (elementary school experiences uniformly misunderstood, not protected, lack of awareness); healthcare (isolation, not respecting family traditions).
- (5) At university there was sense of relief when the course content aligned with experiences and beliefs. Participants said they had a sense of relief that what they had to offer was "FINALLY, FINALLY" accepted and honoured. Finally, they were reading and hearing the true stories of Aboriginal people. One participant's comment summarized this theme: the course content "opened my eyes to my culture and history. I felt proud."
- (6) The importance of diversity and respecting the values, beliefs, customs, and languages of others was affirmed. The importance of respecting the differences in choices of all Aboriginal peoples was emphasized, as was the importance of appreciating the views and customs of other cultures. People shared wonderful stories about learning from classmates from other countries and the importance and value of having people from all over the

world in the classes. There was an expression of generosity toward, and affinity with, other minority groups.

- (7) There were mixed feelings expressed that “many folks were on the bandwagon” – wanting it known that the current embrace of some Aboriginal practices doesn’t discount the painful history of personal and collective experiences with racism, stereotyping, etc., that Aboriginal people have suffered. “Sometimes I think - sheesh - if all these guys are ‘going Aboriginal’, maybe I don’t want to be Aboriginal now.”

This first iteration of themes was presented to a sharing circle of graduate participants only, as anonymity for non-graduating participants could not be maintained in the talking circle. As graduate participants gathered, time for group building was taken; a light supper was provided and introductions were made. Participants had come from different student cohorts that did not overlap with each other. Written permission to record each circle was obtained from each participant. Participants were reminded of the previous interview process and were shown the preliminary themes through the presence of posters, handouts, and verbal presentation. At this point, the question was asked: “Does this fit with your experience?” Responses were recorded again, transcribed, and reviewed in order to refine, verify, or reject the themes.

Within the circle conversations, group members appreciated the support and reflections of others. They responded readily to the seven themes that were presented. They especially appreciated and focused on preliminary themes one and two: the shadow of racism and the vigilance of living in two worlds. Participants described racism and walking in two worlds in their current work sites and in the past:

Just the experience of living in two worlds and having to be vigilant, when you said . . . like, I think that that is something that still rings true for me at times . . . in, whether it’s in my job, or . . . when I’m dealing with families. (C.1, P.17, L 23-27)

They animatedly referred to fresh experiences of racism that occurred to them during the period of this research. The consequences of removing Aboriginal children from their homes and communities, and the subsequent failure to protect them were vividly described:

When I look at . . . I'm a product of the Sixties Scoop, with the old Children's Aid, right? When I look at my experiences, the very first home I was in, I was sexually abused. I told my worker. And I can re-[sic] . . . I mean, I was . . . seven years old at the time . . . I remember telling him and I remember being told . . . I must be crazy because this is the best foster parent they ever had (C.2, P.3, L.48- P.4, L.17)

Another participant contrasted the enthusiastic welcome she received in Europe to the shabby treatment at a voting poll during a recent provincial election:

I, I just came back from [country] . . . And I just realized . . . how free I felt there because people don't really know about Aboriginal people to the same extent, so they don't have those negative stereotypes. As a matter of fact they have positive stereotypes . . . Like she greeted me as if it was something special about me. You don't get that here . . . I felt just totally immersed in the environment and was very comfortable, never felt discriminated against . . . [*In Winnipeg*] I was standing in line. And so then they served the person who came in after me. That happened to me yesterday when I went to vote! (Advisory, P.5, L.17-37)

To this person, it was as if, in a foreign land, an Aboriginal person was honoured while in their own homeland "in Canada, we still discriminate against our indigenous people" (Advisory, P.6, L.1-2). The sense of the persistence of racism, and its description as a shadow, were readily adopted. "And so, as you hear it, as you're growing up, every day, it follows you and shadows you every day" (Advisory, P.2, L.32-35).

The talking circle participants expressed their desire for the day when there would be no need for such vigilance:

When I look at my . . . my . . . not my children, my grandkids now . . . I want them to be able to . . . be able to speak their mind and say how they feel, which is what Creator wants them to do, without even having to look at the room first . . . Now, when we get there, then we can say we have got cultural safety. (C. 2, P.1, L.37-44)

The talking circles agreed with the preliminary theme statements 4, 5, and 6 without much further comment:

- (4) At university there was sense of relief when the course content aligned with experiences and beliefs.
- (5) At the ICSWP there was a sense of being surrounded by similar others, of feeling nurtured, accepted, and “not alone.”
- (6) The importance of diversity and respecting the values, beliefs, customs, and languages of others was affirmed.

It was queried, and confirmed, that this minimal volume of reply was due to the lack of disagreement with the observation, and the greater priority of themes one and two. The importance of spiritual values, embodied in an Elder, was confirmed as supportive:

I didn't always have that . . . Aboriginal support I guess . . . that I could have used when I started . . . There weren't any Elders around that, you know, maybe someone would have or could have been there to be used as a support, you know, especially when you come back into school, you know, and not knowing what that really looks like to you as an Aboriginal person. (C.1, P.7, L.15-22)

The value placed on relationships, within the educational setting and through to the wider context of family and community, was strongly appreciated. “One of the biggest things, family's a big part of who we are, our family, our history . . . no matter who we are as Aboriginal people” (C.1, P.36, L 30-32). The effort that was placed into non-academic supports in creating community through easy communication, open boundaries, and respect of diversity was noted. “I remember that potlucks. I remember sitting down and feeling comfortable with somebody, talking with them about their culture in Africa, or whatever, you know, sharing” (C.1, P. 22, L.33-36).

The presence of similar others was recognized as comforting. Participants indicated that such commonality reduced the sense of need for vigilance. One did not have to be on guard to defend one's treaty rights, spiritual practices, and worldview; to have to explain the significance of the impact of colonization; or challenge racist behaviour perceived as emotionally draining and undermining of that personal affirmation. "Why should we always be the ones defending ourselves?" (C. 2, P.2, L.1). "Educating others, it's a big job and it takes a lot out of me personally as a Nisqua . . . Nisqua – means, is a woman, in Cree" (C.1, P.36, L41 – P. 37, L.5).

In contrast, the absence of a community of similar people was experienced again as contributing to cultural unsafety:

If I went, when I went to the University of [name] I felt a total loss. I was just running scared. You know, getting to class . . . 'cause I know that I could be misunderstood, and looked upon differently. I didn't, I didn't feel good with, about that, I felt unsafe. Yeah. Yeah, cultural safety, yeah I didn't feel so safe out there, in other schools, very good about WEC. (C.1, P. 23, L.17-22)

To model and speak one's own culture was both the way and the experience of safety. "I think we need to be able to tell our stories and have our stories validated, stories maybe our own stories, stories of our families, of our people and have that validated, so we can feel safe" (C.1, P. 25, L. 8-11).

Finally the talking circle responded with some ambivalence to preliminary theme statements 3 and 7:

- (3) Many people bring a personal history of resisting attempts of systems to change them.
- (7) There were mixed feelings expressed that many "folks were on the bandwagon" – (this had seemed more significant to the researcher – and relates in part to the lack of recognition of the depth of racism – superficial recognition, commitment to cause).

The circle participants acknowledged the importance of the personal history they brought with them and that such histories affected their own sense of cultural safety. However, the participants did not talk about this issue in the group settings. They indicated the language here was confusing to them. They acknowledged that a personal history was present in each person, but they did not engage with this theme as they did the previous two.

These preliminary themes were intended to acknowledge the positive energy and efforts with which participants were facing destructive histories, systemic abuses, and personal challenges. However, for those to whom resistance is a matter of survival rather than an optional cause, the language might have seemed excessive. Participants didn't see themselves as resisting the efforts of a system; they were simply trying to survive. It seemed that participants chose an attitude of optimism and hope, and they responded more warmly toward positive descriptions.

Material was then rewritten and presented again to the Advisory Group and to a second circle of participants who had been unavailable for the first talking circle. This material had been revised in two ways. First, the researcher had learned that participants found sample transcript material helpful in comprehending the context of the themes. Consequently non-identifying quotes from conversations and the first talking circle were added to the materials shared with the remaining circles. Secondly, theme seven was dropped from the list of those presented as it had been marked as clearly not helpful.

When I presented these categories to the Advisory Group, they affirmed and elaborated on the phrases in much the same way as had the first talking circle. A stronger emphasis on the connection between cultural safety and wholeness or healing was reinforced. “Moving people toward wholeness, toward a healthy state . . . I think, in part, that’s what we do here, you know. By allowing people to be who they are, and being open about that right from the get-go” (Advisory, P.22, L.2-6). Conscientization was seen to contribute to personal wholeness and healing. Recognition of a systemic problem removed the sense of individual failure:

For me, it was learning about all of those things, the theory then began to provide some understanding of, some explanation of why things were the way that they were . . . [*Another participant: Yeah – You begin to put the pieces together again, you know, and . . . yeah, and I think that sort of contributes to, to sort of your wholeness, you know. You are not as fragmented as you may have been*]. (Advisory, P.15, L.3-12)

Vigilance was maintained at a cost to one’s own identity:

When you look at it, that stuff, it’s that whole mentality of shutting yourself down, turning off being a human being, as it were . . . because of the, the nuisance - yeah, that would be an accurate word - the nuisance of having to defend what you think, what you feel. (C.2, P.2, L.11-14)

Through this long process of listening to and studying the data, identifying topics, and presenting preliminary themes to a series of talking circles, participants went beyond the usual level of disclosure and clarified the emphases that were important to them. One participant made the significance of this additional depth clear when she questioned another participant, saying: “You are saying this in front of her [*the researcher*]?” As a result, there was an authenticity shift of perception that took

place in the description of the themes. It is to a statement of those themes and the resultant theory that this dissertation now turns.

CHAPTER 5: THEMES TO THEORY

Following two talking circles with participants and a review of materials with the study's Aboriginal Advisory Group, the mirror quality of six themes of cultural safety became clearer. Three themes reflected painful experience and three, somewhat parallel, themes represented qualities to be hoped for and pursued. The former three themes described the experience of cultural unsafety: Living in Two Worlds, the Shadow of Racism, and the Requirement of Constant Vigilance. Similarly, the latter three themes were recognized as illustrating aspects of cultural safety: One World Spirituality, Valuing Whole Persons, and The Priority of Relationships. All of these six themes must be understood if attention to cultural safety in the social work classroom or workplace is to be more than superficial.

After a brief caution regarding possible misinterpretations of analysis, the discussion will turn to those themes. The Oxford English Dictionary (On-line edition, 1989) defines the word "analysis" as:

The resolution or breaking up of anything complex into its various simple elements, the opposite process to *synthesis*; the exact determination of the elements or components of anything complex (with or without their physical separation); a. of things material; . . . [and] b. of things immaterial.

The derivation of this term from Greek components *ana* and *lysis*, [meaning: to loosen again], hint at the biological consequence of *lysis*: the death of the body [as in the term lyso-some]. Put more simply, to analyze can have the real implication and meaning of "to kill by cutting apart." To write about Aboriginal worldviews is to risk

an unintended consequence of analysis, the “killing” of a living whole by cutting it apart to examine its constituent parts. One might, indeed, learn much about the components of that worldview. However, dissection can also terminate the very invisible forces that are the vital energy of the whole.

In this chapter, the researcher experiences, in a small way, the challenge of straddling two worldviews. Writing, physically, is a linear task; words and sentences line up single file, move left to right across the page, and then stepwise down. Paragraph by paragraph, page by page, from front to back, writing moves in a linear manner. The Aboriginal worldview, by contrast, is spherical; any part of reality is dynamically interconnected in all directions with the rest of reality. Metaphorically speaking, at any and every time, there are numerous ways on a globe to move from point A to point B: from east to west, west to east, by way of either pole, over the surface of the globe or tunneling through the sphere directly, to say nothing of the circuitous routes that may be possible. Linear and sequential writing cannot do justice to the dynamic interwoven web of relationship possibilities. As a caution for what follows, then, it must be acknowledged that the order and sequence of the relationships described below could easily be adapted and presented in other ways.

Themes of Cultural Unsafety

Through the conversations and talking circles, participants identified that two worldviews were at play in their lives. One of those worldviews (the culture within which they had been raised) was dominated by a second culture, which was not their own. Though participants identified with the first, their own culture was demeaned by

the second. This diminishment of one by the other contributed to a variety of personal and social fractures in the participants and so resulted in a variety of responses. Constant vigilance seemed to reflect the various approaches of their resistance to that risk. It is to these themes of unsafety and their interconnected dynamics that this discussion first turns.

Living in Two Worlds. Many, or perhaps even most, Aboriginal students in Manitoba come to school with a different sense of the world than others. They have grown up within a dominant society but as members of another culture. They have had to negotiate life with the consequences of these two worlds imprinted in their memories, minds, and even bodies. They may have been raised with a “double vision” of the world from childhood and have seen that doubleness as normal. That duality has caused virtually all of them much pain, as described in the next section on the shadow of racism.

Though most of the participants grew up in those two worlds, they recognized that their participation in one of those worlds was often imposed by their dependence upon adults of the other worldview. For many of the participants, the result was a diminished sense of the value of their own inescapable racial and cultural heritage. A sense of shame, a sense of being “less than,” was learned by many of the participants. To be sure, it was not a natural part of them but rather was a perception of self that was imprinted upon them by their surroundings. The sequence of dependence and sense of emptiness that this caused was poignantly described this way by one participant:

The only thing that I knew was . . . the Children’s Aid Society, where I grew up in non-Aboriginal homes. . . . I took on their beliefs and their culture . . . if they

went to church, I went to church with them. If they ate bread, I ate bread with them in church. So it was nothing that I had . . . on my own, it was something that I would take on. Depending on the situation that was there, I was able to adapt and pretend things were fine . . . to survive, absolutely, because in the child welfare system there is no stability. There is no foundation . . . And there was no foundation in my life . . . so I've never had a foundation to work and build my life on . . . So culture was never a part of me . . . in an individual sense. (T.7, P.1, L.27-28)

This cultural duality often is not recognized by non-Aboriginals who live solely within the dominant cultural milieu. However, for the Aboriginal research participants, it has been a constant reality, frequently with negative consequences. One participant described how rules applied in a mainstream healthcare system, supposedly for the benefit of patients but, nevertheless, through a lack of regard for the cultural differences, cut off that Aboriginal person from their supportive community. The family members of a patient in hospital were told to leave the patient's room:

They say, "Oh you have too many people in here." . . . and I said to the nurse yesterday, "Well, too bad, he has a big family." . . . He wasn't doing well. So yesterday, there were people coming in, you know, coming and going . . . and he was sleeping but he looked peaceful . . . and every now and then he'd open his eyes, and look around and smile and go back to sleep. . . . He just, knowing that everybody was there . . . I think, that's just the way it is. . . . It's normal. (T.8, P.3, L.48 – T.8, P.4, L.10)

For the healthcare personnel, individual health was a paramount value to be protected from excessive family contact. The presence of family relations was a much higher value for the Aboriginal person than for the values of the healthcare system. "By you limiting just the family [*in a hospital visit*], like whether it's just the spouse and maybe the children, you are cutting this family off from their supports" (C.1, P.18, L.19-21).

As the statistics mentioned in the first chapter indicated, poor health was noted as a predictable characteristic of Aboriginal populations as a whole. As compared with members of the dominant culture, Advisory Group members described that members of Aboriginal communities often experience closely spaced occurrences of untimely death allowing little time for healing and recover before the next loss:

Even though we are . . . educated . . . are professionals in our field, we still have and live with, on a daily basis, all of that history, all of the . . . the pain and the hurt and the death and the loss, and I mean that's what continuously happens. It's not just, you know, something that happens every five years, or something that only happens to the elderly. . . . It's not a natural, you know, sequence of things. It's a lot of tragic, and it happens all the time. And when we come from a context of extended family, then you know, I mean, it continuously happens. (Advisory, P.9, L.33 - P.10, L.4)

In this dual worldview situation, the consequences of a higher death rate are also not recognized by the dominant culture. This means, as one participant aptly summarized, "Aboriginal people have so many other health issues, and a lot of deaths, so there are funerals . . . And there's not as much control over that kind of situation" (Advisory, P.9, L.5-9). In a high context culture, there is a much stronger expectation of extended family and friends to gather as community at funerals. Further, because families were torn apart through policies like residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, times of loss, ill health, and funerals represent the possibility of healing through re-establishing supportive family connections. Consequently, there is a higher likelihood that Aboriginal people attend more funerals than their non-Aboriginal colleagues. This results in tension for many Aboriginal employees working in non-Aboriginal environments:

But you feel less than, 'cause if you are at one less meeting than somebody else, or if you have to cancel a meeting, it's very negative; you're not able to keep up with your responsibilities. You're always trying to catch up, and it's going to be like that for a few more generations . . . [*Another participant: Yeah. We're judged for that, in a negative way*]. (Advisory, P.10, L.16-23)

When this is not understood or appreciated by co-workers in the dominant culture, the difficulty of living in two worlds is experienced:

So that whole being able to box things in and keep it private, yet for Aboriginal people, if I'm away I have to give a reason for it. You have to explain what the reason is. . . . That's what it's like with people we work with, who are students. They are always asking for extensions, and it's legitimate. (Advisory, P.9, L.15-24)

The reality of living in two worlds was also noted in the different experiences of education. Aboriginal students frequently come from particular kinds of communities (often small, remote, non-industrial reserves), yet they are expected to function the same way as people who have been raised in different milieus (e.g., large urban industrial cities). These expectations might arise from relatively benign ignorance. Compounding this, however, has been, and is, a more malignant dynamic of the two worlds.

The Shadow of Racism. Alongside the experience of living in two worlds was a profound sense of racism. In the initial round of conversations, participants rarely used the term "racism" or "racist." These words, in fact, were repeated a total of 20 times, by only six of the thirteen participants, on an average of three times each. Even those repetitions usually occurred in one portion of each conversation, so that the words racism and racist appear on only five percent of the transcript pages (15 of 130). Yet, accounts of past personal experiences with racism arose in virtually every conversation.

The experience of racism was evident in so much of what was said that it was identified as a theme arising from the data. When raised within talking circles and the Advisory Group, the phrase was immediately embraced and the theme affirmed by the participants.

The lack of references to racism in the transcripts was explained by participants in the following manner. In the decades since the 1960s, when racism was more publicly challenged and made more socially unacceptable, there may have developed a perception that racism finally had been “dealt with.” The participants clearly indicated, however, that while use of inflammatory labels was discouraged, the behaviour of racism, active and systemic, was still experienced. Participants indicated that the desire or pressure to act in ways considered politically correct has not eliminated racism; instead, it has made it only more covert. “The shadow of racism, people don’t talk about it that much. They don’t use the word “racism” because they don’t want other people to feel uncomfortable” (C. 2, P.2, L.54-P.3, L.1).

In a paradoxical way, the participants seemed to find it a relief to talk about racism. A participant at a workshop this researcher led on *The Effects of Long Term Marginalization* observed that since “9-11,” it has become more acceptable to be outwardly racist again. She commented: “It is good to be able to use the word racism again . . . to have a White person who is willing to talk about it.”

One of the research participants also expressed appreciation for the visibility of overt racism over the deceptive fog of innuendo and non-verbal slights:

It’s like one of my guys that I went to university with, to WEC . . . he said he had nothing but utmost respect for rednecks. I said to him, “Well, why? They

hate you.” “Yeah, but at least you know where they’re coming from.” (T.4, P.1, L.32-36)

Similarly, smooth words were not the only reality held suspect by persons living in the two-world environment. Current popular interest in things Aboriginal was also seen to be a shallow form of political correctness. “Sometimes I think – sheesh - if all these guys are ‘going Aboriginal’, maybe I don’t want to be Aboriginal now” (T.4, P. 2, L. 7-11). Though the words had changed, the deeper interest in Aboriginal issues was considered absent. “What they’re saying to me then is, ‘We want you to tell us what you feel as long as you’re agreeing with us, or as long as you don’t rock the boat’” (C. 2, P.1, L.17-18). So, the Aboriginal student is caught between two worlds, between the apparent permission to be Aboriginal and the real censure for continuing to declare a distinctly Aboriginal perspective. It may not be surprising, then, that racism was not directly named in the majority of the conversations.

Though not explicitly named, there was a common looming presence in most of the conversations which I began to call “the shadow of racism.” Time and again, the stories of the participants revealed the repeated blows of racism which participants had experienced by virtue of being simply, but inescapably, Aboriginal. These conversations revealed three qualities of this experience that suggested the usefulness of the metaphor of the shadow: The effects of racism are pervasive, pernicious, and persistent. These three qualities have significant impact on the theory of social work education as developed in the final chapter.

Racism, first of all, was a pervasive influence for these university students. Like a shadow it appeared in the background of the discussions of their experiences. Racism

was as prevalent in their lives as shadows are in nature: starkly illuminated at times, vaguely perceived at others, so common as to often go unrecognized. But once the light was shone upon this experience, once the theme was named, participants acknowledged the experience everywhere visible.

Affected by the “pollution” of a non-supportive, non-Aboriginal environment, racist experiences were described as having occurred in the participants’ own homes and in the homes of their friends. The experiences happened in the workplace as students tried to find work in the retail sector. The name calling at home and playground, workplace, and institution became slurs and insults on the street that led to fist fights, legal injustice, and, too often, life-threatening violence. The experiences of racism also happened in the institutions into which Aboriginal children had been gathered for their care, such as hospitals and the Children’s Aid Society. Caught up in these systems and separated from family and friends, several disclosed experiences of sexual abuse at the hands of caregivers.

Importantly, from the perspective of this study, research participants illustrated the pervasiveness of racism by identifying incidents that affected their experience of education. One participant summed up that experience succinctly: “Being Aboriginal, as a child in school . . . I experienced some pretty, you know, pretty tough stuff” (C.1, P. 26, L.14-16). Appearance was shamed. Grade level expectations were ignored. The residential school system clashed with Aboriginal culture by not allowing students to speak their own languages and by separating children from families and communities.

Teachers failed to see their suffering, failed to protect the Aboriginal students, and in some cases, failed to restrain even their own violence against the children.

The experiences of childhood educational racism continued within university classrooms. In the talking circles, as the topic of racism was broached, participants recalled numerous experiences in the university setting that were blatantly racist or just terribly ignorant. “One prof., in my time, in a course returned my first paper. He came up from behind me, and handed me my paper, and said, ‘[Name], this is very good. Did you write it?’ ” (Advisory, P.2, L.1-4). Another case of profound thoughtlessness was added by another participant:

This older non-Aboriginal woman . . . said, “Well, why didn’t all the Aboriginal people just all get together and move, and go into their own land?” . . . This one student, she was so outspoken, she goes . . . “What did you say?!” She was so mad! So, and I couldn’t blame her . . . But she says, “This is *our* land! *You guys* came here!” . . . And she’s like . . . going on and on . . . and . . . you know, but it was like some people just don’t get it. (C.1, P.32, L.17-36)

Racism, secondly, has been a pernicious force in participants’ lives because they are Aboriginal. Like a shadow that looms in the darkness, these experiences were profoundly personal; they attached to each one interviewed. Like a threat from behind, the shadow of racism cast a toxic cloud into peoples’ ways of being, affecting them at their core, causing deep pain. The talking circles emphasized how this pain was frequently experienced as a feeling of being devalued and “not good enough”:

I think everything that we’ve learned to this point has been a history that was shameful for a lot of us . . . hurtful . . . Our school history for the most part, I know from talking to a lot of people, hasn’t been a good . . . a good . . . anything that was good in their lives. (C.2, P.3, L.29-36)

This ghostly shadow of shame resists exorcism, for the two-world divide and the racist assaults have not disappeared. “When I go to campus, I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel that same level of acceptance or respect . . . that I get here . . . You just never feel like you are good enough” (Advisory, P.4, L.7-9, 27). The comments of Aboriginal faculty members give pause:

People never assume that you can do something really well, as they would there, as their colleagues. Somehow you have to be able to prove it. And you’re not always likely to be asked for something, because they see someone else as being better for that role. (Advisory, P.5, L.1-5)

The tendency to stereotype and partialize the individual continue to devalue the multifaceted talents of the Aboriginal individual. [RESEARCHER: SO WHEN SOMEONE’S BEING ASKED FOR THEIR OPINION, THEY ALWAYS ASK SOMEBODY ELSE FIRST?] Unless it’s on an ‘Aboriginal’ issue” (Advisory, P.4, L.9-11). Speaking about another campus, another Advisory Group member said:

To me, I guess, really it’s foreign. There’s no sense of comfort. You don’t walk into that building, or into [*building name*] with a sense of comfort. It’s not . . . it’s not, it’s not home. It’s not a place of welcoming. (Advisory, P.6, L.12-15)

The demeaning of Aboriginal people not only negatively affected participants’ views of themselves but also had the effect of undermining their own culture and making their race and traditions seem unworthy in their own eyes. As a result, many of the participants expressed being cut off from that cultural part of themselves:

Culture wasn’t something that I was proudful of. It was something that I was very ashamed of . . . of who I am as an Aboriginal person. I didn’t value it; I didn’t know the value of culture, prior to my school years in [*ISCWP - the year*]. (T.7, P.1, L.14-16)

Gradually, for many of the graduates and non-graduates, this disrespect of culture became internalized. Participants reported being alienated from other Aboriginal people or of feeling isolated themselves. Participants indicated that they found themselves coping, in destructive ways, with the sense of a lack of belonging. Eventually, the hostile attitude of racism led to an inner split from the holistic worldview where everything is addressed as “all my relations.” This was made evident in anecdotes of parents refusing to teach Aboriginal ways to children and in the participants separating themselves from similar others on the street or classroom. It was seen as a measure of healing that this split could be overcome once again.

Racism, thirdly, was described by the participants as being strongly persistent. Like a shadow stretching ever longer as the source of light is further removed, the effects of racist experiences echo far beyond the moment in which they were first inflicted. Painful experiences are embedded deep into the affected person and remain there, ready to echo:

Maybe I have witnessed or experienced some form of racism or discrimination or stereotype, you know, that maybe you don't respond to immediately, but you take it with you. You know. You play it back in your head and you know it's just continuous. It's not something that you can escape. (Advisory, P.2, L.24-30)

I really think that's reality. I mean, I think that's reality for all of us, for those of us, you know, who have managed to get to this place, you know, where we go up the ranks, we have reached the professional level. Those things still exist; you can't take them away. Those are things that are deeply embedded. And I think sometimes that you have to, you continuously have to rework those, work with them. (Advisory, P.2, L.12-19)

A recurring dynamic described by participants was that remembered racist experiences left them always on edge, spring-loaded as it were, to protect against new

racially motivated attacks. Where one of these attacks was perceived to occur, those previously harmed were reminded that it can happen again, and found themselves lapsing into defensive postures again. An “echo” of racism could be caused by a simple gesture that can mean nothing to one culture but remind another of a terrible threat. One graduate described feeling frightened in her office before a man who was searching for his medication:

You know, last week a young man came in here, and I said, “[*name*] you’re having a bad day aren’t you?” You know he just sat back here, digging in the bag, and I thought, oh, he’s going to pull out a knife or a gun and I’m just sitting here . . . but he was just coming through a meth-[*sic*] withdrawal. (T.1, P. 18, L. 19-25)

To be sure, it might be suggested that this situation is not directly an issue of culture and that any person would feel threatened by the possibility of a weapon. However, the issue becomes cultural in so far as the descriptions of participants included stories of being in violent communities and contexts.

The echoes of racism relate directly to the educational experience. As was mentioned previously, a loud voice might remind one of an abuser. Elements of the curriculum may trigger the individual memories and internalized identity of “not good enough.” One graduate described being a presenter at a workshop and, in describing her own experience, becoming emotionally overwhelmed:

So these bigwigs flew out and back from [*city name*] one evening. . . . They were talking about child welfare, and that had been my childhood experience. And I became very emotional, because the speaker was talking about my life. And I couldn’t stop the tears. And I felt really embarrassed, and you’re trying right?! And you just can’t. But at that conference, it had been organized by colleagues from different universities, but the majority, the vast majority, 98% were non-Aboriginal. And so that whole public display . . . and then I had to go in and give an hour presentation. . . . It was tough, because I really needed to

debrief, and there was nowhere to debrief. I really needed to smudge, couldn't smudge, you know, to try some things, but yeah, I was feeling very unsafe, having nowhere to go to feel safe in that environment. Like, how do you pull it all together? (Advisory, P.8, L.16-35)

The possibility of such persistent effects of racism was not expected by the dominant worldview sponsors. As a result, the distress was not recognized, and the Aboriginal presenter was left to fend for herself.

The painful past does not simply evaporate and become resolved within automatically. The pain and memories that were buried within are ready to be released again, as "the past . . . still impacts today" (Advisory, P.3, L 22-23). Further, it does not take much to evoke those echoes:

You know, I know what our role and responsibility is. I know in terms of the cultural, in terms of our own culture, what our role is, what our responsibility is, what our purpose is here. And still, I think if you, if you get a comment, you know, that's all it takes – is just one comment. That's all it takes to dissolve all that other stuff. Even if it's only momentarily. (Advisory, P.3, L.10-17)

An event took place during the writing of this document that dramatically reinforced the long reach of racism and its echoes. On National Aboriginal Day, June 21, 2007, a female student at the ICSW Program was assaulted by a white man just outside the doors of the ICSWP building. The woman was knocked to the ground and a flammable liquid was thrown in her face. When a male student leapt out to protect the woman, the assailant jumped into a running getaway car and fled the scene before the fluid could be set fire.

This event not only revealed that virulent racist behaviour persists against Aboriginal people but it was also significant in demonstrating the echo effect throughout the entire school population. The participants in this study, other students,

staff, and faculty alike, as they heard about the attack, identified, to a greater or lesser extent, with her and reported feeling profoundly shaken. As per the discussion of intersecting inequalities, it seemed that those who had multiple levels of vulnerability in common with the student were most affected. Women in the program recognized their vulnerability as females. The effect was increased for women of colour. The effect was even more amplified for poor women of colour. All of these were left shaken, and, more profoundly, on-guard.

The Requirement of Vigilance. The existence and collision of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures has not been benign or insignificant. Racist words, gestures, and experiences have influenced the participants powerfully and remain with them through their life times. Amid an indifferent, if not openly hostile climate of the dominant culture, “acting Indian” could bring about separation from one’s family, humiliating verbal encounters, corporal punishment in school, or serious injury in public. Consequently, this third theme of cultural unsafety emerged: the transcripts of participants revealed that they recognized the requirement of maintaining a constant vigilance if they were to remain safe.

As the participant who was mentioned above said, in the context of searching for a voice to confront injustice, caution is second nature:

If I saw somebody being harmed . . . with racism or with classism, would I intervene? I don’t know. That would depend on where I’m at. You know. And I think a lot of what I do is based on where I’m at internally, yeah. (T.7, P.9, L.14-20)

Awareness of the two worlds indicates that some kinds of conversation are easier in some contexts than others:

I think it [*this research project*] also makes you more aware of the two worlds you are actually living in. Because you do live in two worlds. And you do have to be vigilant . . . when you are with your own people who understand where you are from, and they you are comfortable and can talk, about things, the spiritual aspect or whatever. But if you are with people who don't have that knowledge and experience, then you have to be very careful about how you say things and what you say. (Advisory, P.15, L.15-24)

If educators desire to promote cultural safety within an educational system, they must recognize that need for constant vigilance and assist Aboriginal students to negotiate the bridges or barriers between those cultures:

So I think that in the school we need to learn . . . the truth about being Aboriginal is that you have to be on your toes, you have to be on your toes, and you have to be two steps ahead. (C.1, P.29, L.34-36)

If the classroom is not safe, the defense mechanism of constant vigilance will be required within the educational environment. This vigilance is needed with the instructors or the system itself. “[*We*] have to be very careful about challenging the system. And just how we have to act in the, in the classroom, or with people who are not from their own culture” (Advisory, P.15, L.30-33). Aboriginal people recognize the need to pick their fights against racism carefully, another example of being on guard (vigilant):

There's times when you feel it, and you, you can just feel this rush in you, like “I have to say something,” But knowing when the time is right, and it's like, I know, I have to do that at . . . in my employment. I have to pick and choose and know when the time is right, to make my stance, when I feel that I need to make a stance. (C.1, P.15, L.39-46)

You know, you can't fight them all [*sigh*]. You know, you can't fight them all, but you can, I think every day there's an opportunity . . . and whether you're in an educational setting, and I think right across society, it's education. (C.1, P. 26, L.27-30)

A complementary consequence of one's own constant vigilance looking outwards is the heightened sensitivity to "vigilance in return," to being watched oneself. This is not merely a reflexive sensitivity, an equal and opposite projection of others doing the same thing. It is a sensitivity based upon one's race, a feeling of being watched as an Aboriginal person, who is already suspect from the stereotypic perspective of the other world. Included in this disquiet is a heightened sense, as an individual, of having to represent one's own whole race. "Walking into that position, I was under the microscope, big time! Like, you had to really watch your "ps" and "qs," And it was like, "You know what? I was up for the challenge" (C.1, P.15, L.28-32). This sort of scrutiny was reported, not surprisingly, as unpleasant and undesirable. [RESEARCHER: IT'S JUST THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE. IF DIFFERENT, NOT AS GOOD AS, 'CAUSE THEN IT BRINGS NOTICE.] Yeah. Absolutely. [Another participant: Negative notice]" (Advisory, P.11, L.1-5).

Within this environment of constant vigilance, to protect themselves from bruising by the dominant culture, participants reported responding to the threat or experience of racism through various forms of resistance. These strategies could be described as "fight, flight, and feign." In the context of this research, however, the strategies selected are listed in the reverse order. According to the relative frequency with which the participants mentioned these techniques, the strategies arising out of the constant vigilance were feign, flight, and only lastly, fight.

By far the most frequently mentioned form of resistance (under the "feign" heading), as mentioned in the discussion of topics, was the use of silence. Silence was

repeatedly mentioned as the way in which these participants faced the challenges of the shadow of racism and facilitated their constant vigilance. “I was forced to submit to silence in order to protect myself” (T.10, P.1, L.13). Feigning having nothing to say, was a common method of self-protection: [RESEARCHER: “SO YOU DIDN’T GET PICKED ON.] Yeah! Yeah! Like I believe so, I mean we had to protect ourselves as much as we could” (T.3, P.6, L.19-20). If participants were to speak up and use the term “racism,” they anticipated that a strong negative reaction would be forthcoming, recognizing that some persons with a dominant system worldview have come to believe that racism have been eradicated. To complain about racism, it was feared, would only attract a backlash.

Where Aboriginal young people chose not to hold in their response and be silent, the threat of violence became reality, and the social forms of racist violence could turn physical:

So, I thought, well, this is not a culturally safe place . . . it’s like, I can’t talk about this here . . . if I bring it up, people get all riled and it’s like angry, “trying to impose your will on us or something?” (T.13, P.1, L.22-25)

’Cause my son . . . he’s got a big scar on his face. Why? Because some guy mouthed off to his buddy. So he stuck up for his buddy. The guy turned around, took out a box cutter, *wwccchh* [*sound for slashing*], right down his face. Forty-two stitches, right? (C.2, P.6, L.50 – P.7, L.6)

In the face of such actual and threatened violence, it is not surprising that silencing oneself is the choice students make. “Any reasonably sane human being can pick up the body language from other people. So you don’t even have to think about it. It’s like, ‘Forget it!’ You know? You just, I mean, you shut yourself down (C. 2, P.1, L.20-22).

Perhaps predictably, the short-term tactic might easily grow into a long-term strategy. Aboriginal students indicated that they avoided careers where speaking was required:

I did some courses at the University of Winnipeg for teaching. You know . . . I was going towards teaching . . . but, you know, [*clears throat*] I went and took some courses there and I . . . I didn't feel comfortable talking in class. (T.8, P.4, L.25-28)

Silence is a form of hiding, which in some cases, hearkened back to actual avoidance from the authorities of non-Aboriginal systems, which represent the second category of resistance: flight. It is significant to observe that as these events were described in conversation, the dynamic of silencing was mentioned as part of the story. The stories, mentioned above, of child and grandmother going into hiding, experiencing sexual abuse, and learning to run from foster homes certainly represented this understandable flight response. However, examples of flight as a response to racism were not limited to experiences of physically running away. Social flight was a variation on this theme that was repeatedly raised.

As was mentioned above, participants reported being taught by their kin to avoid things Aboriginal, such as their language. Because the larger society created a culture where it was dangerous to pass on community knowledge, Aboriginal children were taught by their kin to avoid Aboriginal traditions. As was mentioned above: "For me, in my youth I had witnessed the traditional way of life with my, watching my Grandparents, but I was not told, I was not to talk about it, I was just to put it asi[*de*]. . . to forget that you saw that" (T.1, P.13, L.31-37). In the statement quoted above, about

keeping a distance from Aboriginal culture, the participant three times mentioned “not talking” about Aboriginal ways:

My grandmother, who’s a medicine woman, and that was set aside a long time ago. “Don’t talk about it.” And why my grandpa sat with a lot of men and shared a pipe; I was not supposed to talk about it . . . Why my granny burned things . . . all kinds . . . all . . . any time in the mornings . . . when it smelled funny, and we went digging with her into the deep woods, and took things out, and not to talk about it. No. I’m talking about it now, and I’m proud of it. You know. (T.1, P.3, L.22-31)

Another participant mentioned being guided by parents to avoid Aboriginal cultural rituals. Caregivers of these Aboriginal participants, in their desire to protect their children from the racial friction that those traditional ways might attract, were not able to pass on valuable cultural knowledge. “So it’s hard to create cultural safety for an individual who doesn’t know what their culture is” (T.4, P.8, L.23-24). The fifteen year old, mentioned above, who suddenly realized she was Aboriginal, was the product of that flight.

Finally, if silence and flight from danger do not work, it may be that fighting back becomes the response of last resort. While violence against others is contrary to the usual Aboriginal worldview where all are relations, occasionally it seems to have been an outflow of inner pressure:

I learned that “squaw” is a beautiful word . . . meaning Aboriginal woman, Indian woman. A squaw in their language [*English*] meant . . . an Indian woman to be laughed at . . . and to be sexually molested, or whatever, or to be had. And I was called a squaw, . . . many years ago . . . I think maybe I was about 19 or 20 . . . and I was walking down . . . with some friends . . . and I had long, long wavy hair. Anyway, there’s four guys in this car, and they went by, and they yelled at me . . . and I was walking with my ex-husband. And he was six feet tall and his brother was six, seven feet tall and his cousin was eight feet tall [*chuckles*], you know. But, you know what? When those, when that car decided to pull out, it stalled! [*Laughter*]. It stalled, and man, did I feel sorry for those

boys, [*laughter*]. You know, but anyway, when the police came, to get . . . the four of my friends left me, I was left all alone, because they were taken. Even though there were people on the street saying, “Hey, that’s not their fault, it was those guys’ fault.” Those other guys got away. And I felt, “Oh geez.” (C.1, P.21, L.10-33)

One participant commented about wanting to take on members of a motorcycle gang:

Held it in me, didn’t talk about it, didn’t talk about it. Became a very unhealthy individual. Give me a beer, boy, and I’m takin’ on the world. I’d look for the biggest mothers [*sic*] in the place. I remember one time, seventeen years old . . . Concord Hotel . . . I’m throwin’ draft glasses at fourteen Los Bravos. Calling them a bunch of grease balls; “Okay, come on, let’s go! Outside, right now!” Talk about a death wish! (C.2, P.4, L.28-33)

It would not be hard to see such emotions, the desire for protection, and finally a passion to fight back, contributing to the inner dynamic that leads to gang membership and behaviour.

The research participants indicated that they lived in two worlds, one of which was often unseen by leaders in the dominant culture systems. Despite the outward appearance of civility and cultural tolerance, experiences of racism continued to be an important factor in their lives, like a shadow that is pervasive, pernicious, and prevalent. Slight or unintentional triggers may set off echoes of previous hurts (to say nothing of horrible and intentional assaults). To keep themselves safe, participants learned a range of responses to be constantly vigilant, employing strategies of silence (feign), social withdrawal (flight), and occasionally, if necessary, physical resistance (fight).

However, this view of cultural unsafety is only half the picture painted by the research participants. The participants in the study also demonstrated resilience in their determination not to succumb to racism, and in the positive attitude with which they

approached their life, their education, and cultural safety. This study now turns to consideration of those themes of cultural safety.

Themes of Cultural Safety

While participants recognized that two worldviews were at play in their lives, one dominating another, they understood at a deep level that such dualism was ultimately not their culture's description of reality. Their own fundamental spirituality, that sees everything as connected, predates and foreshadows the modern scientific search for a unified theory that would harmonize the elemental forces of nature. The many components of the world, according to this spirituality, cannot be divided and understood in isolation. All are to be respected and valued together, for they all exist within a web of relationships, and it is within those relationships that each has meaning. Hence, three themes of cultural safety were identified out of participants' sharing: One World Spirituality, Valuing Whole Persons, and the Priority of Relationships. It is to these themes and their interconnected dynamics that this discussion now turns.

Affirm Aboriginal (Holistic) Spirituality. A unifying holistic spirituality was not a phrase explicitly used in any of the conversations. However, the importance of a unifying spirituality was a theme that arose out of the numerous references in the transcripts to spiritual practices and spiritual tolerance. "For education, just like when you are learning anything, I think that it's really powerful to . . . tap into the spiritual part" (T.12, P.1, L.36-38). To be sure, a significant number of traditional Aboriginal spiritual practices were mentioned as part of the hoped for experience of cultural safety. These included smudging, dancing, circles, medicines, pow-wows, ceremonies, and

sweats. Further, the presence of Elders in the educational environment was repeatedly appreciated and encouraged.

However, one ought not to assume that every Aboriginal person wants to smudge. Indeed, conversation transcripts repeatedly reveal a high level of respect for a diversity of spiritual practices adopted by various Aboriginal groups. If Aboriginal people were practicing some faith other than a traditional one, that was certainly encompassed as a legitimate choice. This was made explicit in the example of Aboriginal people who had been raised in or had chosen a Christian faith. This respect was also accorded to other non-traditional faith choices made by Aboriginal people. At the 2000 CASSW Annual Congress, I facilitated the opening plenary session and introduced a panel of Aboriginal women talking about their experiences. One young Aboriginal woman was present to discuss her conversion to Islam. A Muslim Aboriginal person was not the representative of spirituality most people expected.

The fact that holistic spirituality was never mentioned is not a surprise. In Aboriginal worldviews, spirituality is not separated from culture. It is not something that happens only in a sacred space but occurs throughout the whole world; all of creation is considered sacred. Spirituality is not something that is generated or mediated by a sacred class; an Elder is not a priest, but a model of a whole person. It is not only the Elder but the whole community who are the bearers of spiritual values. One participant pointed out how an Aboriginal ceremony, a graduation pow-wow communicated this sense of spiritual valuing. "It was very empowering because, just getting that certificate from the Elders that was . . . that was empowering . . . but not as

empowering as standing in that circle and being honoured by a whole community of people” (T.2, P.8, L.29-32). Spirituality refers to those things that make life meaningful, that provide the courage to return to school. Consequently, broadness of experience is valued. The language of values in these conversations was often not distinguished from the language of spirituality.

The concept of the Medicine Wheel (depicted in Figure 1) described in *The Sacred Tree* (Bopp, Bopp, Browne, & Lane, 1985) helps to illustrate the sense of global spirituality. This concept, part of the curriculum in the first year of the ICSW Program, is a graphic summary of the sense of a unifying spirituality present in Aboriginal communities. While it is familiar to many Aboriginal people, it is also new to some. Reviewing the Medicine Wheel not only introduces this perspective to some Aboriginal students; it also serves to present it to non-Aboriginal people and to show respect for concepts important to many Canadian Aboriginal cultures. While this is by no means the only model of a holistic spirituality, it proves to be open enough that students and faculty with other faith attachments have been able to participate without qualms:

That could include other, other . . . whatever way shape or form that person believes in. Whether that’s . . . whether they believe in Bible teachings or whatever, you know, it’s that what that person believes in and they’re free to practice that and free to do that. (T.11, P.1, L.17-31)

The Medicine Wheel is a circle divided into four equal quarters. The sections are named by the four cardinal directions of the compass: North, East, South, and West. Through the use of colours (yellow, red, black, and white), each quarter is used to represent one of the main racial streams of humanity. Each section, similarly, is used to represent one of the various aspects of human being within the individual person. The

quarters represent, respectively the spiritual aspect, the physical aspect, mental capabilities, and emotional capacity. All these quarters signify parts of humanity, all of which are needed if humanity, individual or collective, is to be whole.

The Medicine Wheel is used in Aboriginal cultures to teach many things. To be healthy, there has to be a balance of the four directions and the four aspects. If a person feels out of balance, the Medicine Wheel provides clues to aspects that may have been ignored. Similarly, peace requires the balancing of the races of the world. No one race should expect to take more than its share. Layering of the global and individual meanings together in the wheel suggests that the personal and social aspects of individuals are interrelated. The community is as healthy as its individual members. *The individual does not exist in isolation but rather in a community, not only of kin and humanity, but also with all life.*

The Medicine Wheel concept signals a unifying worldview or spirituality in which all things are included. Whether the influence of this concept occurs at conscious, symbolic, or practical levels of awareness, it serves to reverse the partializing divisions previously experienced by participants. The alienated self is not disowned by the individual or consigned to punishment; she or he is a person seeking balance. The troubled student is not functioning alone, cut off from community. "Although you may feel weak, discouraged at times, there's someone there's someone there to help you through that, whether it's emotionally or spiritually, there's always someone there to kind of help you through the hard times" (T.2, P.1, L.41-44). Differences between cultures are seen to be gifts rather than offenses. "The purpose in

there was to learn, and to grow, and to . . . share each other's cultures and experiences, and to me that is probably one of the most treasured memories I will have of WEC" (C.1, P.16, L.21-23). The community belongs in all aspects of a person's life. Kin are welcome at school:

Made me feel that I was valued . . . and my presence being in that year group or in that program was important . . . not only for myself, but of course for my child, who I had at the time, and for my community, and for my family. (T.9, P.1, L.48-51)

Elder presence is normal and empowering. Elders may act as trusted guides to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. The distance between student and professor is overcome; both are seen to be part of the same circle.

Needless to say, a number of values were suggested by pursuit of a world-unifying spirituality. One such value is respect. For a balance of personal and social diversity to be obtained, respect of each and every member is required. The circle cannot remain whole if one portion is excluded. Secondly, the Medicine Wheel also proclaims the crucial significance of relationship. Each of the components touches all of the other components, if only at a single central point, or all along an edge. There is connectedness among the parts. Consequently, it should not be surprising that, following the fundamental assumption of holistic spirituality, the other themes of cultural safety arising from participant conversations were valuing whole individuals and the priority of relationships.

Value Individuals as Whole Persons. Eurocentric approaches to academic study have tended to expect students to reduce holistic experience into theory, to compartmentalize integrated dynamics of life into discrete realities, to develop

objectivity that distances oneself from relationship, and to write in third person parts of speech. Mainstream university students normally are expected to demonstrate individually what they know through assignments like tests and essays. Thus, learning seems to be primarily a product of the mind. For some Aboriginal students, this process requires contortions that go against their sense of the world and themselves, to say nothing of their style of learning.

Thus, it is not surprising that valuing Aboriginal persons as whole persons emerged from the conversations and circles as a significant theme of cultural safety. To value in this way was to appreciate and respect the multi-dimensionality of students' whole beings, attending not only to students' minds, but also their spiritual sensibilities, their physical well-being, their emotional health, their obligations to family, and their various communities. The repetition of the topics of respecting and valuing, freedom to be themselves, finding their own voices, and escaping the constraints of stereotypes indicate that cultural safety involves actively seeing Aboriginal students as they choose to be and defending that right to be as they choose.

Feeling valued as a whole person was recognized in participants being able to bring every aspect of their being to the program. Nothing needed to be split off and compartmentalized. Participants appreciated being able to involve the rest of their lives (work, significant others, family members, and even pre-school children) in their classroom experience. Students who felt they were able to bring their future hopes and fears, their current circumstances of success and struggle, and, significantly, their pasts, felt both valued and culturally safe. In bringing their pasts, participants were able to

bring their experiences, both positive and negative, their personal strengths and foibles, their experiences of racism, and appreciation of diversity. There was a sense of appreciation that a person's reality was not artificially limited so as to pretend that everybody was the same. Students knew they could talk about experiences, their children, and families in an honest way in class.

Attention to and caring for these multiple aspects of individuals were mentioned throughout the transcripts: flexibility to deal with family circumstances, feasting, family nights, provision of Elder supports, spiritual practices, construction of a school in close proximity to the students' communities, smudging space, quiet round room, counselling support, and access to faculty home phone numbers were all noted. Some aspects, not mentioned in the transcripts, but that extend this sense of valuing the whole person, could be added: an individual check-in occurs prior to each class, pre-school children often appear with parents in classes, a community pantry is stocked by those who are able to do so, clothing exchanges regularly occur, bus tickets are available at the front desk, and so on. All these also contribute to the sense of respecting people and the sense of family at ICSWP.

There was, of course, recognition that ICSWP is a university program aimed at intellectual and skill development. Exercise of this was expected and rigorously pursued. Students were required to attend classes, and grade standards were equal to that on the main campus. The capacity for, and performance of, responsibility from students was part of the valuing of the whole person that was appreciated by students. A rigorous selection process was seen as affirming of student identity and ability rather

than an excluding barrier. That faculty did not subtly patronize students, but rather had high levels of expectation, was seen as further evidence that Aboriginal students were fully valued.

That the many other diverse aspects of the whole Aboriginal student were intentionally taken into consideration was appreciated and identified as contributing to cultural safety. Participants expressed appreciation that students did not have to contort their whole lives around school but might be accommodated to some degree. The flexibility of course hours and holiday scheduling was seen as responsive to family needs; educational processes that were “not just sitting around being academic” were seen as responsive to needs of the body as well as the mind. Social needs were seen to be addressed by the use of a cohort model, in which students “travel through” their courses together. Connection of the program within their communities encouraged that sense of valuing the individual. The provision of non-academic supports was recognized as supportive; emotional needs received attention. Receiving counselling and guidance was normalized.

The building was located in the inner city neighbourhood where many of the students lived. The buildings made it easy to get outside; a student could see outside from every room, either to a green space courtyard at the centre or to the cityscape outside the exterior walls. All rooms were at ground level. Classes were arranged physically in a circle (as close as possible with square tables). A change table was provided in the bathrooms at ICSWP. A quiet room, round room, and rooms especially equipped with smoke detector systems and ventilation that allowed for smudging, were

available, in addition to the more usually expected library, common room, and classroom facilities.

Understanding and valuing students as whole persons for cultural safety, however, went further. Valuing the wholeness of a student included both extending the honour they deserved as human beings and members of the sacred circle, and recognizing that they brought with them their own histories of being dishonoured by the shadow of racism. Students indicated that they felt respected when they were recognized as having something to share and when their struggles with the negative effects of colonization were already understood and accepted by the educators.

University in the mainstream culture was seen by participants as tending to welcome students to school looking primarily forward. "I really feel that sometimes the main campus is more concerned about putting the graduates out, instead of putting them out healthy and ready to face the world." (T.4, P.7, L. 17-19) All that needs to be focused on is what is yet to come, hard work, great learning, and subsequent career success. What has happened in the past, aside from pre-requisite course work and grades, is not considered. However, not to attend to the ongoing effects of more than five hundred years of contact between Aboriginal culture and non-Aboriginal colonization is to allow racist influence to continue.

The ICSW Program recognized that in a high context culture, one cannot simply ignore what has gone before. The effects of colonization came with the students as they walked through the doors of the university:

I guess when you come into this place people bring with them their life experiences for the most part. And that's what you feel when you come here.

Because you all, you know that you come into this program with your life experience that you've gained through stuff, whatever that may be and whatever that may look like (T.11, P.8, L.36-47)

The reality of the whole student was valued sufficiently that effort was made to ensure that the faculty members hired at the ICSWP were attentive to this history and capable of responding to its consequences. This effort was perceived as a commitment toward cultural safety by more than one participant. As mentioned above, "It's not only that the students get picked to come here . . . it's the professors that get picked to come here and teach as well, and who would fit." Another observed: "WEC is really . . . I think . . . I don't know who does the selection for the, you know, when the courses come up or whatever, but I think they are very . . . mindful of that [*who teaches*]" (T.8, P.7, L. 52-55).

A culturally safe social work program not only would acknowledge that past; it also would delve into that past, teach more about it, and provide for supports that attend to the effects of colonization, racism, silencing, and the resulting culture of shame. This at least would have to do with honouring lost Aboriginal cultural connections. "What WEC would do is, they would, you know, kind of look at you and get you to look at yourself and how you want to be seen" (T.4, P.8, L.27-29). It might have to do with extending respect to those who had not experienced much respect before:

And I never pretend to be something that I'm not. Never. And that's something that, I think that program gave me, too. Don't . . . don't be ashamed of yourself. It just is, who I was, and what I went through. It just is. No judgment. So . . . my brain just went craz[y] . . . just went like, "Wow?!! I got a brain that really works [*laughter*]. I just became more of who I am . . . I learned to . . . become my own person . . . I don't go to anybody's, anybody's drum, just mine. And that's what WEC gave me . . . I said, "Yeah, that's who I am, or that's what I

do, and that's how I believe, and it was honoured and respected . . . so that was really powerful. (C.1, P.27, L.21 – P.28, L.7)

It might have to do with recognizing that a student has something valuable to give by virtue of being an Aboriginal student. “I used to hear that, I think from professors, that they always felt that I probably did have a lot of knowledge to share” (T.3, P.2, L.26-28). Even if there were challenges presented to the students, the sense of being valued upheld the sense of safety:

We did have rough times. We did! And as a group we had to pull through them and had to kind of go . . . get beyond that. But you know, it's like, still . . . just that . . . I think it's just the feeling of a safety net that when you walked in the doors of WEC, you didn't have to worry. (C.1, P.16, L.11-15)

The Priority of Relationships. The significance of indigenous worldviews of holistic spirituality may account not only for valuing the whole person but also for the significance of relationships. “At its centre is respect for the spiritual relationship that exists between all things . . . education starts with prayer” (Hampton, 1995, p. 19). Spirituality is in everything. Therefore, everything has to be respected and connected. Such an approach, summarized in McCormick (1995) and Hampton (1995), is centered in a world of relationships.

Respect for the whole student goes beyond admiring and fostering intellectual achievement. Cultural safety, from the view of the participants, adds the responsibility of developing a relationship of care toward the individual's emotional life (sharing sorrows), spiritual issues (exploring values and ethical dilemmas), and social circumstances (family needs). The stability or mental illness of a parent or the addiction issues of a student's child would be recognized as part of the student's learning

environment. Even the sense of physical relationship was mentioned by participants. While appropriate boundaries were observed and differences in roles acknowledged, nevertheless relationship in the sphere of social work education could mean an increase in physical accessibility and increased supports for the physical needs of students.

The participants in this study indicated that more than an academic relationship was required in education. A holistic relationship, consistent with Medicine Wheel teachings and valuing of the whole person, would involve openness to and engagement with emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of relationship. In such a view, students could expect that the instructor might also know the person's individual history and members of the student's family, both parents and children. In return, the student might well expect to know more about the instructors' biographies. In a culturally safe environment, if the student was having difficulties at home with respect to a partner relationship, health of a child, financial concerns, issues of safety, for example, the faculty member would or could function as an advisor who well may be consulted. This sharing would be undertaken in order to provide additional academic and emotional support for students within the learning community. To be reassured and coached by one's professor when struggling with an assignment would help to reduce the anxiety of past educational experiences. When students and faculty were in community, participation in community carried responsibilities. The students themselves maintained the appropriate relationship, so that the academic border remained a boundary and did not need to become a barrier. An informal survey of five of the longest serving

instructors at the ICSWP (each with more than fifteen years service) revealed that all had confidence that their home phone numbers had never been used inappropriately.

The participants expressed appreciation for the lack of such relational barriers at the ICSWP. They commented that “there is someone always around. You don’t need an appointment to speak to a prof.” The request for time, from student to instructor, could frequently be made in the hallway in passing, phrased as: “Can we talk now?” This type of approach had less to do with the convenience of getting together or of making “spur of the moment” decisions than it had to do with invisible boundaries and barriers. If one had to go through the procedures of making appointments and coming to an office, the process would subtly reinforce the hierarchical advantage of the professor as the one who held the power, maintained the control, and distanced the student. Instead, the hallway conversation conveyed a sense of the meeting of two persons with differences in skill-sets and roles, but equal value within the community.

Such a relationship set at the ICSWP was described very differently than the usual professional relationship:

I was fortunate when I was in university, because there was a woman here, back then, I think, an Aboriginal woman, [name] Yeah! And I think just having her over there at WEC it was good for me to have her there, because I was able to go talk to her and when I’d get stuck, she’d make me feel . . . just became like a mother to me . . . But she’d sort of . . . you know, she’d make me . . . and I’d be crying when I go see her, but when I’m coming out of there, you know . . . feeling very different. (T3, P.4, L.28-34)

A further consequence of the priority of relationship was the importance of the social context. Students repeatedly spoke about the importance of being connected to a community of one’s own, thus referring to both the demographics of the school

participants and the content of the various course offerings. At the ICSWP there was a sense of being surrounded by similar others, of feeling nurtured, accepted, and “not alone.” Participants felt they were part of a group that was “all in it together.” The majority of faces of student colleagues were Aboriginal; those who weren’t Aboriginal were recognized as “kin” in that all hailed from similar experiences of marginalization. Conversely, various participants described the experience that study at the main (Fort Garry) campus meant a return to an environment of isolation, racism, superior acting folks, “having to explain,” feeling different, having to be the one who presented alternate views, and defend Treaty Rights, and the effects of colonization. “We feel safe in our own, mostly I think, in our own community, you know, when we’re working with our own people” (Advisory, P.4, L.1-3).

In contrast to the main campus, where Aboriginal students described themselves as feeling lost and alone in the bigness (majority) of the campus, at ICSWP the majority of students were Aboriginal. Aboriginal faculty modeled a career path that was slowly becoming more common. Research participants found that very encouraging. While the number of Aboriginal faculty remained below 50%, the ethos of the school was at least pro-Aboriginal. This ethos was sufficiently visible that when students traveled to an unfamiliar class or conference, they noticed, “There are four or five WEC-ies here, so it’s okay.”

There was an appreciation of the sense of connection, through cohort streaming of students with similar others. Individuals learned with their colleagues in groups and journeyed with familiar people as they moved together from subject to subject. There

was a connection with similar others through the presence of Aboriginal instructors. Within this cluster there was understanding that individuals did not need to explain colonization or Treaty Rights or fear stereotyping. Within this environment, constant vigilance could be relaxed, one's own voice could be tested, and one's real self could emerge.

Related to the sense of being immersed amidst one's own people was the sense of being immersed within one's own history and cultural identity. Participants spoke with excitement about the significance of awakening to a narrative other than that taught by the dominant culture. As history, laws, and issues relevant to Aboriginal people were made integral to the curricula of the school, there was a connection with one's own story. Several mentioned growing up alienated from Aboriginal culture and finding their Aboriginal roots just before school or at the beginning of the program. They were grateful to be able to hear more of their own story, in the words of Aboriginal authors, and to be introduced to an Aboriginal epistemology. The involvement of community leaders, Elders, issues, and practices amplified the sense of a culturally safe environment. Aboriginal culture within the curricula helped to overcome the previous sense of deficiency and to confirm the value of the whole person and the culture, even for someone with strong sense of Aboriginal identity:

I don't know if it matters where they come from, you know. Whether they come from their community or whether they're born and bred in Winnipeg. They are still part of the Aboriginal community. They are still seeking, still seeking who they are . . . I grew up being an Indian, and I knew I was an Indian. My parents and grandparents talked [*tribal*] language with me all the time, and they, when we, they did ceremonies all the time, and customs, and those things, always did that, that's how. . . . But, when I came to university I learned, what I learnt was about the Indian Act . . . And I learned about colonization, and it really helped

me to put things into perspective, and look at my family's and my community's situation in a very different light. (Advisory, P.13, L.1-20)

Even the physical sense of place could be included in this worldview of relationships. There is a feeling of connection with place, as the school was located near where many of the student participants lived. To be in one's own place could also be seen as an illustration of strong, visible relationships. For as McCormick (1995) intimates, place represents community rather than address:

“Territory” [or place] is important. Indian people feel the pain of being a minority in our own land. A sense of turf, a place that is Indian, a place where one is free to relax from the conventions of white society and be one's Native self is essential to well being. Native community demands a place. (p. 39)

An integral message of the Medicine Wheel is that relationships are an essential condition of existence. Everything is connected and, properly working, nurtures every other thing. A clear theme of the participants in this research study is that authentic relationships are an essential priority of cultural safety in social work education. Learning in a high context culture is about watching how people behave in community and listening to what they say over the long term, as opposed to listening only to what they say or think in a classroom lecture. Students want to see what is in the heart as well as the head of the faculty. That is why it is inappropriate to think that a non-Aboriginal person can “bring in an Aboriginal person” to be a one-time guest lecturer, “get what [*Aboriginal insight*] I need,” and “move on,” as if that is all it takes to become sufficiently informed and knowledgeable. High context learning is not about information but relationship and transformation.

The theme of relationship arising from the holistic spirituality assumed by the research participants suggests the importance of building connections throughout a social work education program. Cultural safety was enhanced when the connection between faculty and staff went beyond a sense of professional relationship, where distancing barriers were lowered and respectful boundaries maintained. Where the respect of culture and the entirety of persons were experienced, and where significant depth of relationships existed, the need declined for Aboriginal people to feign silence, or flee from their own culture. Where Aboriginal students thus found enough voice to name issues of cultural safety and confront unsafety in the university environment, a context of greater partnership might be forged. Within such a context of experienced mutual respect, the conditions existed within which processes of education can be made flexible and negotiated toward the service of students and their communities.

CHAPTER 6: WEAVING THE CIRCLES TOGETHER

The purpose of the research questions discussed with participants was to identify:

- (1) the meaning of cultural safety to Aboriginal participants;
- (2) the relevance of cultural safety to individuals' Social Work education experiences;
- (3) the elements that contributed to or detracted from cultural safety;
- (4) the applicability of the concept of cultural safety to a Canadian B.S.W. program;
and
- (5) the guidance that cultural safety might have to offer for program development.

Reflection on these purposes provides the outline for the majority of this chapter. First will be discussion of the guidance that the concept of cultural safety might be able to offer social work education program development. This will be followed by discussion of the next steps for research of this concept and some concluding remarks.

Meaning

The first purpose of the research project was to determine how participants would define the concept of "cultural safety." As has been shown, participants did not define cultural safety in a dissecting, analytical way. Instead, they described cultural safety from the perspective of lived experience embedded within personal narratives. Whether such narrative approaches reflected a high-context Aboriginal worldview where intellectual content could not be separated from spiritual, social, emotional, or natural context, the response indicated that cultural safety was understood to be an encompassing experience. Cultural safety was not simply a mental construct disconnected from the lives of students. Based on their lives, the meaning of cultural safety was partially defined by its absence. In order for social work educators to

comprehend a positive definition of cultural safety, it is necessary to appreciate the fullness of its opposite.

Conversations with research participants and Advisory Group circles revealed the significant depth of issues of cultural unsafety faced by Aboriginal students entering the Bachelor of Social Work Program. Aboriginal people lived in two worlds (for the sake of clarity, there are at least two, characterized as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal). That fact, challenging enough on its own, was made more important in that many non-Aboriginal people may be not conscious of the duality.

Simone Weil (1909-1943), a contemporary and colleague of Simone de Beauvoir, pointed out how awareness of two such worlds can be so markedly different. Light passing through glass was the helpful metaphor she used to illustrate the awareness of differing worldviews. "Someone who does not see a pane of glass does not know they do not see it. Someone who, being placed differently, does see it, does not know the other does not see it" (cited in Young, 1990, p. 39). A person living in a world constrained by racism knows it as reality and might assume all others would know it also. However, a person differently placed, living in a world of privilege where one does not experience the constraints and injuries of racism, may be blithely unaware of that other world.

Non-Aboriginal people tend to be much less aware of these two worlds. Three tendencies that continue to cause pain to Indigenous people indicate that this is so. First, stereotyping frequently reveals an ignorance and carelessness toward the realities of a significantly diverse Aboriginal community. Second, suggesting that "racism is a

thing of the past” indicates that non-Aboriginal people do not see or appreciate the ongoing experiences of racism Aboriginal people still endure. Third, this blindness to Weil’s “pane of glass” is revealed in impatience with and hostility over continued requests for redress, whether it be over settlement of land-claims, apologies for injustice, processes for healing, or financial reparations.

In contrast to those people who enjoy privilege, Aboriginal people, though a diverse constituency, are similarly placed, and share the experience and awareness of discrimination. They tend to be more aware of these two worlds. Made identifiable by virtue of their identity (name, history, appearance, and address), they experience and know well the shadow of racism that one world casts upon the other.

The participants strongly indicated that they experience racism as a pervasive, pernicious, and persistent reality – a shadow over their lives. The pain of those racist experiences had been, and continued to be, fracturing of self, community, and culture. All the participants, graduates, non-graduates, and Advisory Group alike, described experiences of negative contact with racist individuals and systems. Whether participants struggled with poverty, residential school, and social services involvement, or whether they came from strong, well-to-do families who provided private school education, all reported experience of racist assaults. The depth or breadth of this experience signals that if one listens to the voices of the participants, cultural safety, at least by virtue of its rarity, is an important issue.

The consequences of racist experiences persist, not only by being repeated today, but by lasting long after each causal event:

Still very, very emotional time for, for . . . to hear these women and know that . . . we come out of, you know . . . hard, hard times and . . . sometimes we didn't even know that they were hard times, and then when you come to university and then you learn, "Ho! Geez! I really did have a shitty life!" (C.1, P.27, L.19-24)

A single act of racism has the effect of an assault or terrorist act. It makes the recipient of such unwanted attention wary of everyone who appears like the attacker. When it is impossible to know from outward appearance which non-Aboriginal person will be safe and which dangerous, the inescapable consequence is a heightened sense of vigilance. Such constant vigilance is a means of keeping the individual safe from such incidents, both within and beyond the educational milieu. While fight and flight responses are part of the repertoire of self-defensive measures, by far the most frequent response mentioned by participants was the feign response: going silent, still, and invisible. This response is so readily used that it may have contributed to the stereotype of the stoic, silent Native, as if silence were a genetic characteristic rather than a learned response of self-protection. Ironically, or perhaps tragically, this silence may be misunderstood by the non-Aboriginal culture and be interpreted as acquiescence or agreement with the dominant group perspectives.

An Aboriginal student living in these two worlds, under the shadow of racism, practicing constant vigilance, and tending toward silence, is functioning in cultural unsafety. The experience of education, as practiced by the dominant system, despite the promises of that system, has tended not to resolve those unsafe themes for many Aboriginal students, and has remained at least unsatisfying and problematic for them. The dominant culture education system has tended not to recognize the two-world

experience, the continuing shadow of racism, and the silence of Aboriginal students as persistent signals of an ongoing challenge.

The research conversations in this study, however, did not fixate on the negative. The participants revealed a significant resilience and available resources for another way of being that has inspired their efforts, despite the cultural danger with which they live. The spiritual underpinning of the Aboriginal holistic worldview, consciously or unconsciously, provided an alternative that not only affirmed the identity of the Aboriginal person but also invited the recognition and welcome of outsiders into the Aboriginal community. As much of this perspective of Aboriginal culture has been overlooked or misrepresented, the excitement expressed by research participants over the discovery of their own stories suggested that there well could be wider benefits from valuing that history within the educational setting for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike. The holistic spirituality of Aboriginal cultures, with its view of the sacredness of all beings, supported the view of valuing students as whole persons and not just attending to their minds. Once one appreciates that much of Aboriginal culture celebrates the high context of community, then one realizes further attention needs to be paid to a richer sense of relationships within the educational systems.

To phrase the meaning positively, then, cultural safety, in the Canadian context, is a context that takes seriously the reality of differing cultural realities (two-worlds), the depth of racism, and the ingrained patterns of feign, flight, and fight. It is a climate which requires three necessary conditions:

- Cultural safety for Aboriginal students requires, first, valuing of Aboriginal culture in the broadest terms. That is to say, the Aboriginal holistic perspective (spirituality), even if not fully shared by others, is at least respected as having something to offer, and attempts are made to understand and honour the implications it has for Aboriginal people within the educational system. One consequence of such valuing of Aboriginal perspectives in an educational environment is that students would be able to recognize themselves in the curricula (see it as “our story”) and find their own ways and community (“our people”) engaged in the processes.
- Second, consistent with valuing the sacredness of the whole, cultural safety requires that Aboriginal people be valued as whole persons and not merely as parts (bodies, in the healthcare field; minds, in the realm of education; workers, in the arena of the economy). Respect for the diverse issues that influence a student’s learning, within the person and that student’s community, would allow for a greater range of individual choices, supports, and partnerships.
- Third, consistent with the interconnectedness of all that is within that whole, relationships between the elements are seen as fundamental components and signals of cultural safety. Where that high context relationship exists, the need for significant levels of vigilance is reduced. Where there is an increase in the depth and rate of sharing, expression of Aboriginal voices could be expected to increase.

Cultural safety in general, therefore, is understood to be an environment that may or may not be pursued between people of different cultures, especially where there

is an imbalance of authority and vulnerability. Where it is pursued, the existence of cultural safety is discerned and determined by the recipient of service rather than the service provider. Fulcher's (1998) definition of cultural safety is broad enough to incorporate the three particular conditions of cultural safety for Aboriginal students: valuing Aboriginal (holistic) spirituality, valuing individuals as whole persons, valuing the priority of relationship. However, the experience of introducing the concept to the participants and Advisory Group suggests it would be helpful to indicate more explicitly that the determination of the existence of cultural safety is understood to be the prerogative of the recipient of the service. When such a level of self-determination can be recognized and supported by the educator or service provider, there may be enough respect of culture, person, and relationship for such safety to be present.

Therefore, Fulcher's (1998) definition of cultural safety might be rephrased this way [*italicized words added*]: "Cultural safety is that state of being, *defined by the more vulnerable person*, in which the [*individual*] knows *holistically* that her/his personal wellbeing, as well as social and cultural frames of reference, are acknowledged *and respected*, even if not fully understood; (p. 333), and those frames of reference are understood to include the place that a person learns to call "home," the community one learns to call "my people" and the particular history and socio-political identity one learns to call "my story" (p. 452); and furthermore, the *more vulnerable* individual is given active reason to feel hopeful that her/his *identity*, needs and those of her/his family members and kin will be accorded dignity and respect (p. 333); and, as Polascheck (1998) notes, such reason to feel hopeful is grounded in "the actions of

others which recognize, respect and nurture the unique cultural identity needs of the *more vulnerable person*, and safely meet their needs, expectations and rights” (p. 452).

With respect to refining this revised Aotearoa/New Zealand definition of cultural safety for the Canadian social work education environment, an appendix might be added that develops the concept of cultural safety within different regions of Canada. In the same way as the principles of the *Social Work Code of Ethics* are surrounded by commentary which adds context and place to formal definitions, the experience and wisdom of participants, and the emphasis of their themes could be added to help clarify the meaning of cultural safety in the Canadian Aboriginal context.

Cultural safety in the Canadian B.S.W. environment in Manitoba was described by the research participants specifically as the environment in which members of a more vulnerable culture, in this case the diverse cultures of Aboriginal people, generally represented by a holistic worldview found within Aboriginal spirituality, was felt to be respected by members of that community. Within this climate, effort was made to understand the pervasive, pernicious, and persistent experience of racism and its long-term consequences, so that the more vulnerable Aboriginal individual was actively and holistically valued. Such honouring relationships can help enable the negotiation of differences to be undertaken with hope.

Relevance of the Concept of Cultural Safety

The second purpose of the research was to assess whether participants considered cultural safety to have been a relevant factor in their educational experience in the ICSWP. As soon as the language of cultural safety was introduced to the

participants in the preliminary conversations, these former social work students started using the term. As we met again in two separate talking circles, discussion of that term was prominent in the conversation:

After you came to talk to me, I really thought more about cultural safety. . . . I think a lot of this has made an impact for me, in terms of how I am dealing with the people I work with; not only the immediate people I'm working with but the clients who come through our doors. (C. 2, P.2, L.45-47)

And I think that if we continue to talk, and to teach, and to educate our people, our young ones, I think it's going to help. I think bringing this kind of research . . . I think is really important. I think this needs to be . . . this needs, I haven't seen anything to this point about cultural safety to this extent, and I think it's really good. I think . . . that what comes out of here is going to help a lot of people, a lot of organizations hopefully. So I'm really happy to be part of this actually. (C. 2, P.3, L.8-14)

Participants affirmed that cultural safety was observable and appreciated in their experience of the ICSWP and contributed positively toward their education. Other factors also were affirmed as important, such as feeling a sense of personal safety within themselves and a sense of safety around them in their immediate family or community. Cultural safety was never described or experienced as a completed reality; participants sensed some institutional environments were moving toward cultural safety, and were either closer (the ICSWP) or further (other campuses) from that end. By their incorporation of terms, like "two-worlds," "constant vigilance," and their enthusiastic elaboration of the term "shadow of racism," participants also indicated the relevance of the themes that arose over their conversations.

It appears, then, that the concept of cultural safety is at least reasonably relevant in the Canadian context. It was a term that evoked discussion among the research participants that otherwise would not have occurred. It further invited a shift in focus,

so that ensuing conversations centred not on institutional requirements or piecemeal suggestions of cultural add-ons but rather on what might benefit students holistically. For some of the participants, the concept was very relevant. Assuming ICSWP to be a culturally safe environment, one participant declared, “You know, I could never have gone to university if it wasn’t for Inner City Social Work [*Program*]” (C.1, P.26, L. 39-40). For the rest, the concept was at least partially relevant, in that other issues of safety (within, around) were occasionally more pressing.

While the data cannot prove that cultural safety is generically relevant for the Faculty of Social Work, further study of that premise is certainly warranted. Even if a social work student is not Aboriginal, many clients of social workers in Canada will be Aboriginal, and awareness of the issues of cultural safety may shift the mind-sets of these non-Aboriginal helping professionals in a helpful way. It well may be that a greater benefit to cross-cultural relations may come from non-Aboriginals discovering this concept in theory and exploring it in practice.

Finally, the concept of intersecting inequalities suggests that this concept may be relevant for any university access program. This concept suggests that the probability of oppression is cumulative; the more characteristics a person has that tend to be discriminated against individually, the more frequently and intensely that person is likely to experience oppression. If the experience of being discriminated against is somewhat similar across other qualities that are discriminated against, such as being disabled, gay or lesbian, immigrant refugees, or poor, it may be possible to recognize

these service receivers as having the role of discerning the existence of “cultural” safety as well.

Elements Contributing to Cultural Safety

For students, the process of unearthing their own vestiges of the shadow of racism are challenging, if not painful. A warning to this effect, and a readiness to face such challenges, are advised:

When I came to school, I think it would have been more safe for me and my family and my children, if, if we would have known what we were really in for. 'Cause when I really learned about what I went through in my life, my children became unsafe. And I went to counselling right away [*snaps fingers*], you know, I went right to [*instructor*], and I just said, “I did this and I need help.” (C.1, P.27, L.42 – P. 28, L.4)

Unearthing such pain makes one feel vulnerable. “You are vulnerable. I mean, you open yourself up. It’s like opening a wound; you have to be there to make sure it doesn’t fester any more than it already has” (Advisory, P.6, L.24-31). “Social work naturally brings out the issues that haven’t been dealt with” (Advisory, P.22, L.25-26). Such unearthing can become outwardly explosive toward the people who produced it in the first place, or to the persons now trying to help remove it. It is not surprising that many persons prefer to move past it or bury it again.

Such avoidance strategies, however, do not create cultural safety but rather maintain two disconnected worlds. Cultural safety requires unearthing the poison from the soil in which it is buried, bringing it to the surface, and disposing of it as the hazardous material it is. Hence, to sufficiently attend to the education of Aboriginal social work practitioners requires a willingness of all participants to enter a deeper reality, to locate, name, and remove the toxins that have been buried unseen in the

students, and in the institutional representatives' ways of relating. Once this soil has been cleared, the development of cultural safety may proceed with the creation of a welcoming environment which nurtures community among all participants. In such an environment, academy and community can build partnerships to expand accurate cultural knowledge, encourage positive cultural identity, and recognize and empower the diverse manifestations of culture which the people are free to choose.

Applicability in a Canadian B.S.W. Education Environment

The utility (purpose #2) of the Aotearoa/New Zealand concept of cultural safety for a Canadian B.S.W. program, that educates Aboriginal and other students, was demonstrated in the concept's capacity to generate meaningful recommendations to improve social work education and practice. Here applicability of the concept refers to the usage of the findings in the same context. The themes of cultural safety and unsafety that emerged from the research conversations suggested several practical steps which may enhance social work education environments. Specifically, a receptive response begins with stretching the mind-set of faculty councils and moves to issues of faculty hiring. There are implications for non-academic supports from schedules, funding, counselling supports, and class sizes. Curricula revisions that include Aboriginal perspectives are needed. Students also participate in the creation of cultural safety through their participation in student selection, intake, and development of expectations.

Faculty Councils. Cultural safety in social work education, as defined by the participants, involves a perspective of collaboration, community, and relationships,

rather than the pursuit of individual accomplishments on a career trajectory toward tenure and promotion. However, the shift to the condition of cultural safety is well within the values and ethics and traditions of the social work profession. The roots of social work lie deep in the settlement house movement, in the fertile soils of justice, education, and community. Social work faculty understand and teach community building, equality, respect of others, nonjudgmental relations, collaboration, open communication, mediating differences, and engagement with issues, in short, a commitment in action to move toward a safer and healthier community. As faculty members see themselves as role models in the practice of research, teaching, and practice, this shift to a holistic sense of cultural safety is within reach.

Faculty support could promote greater cultural safety through the encouragement of all faculty members to study the traditional worldview of Aboriginal people. This could take the form of collaboratively developing culture camps, as is done in Aotearoa/New Zealand by Maori Elders, to enable non-Indigenous people to learn from Aboriginal leaders. Discussion of the difference between high and low context cultures would figure prominently in that exploration. Faculty Councils also could exhibit the leadership necessary to attract significant participation from Aboriginal communities to develop partnerships in course design. Relationships with various Indigenous communities could help to develop responses to various cross-cultural issues. An Elder advisory group well could assist in the development of course curricula or in finding ways to attract Aboriginal students. Such a group could help guide an instructor or the program director on “what is safe or unsafe” so that such

processes may be signalled in course outlines. Further, when relationships exist in advance, Aboriginal advisors may help other instructors negotiate multicultural environments where safety for one student seems like unsafety for another student.

Faculty Councils also could promote awareness of particular issues with respect to Aboriginal students. For example, the Faculty Councils could promote awareness of issues of voice and silencing, where behaviours considered benign or irrelevant in one culture could have quite unpredictable impacts in another. A faculty member speaking loudly enough to be heard at the back of a large room unwittingly may stimulate a response, with unintended results such as the psychological withdrawal of a student, who then could not “hear” at all. Faculty members may develop increased responsiveness to classroom situations that seem unusual, such as students “going away” or “going silent.” Classroom processes may be developed and announced so that students, recognizing such triggers, have forewarning to prepare or protect themselves, and permission to seek counselling or Elder assistance to attend to these effects.

Faculty Members. Professors in access social work programs must be not merely educators in this setting; they also must practice social work’s healing and helping arts. The themes arising from conversations and circles indicate that hiring appropriate faculty and staff is essential if the toxins of racism are to be unearthed and the environment of cultural safety to be deepened. Hiring committees, therefore, might look for safe-making qualities in new staff if cultural safety is to be well-founded. To repeat Weil’s language, the right faculty members are those differently placed who are able to see the pane of glass and know that others do not see it (as cited in Young,

1990). Non-Aboriginal faculty frequently may be placed so as not to notice the effect of the shadow of racism. This does not mean that only persons who are Aboriginal should be hired, but certainly having that ability to see the effects of colonization and racism, and the passion to act, must be present if cultural safety is to be pursued.

To be sure, part of this awareness is intellectual: “And lots of people don’t understand that. A lot of people don’t have that awareness of that historical” (T.1, P.3, L.6-7). Not to have even this awareness contributes to further cultural unsafety:

I feel safe in my workplace, but when I have a new staff that comes in and talks with me, or somebody that’s new in the agency and asking about Aboriginal this and Aboriginal that, and I just said, “You know, you graduated from social work University of Manitoba last year?” . . . if you are going to be working in Winnipeg, we are a growing population, we do not want to be misunderstood no more. . . . I do feel unsafe when I have to work with somebody that doesn’t know too much about who they’re working with. That’s a . . . that’s a major concern on my, in my workplace. (C.1, P.20, L.16)

The observation that those most affected by cultural unsafety or danger are best able to point out the problem has two further implications. It invites those with privilege in the teaching role to remain open to the possibility of blind spots and to invite dialogue which builds both relationship and community. It also suggests that those with dominant culture privilege who seek to move toward greater cultural safety must look to those affected by racism for perspective on cultural safety, whether the guidance come from Aboriginal students, faculty, or community. As one prepares to explore any matter directly connected to Aboriginal experience, the instructor does well to enlist partners who may bring such advice to the class planning and presentation process.

With respect to faculty members at the hiring stage, given the importance of lengthy relationship and community awareness to the sense of cultural safety, it may be that continuity of staff needs to be valued. At ICSWP, both the program director and office manager have been involved over 25 years, and at least four other staff have been present over fifteen years.

Having recognized the possibility of the echoes of racism in social work education, staff who pursue cultural safety would be open to creating supportive environments. Such faculty would demonstrate awareness of the dynamic of going silent and would show the capacity to engage with those who are constantly vigilant and cautious. Research participants said they hoped such staff would:

give the student the, I guess, the time and, you know, to always make sure . . . you might see others in the group that are . . . that are . . . that are very . . . more expressive like that [RESEARCHER: MORE TALKATIVE] . . . Yeah! And just to . . . balance that out a little bit . . . a little more . . . to invite participation. (T.3, P.4, L.40-49)

The social work educator therefore must recognize that Aboriginal students' silence in a classroom does not mean indifference on the part of the students, agreement with the course content, or acquiescence with the instructor's positions. The silence may simply mean holding still, so as not to be noticed, not to come under suspicion, and not to become a target:

Because you are immediately put back into that situation where you are needing to protect yourself. I never spoke up in class . . . with faculty nearby. I didn't dare raise my voice. People would look at me . . . because they do. They look at you and when people look at you, something's wrong, or something. (Advisory, P.1, L.37-38)

The social work educator also must remember that silence and non-reaction are not qualities of the race; Aboriginal people know that these are learned behaviours. “One of the things I had to learn the hard way was not to react to racism” (C.1, P.21, L. 9). Because the learning came “the hard way,” the vigilance goes deep, and even as graduates of the ICSW Program, participants were not all ready to speak up against racism. However, as quoted above, this lesson was one that served the wishes of the dominant system for acceptance of the given order:

They’ve been so acclimatized to the system, and the health or in the judicial system, you see it all over the place . . . they just automatically follow the rules, do what they are told, and if something happens to them . . . they are socialized to be silent as Aboriginal people. (T.10, P.1, L.32-36)

Such staff would recognize and actively intervene in instances of cultural unsafety:

And I really liked the fact that if someone got off topic, like if someone was actually racist in the classroom, then they’d be called on it, in a good way . . . no one was fighting. It was just, said like, “Okay, now that’s not . . . that’s kind of . . . that’s going against this person,” or, you know. It was a good way of learning. (C.1, P.31, L.28-35)

Such faculty would show the capacity to be active and effective listeners, for cultural safety is about listening to, checking in with, not intimidating, and of letting go of control. This helps reverse the previous inability of larger institutions to accommodate the values and practices of a high context worldview. This is to enter a dialogue of respect.

Culturally safe-making staff would be prepared for complexity. They would realize and assume diversity and complexity rather than homogeneity among Aboriginal people. They would be prepared to work among racially diverse faculty and staff. Faculty members have to be able to recognize the complexity of support required.

Sensitivity and a practice of empowerment are needed to build up students continually: “So either you are going to be able to work with them and acknowledge support, or you are going to make them feel like damaged goods and let go” (Advisory, P.21, L.33-36). Lack of recognition of “street” behaviour as adaptation and survival skills can lead to treating such students in a condescending way, rather than respecting their resilience. This may reflect unexamined assumptions related to class.

Culturally safe-making staff must have a significant capacity for relationship that exceeds the limits of professional courtesy. There must be thorough-going warmth that exceeds what is necessary to pursue one’s own career, and empower the students. “Maybe the people like being cold, unreceptive, no humour . . . just straight by the book . . . no laughter, whatever . . . like I wouldn’t feel like approaching that person, or asking that person especially for help” (T.2, P.7, L.14-16).

Safe-making faculty must have an empowerment perspective, to believe in the capacity of able students, even when the students lack this confidence:

“I want . . . like to take a year off,” and her answer to me was “No.” She looked at me straight and said, “No.” And I just kind of like . . . [*laughs*] . . . “wait a minute you’re supposed to support me, and . . . like I’m just asking for a year off . . . like I just need some . . .” But she said, “No.” And she said, “I would not approve it.” She just looked at me and she said, “You can do it.” And I walked out of there . . . like I said, I didn’t feel defeated . . . didn’t feel like I wasn’t supported . . . it to me it was still feeling . . . it was a vote of confidence. And that was something that I always felt, like every time when I was in WEC, whether it was with other students, with instructors, there was always a vote of confidence. (T.9, P.3, L.16-25)

These faculty members must value the individual students, the development of long term relationships, and the culture of Aboriginal groups, that all may be strengthened.

“But you know, it was like, it was such a feeling to know that you were wanted, that

you were valued” (C.1, P.17, L.7-8). As Aboriginal culture and students are valued as whole persons, capacity for learning and change in those students grows:

I think the one point you made around strengthening ethnicity, as part of the process, I think that’s really an important part, really a strong element in terms of moving towards cultural safety in terms of being safe within an environment. . . . If you have a solid foundation, if you know who you are, you know, it doesn’t matter, you get smacked around . . . It doesn’t mean they still don’t experience, you know, some of that doubting or issues around esteem, or, you know, but they’re not as destructive, I think, to whomever they might have been at another point in time. (Advisory, P.19, L.19-35)

Finally, safe-making staff will exhibit a capacity for patience. To overcome the shadow and to create a culture of safety is not going to be achieved in a day or in a single lifetime. “I doubt, very much we’re going to get there in my lifetime, I can say that, because the progress that is being made isn’t happening fast enough” (C. 2, P.1, L.32-34). Cultural safety is a long process of change:

The whole thing about learning about colonization, and the Indian Act, and racism and stereotyping. What that did to our people, and how it impacted me personally. And it’s something you can only take a little bit at a time. It’s a growth. But it has to be. One, as much as you can take at one particular time, I’m still working on it. I’m still working on it . . . And I think that’s what WEC helps us to do. It helps to develop that identity, and strengthen that, or which ever part of . . . that they want. Whether it’s Christianity, traditional, or whatever, who they are. So you feel okay for the first time. (Advisory, P.13, L.37- P. 14, L.10)

Non-academic Supports. Such long-term work of creating a culturally safe environment demands more than safe-making faculty. Aboriginal students, both from the sense of vigilance and holistic worldview, look for evidence of “home” in non-academic realities as well. They look for someone who can relate to them (Aboriginal instructors, Aboriginal people), for some representation of self (symbols of culture), for signs that the school is a safe enough place.

In an ecology of safety, even the bureaucratic necessities of the institution can serve the purpose of giving voice. The application requirement of writing one's own autobiography for some was consciousness-raising, and helped them to reflect on their own experiences and identity. "I applied three times and it really helped. I don't know I just felt like I could really write. It helped me to write out those things. . . . Yeah, it helped me to understand myself" (T.12, P.6, L.37-41). Another participant noted the same perception:

It was a must, and . . . right away this program was already making me think, even before you were accepted into it . . . because you were asked to submit an autobiography before you could even get in. . . . When I was writing it down, I was rereading it, I thought, "Holy cow! You know . . . you went through all of this and you are still here." You know, and . . . I guess I don't really see the big picture of it until I put on paper . . . I guess it's not really a big thing until I put it down and I see what I've done, and then I think, "I do all of that!" (T.11, P.6, L.2-5, 18-27)

Ensuring the presence of other members of Aboriginal communities in selection panels honours the leadership of Aboriginal people and signals a relationship of respect.

Another non-academic support that was frequently referenced was the availability of a counsellor. "Although you may feel weak, discouraged at times, there's someone there to help you through that, whether it's emotionally or spiritually, there's always someone there to kind of help you through the hard times" (T.2, P.1, L.41-44). Aboriginal Elders available to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal faculty and students alike, would be appreciated. Their task would be to help unearth the scarring vestiges of residential schools and negative educational and social services experiences, and to replace embedded racism and its effects with an Aboriginal-affirming presence, so

people may be more ready to be themselves, proud of their culture, and able to deal with the remnants of racism:

I went to [*name*] and yourself just for guidance . . . 'cause . . . you know, like home life . . . or my parents . . . or . . . just struggling personally. So it helped very much . . . Yeah, it was very much honoured. And . . . I didn't expect to know everything or to . . . I guess somewhat normalized because everyone there everyone at the Centre had children and spouses and life goes on despite whether they're a student or not a student. (T.2, P.7, L.53-55 – P.8, L. 4-7)

Some of the counsellors available within the culturally safe program would be social work faculty who already would be known to the community. These counsellors can be watched and assessed, over time, by those students who are maintaining vigilance and seeking relationship:

I felt totally comfortable with [*instructor*]. She was very good to me. I've a lot of respect for her. And I think having her, as well, you know, that helped in time. Because she's . . . she's been through that program she knows what it's like and I felt a lot of support from her. And any time I needed to talk, her door was always open, whenever she was there . . . and I phoned her a few times for guidance and she was always there, so that helped. (T.2, P.6, L.1-9)

Where this service is not provided, it is a burden for the student to find appropriate assistance. It might feel like one person against an institution. "But our students on campus don't have it [*support*]. Basically they have to deal with it on their own" (Advisory, P.22, L.32-34). The issues of need thus could be made to seem matters of individual inadequacy or incompetence, rather than struggles with the collisions of cultures:

And if you were to compare that to an Aboriginal student's experience on campus, where they don't have any of those supports, unless they find themselves their own counsellor, and so they are dealing not only with identity issues, they are dealing with all those other issues, the impact of that growing up, and they are doing it on their own. (Advisory, P.22, L.11-17)

As mentioned above, the non-academic support of spiritual practices, inclusive of many faiths, was appreciated and would be welcomed as evidence of the effort toward safety-making. Ceremonies like smudging and sharing circles would be readily available. This presence maintains the messages of the connection of all things, validates the wholeness of being in each student and staff person, encourages balance, and promotes the learning of Aboriginal cultural elements:

Well, we had some of those supports when I was back at universi[ty] . . . at WEC then. But there could be more of that, I think, and whether it's people feel safe . . . safe enough to get into healing circles and be able to do the smudge, and . . . be able to do some of that sharing, this is where I come from. (C.1, P. 25, L.35-40)

Curricula. The valuing of Aboriginal identity involves exposure to the history, research, and experience of Aboriginal people. Including a truthful awareness of Aboriginal culture in multiple parts of the curriculum would contribute further to safety-making:

I think the more we try to incorporate Aboriginal culture and beliefs wherever we can and, you know, helping people understand that, then, well yeah, I think it's positive! We're still going forward, and moving forward, without erasing the past, but learning from it, and building on that. (C.1, P.11, L.26-32)

Such curriculum would help to validate and honour the individual:

I didn't always share what I could have shared. But, I definitely learned a lot . . . I definitely, like my own personal history . . . that a lot of that was validated for me. I remember reading a book called . . . *Prison of Grass* [Adams, 1989]. And I thought, "Oh, my god. Like . . . This is what happened here in, on the prairies . . . this is what for me some of what happened in my own family history." . . . And . . . it was very . . . powerful . . . very powerful learning for me. (C.1, P. 24, L.26-36)

The effect of such an honouring would be to build up pride in Aboriginal culture:

Every day I just walked a little bit straighter, every day in that course, 'cause I thought, "Wow, I never knew any of this stuff, this is so great!" And I was thinking more proud . . . (C.1, P. 31, L.10-13) . . . *The Dispossessed*. [Another participant: Yeah. So that book made an impact on me, so several things like that made an impact on me, and just changed me for ever, so it's powerful . . . there needs to be more of that]. (C.1, P.31, L 21-24)

The opportunity for Aboriginal content may have been limited to a single course on Aboriginal perspectives. Additional courses that relate directly to Aboriginal experience within the various social service systems and the justice system were suggested by participants. Courses that explore the history of land claims and treaty rights also were seen as empowering and needed. In a cultural safety-pursuing environment students carry an emotional burden, as well as garner many of the benefits. Discovering one's own culture through that education could be part of a process of healing:

What made a difference was *education* [*emphasis in original*]. The educational piece, in terms of Aboriginal perspective . . . that taught me a lot . . . Aboriginal Perspectives was a lot of pain . . . it was very painful for me . . . it was very . . . the pain that I'm talking about is . . . how, how badly Aboriginal people are treated . . . and how it continues to be that way . . . And, and it's just so big . . . how do you protect yourself . . . you know, and it's . . . through Aboriginal Perspectives, Feminist Perspectives . . . all of what I learned in education, through the education . . . helped to piece me together in way that it's not mine anymore . . . the shame isn't mine. And it helped me let go of that and be okay with who I am. Yes, I'm an Aboriginal person; these are the things that are happening out there. These are the things that are continuing to happen out there. (T.7, P.4, L.30-41)

Student Intake. Several participants mentioned the experience of feeling lost in the larger university campus. Most of them talked about how "big" main campus was compared to the ICSWP. It seemed that the issue was one of feeling isolated and different amid a sea of "others." It seems that the presence of a significant body of

Aboriginal people studying together helps to create the sense of community and affirms the normalcy of Aboriginal identity. Consequently, the size and composition of a cohort intake is another locus for safe-making decisions which faculties might well address.

At the ICSWP, where at least 50% of the students are Aboriginal, students recognize themselves to be part of the majority, part of a community and much less “lost.” While the optimum size of each intake/community was not identified, one might expect that the smaller cohorts allow for more meaningful relationship and community than would larger cohorts.

Guidance for Program Development

The effects of the shadow of racism are so significant that the skill set required in social work education to attend to those effects is more than academic. Understood in this way, social work education with Aboriginal students, at least with the present generation, is more properly described as practice than theory. It is the care of the whole person. It is actively listening and reaching for feelings. It is healing of social hurts. It is empowerment, advocacy, and consciousness-raising. When there is well-being in the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of an individual, the intellectual capacity to learn is enhanced.

So long as the shadow of racism continues to generate a constant vigilance, faculty will be tested again and again; readiness for such testing might well be another quality to be sought in the hiring of safe-making instructors. If staff members are non-Aboriginal, they will be tested repeatedly to see if they are indeed safe (non-racist), willing to attend to pain, and risk association and alliance with Aboriginal people. Staff

persons will be tested to see if there is integrity in relationship. They will be watched to determine whether they function from within relationship or from a sense of distance, the latter not being a foundation for a relationship of respect:

“When you see an Indian person,” I said to them, “say thanks in your heart.” You don’t have to grovel! You know what I mean. Don’t grovel and . . . but just in your heart, their heart will know it. (T.12, P.4, L.12-14)

If the faculty members are Aboriginal, they will be tested again and again to evaluate their capacity as role models. Such staff members will be looked to as important mentors. “Aboriginal people in that setting . . . whether it’s in the teaching or in even within administration, I’d want to make sure there were those role models” (T.3, P.4, L.14). They will be expected to offer relationship: “I have, we have an Elder in the building here, and she’s taught me a lot. And basically, just having a relationship with . . . with my own people, with my family” (T.1, P.10, L.11-13). A transparency of relationship will be expected so that students may identify with their role model: “Most of us have gone through the experiences that you have gone through as a student. So we can identify with that. And we’re not afraid to admit that. We’re not afraid to talk about that” (Advisory, P.7, L.23-27). With appropriate boundaries, rather than distancing barriers, important similarities and differences of experience may be explored:

So, by having staff who can attend to those things, and know that those things are going to happen, then it does allow them. It really does, it really does strengthen them and does allow for that vulnerability. [*Another participant: That’s right. That’s where your strength comes, that’s where your healing comes from, right? Open that wound, and understand why you are still that way. . . . The more we do that the stronger we become. The more solid we become, you know . . . our foundation becomes much stronger.*] (Advisory, P.20 L.23 – P.21, L. 3)

When you are on the [*main campus*] there, people are not talking about being abused or growing up in an alcoholic home, or being fostered, or . . . you know, most people there are not talking about that. Everything about who they are is private and personal. (Advisory, P.7, L.29-34)

As McIntosh (1988) says, we need to face, acknowledge (be honest about), and “unpack the backpack of privilege.” With such recognition, faculty members may begin to stand down from such privilege more frequently than is now customary. Hence, the first guidance for pursuing cultural safety is to be prepared to be evaluated.

Difficult questions will continue to arise within the academic setting: What are the issues of standards and processes that are not negotiable in university social work courses that might be challenged as conflicting with Aboriginal culture? What flexibility can be introduced into course outlines to allow for student challenges, without opening the process to appeal? How does a faculty member identify what changes should be accepted? What are the possibilities of conflicting claims in the same class? How does the faculty member actively ensure the sense of cultural safety in the classroom if one group of students feels culturally unsafe by virtue of the practices another group feels are essential to cultural safety? How can such negotiations be undertaken without derailing course curricula?

The process of negotiating curriculum changes is a demanding, energy - consuming experience. It might be decided to have periods of time in which that negotiation could be made during the first week and again at mid-term. Clearly there is a need for a protocol that acknowledges the issue, invites class discussion, and facilitates the involvement of community representatives. Further, there needs to be

some agreement on overarching principles of cultural safety, such as human rights, to which differing cultures might subscribe.

Next Steps for Research

This research has identified broad strokes of cultural unsafety and safety in the parallel sets of themes: “two worlds,” “constant vigilance,” and “shadow of racism,” on the one hand, and “valuing whole individuals,” “genuine relationships,” and “the affirming of Aboriginal (holistic) spirituality” on the other. The dynamic of silencing and finding voice as measures of cultural unsafety and safety, respectively, were reaffirmed. The importance of negotiating in relationships of mutual respect was identified.

There is a variety of learning from this study that could guide future research. First, the talking circles were extremely important in generating depth of discussion. It was there that the more focused and powerful reflection on the subject was relayed. While the assessment was not asked directly, it seems that the presence of similar others and the repeated participation was empowering, in that it gave stronger voice to the issues of importance to the participants.

Second, a larger cohort of non-graduating participants would have allowed for the possibility of a talking circle with this group. While the conversations did not seem to indicate cultural safety was the cause of non-completion, the depth of conversation within a circle group might well probe this area more deeply.

Third, a number of specific process questions may be asked in future studies that give more direction to culturally safe practice of social work education with

Aboriginal students: Given a limited time to study social work foundations, how might more Aboriginal perspectives be worked into the curriculum? How important is it to have an in-house counsellor? Is use of a cohort model optimum? Is it preferred that a majority of the year group identify themselves as Aboriginal? What proportion of Aboriginal students in a class is necessary to give a sense of community?

Fourth, examining the concept of cultural safety among other student groups would be useful. The study might be repeated with other graduates of the ICSWP to further explore the trustworthiness of the data. The study might be repeated with students participating in the Aboriginal Child Welfare Initiative (ACWI) stream as opposed to the ICSWP stream. The ACWI students are in cohorts where all students self-define as Aboriginal. Thus, this experience may give insight into issues of diversity within the Aboriginal community and the importance of being in the majority of students. It would be valuable to talk to other non-Aboriginal students from the ICSW Program to assess their understanding of cultural safety from another perspective along the disadvantage/privilege spectrum. This might include people of colour, immigrants to Canada, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, two-spirited, or transgendered students, or women who have experienced issues of poverty and violence.

Fifth, repeating the study with a different researcher would provide opportunity to examine the influence of the current researcher. This might be conducted by an Aboriginal researcher, to attempt to reduce the race biases, and secondly by a non-ICSWP researcher, to assess the importance of relationship versus dual role bias.

Conclusion

Many of the themes that were discovered in the research conversations already can be found in the research literature. Though the language used may have been different, the notions of spirituality, relationship, racism, and silencing all have been noted previously. Within a partializing worldview or mind-set, it is possible to be exposed to all of these components, and to see them only as separate realities, and not to appreciate that these are all linked together. The value of the concept of cultural safety is that it serves as an organizing principle which binds the positive and negative themes together in the lived experience of Aboriginal students. When one observes any of the six themes operating in a situation, one may expect that the issue of cultural safety is affecting someone in that situation. If another is silenced, one might ask: "Is this person feeling unsafe?" If a person complains of being stereotyped, of not being valued as a whole person, the issue is not a minor one of being slighted, but that something essential to the existence of their identity is at risk.

Secondly, cultural safety is a term that has a McLuhan-esque (1964) quality, where the medium is the message. Cultural safety is simultaneously a beginning point, process, and goal. The first step of the process is consistent with the end and with the process of getting there. The first step toward cultural safety is to ask the Aboriginal students what they believe it is, and to create opportunities for them to talk about their sense of what it is. Immediately, such an inquiry has the benefit of transferring a measure of authority from the teacher to the student. With that authority, the student is

in a stronger position to negotiate different ways of relating that actually increase the sense of safety.

Such a partnership requires a continuing commitment to maintain that climate. Where such a culture of safety prevails, the effect of respecting both Aboriginal culture and individual is that participants begin to heal, begin to strengthen their own voice and begin to use it. If silence is one of the primary responses to the pervasive, pernicious, and persistent shadow of racism, it should not be surprising that participants defined cultural safety as the freedom to speak one's mind, decide for oneself, and act accordingly.

ENDNOTES

¹ References to transcripts are abbreviated according to the following pattern – “T” indicates the transcript and therefore the participant; “P” indicates the page of the transcript on which the comments exist; and “L” indicates the lines on that page where the particular sentences may be found. See also the List of Abbreviations.

² In this dissertation, I use the term Indigenous to speak about the first people in the broadest context. That said, the Advisory Group indicated that “Aboriginal” is the more commonly used term in Manitoba. Hence, in this dissertation the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are used interchangeably as inclusive of all the various subsets of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada, regardless of legal status as defined by *The Indian Act*. Many different conventions are assumed across Canada and North America; as a consequence authors quoted in this dissertation may use these terms differently.

Where an individual or group is known to come from a particular First Nation (or, according to American influenced language: tribal affiliation), my Advisory group suggested that the person or group be acknowledged by that identity, for example, as Cree, Dene, or Anishanabe. As this information was rarely available, such designations are infrequently used in this work.

Finally, I use the singular “people” to refer to Aboriginal individuals or groups, where the context has more to do with personal identities. I use the plural “peoples” in contexts that refer to diverse political identities of Aboriginal individuals or groups.

³ To the first inhabitants of the country now known as New Zealand, the land is called Aotearoa; therefore out of respect for the Maori tradition, I will use both when referring to this country. The exception is direct quotations from others.

⁴ On May 29, 2007, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) became the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), or the Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (ACFTS) in order to reflect a more inclusive Association. CASSW is used in this dissertation when referring to documents or issues that arose before the organization name change. CASWE is used when referring to publications or issues arising after May 2007.

⁵ The concept of Aboriginal education for social work practice has a variety of meanings and is variously defined by Aboriginal scholars from different Aboriginal and Métis traditions. Neither the presence of an Aboriginal social work instructor nor a room of Aboriginal social work students necessarily signals that Aboriginal social work education is occurring.

⁶ The concept of “other” derives from the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1972).

⁷ The column discussing the report appeared in the *Montreal Star*, November 15, 1907, and *Saturday Night* on November 23, 1907. The report was fully titled Report on the Indians of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories [Bryce report] (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1907). This material was quoted in footnote 162 NAC RG10, volume 4037, file 317021, MR C 10177, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Volume 1 - Looking Forward Looking Back, Part Two - False Assumptions and a Failed Relationship, Chapter 10 - Residential Schools, Section 2 - Systemic Neglect: Administrative and Financial Realities. It is available at www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg30_e.html).

⁸ Reference to “the four aspects” refers to the philosophy of the Medicine Wheel, which links identity and spirituality to four directions and four dimensions of human existence – emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. For many Aboriginal people, the Medicine Wheel is a significant life-organizing construct that shapes their worldview, and is a natural reference to the balance necessary to a sense of safety. This construct is well described in *The Sacred Tree* by Bopp et al. (1985). See Figure 1, for one illustration of the Medicine Wheel.

⁹ This makes sense from the point of view of a high context culture – where context is essential to meaning. Meaning is interwoven in narrative; it is not “hard-wired” into each term. Consequently, in a high context culture such as an Aboriginal community, answers to questions are not direct. One tends to describe or speak around a subject rather than defining it. Hence, much of the topic language is interwoven together.

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FIGURE 1:
MEDICINE WHEEL

This illustration of a Medicine Wheel was created for this dissertation to illustrate both the concept of the Medicine Wheel and the surrounding shadow of racism. It is derived from *The Sacred Tree*, by the Four Worlds Development Project, with input from Aboriginal Advisory Group members. Many variations of the Medicine Wheel exist. Colours appear in different orders. Categories within each quadrant may vary or be absent entirely. An Aboriginal colleague, Vern Morrisette, confirmed the following arrangement, saying:

I acquiesce to Eddie Benton Benai and to the more general use of the colours you mention. Yellow-east; red-south; black-west; and white-north. Eddie refers to these in the context of the four colours of man (humans) and I can concur here. However, the colours may vary depending upon the teaching and usage. These same colours and the configuration are used for the teaching of the life cycle for example. Some Cree people use Blue in the western doorway and its meaning is consistent with the teachings of the four colours of humans and also relates to the inward journey or introspection. (Personal communication, Dec 7, 2007)



**FIGURE 2:
SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT PAGE**

Page # of transcript	Participant Number:	Date of Conversation	Date of participant check-off / approval
<i>Line no.</i>	<i>Transcribed statements; 1 statement per space below</i>	<i>Concepts, categories, themes</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			

Sample footer:
Participant No. _____ **Page** __ **of** __ **total pages** _____ **Interview Date** _____

APPENDIX A:
LETTER OF APPROVAL ICEHR



Memorial

University of Newfoundland

Office of Research

February 10, 2006

ICEHR No. 2005/06-040-SW

Ms. Eveline Milliken
 School of Social Work
 Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Ms. Milliken:

Thank you for your submission to the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) entitled "*Towards cultural safety: an exploration of the concept for social work education with Canadian Aboriginal peoples*". The ICEHR is appreciative of the efforts of researchers in attending to ethics in research.

The Committee has reviewed the proposal and we agree that the proposed project is consistent with the guidelines of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS). Full approval is granted for one year from the date of this letter.

If you intend to make changes during the course of the project which may give rise to ethical concerns, please forward a description of these changes to ICEHR for consideration.

If you have any questions concerning this review you may contact Dr. Catherine Penney at cathpenn@plav.psych.mun.ca. We wish you success with your research.

The TCPS requires that you submit an annual status report to ICEHR on your project, should the research carry on beyond February 2007. Also, to comply with the TCPS, please notify ICEHR upon completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

T. Seifert, Ph.D.
 Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
 Ethics in Human Research

TS/en

cc: Dr. C. Penney
 Supervisor

APPENDIX B:
CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

This consent form should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation should involve. A copy of this form will be left with you for your records and reference. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included, feel free to ask.

Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand this and the accompanying information.

- The purpose of the research is to better understand what graduates and non-graduating students from the ICSWP might mean by the concept of cultural safety in social work education and the relevance of that concept.
This conversation will be about 1.5 hours long and will be tape-recorded with your permission.
Do you agree to allow me to audiotape our conversation. ___ Yes ___ No.
- Your identity and responses will be kept confidential and the tapes will be destroyed after the study is completed
 - I will make every effort to protect your privacy. I will not use your name in any of the information obtained from this study or in any of the research reports.
 - The information from this interview may be published but without names on it.
 - The identifying information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- A copy of the findings from this study will be made available to you.
- If you feel the need to debrief after our conversation, I will arrange (at no cost to you) for a meeting with an Aboriginal Social Worker.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read, understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this study, and that you agree to be a participant. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and may refuse to answer any question. Feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

<p>Researcher: Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Assistant Professor, ICSWP 15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB</p>	<p>Office: 668-8160 ext. 32 Home: 452-9899 Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca</p>
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Supervisor: Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. Professor & Department Head
North Carolina State University Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work)
Department of Social Work Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office)
CB# 7639, Raleigh FAX: (919) 515-4403
North Carolina, USA 27695-7639 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Ken Barter, Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office)
School of Social Work, FAX: (709) 737-7701
Memorial University E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca
St. John's, NL,
A1C 5S7

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C:**TRANSCRIPT APPROVAL FORM**

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

I have read the transcript of the conversation I had with Eveline Milliken on ____/05.
I agree that its content is an accurate representation of my comments

Where I believe the transcript was inaccurate after reviewing the tape, corrections were made in writing upon the transcript form and initialed by me.

I give permission to use this material for the research study under conditions of individual confidentiality to which I previously agreed. I understand that my name will not appear in any presentation or reports.

Participant _____ Date: _____

Researcher: Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Office: 668-8160 ext. 32
Assistant Professor, ICSWP Home: 452-9899
15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. Professor & Department Head
North Carolina State University Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work)
Department of Social Work Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office)
CB# 7639, Raleigh FAX: (919) 515-4403
North Carolina, USA 27695-7639 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Ken Barter, Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office)
School of Social Work, FAX: (709) 737-7701
Memorial University E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca
St. John's, NL,
A1C 5S7

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND SUB-QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer three questions:

- A. What might you mean by the phrase “cultural safety”?
- B. In what, if any, ways does the concept of cultural safety apply to a Canadian Bachelor of Social Work program that educates Aboriginal students and students of other backgrounds?
- C. How can cultural safety guide the development of social work education programs for Aboriginal students and students of other backgrounds?

To invite data responding to those three questions, five basic queries will be offered to participants in advance and will be asked at their interviews.

A series of follow-up questions to probe for extra detail is provided below for each query:

1. When you hear the term “cultural safety,” what does this concept mean to you?
How would you define cultural safety?
What do those words draw out from you?
What thoughts / ideas / pictures come to mind?
2. What role did cultural safety play in your educational experience at the ICSWP?
While you were at the ICSWP, was cultural safety important or unimportant?
What factors at the ICSWP contributed to or detracted from that sense of cultural safety?
What sorts of things were more important and less important? (question that gets at gradations of safety, priorities) .
Was the ICSWP a safe place to acknowledge your culture? Was your culture respected?
3. How did you know you were safe?
What would be some examples of how you experienced cultural safety, or of not being culturally safe at the ICSWP?
When you felt culturally safe or unsafe, what kinds of things were going on?
What was it about the situation that contributed to you feeling cultural safe?
What was present or absent?
4. I’ve asked you to think about what it was like at the time. As you think about it now, are there things that you think would have helped you to feel more culturally safe (not only then, but subsequent reflection; make a contribution for present & future)?

In order to attend to the possibility of responses being skewed by “social desirability” influence – the experience that people will tell you what they think

you want to hear - other questions are needed, so participants may externalize negative comments by attributing them to others.

5. What do you think other Aboriginal graduates might say about their sense of cultural safety at the ICSWP?

What would have to be there at the ICSW Program for you to feel culturally safe?
Are these issues specific to (Aboriginal) culture or relevant to persons (across cultures?)

What would be symbols of your culture that would be important for you to see or experience at the ICSWP?

APPENDIX E:
LETTER TO DIRECTOR

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

Date

Dear ICSWP Director:

As follow up to our recent conversation, please find enclosed a copy of the research proposal entitled "*Toward Safety*" for your review. Thank you for your support of this study and for your participation in the project.

The completion and defense of this study and dissertation will satisfy in part the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from the School of Social Work at Memorial University of Newfoundland. My supervisor is Dr. Joan Pennell at the University of North Carolina (contact information is in the proposal).

As you know, my area of interest is the experience of cultural safety, particularly its presence or absence and its meaning in Social Work education, as perceived by former Aboriginal Social Work students of the Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP) at the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC).

As I have discussed with you personally, and detailed in the proposal, I am seeking your help to identify prospective candidates for the study from among graduates of the ICSW Program, and from among those who have chosen to withdraw from the program and therefore did not graduate.

Attached is the approval of the research methodology by Memorial University of Newfoundland's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR).

What I am requesting is that you assist me by:

- compiling a list of self-identified Aboriginal ICSWP Social Work students who graduated and could be approached to participate in this study;
- selecting 10 of these, and
- mailing the enclosed letter (Appendix F) to them for me, at my expense, (or email the letter) inviting them to participate.

You may assist me in a similar way by:

- compiling a list of self-identified Aboriginal ICSWP Social Work students who have left the program and therefore did not graduate;
- selecting 3 of these, and
- mailing the enclosed letter (Appendix G) to them for me, at my expense, (or email the letter) inviting them to participate.

My work is being guided by an advisory group of Aboriginal Social Work instructors: Y. Pompana, M. Lands, and G. Gosek.

As dictated by the ICEHR, confidentiality will be maintained for participants. When this study has been completed, I will be happy to share the findings with you, the ICSWP, and the participants. Please feel free to call me if you have questions or comments to make regarding this study, at 790-7209 (office) or 452-9899 (home).

I appreciate your support, and look forward to your participation.
Sincerely yours,

Eveline Milliken

Researcher:	Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Assistant Professor, ICSWP 15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB	Office: 668-8160 ext. 32 Home: 452-9899 Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca
Supervisor:	Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. North Carolina State University Department of Social Work CB# 7639, Raleigh North Carolina, USA 27695-7639	Professor & Department Head Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work) Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office) FAX: (919) 515-4403 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu
Co-Supervisor	Dr. Ken Barter, School of Social Work, Memorial University St. John's, NL, A1C 5S7	Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office) FAX: (709) 737-7701 E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX F:**LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS - GRADUATES**

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

Name:

Address:

Date:

Dear

My name is Eveline Milliken. You may remember me as an instructor at the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC) where you studied in the Faculty of Social Work. I am completing work on a Social Work Ph.D. study and dissertation at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

What I want to study is the experience of Aboriginal Social Work graduates of the Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP) at WEC. It is my belief that graduates like you have an important contribution to make, and there is a need for research into the perspective of Aboriginal Social Workers to make recommendations for social work education. I am specifically interested in issues of safety within the university environment, especially around issues of one's culture. I am inviting you to participate in this study.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any point. You do not have to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. Should you wish to seek debriefing outside of the study, I can arrange that at no cost to you through an Aboriginal social worker. You will be invited to attend a voluntary circle of other participants to respond to a preliminary report on the themes that seem to be arising. It is not necessary for you to attend the participant's circle. For example, you might agree to a conversation with me but choose not to attend the circle group.

You do not need to do any preparation for this conversation. I am interested in your thoughts and opinions about your experience at WEC. My hope is to interview 10 ICSW Program Social Work graduates about their experiences at WEC.

- The study will involve an individual conversation with me which will last 1.5 hours or so.
- With your permission, the conversation will be audio-taped so that I may carefully review your responses;

- I will compile themes and write out preliminary reflections on what I have heard.
- You will get an opportunity to review and comment on the transcript of your interview to verify that it captures your thoughts accurately.
- I will then invite participants to gather as a group to consider and respond to preliminary themes.
- Once again, with permission, I will audiotape the responses so I may carefully reflect upon and incorporate your responses into my final write-up.

Please be assured that your confidentiality will be protected through a variety of means:

- Tapes will be identified by a number, will be held in a locked facility, and then destroyed after the dissertation stage is complete.
- Information that might identify an individual will not be used; responses will be presented in collective form.

This study is being guided by an advisory group of Aboriginal Instructors: Yvonne Pompana, Marie Lands, and Gwen Gosek.

If you are open to talking with me about your experience at the ICSW Program, please phone me at 790-7209 (office) or 452-9899 (home). Voice mail is available at both numbers.

I will get back to you as soon as possible.

Sincerely yours,

Eveline Milliken

Researcher:	Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Assistant Professor, ICSWP 15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB	Office: 668-8160 ext. 32 Home: 452-9899 Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca
Supervisor:	Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. North Carolina State University Department of Social Work CB# 7639, Raleigh North Carolina, USA 27695-7639	Professor & Department Head Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work) Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office) FAX: (919) 515-4403 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu
Co-Supervisor:	Dr. Ken Barter, School of Social Work, Memorial University St. John's, NL, A1C 5S7	Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office) FAX: (709) 737-7701 E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX G:

LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS - STUDENTS WHO WITHDREW

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

Name:

Address:

Date:

Dear

My name is Eveline Milliken. You may remember me as an instructor at the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC) where you studied in the Faculty of Social Work. I am completing work on a Social Work Ph.D. study and dissertation at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

What I want to study is the experience of Aboriginal Social Work graduates of the Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP) at WEC. It is my belief that people who have had the experience you have had, have an important contribution to make, and there is a need for research into the perspective of Aboriginal Social Workers to make recommendations for social work education. I am specifically interested in issues of safety within the university environment, especially around issues of one's culture. I am inviting you to participate in this study.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any point. You do not have to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. Should you wish to seek debriefing outside of the study, I can arrange that at no cost to you through an Aboriginal social worker.

You do not need to do any preparation for this conversation. I am interested in your thoughts, experiences and opinions about your experience at the ICSW Program.

- The study will involve an individual conversation with me which will last 1.5 hours or so.
- With your permission, the conversation will be audio-taped so that I can prepare a transcript of your responses;
- I will write up themes and write out preliminary reflections on what I have heard.
- You will get an opportunity to review the transcript of your interview to verify that it captures your thoughts accurately.

Please be assured that your confidentiality will be protected through a variety of means:

- Tapes will be identified by a number, will be held in a locked facility, and then destroyed after the dissertation stage is complete.
- Information that might identify an individual will not be used; responses will be presented in collective form.

If you are open to talking with me about your experience at the ICSW Program, please phone me at 790-7209 (office) or 452-9899 (home). Voice mail is available at both numbers. I will get back to you as soon as possible.

It is my hope that your experience can help us continue to make the environment, program and processes at the ICSW Program more comfortable for social work students to grow and learn.

Sincerely yours,

Eveline Milliken

Researcher:	Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Assistant Professor, ICSWP 15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB	Office: 668-8160 ext. 32 Home: 452-9899 Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca
Supervisor:	Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. North Carolina State University Department of Social Work CB# 7639, Raleigh North Carolina, USA 27695-7639	Professor & Department Head Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work) Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office) FAX: (919) 515-4403 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu
Co-Supervisor:	Dr. Ken Barter, School of Social Work, Memorial University St. John's, NL, A1C 5S7	Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office) FAX: (709) 737-7701 E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX H:
LETTER CONFIRMING PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

Name:

Address:

Date:

Dear

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study.

I am looking forward to seeing you and hearing your thoughts and opinions. This letter is to confirm the arrangements recently put in place by phone, for us to meet and conduct the conversation about your experience at the ICSW Program.

As we agreed, the details for our meeting are as follows:

Date:

Time:

Place:

Questions (Appendix B attached)

As I indicated in the previous letter, the conversation will take about 1.5 hours. It will be taped to assist in accuracy and identification of themes. Once again, please be assured that all appropriate measures of confidentiality will be taken.

In order to include your responses in this study, it is necessary to have your written permission.

Therefore, please read, complete the form and sign your name to indicate that your permission is given. Please bring the consent form with you to our meeting. The interview can only take place when the consent forms are completed and in my hands.

If you have questions, concerns or comments to make about this consent, please do not hesitate to call me at 790-7209 (office) or 452-9899 (home).

I look forward to seeing you in person. Your thoughts, opinions on this topic are very important.

Sincerely yours,

Eveline Milliken

Researcher: Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W.
Assistant Professor, ICSWP
15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB
millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca

Office: 668-8160 ext. 32
Home: 452-9899
Email:

Supervisor: Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D.
North Carolina State University
Department of Social Work
CB# 7639, Raleigh
North Carolina, USA 27695-7639

Professor & Department Head
Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work)
Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office)
FAX: (919) 515-4403
Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Ken Barter,
School of Social Work,
Memorial University
St. John's, NL,
A1C 5S7

Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office)
FAX: (709) 737-7701
E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX I:**CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT WITH TRANSCRIBER**

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

I, _____ declare that I am a professional transcriber.

I agree to protect and maintain the confidentiality of all the materials processed by me, with respect to this research, including, but not limited to, tapes, manuscripts, emails, conversations, etc.

All materials provided by the researcher will be returned to the researcher.

No materials will be kept by me in any format (digital, paper, other).

I confirm that I have no rights of ownership or of use of any of the information transcribed or handled by me as part of this study.

Transcriber: Print name

Researcher: Print Name

Transcriber: Signature

Researcher: Signature

Date

Date

APPENDIX J:

PERMISSION FORM TO RECORD TALKING CIRCLE

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

This form provides consent to tape your participation in the Talking Circle component of this study.

A copy of this form will be left with you for your records and reference.

If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included, feel free to ask.

Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand this and the accompanying information.

- The purpose of the talking circle is to better understand what graduates and non-graduating students from the ICSWP perceive as contributing to cultural safety in social work education and the importance of that concept.
- This conversation will be about 1.5 - 2 hours long and will be tape-recorded with your permission.
Do you agree to allow me to videotape our conversation? Yes ___ No ___
- Your responses in the group, obviously, will be heard by the group. Therefore, by agreeing to participate you are recognizing that your responses within the group are not anonymous.
- Outside of the talking circle, your identity and responses will be kept confidential by me and the tapes will be destroyed after the study is completed
 - I will make every effort to protect your privacy.
 - I will not use your name in any of the information obtained from this study or in any of the research reports.
 - The information from this interview may be published but without names on it.
 - The identifying information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- A copy of your contribution to the transcript can be made available to you upon request.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read, understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this study, and that you agree to be a participant. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and may refuse to

answer any question. Feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Researcher: Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Office: 668-8160 ext. 32
 Assistant Professor, ICSWP Home: 452-9899
 15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. Professor & Department Head
 North Carolina State University Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work)
 Department of Social Work Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office)
 CB# 7639, Raleigh FAX: (919) 515-4403
 North Carolina, USA 27695-7639 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Ken Barter, School of Social Work, Memorial University
 St. John's, NL, Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office)
 A1C 5S7 FAX: (709) 737-7701
 E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX K:

ADVISORY GROUP CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: *Toward Cultural Safety: An Exploration of the Concept for Social Work Education with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples*

Researcher:

Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W., Ph.D. (candidate).

Advisory Group

This consent form should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation should involve. A copy of this form will be left with you for your records and reference. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included, feel free to ask.

Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand this and the accompanying information.

- The purpose of the research is to better understand what graduates and non-graduating students from the ICSWP might mean by the concept of cultural safety in social work education and the relevance of that concept.
- This conversation will be tape-recorded with your permission.
Do you agree to allow me to audiotape our conversation. ___ Yes ___ No.
- I will make every effort to protect your privacy.
 - The information from this interview may be published but without names on it.
 - The identifying information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- A copy of the findings from this study will be made available to you.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read, understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this study, and that you agree to be a participant. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and may refuse to answer any question. Feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

<p>Researcher: Eveline Milliken, M.S.W., R.S.W. Assistant Professor, ICSWP 15 Chester Street, Winnipeg, MB</p>	<p>Office: 668-8160 ext. 32 Home: 452-9899 Email: millikn@cc.umanitoba.ca</p>
<p>Supervisor: Dr. Joan Pennell, M.S.W., Ph.D. North Carolina State University Department of Social Work CB# 7639, Raleigh North Carolina, USA 27695-7639</p>	<p>Professor & Department Head Tel: (919) 513-0008 (Work) Tel: (919) 515-2492 (Office) FAX: (919) 515-4403 Email: jpennell@ncsu.edu</p>

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Ken Barter,
School of Social Work,
Memorial University
St. John's, NL,
A1C 5S7

Tel: (709) 737-2030 (Office)
FAX: (709) 737-7701
E-mail: kbarter@mun.ca

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has approved this research at Memorial University of Newfoundland. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or Juanita Peach, Secretary to ICEHR, Tel: (709) 737-2861, e-mail: juanitap@mun.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date: _____



