

**Exploring the transitions associated with aging in Two Northern
First Nations Communities.**

By

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Abstract

First Nations people have experienced dramatic life changes in a very short period of time. The process of change was not a conscious decision made by First Nations peoples but rather the result of successive stages of European contact and formal colonization by what is now the government of Canada. With such constant changes and the history of assimilation that overshadows the Aboriginal population, it is becoming difficult for Elders to sustain their roles within the family unit and in their community as a whole. This study provides a description of the oral accounts of Elders living in two remote First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. I conducted three summers of ethnographic research that involved participant observation of local cultural practices and 12 semi-structured interviews from 2009 to 2011. Guided discussions with Elders about their lives and their relationship to the land provided important insight into local cultural and personal values. Three primary themes emerged from the conversations with the Elders about life during the childhood: the intense physicality of life in the past, the connection between health and local foods and the changing role of Elders. Findings suggest that Elders are eager to transmit their knowledge to provide a healthier lifestyle for future generations. In addition, I provide a description of the current living conditions of Elders in both communities. First Nations Elders, who were once crucial to the survival of a band, are now facing the highest degree of vulnerability and are desperately searching for a new identity that gives them purpose. The consistent thread in all the cases was the ongoing struggle Elders have faced trying to reconcile traditional perspectives with the growing dominance of contemporary western lifestyle practices.

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Introduction

My Elders are my role models. They have a lot of knowledge and experience of life. It is too bad that they are not seen as important because of the changes. I look at my grandchildren and I am frightened because it is changing fast, our culture is in danger. (Penashue in Kulchyski, P. et al, 1999, p.205)

As Elizabeth Penashue, an Innu Elder explains, there are many changes taking place in Aboriginal communities, which is having an impact on the Elders' roles. It was only a half a century ago when families lived a mobile life, travelling many kilometers by foot to set up a shelter wherever they had caught large game. This lifestyle allowed family members to build a tight bond while depending on each other to survive. The combination of life experiences and rich traditional knowledge naturally placed Elders in a position of leadership within the family unit. The children learned from a young age how to harvest and prepare traditional foods and the evenings were commonly reserved to the Elders, an opportunity for them to tell stories and teachings about the values of their culture. The wisdom they provided to their family members created a level of respect that assured a continuity of care. As they got older, the Elders naturally became less physically active and it became the younger generations' responsibility to accomplish the arduous tasks.

The changes have contributed to the erosion of the role of Elders, as well as disrupting traditional structures that once empowered the community. It is crucial now more than ever, to understand the role of Elders in First Nation communities due to the aging population. With life expectancies on the rise, intergenerational living will become more complex and present new challenges, yet there is a very limited body of literature on the Aboriginal Elder population (Dumont-Smith, 2002). These dramatic changes demonstrate the urgency to converse with Elders in order to better understand the reality of aging in Aboriginal culture.

The ethnographic nature of this project provided unique opportunities for a rich data collection experience. It was crucial to create strong relationships with the Elders, in order to be seen less as an ‘outsider’ seeking information, but rather an individual looking to learn from the Aboriginal culture and way of life. The researcher lived in both communities for several weeks to gain in-depth knowledge about community practices and local culture. The fieldwork was an opportunity to be submerged in the community daily living and have a better understanding of the community dynamics.

Cultures are not static, as they naturally undergo several transitions and transformations over time (Bhabha, 1994). Important changes have occurred in very little time in First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. The rapidness of the transitions has impacted the Elders’ lives as well as the communities on several levels. The goal of this research project is to create discussions with the community Elders in order to obtain a firsthand perspective on the changes that have occurred in their lives as well as their communities during their lifetime. Elders shared stories of daily living in the past, which enabled the author to provide a rich description of the complex changes that have occurred over time. A vivid contrast is also explained by providing a description of the current crisis situation some First Nation Elders are facing. By exposing a reality that is not easily understood and often obscured from the general Canadian population, this thesis will shed light on some of the issues Elders are facing in these communities and the challenges communities are facing in responding to them.

Literature Review

The Canadian Population and Aging

The Canadian population is aging rapidly. This trend is expected to continue for the next several decades due to a combination of factors. Data from Statistics Canada clearly demonstrate the shift in the historical balance between the young and the old. There was an increase of 8.2% of the population over 65 years old during the last 85 years and it is projected to increase from 4.2 million to 9.8 million between 2005 and 2036 (Turcotte and Schellenberg, 2006). Biological age, however, is just one factor in the construct of aging. It is important to define the elderly population. At the end of the 19th century, German Chancellor Otto von Bismack established laws around mandatory retirement for all citizens at the age of 65, a time when few individuals lived much beyond this retirement benchmark (Vézina et al., 2007). Since this was adopted, there have been many changes in the reality of Canadians, which may lead an individual choosing to retire at the age of 50 or continue working till their 75 years old. In addition, an individual's 65th birthday is not a clear indicator of their physical, psychological, social or financial well-being. To avoid any subjective determination of age, I will define a senior citizen as does the Canadian State, which is anyone aged 65 or older. This will allow for more meaningful statistical comparisons to follow.

Looking back at the census history in Canada, there is a clear indication of an aging population. In 1921, 420 000 seniors were accounted for in Canada and that number escalated to 4.3 million in 2006. When comparing those figures to the entire population during those same years, 5% of the population was over 65, and by 2006, this number increased to 13.2% (Vézina et al. 2007). This figure represents 33% more individuals than in 1981 and the demographic trend predicts that by the year 2026, 1 in 5 Canadians will have reached age 65 (Health Canada,

2002). An aging population can be the product of a series of different factors, but Statistics Canada suggests three primary reasons for this increasing trend: increased life expectancy, decreased fertility rates and the effects of the baby boom.

Life expectancy rates serve as a good indicator of the overall health of a country. This value represents an estimate of the number of years an individual is expected to live. Looking back to the early 1950s, men in Canada were expected to live until the age of 66, while women would have an average life span of 71 years (Statistics Canada, 2010). In the new millennium, babies born in 2005 were expected to live 78 and 83 years for men and women respectively (Statistics Canada, 2010). Therefore Canadians have gained 12 years to their life expectancy in only five decades. The trend towards a longer life has been influenced by a number of public health factors that have reduced the mortality rates in Canada and around the world. The control of infectious disease and similar discoveries in the field of nutrition, medical care and technology have been beneficial to the life-span of Canadians. Life expectancy in Canada is predicted to increase, reaching 81 years for men and 86 years for women by 2041 (Health Canada, 2002).

Even though adults are living longer lives, they are having less children than previous generations. Thus the second factor influencing the aging population is fertility rates. Most Canadians now have the luxury of planning their pregnancies and many are choosing to have fewer children compared to their parents and grandparents. After World War II, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, there was a boost of births where women had on average 3 or more children (Hirsch de Haan, 2004). The birth rates have significantly dropped since that period of history and has remained below the rate for natural replacement of the population of 2.1 children per women for the last thirty years (Vézina et al., 2007). The fertility rate is currently at 1.5 children per woman and is expected to remain relatively constant for several years to come.

With a constant decline of births every year, the percentage of the elderly population naturally rises. The demographic of the population is subject to a rapid change when individuals are living longer lives, but also choosing to have fewer children.

The influx of births after the Second World War was named the Baby Boom. The baby boomers cohort is defined as those born between 1946 and 1964, the post Second World War era. Many individuals from this large and influential group are approaching retirement in the next few years. As this group of individuals ages, the percentage of Canadian seniors will increase from 1.5 million in 1966 to 6.7 million in 2021 and to 9.2 million in 2041 (Health Canada, 2002).

Aboriginal Perspectives on Aging

In contrast to the demographic data provided above, the Aboriginal population in Canada is significantly younger than the general Canadian population. According to the 2006 census, 1.17 million people self-identify as Aboriginal in Canada, which represents 3.8% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2008). The Constitution Act of 1982 defines Aboriginal peoples as three distinct groups: First Nations, Métis and Inuit. First Nations constitutes about 60% of the Aboriginal population, Métis comprise 33% and Inuit represent 4% (Statistics Canada, 2008). In general, the Aboriginal population is much younger than the non-Aboriginal population (Wilson et al. 2011). Seniors make up a relatively small proportion of Canada's Aboriginal population as the median age is 27 years in comparison to 40 years for the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2009). In 2006, Aboriginal seniors accounted for only 5% of the Aboriginal population compared to 13% in the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). Although there have been improvements in recent years, the average life expectancy of

Aboriginal peoples remains significantly lower than the Canadian average. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report, the life expectancy for Aboriginal men and women is approximately 13 and 11 years less respectively, compared to the general Canadian population statistics (Reading and Elias, 1999). Although the Aboriginal population is currently notably younger than the general Canadian population, recent statistics indicate that the number of Aboriginal Elders in Canada is expected to more than double by 2017 (Turcotte and Schellenberg, 2006).

This being said, a person of Aboriginal ancestry's life expectancy is similar to rates of the Canadian population 40 to 50 years ago. As mentioned above, life expectancy is an important indicator of the overall health of a country. Aboriginal people's living standards are significantly lower than the Canadian population as a whole, since an Aboriginal person is not only expected to have a shorter life, but is more commonly affected by illnesses, has a greater risk to face family violence related to alcohol abuse and on average attain lower levels of education (Warry, 2009). In addition, Aboriginal peoples suffer a wide range of health problems at significant higher rates than other Canadians (Waldram et al., 2006). In one report, it is suggested that Aboriginal People "have 6 to 7 times greater incidence of tuberculosis, are 4 to 5 times more likely to be diabetic, 3 times more likely to have heart disease and hypertension, and 2 times as likely to report a long-term disability" (Kirmayer et al, 2009: P.6). These health disparities make it difficult to believe that Aboriginal peoples are part of a country that the United Nations rates among the elite nations in the world for quality of life (Adelson, 2005). Aging is becoming an important area of study because changes in demographics will not only have an impact on individuals but will also influence communities as a whole. The changes brought about by an aging population whose life expectancy is on the rise, will attach new meanings to concepts such

as intergenerational living and instigate numerous other structural, institutional and social changes to Canadian society (Turcotte and Schellenberg, 2006).

The Variances According to Generations

The effects of the growing senior population have uncovered new challenges for the Canadian population. With a life expectancy of 78 years for men and 83 years for women (Statistics Canada, 2010), more than four generations can potentially be living at any given period. Intergenerational living has enriched the complexion of Canadian society, where each group offers new perspectives on how to view the world, but challenges naturally occur with the diversity of this population. The “baby boomer generation’ is an influential group in our aging population, but it is important to understand what is a generation and how they are different from one another. A generation is not simply determined by dividing the population in regular time frames, like at a 40-year interval. Dumas and Turner clearly define a generation as “a class of social agents of similar ages (age groups who related similarly to a social phenomenon) that have witnessed similar historical events; that share similar experiences, aspirations, feeling, and ideas; and that face similar constraints and opportunities” (2009: P. 43). For this reason, a major event like World War II or the 9/11 terrorist attack for example, can have an influence on daily living. The academic literature divides today’s society into four different generations. The oldest group of our society is called “matures”, which represent the individuals born between 1920 and 1945 (Hirsh de Haan, 2004). This group embodies a large proportion of seniors in Canada. Many of these men and women have lived a lifetime of duty and sacrifice, experiencing in varying degrees World War II and other major international conflicts. During this period it was typical that families were sustained by the income generated by men in the workforce. Women most commonly were dedicated to familial tasks related to organizing a household. The next

generation constitutes the individuals born between 1946 and 1964 who are labeled the “Baby Boomers”. This term describes the influx in birthrates after the Great Depression. “Between 1940 and 1965 the annual number of births in Canada rose from 253 000 in 1940 to 479 000 in 1960, but drooped to 419 000 in 1965. Over a period of 25 years, the baby boom produced about 1.5 million more births than would otherwise have occurred (about 8.6 million), an increase of more than 18%” (Krotki and Henripin, 2011: p.1). The baby boomer population grew up fighting for civil rights and equal opportunities while valuing the importance of individuality (Hirsh de Haan, 2004). Today, this group ranges from 47 to 65 years of age and is often labeled as workaholics. Moreover, many Baby Boomers continue to dominate management positions in their workplace due to their strong work ethic and long work hours (Hirsh de Haan, 2004). Commonly perceived as being overshadowed by the Boomers, the Generation X represents the individuals born between 1965 and 1977. The members of this group were raised in families where both parents worked, but many will aspire for a balanced life more than professional accomplishments (Hirsh de Haan, 2004). Born after 1978, the latest generation is labeled Generation Y or also known as the Millennials. Raised by Boomer parents who have high expectations for themselves and their children, Millennial’s have come to age in a very child oriented world (Coates, 2007). They are at the forefront of the constant evolving digital technology, which has changed the way they communicate, learn and interact on a daily basis. This generation is strongly founded on individuality where they are motivated by their personal goals and personal choices to impact their future (Coates, 2007). The brief overview of traits described above represents general characteristics of each generation. Although each individual may have their unique perspectives, there is a tendency for people who share certain cultural experiences to develop similar sets of behaviors and outlooks on life (Cortsen,1999)

Since communities are made of a mixed age demographic, tensions can arise while trying to coordinate the needs, values and interests of various social agents like children, young families and retired individuals (Warry, 2009, p.7). There are two primary causes for intergenerational conflict: first, struggles over scarce resources between generations and confrontations over conflicting views of the world (Tolbize, 2008).; second, individuals might see the world through a different lens due to generational knowledge, dispositions, and aspirations established by a set of constraints and opportunities that were created by socio-historical events (Dumas and Turner, 2009). The complexities of intergenerational conflict are demonstrated with the inclusion of cultural variability. For example, residential schools are an example of an experience that might lead Aboriginal Elders to have certain belief systems. Aboriginal children, mainly First Nations children, became the central target of assimilation strategies over the span of 100 years, where they were taken from their homes and forced to attend residential schools that fiercely denigrated and suppressed their heritage (Kirmayer et al., 2009). This socio-historical event caused severe emotional trauma to thousands of individuals and deprived children of their cultural practices and identities. The removal of children from their families and communities became a strategy to introduce new cultural values, a new language and for several, a new religion. Therefore, senior Aboriginal citizens might have a different lifestyle and cultural practices due to their experiences of residential schools. With an increasing number of seniors in Aboriginal communities, it is important to understand the historical, social, political and cultural influences that have shaped the lives of these individuals.

Aging in an First Nations Context

From this point forward, I will adopt the term First Nations to be specific to my research population. In basic terms, the words Elder and “senior” (as in senior citizens) are used

interchangeably to describe an individual over the age of 65, but these terms are not synonyms in the First Nations culture. In this context, Elder is not used as a descriptor of age but rather as a social status with associated respect and knowledge. These individuals have substantial life experiences and have considerable knowledge of cultural and spiritual practices and with this are perceived as knowledge bearers in their communities. An Anishnawbe traditional teacher explains that an Elder is “One who knows the teachings, who knows them so well that he’s able to live by them. And he’s lived through all those stages of life and he’s held on to them and not only can he give them those teachings, he can help them to understand them because he’s lived it” (Stiegelbauer, 1996: P.41). This being said, in traditional terms, an Elder is recognized as a leader, a teacher and a mentor who should be an authority on the histories of the community and culture.

Unlike a westernized system of political governance, a person is not elected or nominated to become an Elder. The process happens over time and it not only depends on the individual’s life and ability to talk to others, but also their influence or ability to empathize with the reality of others. A compilation of statements presented in the interviews with the Native Centre Elders’ Advisory Council has been published to help understand what an Elder is (Stiegelbauer, 1996). According to this survey, an Elder is someone who:

1. Is knowledgeable about tradition including ceremonies, teachings, and the process of life and is ideally a speaker of a Native language;
2. Lives those traditions;
3. Is old enough to have reached a stage of experience at which it is appropriate for them to communicate what they have learned from life and tradition;
4. Is recognized by the community for their wisdom and ability to help;
5. Is still an individual with varying knowledge skills;
6. Is able to interpret tradition to the needs of individuals and the community;

7. Is often asked to represent First Nation views as symbols of the culture or through active involvement with issues and individuals. (Stiegelbauer, 1996)

A key element when defining who can be considered an Elder is indicated in the fourth statement mentioned above, which is recognition from the community. This is an essential part of becoming an Elder. Oftentimes, an individual will have initiated a learning process that is triggered by an event or circumstance, such as personal, spiritual or even political experience. To seek guidance, the person returns to their traditional ways in order to actively learn and practice the teachings and ceremonies to overcome the obstacles (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Through the process of accumulating knowledge and experience, the community slowly begins to refer to them in order to give these teachings back while seeking guidance during discussion or to make decisions. Elders are crucial to Aboriginal communities because they are a link to the past. As Kirk (1986) explains: “ In a short space of two generations, they have gone from travelling the coast in canoes to flying in floatplanes. Not even the disorientation of changing to cash economy with a more complex technological base, the acceptance of a new cosmology and religion, none of these broke native pride in the past or native ties to ancestral lands and water. This is what the Elders are about (Stiegelbauer, 1996: P.61).” These individuals have experienced the transition from the traditional ways to the new, which makes them vital holders of cultural knowledge about teachings, stories and ceremonies.

During the course of this study, it became evident that there is not a clear definition to describe this complex group of individuals in First Nations in this region of Canada. In a traditional manner, each community sees Elders as older individuals who are carriers of traditional knowledge and also are recognized as role models and teachers. They are recognized as authorities who advise and act on important community or family matters (Assembly of First

Nations, 1993). In addition, the term Elder can also be used to describe any older person to indicate respect and as a special status as ageing in many cultures is associated with experience, transmission of cultural heritage, language or leadership roles. There is no specific age category to identify an Elder but rather any person who is recognized by the people as having the knowledge and the understanding of the traditional culture of the community. The combination of knowledge and wisdom along with the recognition and respect of the community are essential characteristics when defining an Elder.

The result of European colonization has created a legacy of disadvantage amongst First Nation Elders. This group of individuals has endured unhealthy living condition, poorer health status and a higher incidence of chronic disease than other cultural groups in Canada. Aboriginal people are a relatively young group compared to non-Aboriginal population, but the number of older adults is rapidly increasing. The latest projections indicate that by 2016, the number of Canadian Aboriginal people aged 65 and older will triple, where many are likely to suffer from chronic illnesses. Aboriginal Elders have the lowest life expectancy of all groups in Canada (Ship, 1997). On average, Aboriginal people live five to ten years less than Canadians in general. The geographic isolation and remoteness of many Aboriginal communities in Canada lead to a precarious health status of its Elders (Minore and Boone, 2002). There is little research on the needs and challenges of caring for Aboriginal Elders living on-reserve. The gap is notable when we consider the Aboriginal understanding of the changes associated to aging.

First Nations Culture in Canada

There is not one but many Aboriginal cultures that represent the richness of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. A culture has been defined as a “system of ideas, values, and

metaphors that are consciously and unconsciously used or enacted by people in their everyday lives” (Warry, W., 2009: P.88). There are more than 50 languages, individuals who live on reserves, in rural or urban cities and various forms of arts and forms of expressions in each of the three Aboriginal groups (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) of Canada (Norris, 2008). Like all cultures, Aboriginal peoples do not have a rigid set of behaviors and traits but rather hold a fluid and adaptive system of meanings. This diversity of culture reflects the history of colonialism, the relations surrounding the treaties and the reality in Aboriginal communities today.

In First Nations cultures, Elders are commonly viewed as embodiments of strength as well as keepers and guardians of traditional lifestyles (Baldrige, 2001). Many media sources such as movies, television commercials or newspapers commonly paint an idealistic image of Elders, ultimately creating a caricature of what it means to be an Elder which numbs the conscience of several Canadians. The “romanticization” of Elders does not help to portray the complexities of their daily lives nor does it provide a realistic understanding of their current living conditions (Baldrige, 2001). Aboriginal peoples in Canada face critical challenges originating from the “history of marginalization and oppression aimed at erasing the Aboriginal culture and assimilating the Aboriginal people into the dominant (i.e. colonizing) population” (Wilson et al. 2011: P.358). Living within the enduring legacy of colonialism First Nations people struggle to situate themselves within the western colonial imaginary while trying to maintain local cultural practices (Warry, 2009). With such constant changes and the history of assimilation that overshadows the Aboriginal population, it is becoming difficult for Elders to sustain their roles within the family unit and in their community as a whole. Evenings that were once dedicated to story telling and opportunities for the Elders to transmit traditional knowledge have being replaced by video games and television shows. This being said, the Elders that once

had an uncontested authority over family decisions are now quickly being replaced by new power structures. Warry (2009) explains how Elders are going through an unclear transition of roles and responsibilities.

When cultures collide and meet - especially when Indigenous cultures have been under assault by a dominant culture for hundreds of years – it is sometimes difficult to see that the minority values persist and remain vibrant. (p.91)

The effects of colonization have had a significant impact on the role of Elders and disrupted structures that once governed Aboriginal communities. Previous research is limited in terms of understanding the experiences of Elders and their perspectives on the changes within their family unit and in their communities. In this thesis I will attempt to fill that gap.

Theoretical Perspectives

This thesis project has been informed by a variety of theoretical perspectives, in particular postcolonial and generational theory. The two theories were used as a guide in the description of the results in both of the articles to help understand why the situation in First Nations communities is unique and important to research. In this chapter I describe both of these theoretical perspectives and discuss how they have informed my thinking on the subject of Elders in First Nations communities.

Postcolonial Theory

It is important to break down the terminology in order to fully grasp the significance of postcolonial theory. First, colonialism can be described as the process of settlement by Europeans in different parts of the world such as Australia and Canada. The settlers often violently appropriated the indigenous people's way of life by studying their forms of knowledge, art, cultural practices and religious beliefs in order to police, judge and then alter their way of life to fit their own dominant ideologies (Nayar, 2010). The second component of this term worth mentioning is the prefix "post". This word is commonly used to describe the aftermath of an event. In the context of postcolonialism, it does not imply that the groups or cultures, which have been silenced by dominant ideologies for several decades, have ceased to experience this kind of treatment. On the contrary, postcolonial theory strives to give voice to groups and cultures that have been silenced and marginalized as a result of imperial conquest and domination. Although it is very broad in scope, postcolonialism can be understood as responses from political, economic, cultural and philosophical perspectives on the subject of colonialism from its inauguration to the present day (Hiddleston, 2009). Postcolonial theorists call attention to

colonizing practices that situation privilege western Euro-centric values and beliefs over colonized subjects. Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are three influential postcolonial theorists who have made important contributions to this vast body of literature.

Edward Said is a Palestinian scholar who has written extensively on postcolonial subjectivity. His work combines literary criticism with political and cultural philosophy (Nayar, 2010). In his book *Orientalism*, he presents the tenuous relationship between the Orient and the Occident and how Occidental hegemony constructs the Orient as *Other*. This privileging of western civilization, or in overarching construct of modernity, those outside of this teleological view are interiorized. Said refers to this as Orientalism which can be seen as “a Western style of domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1995). One of Said’s most important contributions is his acknowledgement that constructs of Western superiority would not be possible without constructions of the East. In other words the West defines itself against the pejorative and ethnocentric constructs of the orient as being uncivilized and barbaric.. The majority of Said’s publications are dedicated to the dialectical relationship between the Orient/East and the Occident/West, which he elucidates through literary, historical and political examples (Hiddleston, 2009).

The division Said establishes between occidental and oriental identities is often problematized by scholars such as Homi Bhabha who feel Said’s work is too focused on occidental and oriental oppositions. Instead, Bhabha valorizes the spaces in-between cultures rather than the duality present in much of Said’s work. He criticizes Said for presenting colonial discourse as two separate entities, West and East or colonizer and colonized. On the contrary, Bhabha unveils a new perspective by describing “ the ambivalence of colonial discourse, the

limits of the grasp of the colonial language over its subjects, and undermines colonialism by focusing on its loopholes and blind spots” (Hiddleston, 2009: P.114). According to Bhabha (1994), the space of hybridity offers a significant challenge to colonialism due to the degree of ambiguity that a heterogeneous culture can offer. In one of his essays in his book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha offers new definitions of one of the main components of colonial discourse, stereotypes. In order for a stereotypical reference to support the producer’s message, it requires a fixed image that one knows and that can be defined. The desire for “fixity” is essential in order to be able to identify what is already known and therefore must be repeated. In other words, “it is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Bhabha, 1994: P.117). A stereotype can thus become a difficult strategy to reinforce colonial discourse due to the hybridity of cultures and lack of specific markers.

Building on the work of Said and Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian scholar who has become one of the field’s most cited authors. She is best known for the article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she presents the notion of the “subaltern”. This term is most commonly used to describe an inferior military rank, but when applied to discourses on colonialism, Spivak describes the subaltern as a marginalized group or culture (Ross, 2009). Her work is distinctive for her focus on gender where she denounces the ways in which the oppression of women particularly in India, have been silenced for several years and she demonstrates how their voices are faintly heard in Western philosophy and literature (Hiddleston, 2009). Said (1995), Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1988) are amongst the most cited scholars in postcolonial theory.

From a First Nations perspective, the impact of colonialism has been devastating as demonstrated through the loss of lands, cultural, political and economic autonomy, the creation of reserves, the residential schools and assimilatory efforts seeing to erase traditional culture and values (LaRocque, 2010). Andie Palmer, a researcher from the University of Alberta, has demonstrated the importance of traditional practices of hunting and gathering which created shared lived experiences between community members and a social context for exchanging knowledge of the land (2005). For Aboriginal peoples, the land also serves as a means for creating memories and cultural practices. In her book *Do Glaciers Listen?* Cruikshank (2005) demonstrates how local knowledge is produced through encounters with nature. Glaciers display how natural and social histories are intertwined, which echo in the oral histories of Aboriginal peoples. As previously mentioned, the aim of postcolonialism theory is to give a voice to the groups that have been marginalized in the past. Thomas King is a Canadian Aboriginal scholar who has used his voice to make sense of North America's relationship with its Aboriginal peoples. King (1990) explains that "Most Canadians have only seen Natives through the eyes of non-Native writers, and, while many of these portrayals have been sympathetic, they have also been limited in their variety of characters, themes, structures and images" (p.xi). He explains Aboriginal culture's ties to storytelling while emphasizing the importance of stories in shaping people and how people understand and interact with their surroundings.

The colonization of Aboriginal peoples by western Europeans has been far-reaching and everlasting. Not only have Aboriginal peoples been physically displaced from their traditional territories (Wilson et al., 2011), undergone profound dietary and lifestyle transformations (Haman et al., 2010) suffer considerable health disparities compared to the non-aboriginal population (Hackett, 2005), the effects of colonization have also been felt at the social structure

level of the communities (Waldram et al., 2006). Elders were traditionally seen as persons of wisdom, leaders who were consulted frequently for advice and had great influence in their communities. Boldt (1993) argues that colonial initiatives have contributed to the erosion of the role of Elders and disrupted traditional structures that empowered First Nations communities. In many cases Elders no longer play a formalized role as leaders in their community. The system of governance that regulates western societies has been transposed to Aboriginal communities, which commonly leave Elders with no voice. Working from Spivak's notion of the subaltern Aboriginal Elders can be described as doubly subalternized: marginalized as a cultural group, and marginalized within their own cultural frameworks. Few studies have revealed how the roles have changed for Aboriginal people who are aging; hence, research is needed to directly seek input from Elders about their perceptions and experiences. In this thesis I will be speaking with Elders in the Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nations, two remote fly-in communities in northwestern, Ontario, to learn about the role of Elders in their communities and how these roles may have changed over the course of their lifetimes.

Generations Theory

There is a certain level of distinctiveness about generational relations in First Nations communities. Aboriginal people are a relatively young group compared to the general Canadian population. First Nations family dynamics are rapidly changing, where traditional values are becoming less valued in the community and within the family unit. As the senior population is predicted to triple by 2016 (Ship, 1997), it is important to understand the complexities associated to the rapidity of the changes in the community dynamics.

The scholar Karl Mannheim is renowned for introducing the concept of generation in his work *'The Problem of Generations'* (Mannheim, 1952). He explains that generations share “a common location in the social and historical process, which thereby limit them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action” (p. 291). This work has led to a mass proliferation of scholarship on the topic of generation from a wide range of fields, ranging from anthropology, political science and cultural sociology (Cortsen, 1999). The concept of generations has been subject to change in the flow of history and circumstance in which it has been put to work. For my research, the concept of historical generations is particularly relevant because generations are viewed as “sharing a picture of ‘their time’ or a script of the drama of their collective development in the course of ‘their’ historical phase” (Cortsen, P.252). An important element of the concept of historical generation is that it cannot be determined solely by a cohort of birth years, as it requires a process of discovery and explanation. The process of discovery involves identifying a distinct consciousness associated with the generation. Secondly, it must be explained by identifying the geographical locations and the key social events that have contributed to the formation of this consciousness (Dassbach, 1995). This being said, this concept signifies that generations are not necessarily successive, but develop when a group shares a set of experiences in their lifetime as result of influential social events. As societies age it forces academics to view generations through a different lens. The demographic structures of societies have been completely transformed from a pyramid (with a large youthful base) to a barrel shape, with includes a relatively smaller youth population and a growing senior population (Burnett, 2010). This research offers a rich perspective by examining the

transformations in demographics of the Canadian population in combination with the colonial history of First Nations peoples.

Jaeger (1985) quotes a statement found in Goethe's preface in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811): "anybody born only a decade early or later might have become a completely different person as far as his own education and sphere of action are concerned" (P.274). This statement represents the importance of history when studying First Nations in Canada. Elders have lived a set of events that are unique to the First Nations peoples during a specific time in history. Conversing about their experiences with the effects of colonization, such as residential school and the creation of reserves provides testimonials that cannot be obtained from any other age group. A generation survives by maintaining a memory of its origins and the historic struggles they have overcome (Eyerman and Turner, 1998). Due to their personal experiences, Elders will describe a phenomenon in a completely different manner than youths or adults. In addition, the idea of collective identities is pertinent because it allows the researcher to put into perspective "How do people who have been born and who have been brought up in the same period of time come to a common understanding of their experience?" (Cortsen, P.252). My research will provide an opportunity for Elders to share their experiences and memories over the course of their lifetime.

Methodological Implications

When developing a research project involving Aboriginal people, the *Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)* stress that communities should be presented the option of a participatory-research approach (CIHR, 2008). This collaborative approach distinguishes itself from other types of social inquiries found in qualitative research due to its commitment to the inclusivity and the representation of communities that are often amongst the most marginalized groups in our society. Aboriginal peoples in Canada have endured several decades of inequity, which has transformed the economic, political, social, community and individual health aspects of their daily lives (Adelson, 2005). In order to minimize the impact of this type of social marginalization, a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology is applied for this study.

CBPR can be defined as both a research ideology and a strategy for conducting research. The academic literature commonly adopts the definition used by the *Community Health Scholars Program*, which defines CBPR as a:

Collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community and has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change. (Faridi et al., 2007: P. 3).

The essential elements of this approach consist of doing research FOR and WITH Aboriginal peoples rather than ON them, which has been a common trend in the past (Fletcher, 2003). The core principle of inclusivity allows researchers to reduce power relations by creating partnerships with community members in order to coproduce knowledge (Dodson and Schmalzbauer, 2010).

With a CBPR approach in mind, this research is part of a larger formal partnership with the the Indigenous Health Research Group (IHRG) at the University of Ottawa and three First Nations communities—Kasabonika Lake First Nation, Wapekeka First Nation and Wawakapewin First Nation. The partnership was created in order to devise a research program that would provide tangible benefits for the community members (Robidoux et al., 2009). Researchers from the IHRG, along with Project Leaders from all three communities have come together to identify research activities that are in accordance with community protocols (Robidoux et al., 2009). Combining the knowledge of all stakeholders regarding off-the-land food gathering strategies and consumption will enable a greater initiative for social change and will diminish health disparities (Roche, 2008). Within this multidisciplinary project, my role consists of exploring the perspectives of First Nations Elders by understanding the significance and value of ageing in Wapekeka and Kasibonika First Nations. Creating strong relationships with community members is a crucial component of the research process in order to fully understand the complexities associated with off-the-land cultural practices in a northern First Nation context. CBPR is the ideal approach to promote community involvement in this effort for social change as it draws on the concept of local empowerment, provides rich and meaningful data and is relevant to a specific socio-cultural context.

The CBPR model draws strongly on the concept of local empowerment with regard to a marginalized group in our society. By representing participants as equal partners in all phases of the research process (i.e. the problem definition, methodological development, data collection and analysis, and the communication of findings), the hierarchy commonly found in research is replaced with a more balanced relationship of power (Fisher and Ball, 2003). Participants

involved in this type of research are given the opportunity to explain various dimensions of their social reality.

In addition, the use of this methodology provides several opportunities to collect rich and meaningful data. The inclusion of community members in several phases of the research project helps to establish a strong foundation for a relationship of mutual trust and cooperation (Olshansky, 2008). Once a level of trust has been established, CBPR is recognized to engender a greater response from participants, as well as capture a more authentic representation of events or issues (Horowitz et al., 2009). The richness of the data derives from community members who have a unique insider expertise that can enlighten issues that are not easily identifiable by a researcher. Demonstrating specific beliefs associated with ageing in a community context can help a researcher to recognize the barriers and seek opportunities to make changes. Moreover, the community perspective enriches a CBPR methodology as it provides information that is specific to a particular socio-cultural context. By applying a bottom up approach, the information that is collected will address issues that are pertinent and relevant to members of our three host communities. For this reason, CBPR is a suitable approach to identify the types of changes that are pertinent for the communities and provide the appropriate means to make it possible (LaVeaux and Christopher, 2009). Given that there are several advantages to adopting a CBPR methodology for this research project in northwestern Ontario First Nation communities, it is important to also acknowledge potential weaknesses that may arise during the research process.

CBPR focuses on identifying the particular needs of a marginalized group in society, followed by a proactive strategy to encourage social change. Due to the collaboration of several stakeholders, the operating principles that guide this methodology can often remain very broad in scope (Laveaux and Christopher, 2009). This requires a great level of flexibility and an open

mind from all the people involved, due to the unknown outcome of the project. Additionally, community-based participatory research remains a fairly new approach amongst many traditional social inquiry methodologies. In the 1970s, academics began to understand the importance of not basing their research designs solely on western knowledge, but rather creating community-academic alliances in order to incorporate indigenous ways of knowing (Fletcher, 2003). Given that local conditions and community experts differ from one community to the next, there are no proven universal formulas that can be generically applied to all research initiatives. For this reason, the researchers must maximize their interpersonal skills as they invest a significant amount of time in building strong partnerships with all concerned parties. Lastly, despite powerful arguments endorsing a CBPR framework, it can be difficult for university academics to gain recognition for their work (Horowitz et al., 2009). There are still interrogations concerning the value of the evidence that is gathered, the integrity of the measurement, and the overall scientific credibility of this type of approach (Laveaux and Christopher, 2009). With this in mind, it is important to note that CBPR is a holistic methodology and transcending the academic comfort zones are paths that will eventually lead to innovation.

My preoccupation as a researcher for my Master's project is the impact that I will have in Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nations, which encouraged me to adopt a CBPR framework. The impact of an academic can be positive in nature where, for example, one can develop meaningful relationships with community members, obtain a clear representation of beliefs associated with ageing processes or even be able to identify the resources that would be culturally appropriate to promote social change. On another hand, there is always a risk of leaving a negative imprint when conducting research that involves working with people and communities. I strongly believe that there is a greater risk associated with working with

marginalized populations that have a history of being misunderstood and oppressed due to power hierarchies. For this reason, community-based participatory research offers the optimal framework to establish a collaborative approach that will maximize the opportunities for exchanging different types of knowledge. Consulting with community members who are immersed in the social reality that is being studied will not only help to provide representative data, but it will also create a context that allows all research partners to address concerns that may arrive at any moment during the study. I took advantage of this learning opportunity to immerse myself in a cross-cultural experience that did not only allow me to grow as an academic, but also on a personal basis as I exchanged stories with individuals who have so much life experience.

Methods

This study stemmed from an existing research project of the IHRG to “comprehensively examine the potential viability and subsequent benefits of a First Nation’s health model that draws from off-the-land cultural practices specific to this region in northern Canada” (Robidoux, M.A. et al. 2009). Key strategies of the project were to increase local capacity to procure, process and equitably distribute off-the-land foods, and support the development and implementation of new skills, knowledge and interest in vegetable gardening. For effectiveness and sustainability, the project was structured around intergenerational sharing of traditional and new knowledge, with Elders as the foundation of the knowledge sharing process. My research was incorporated in the intergenerational sharing component of the project where I maximized the knowledge translation opportunities to meet with the Elders of Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nations. The research was conducted according to research protocols established in the initial planning phases for the larger research program with the Shibogama First Nation Tribal

Council, Kasabonika and Wapekeka Chiefs and Band Councils and the University of Ottawa research team. All research activities underwent full ethics review and were approved by the Research Ethics Boards at the University of Ottawa and Health Canada.

Community Profiles

Both communities of study are located in Northwestern Ontario, which comprises 60% of Ontario's land but holding only 2.3 percent of its total population (Habjan et al., 2010). In this region of the province, there are many small and remote towns and First Nations communities. Several of the isolated settlements are fly-in communities, where they rely solely on daily flights or the winter roads for a short period of the year to transport supplies in the community. The isolation factor creates a degree of difficulty to create new employment opportunities or even to transport the building materials to provide adequate housing. Traditionally, the Elders held the leadership roles in the community where its members relied on them to ensure their future and well being. Today, the community relies on a western imposed governance model where the community chief and band councilors are elected to be the decision makers in the community. Both communities share several socio-economic similarities of being isolated remote settlements. Although the geographical location is very similar, there is a uniqueness attributed to every reserve due to the size of the community and the particular dynamics.

Wapekeka First Nation is an isolated reserve in northwestern Ontario located at 451 kilometers north of Sioux Lookout. This community has 363 registered band members with 328 individuals residing in the community year-around. The plane is the most reliable form of transportation as winter roads are only accessible a few months a year depending on the weather conditions. The traditional language is a mixture of Ojibway and Cree (Oji-Cree), which is spoken by the majority of Elders. Most adults and kids will converse in English and it is also the

language of instruction at the local school. The Reverend Eleazar Winter Memorial School has four classrooms and education is provided from kindergarten to grade 8. Youth have to leave the community in order to attend secondary school. Wapekeka has a locally owned store, which stocks non-perishable foods, a small variety of fresh produce, clothing and hardware. The community also has a medical clinic, an Anglican Church, a Parish Hall and a Full Gospel Youth Ministry church. In the summertime, local transportation is by motorized vehicles such as trucks, cars and four-wheelers whereas snowmobiles are the main source of transportation during the winter.

Kasabonika First Nation is a slightly larger community with 1014 band members and approximately 948 individuals live on reserve. Located at 448 kilometers from Sioux Lookout, Kasabonika has a very similar social-cultural reality to its neighbor community. Like Wapekeka, it is mostly accessible by air with winter roads during the winter, most community members can practice their religion at one of 3 churches and medical services are offered at the Emily Anderson Nursing Station. Youth living in Kasabonika can attend school from kindergarten to grade 12. In addition, Kasabonika has two retirement homes, which holds four units each. A temporary store is located in the Community Hall after a fire destroyed the local store owned by the franchise Northern Store in May 2011. According to the band council, a new store is expected to be build in 2012.

Ethnography

Ethnographic methods are used in the present study as a mean of capturing participants' multiple realities. One of the many strengths of ethnographic research is its ability to gain an in-depth understanding of lived realities of people and how people experience given issues

(Kendall, Murray & Linden, 2000). The ethnographic nature of this study permitted me to closely observe, record and engage in the daily life of local First Nations community practices. Ethnography is in itself a combination of research methods, combining among other things, participant observation, and formal and informal interviewing (Stewart, 1998). Using more than one method allows for obtaining information that might have been missed otherwise. For this research project, the majority of the data collection took the forms of participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is an effective method of data collection because it takes place in a naturalistic setting, where the researcher observes and takes part in the daily occurrences of the group of study (Jorgenson, 1989). This method focuses on the meanings of human existence as seen from the standpoint of those living within the cultural context (Stewart, 1998). The point of view of local community members can often be obscured to those outside the culture; therefore, direct involvement is essential to learn aspects of local life routines and cultures. By becoming directly involved as a participant in peoples' daily lives, the researcher can observe and experience the meanings and interactions of people from the role of an insider. It is important to note that this method is different from both pure observation and pure participation. It can be viewed as a strategy and a method for gaining access to the interior, seemingly subjective aspects of human existence (Jorgenson, 1989). Certain individuals take more readily to participant observation due to their ability to interact and develop relationships with people. The researcher's natural abilities will also influence the degree of involvement that one will choose or even be forced to adopt. Bryman & Teevan (2005) explained that the researcher adopts various roles during fieldwork as displaced on a continuum of degrees of involvement and detachment

with members of a social setting. Four participant roles are identified: a complete observer, a participant-as-observer, an observer-as-participant, or a complete participant. In this model, participation and observation are viewed as competing objectives; therefore, the more a researcher participates, the less she is able to observe and vice versa. The combination of the two degrees of involvement is most common when using this type of method in a research design. This allows the researcher to capitalize on the strength of each degrees of involvement. Despite the danger of migrating to either extreme of this method, it is possible to strike a balance to maximize the immersion in the field. As a result, I attempted to employ all of these roles at different times and for different purposes in the course of my research. The intention was to be an equal partner and enter a dialogue in order to share different kinds of knowledge and experience about the research issue. This method is important for my research because it allowed me to develop a level of familiarity with the two communities of study. The investment of time that is required to establish strong relationships with community members allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the context that can only be obtained by gaining first-hand experience (Brass, 2004). In addition, witnessing and participating in the phenomenon of study will expose me to themes that may not have been identified in the literature (Ely, 1991).

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition, data collection was also conducted by talking with community members using a semi-structured interview approach. This type of qualitative interview has an informal, conversational character, being shaped partly by the interviewer's pre-existing topic guide and also by concerns that will arise during the interview (Bloor and Wood, 2006). Working from a minimal question guide, preparation and skill is required to direct the interview in the right directions depending on the response of the participants. A key element of the interview process

was the utilization of interviewing techniques, which are an integral part of the success of this method in order to obtain rich qualitative data (Gratton and Jones, 2009). The content of the conversation was dependent on the responses of the interviewee, which at times led to new and unexpected revelations. Every participant was considered individually in order to create an environment that fostered an interaction of comfort and trust to encourage disclosure (VanderStoep and Johnson, 2009). While using this method of data collection, it was essential for me to develop an empathic, but separate, relationship with the research participants in order to maintain a good rapport and maintain the appropriate boundaries. As an interviewer, the mantra should be: “I will listen. I will affirm your experience. I will care. I cannot fix all the problems I see. Indeed, it may not be in my role or capacity to fix anything at all.” (VanderStoep and Johnson, 2009: P. 228). It is important to adopt such an approach as a researcher doing community-based participatory research (CBPR) because by eliminating these relational boundaries, it may develop an emotional involvement that may make detachment difficult challenging objective analysis. With this, however, the interview method has a number of advantages that maximize the data collection phase. The personal and interactive nature of an interview enables participants to talk about their own experiences and to elaborate on any areas of importance (Gratton and Jones, 2009). The unstructured approach of this type of interview is crucial to reveal insights and attitudes about the phenomenon of study, while observing the body language, tone of voice and expressions of the participants that may be useful.

In order to analyze the data gathered during fieldwork I employed discourse analysis. From a socio-cultural perspective, discourse can be defined as set of texts and their productions, dissemination and reception in a social context that brings it meaning (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). There are several materials that can be used to manifest discourse such as texts, videos,

newspapers, etc. These materials are used as a source of reference for individuals to construct meaning of their social reality. This being said, discourses can vary according to the community, the culture or even the historical context. These variations were the points of interest when analyzing the interviews. Discourse analysis is important in that it allowed me to explore power relations in an attempt to make sense of the social world of my participants by providing new and critical insights (Morgan, 2010). I attempted to identify categories, themes, ideas and roles within my conversations with the community members. Berger and Luckmann (1966) affirm that reality is socially constructed and therefore, people are products of social interactions. For this reason, discourse analysis offers a way of understanding social interactions. Researchers using this methodology emphasize the importance of reflexivity in the process of the project (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). It is important to recognize that the 'knower is part of the matrix of what is known' (Wilkinson, 1986, p.13). For this reason, one must be able to identify her preconceptions and bias on the subject in order to minimize them from the data analysis. There are several advantages of using discourse analysis. First, this technique can reveal unspoken or unacknowledged dimensions of human behavior that perpetuate dominant discourses that contribute to maintaining marginalized positions in society (Morgan, 2010). In addition, using a non-traditional method like discourse analysis creates an opportunity to see things that have been masked by the repeated application of traditional methods (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). This being said, discourse analysis did not provide concrete answers to a problem, but allowed me to understand the conditions behind the reality of Elders, and made me realize the essence of these conditions like in the assumptions, the very assumptions that enable the existence of this reality.

The analysis of the data was also inspired by an issue-focused analysis. The aim of this analysis is issue focused, where the concern lies in what could be learned about specific issues

from the participants (Weiss, 1974). In this type of analysis, some participants might naturally contribute more to the analysis than others. The coding involved in this type of analysis depends on the research interests one brings to the project. Some coding categories were created before knowing what the interviews were going to produce because they were related to the issues being studied. The process involved a shift from reading and coding transcripts. The coding was developed and defined through interaction with the data (Weiss, 1974). During the analysis, it became evident that the testimonials were divided in two categories: life in the past and the reality of life today. These two themes became the structure of each article. When talking about the memories of their childhood, the discourse was more emphasized on themes of survival for the Elders and their families which became the categories for the first article: the intense physicality of life in the past, the connection between health and local foods and the changing role of Elders. The second article is a result of the researcher's observations during her stay in the communities as well as the testimonials that were given during the interviews. Several themes could have been addressed in this second article but the predominant issues concerning the Elders that were chosen to describe are poor housing conditions, Elder abuse and the addictions rates in the community.

Ethical Considerations

In 1992, eighty individuals of Aboriginal descent reunited during a meeting of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples to discuss ethics in research. According to Costellano (2004), many protested that they were "researched to death". This is a justifiable statement considering the number of research projects that have taken place in Aboriginal communities over the last twenty years. At that moment, an Elder offered a thought of wisdom by saying: "If we have been researched to death, maybe it's time we started researching ourselves back to life"

(Costellano, 2004: P.98). This statement offered a new approach to Aboriginal research for several years.

In order to respect the culture, traditions and knowledge of the community members of Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nation, partnerships were created at the beginning of the research project and community leaders were involved in every step of the research design. The research agreement has been negotiated and partnerships have been established with our research group and the three participating communities. Additionally, all guiding ethical principles from the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2005) were adhered to throughout the research process.

As a student researcher, I understand the importance of increasing my awareness and understanding the reality of the individuals living in Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nations. To help me with this, I have taken part in an undergraduate Aboriginal studies course to familiarize myself with the socio cultural implications of conducting this type of research. Also, I have lived in both communities for a total of 16 weeks over the span of three summers in order to get acquainted with the community and get to know its residents. Prior to every interview, consent was obtained from participants by their signature on appropriate forms. Information on the consent forms was presented orally to each individual. The consent form was signed in duplicate- one copy for the participant and one for our records. Furthermore, a local research coordinator who was hired on the outset of this project and who also works as a band counselor acted as a gatekeeper for during the recruitment process. In order to create a non-threatening environment, the interviews had a conversational format and participants will be interviewed at

their area of choice. The Elders also had the option of doing the interview in English or Ojibwe. Consent was also obtained before audio recording any conversation for data analysis purposes.

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Running head: CHANGES CONCERNING THE ROLES OF ELDERS

**Are Elders No Longer Elders, but Just Old People?: First Nations Elders perspectives on
the changes concerning the critical roles of Elders in two remote communities in**

Northwestern Ontario

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Abstract

First Nations peoples have experienced dramatic lifestyle changes in a very short period of time. Less than a century ago, the land provided First Nations peoples with everything they needed for basic subsistence. With such constant changes and the history of assimilation that overshadows the Aboriginal population, it is becoming difficult for Elders to sustain their roles within the family unit and in their community as a whole. The present article describes the oral accounts on the critical roles of Elders in the past and the complexities of the changes that have occurred in two remote First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. The article is based on three summers of ethnographic research that involved participant observation of local cultural practices and 12 semi-structured interviews from 2009 to 2011. Guided discussion with Elders about their lives and their relationship to the land provide important insight into local cultural and personal values. Three primary themes emerged from the conversations with the Elders: the intense physicality of life in the past, the connection between health and local foods and the changing role of Elders. Findings suggest that Elders are eager to transmit their knowledge to provide a healthier lifestyle for future generations. The rapid transitions that have occurred in Northwestern Ontario have created a sense of urgency amongst the Elders to preserve the traditional cultural knowledge.

Introduction

Elders have always held an important place in Aboriginal societies because of the knowledge they possess about their culture, their land and what is required for their people's survival. The dramatic changes brought about by contact with Western Europeans have left First Nations Elders struggling to contend with the realities of contemporary existence while trying to maintain local cultural practices. For Aboriginal groups in Northern Ontario specifically, where contact with Europeans was relatively recent compared to other Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, the impact of colonization was profound. Semi-nomadic, subsistence-based lifestyles have been transformed to permanent wage-based settlements, which has altered familial relations and the roles Elders play in contemporary life. This paper documents the process of change that has occurred for First Nations peoples and the impact these changes have had on Elders in two remote First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. The article is based on three summers of ethnographic research that involved participant observation of local cultural practices and 12 semi-structured interviews from 2009 to 2011. From this ethnographic perspective, the complexities of Elders facing these transitions were investigated and situated within the broader historical context of colonialism. The focus of the study was to obtain oral accounts on the critical roles of Elders in the past and a description of the changes that have occurred over time. Their memories, which span several generations, concentrate on life in the bush and on the reserve before Euro-Canadian influence permanently impacted these remote settlements. This study was specifically intended to present the voice of Elders to enable them to speak to the complexities they are facing. Guided discussion with Elders about their lives and their relationship to the land provide important insight into local cultural and personal values (Ahenakew and Wolfart, 1992). The overall impression provided by these testimonials highlights

how Elders are caught between two worlds and are increasingly unsettled by their diminished abilities to influence either.

Methods

This article is part of a larger research project being conducted by the Indigenous Health Research Group (IHRG) at the University of Ottawa, involving working with remote northern First Nations to develop local food-procurement and distribution strategies. Key strategies of the project were to increase local capacity to procure, process and equitably distribute off-the-land foods; and supporting the development and implementation of new skills, knowledge and interest in vegetable gardening. For effectiveness and sustainability, the project was structured around intergenerational sharing of traditional and new knowledge, with Elders as the foundation of the knowledge sharing process. My research was incorporated in the intergenerational sharing component of the project where I maximized the knowledge translation opportunities to meet with the Elders of Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nations. The research for this project took place in the Wapekeka First Nation and the Kasabonika Lake First Nation. The study was conducted according to research protocols established in the initial planning phases with the Shibogama First Nation Tribal Council, Kasabonika and Wapekeka Chiefs and Band Councils and the Indigenous Health Research Group at the University of Ottawa. All research activities underwent a complete ethics review and were approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa and Health Canada.

Data collection

When conducting historical research, it is important to keep in mind that “written accounts, no matter how objective they may appear, are always influenced by the attitudes and

beliefs (not to mention the cultural outlook) of the writer” (Long and Dickason, 2000; p.16).

Canadian history, for example, is for the most part derived from written documentation, which many consider the only official source of history. It is important to understand the origin of the sources when discussing the history of the indigenous peoples of Canada, who for centuries relied on oral traditions to convey their history, their traditions and their teachings (Spielmann, 2003). Before contact with Europeans, Aboriginals in Canada relied solely on oral stories to transmit knowledge from one generation to the next (Steckley and Cummins, 2001). Western historical accounts tend to neglect the strong oral histories in which indigenous societies are rooted, thus requiring researchers to extend beyond written accounts. That being said, the information presented in this article builds on literary sources but also incorporates knowledge gleaned from the first-hand experience of living in the communities and from speaking with Elders who have lived in northern communities all of their lives.

The data presented in this article was obtained from an ethnographic study. Ethnographic methods were used as a mean of capturing community members’ multiple realities and immersing the author into daily life in Northern Ontario. Living in Kasabonika and Wapekeka First Nations during the spring and summer months over the span of three years afforded a unique opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of lived realities and how individuals experience given issues (Kendall, Murray, Linden, 2000). The first trip to the communities primarily entailed becoming familiar with the communities, the people and their culture, and participating in local activities such as community feasts and rummage sales to interact with community members. During the second trip, I worked as a research assistant and participated in food preparation activities. I met with adults and Elders to discuss the topics of food security and traditional food practices. The time I spent living in the communities allowed me to witness the

beauty of Northwestern Ontario as well as the challenges associated with the remoteness of its location. My third and final trip was dedicated to data collection for my research project. With the help of a community coordinator, who also acted as an interpreter, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with Elders in both communities. The qualitative interviews were purposively conversational, being shaped partly by the interviewer's topic guide (see Appendix A) as well as concerns that arose during the interviews (Bloor and Wood, 2006). Questions sought to explore how the rapid transitions in First Nations culture are affecting the Elders. The Elders had an opportunity to reminisce about the past in a casual environment while sharing knowledge they believe is important for future generations. The interviews varied in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Before each interview, the Elder was given the choice of doing the interview in Oji-Cree (through an interpreter) or in English. In addition, consent was obtained to audio-record the exchange in order to transcribe the interviews verbatim during the data analysis process. A conscious effort was made during the entire interview process to conduct the interviews in a non-threatening environment by asking the Elders to choose a place where they felt comfortable to meet in order to adopt a conversational format.

The semi-structured interview was very beneficial to data collection. The personal and interactive nature of the interviews permitted Elders to talk about their own experiences and to elaborate on stories that were important to them (Gratton and Jones, 2009). The unstructured approach was also crucial in revealing insights and attitudes about the topics of the study, with the added benefit of being able to observe participants' body language, tone of voice and expressions. During this trip, I also had the opportunity to interact on a deeper level with families, who graciously shared their knowledge of their land-based activities. I experienced the entire food preparation process: going out on the boat to set fishing nets, checking them daily to

bring in our catch, and observing and learning how to prepare fish and game in a traditional manner.

It is important to state that creating relationships with community members was not always an easy task as a young white female from the south who attends university. For this reason, it was important to spend time in both communities to fully understand the way of life in a remote settlement while demonstrating my intentions to learn from the community members. During my ethnographic stays, families generously opened their tepees and shared their stories, which allowed me to fully understand the richness of Kasabonika and Wapekeka culture and create very meaningful friendships.

The analysis of the data was also inspired by an issue-focused analysis. The aim of this analysis is issue focused, where the concern lies in what could be learned about specific issues from the participants (Weiss, 1974). In this type of analysis, some participants might naturally contribute more to the analysis than others. The coding involved in this type of analysis depends on the research interests one brings to the project. Some coding categories were created before knowing what the interviews were going to produce because they were related to the problem that was being studied. The process involved a shift from reading and coding transcripts. The coding was developed and defined through interaction with the data (Weiss, 1974). During the analysis, it became evident that the testimonials were divided in two categories: life in the past and the reality of life today. These two themes became the structure of the article. When talking about the memories of their childhood, the discourse was more emphasized on themes of survival for the Elders and their families which became the categories for this article: that being the intense physicality of life in the past, the connection between health and local foods and the changing role of Elders. .

Community Profiles

This paper focuses on two First Nations in Northwestern Ontario. The first community, Kasabonika Lake First Nation, is situated on an island in the Ashweig River, located 580 kilometers northeast of Thunder Bay. The community moved from its original reserve location in 1962 and only achieved full reserve status in 1976. There are 914 band members registered with the community, and 866 identified as permanent residents. The community is accessible year round by air, and for about two months during the winter, a winter road is built so critical supplies can be trucked in. The diet of community members consists of a mixture of market and land-based foods. Traditional fish and game are still regularly harvested and remain important aspects of local dietary practices. Residents speak English, Oji-Cree, or a combination of the two. Oji-Cree, an amalgamation of the Ojibway and Cree languages, is the prominent indigenous language spoken there. The majority of Elders speak their traditional language, but younger people are increasingly speaking English. The youth in the community can obtain an education at the Chief Simeon McKay Education Centre School, which offers educational programs to students from Junior Kindergarten up to Grade 12. There are also medical services offered at the Emily Anderson Memorial Nursing Station, which is staffed with registered nurses who provide medical care to community members and smaller neighbouring communities.

The Wapekeka First Nation (also known as Angling Lake), was established in 1947 as a satellite community of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (Big Trout Lake) and developed official band status in 1976 (Shibogama Education). Located 608 kilometers northeast of Thunder Bay (approximately 100 km northwest of Kasabonika), Wapekeka is a smaller community of only 350 people (AANDC, 2008). Similar to Kasabonika, it is a remote fly-in community with road access only during the coldest winter months. As a smaller community, it has limited

infrastructure compared to Kasabonika Lake. First, the Reverend Eleazar Winter Memorial School is the only school, an elementary school that includes Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8. As a result, youth have to leave their family and their community at the age of 14 if they wish to obtain their high school diploma, unlike in Kasabonika where they remain in their community to attend high school. Most students who go to high school move to Sioux Lookout or Thunder Bay for the duration of the school year. Second, the community has a locally owned store unlike the Northern Store in Kasabonika. The store is small but stocks non-perishable foods, a small variety of fresh produce, clothing and hardware. In terms of recreation, Wapekeka does not have an arena, but it does have a recreation centre, an outdoor rink where people can play hockey and broomball in the winter months and court sports such as basketball in the summer. It is one of the few places in the community with outdoor lights, which is significant in the winter months where there is less than eight hours of daylight. For a smaller community, there are many places of worship, all Christian: St. Paul's Anglican Church, the Parish Hall, the Full Gospel Youth Ministry Church and the Wapekeka Assembly Church. Like Kasabonika, the prominent indigenous language is Oji-Cree, which is spoken by the vast majority of Elders. Again, most youth have some knowledge of Oji-Cree but primarily communicate in English.

Historical Overview of Northern Oji-Cree Communities

First Nations peoples have experienced dramatic lifestyle changes in a very short period of time. Less than a century ago, the land provided First Nations peoples with everything they needed for basic subsistence (Hackett, 2005; Haman et al. 2010; Waldram et al., 2006). The land was essential for survival, not only for food, but also for shelter and other material resources. In many ways their environment shaped their lives. In order to survive, people lived in groups of closely related families called bands, where they remained scattered throughout the territory for

the greater part of the year (Rogers 1963). Every family member had a particular role to fulfill and was expected to contribute to the overall welfare of the family. The children worked alongside the Elders from an early age, which gave them a sense of belonging and imparted the knowledge they needed to survive. A communal approach was also present for parenting where both the family and the community were responsible for educating the children. Elders stated that winters were even colder than today, making warm shelters essential to combating the cold. Housing consisted of cone-shaped tepees, oval wigwams and, later, box-like log houses (Hiebert and Heinrich, 2003). The tepees were built with trimmed wooden poles leaned up against each other. The gaps between the branches were covered with fir branches and moss to keep the cold out. Francis Muckuck, an Elder from Mishkeegogamang, described the outer side of the dwelling. “They took pieces of birch bark—these pieces were sewn together like a quilt. So you’d take these and place them end to end. They were quite long. And then these bark scrolls were placed over the wooden tepees. It was never cold” (2003). These wooden dwellings were easy to construct on the land and the framework was usually left behind to benefit another family or the families would return to the same location. Joanⁱ, an Elder in her late seventies from Kasabonika Lake, explained how they maximized their resources for shelter during her childhood: “A long time ago trees were cut down for lodging and branches were used for flooring” (2011).

The families created their modes of transportation from the resources found on the land around them. In winter time, long trips would generally be done on toboggans pulled by dog teams. People used handmade snowshoes to travel in deep snow. As they spent the majority of their time outdoors, they kept warm with clothing items made of rabbit skins and caribou hide,

ⁱ All names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

such as jackets, mittens, leggings and moccasins. All of the knowledge for survival was transmitted from the Elders to the younger generations. These key individuals knew how to stay warm, set up shelter, gather food and travel on the land. The Elders used their knowledge to guide the group through life-altering decisions and how to live off the land (Jorgensen, 2007). This description of daily living was the reality of First Nations peoples up until the second half of the twentieth century. In only a few decades, First Nations peoples have transitioned from a sustainable living off-the-land lifestyle to a sedentary life in remote communities of Northern Ontario.

Graduated Stages of Euro-Canadian Intervention

Assimilation is a “very heavy loaded word—literally the process by which a minority population is absorbed into a prevailing or dominant culture” (Warry, 2007). In order to gain some sense of what contemporary life is like for First Nations people living in this remote region of Northern Ontario, it is important to acknowledge the government policies and the larger processes of colonization that have encouraged or even forced Aboriginal peoples to assimilate into mainstream society. In this region, Euro-Canadian intervention began in the mid-1700s but was formally articulated with the signing of Treaty 9 (signed in 1905, with adhesion coming in the early 1930s) and the creation of reserves. Under the Indian Act and life in permanent settlements, First Nations groups underwent dramatic lifestyle changes.

The people of this interior region of Ontario are amongst the last indigenous peoples of Canada to be contacted on their own lands by Europeans in the early to mid-1700s (Rogers, 1963). During that time, the Northwest Company and later Hudson’s Bay Company fur traders were in search of furs for the European market, which brought major shifts in population patterns. They initially established a mutually beneficial relationship for several years, where the

First Nations people supplied valuable furs in exchange for tools and supplies that simplified daily life. As Rogers (1963) explained, the exchanges quickly gained in importance to both parties:

As the tempo of fur trade increased, more and more goods of increasingly diverse types flowed into the country. As this took place, the native inhabitants became more closely allied with and bound to the traders, spending increasingly more time trapping fur bearers, the pelts of which were used in exchange for tools, food and clothing (p.69).

These exchanges made it more difficult for families to maintain a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The trade posts provided new opportunities for families to gain possessions and beneficial tools they had never used in the past (Jay, 1978). An Elder from Kasabonika Lake described one of his childhood memories of trade in the mid-1900s. “Sometimes my father would come to town at Christmas time when he had fur, he had to bring it at the store, what you caught. Beaver, mink, otter, squirrel, weasel, things like that. I don’t know how much they got paid at the time” (Jacob, 2011). As he explained, the hunters and trappers would bring their pelts to the post in exchange for a variety of material items. The fur trade was one of the factors that initiated the movement towards more permanent settlements. Later in the nineteenth century, the construction of the railroad enticed the Canadian government to sign a treaty with the Aboriginal peoples of the James Bay area to gain access to their traditional land. This partnership encouraged the First Nations peoples of Northern Ontario to sign their adherence to the James Bay Treaty on July 5, 1929 (Duhamel, 1964). Unlike most of the other treaties that were usually signed at a central location, this one was signed by the chief of the community, Sampson Beardy, at Big Trout Lake, where Elders agreed to share the benefits of the land and its resources with the government. For this, nearly 350 individuals received a gratuity of \$8, followed by an annuity of \$4 from the federal government (AANDC, 2008). Treaty 9 is still greatly criticized by the First

Nations Peoples of the James Bay area due to the unanswered promises that were made orally to the Elders upon signing. An Elder who was present that day explained, “I can clearly remember when the treaty was signed. We were promised assistance and protection from the government for as long as the sun shines and rivers flow. We were promised that our traditional activities would not be regulated from us” (McKay in Hiebert & Heinrich, 2007). The signing of the Treaty, however, brought up significant changes to all aspects of traditional life, as families came to rely on goods and services available in the communities, while receiving annual payments from the government (Sieciechowicz, 1986). The semi-nomadic lifestyles once necessary to follow food sources were no longer possible under the reserve system. Goods and services (i.e. stores and health stations) were put in communities to encourage people to permanently settle in designated partitions of land. This dramatically altered food-procurement practices, as people relied on store items rather than what was available on the land. This decrease in hunting/gathering lifestyles replaced nutrient-dense foods with lower quality store foods, while similarly decreasing the level of physical activity needed to maintain land-based food systems.

As communities were developed, other assimilatory strategies were implemented, most effectively witnessed through the residential school system. The federally run program, under the auspices of the Department of Indian Affairs, was designed to “kill the indian out of the child” (Milloy, 1999). It targeted Aboriginal children who were more vulnerable and easier to mold in order to make them adopt the Canadian customs of Christianity, learn English and therefore be more likely to integrate into mainstream society. Religious institutions of various Christian denominations assumed operation of the schools on behalf of the Canadian government. Children were forced out of their communities and isolated from their families for the greater part of the year in an attempt to maximize assimilation. There were a total of 130 residential

schools that operated from the nineteenth century to 1996, when the last school closed its doors (Miller, 1996). The statistics are unclear on the number of children who attended these schools but estimates are upwards of 150 000 youth (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Kirmayer et al., 2009). The impact of residential schools was tremendous. Children were forbidden to speak their native languages and cultural practices were condemned. Languages were lost, traditional healing aborted, spirituality and ceremonies condemned, leaving a tremendous cultural and spiritual vacuum for First Nations peoples across the country. Compounded with cultural loss, thousands of children experienced ongoing sexual, emotional and physical abuse from the individuals who administered the school (Steckley & Cummins, 2001). Communities and individual community members are still coping with the legacy of residential schools and are striving to find ways to recover what was lost over this dark period in Canadian history.

To conclude this brief overview of Euro-Canadian interventions, it is fundamental to grasp the complexity of the transitions that have occurred in First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. All cultures face transformations of varying degree according to the impact of the environment that surrounds them. For First Nations, however, the speed at which these transitions occurred, along with their severity, produced tremendous turmoil. The combination of policies, laws and colonial mindsets have brought dramatic changes, and Elders are experiencing the highest degree of vulnerability (Ahenakew and Wolfart, 1992; Baldrige, 2001; Labillois, 1994). The Elders who live in the communities today were born in tepees, endured resource scarcity and struggled to maintain traditional knowledge that was vital for their own and their ancestors' survival. In a lifetime, they have experienced the vast majority of the

changes that have occurred to First Nations peoples. The following section presents the Elders' perspectives on the impact of these transitions on themselves and on their communities.

The Impact of Rapid Transitions

Three primary themes emerged from the interviews with the Elders in Kasabonika and Wapekeka: the intense physicality of life in the past; the connection between health and local foods; and the changing role of Elders. It is important to stress that a relationship of trust had developed between the Elders and the researcher. They shared stories of their past while also expressing hopes and aspirations for their grandchildren. In writing their words down, the limitations of capturing the full context of what was being communicated became evident. In response to this, several verbatim passages have been included to bring the reader as close to the interview experience as possible. The goal in relating these stories is to give the reader the feeling of having a conversation with a grandparent who is sharing his or her words of wisdom about the world we live in today. This type of knowledge-sharing does not reflect the oral traditions of First Nations peoples in this region, but the written form does “give a voice to the marginalized and assist in creating outcomes from research that are in line with the nature of the community” (Kovach, 2009: p.100).

Elders' Knowledge and the Physicality of Survival on the Land

First Nations peoples have experienced dramatic life changes over the last century. In the past, the land was essential for survival as a lone food source and a means of shelter. Life on the land was arduous and demanding, and required intimate knowledge to even travel the vast terrain and complex waterway systems. The pace of life associated with hunting and gathering to survive was not easy and required a high level of physical activity (Haman et al., 2010; Hayes et

al., 2005). The interviews conducted in the scope of this study support this statement. All of the Elders described their way of life in the past as difficult and challenging. As John explained, “It was a lot of work to survive. It was a lot of determination even for the kids to survive” (John, 2011). Unlike today, people lived semi-nomadic lifestyles, following their food sources.

Elizabeth emphasized this difference:

It’s a lot different than living a long time ago. Most of the time we were spending our time in the bush, moving around where we can get the food. Now all they do is stay in one place. We just kept moving around. But today we stay in one place, we don’t move around. We did a lot of moving around with our body and all that, moving our body circulation everyday but today we’re not like that. (Elizabeth, 2011)

Christopher also compared the physical demands of the past to those today and the toll it takes on the health of people:

Before, when you want to get something done, like if you wanted to cook, you had to go out and get wood to make a fire. Now if you want to cook, you just have to turn something on and that’s it. If you wanted to have water, you had to go down to the lake and get water. Now it’s just turning knobs. Everything is easier. There’s a reason why people tend to get sick at an early age, it’s because we hardly move around. Back then, people used to work for what they wanted and they lived longer. (Christopher, 2009)

Joan also talked about the health of her Elders. “Elders a long time ago were really strong and healthy. I had a grandfather who was like that. He took care of his family responsibilities till the time he was almost ready to leave” (Joan, 2011).

The Elders agreed that life in the past was a healthier way of life; it was not by choice but rather the need to survive. They followed the game on the land, which required building several temporary shelters. Elizabeth explained:

We would just stay there where the food is because we didn’t have any houses. All we had was a moss tepee or a canvas tent. That’s all that was available. If the man kills a moose, then the family moves in there, like to where they kill the moose. (Elizabeth, 2011)

The shelters were not torn down after every stay. Isaac explained that they reused the shelters even if they travelled long distances: “Wherever the food was plentiful, that’s where we moved. We left everything, the lodging, and we would come back” (John, 2011). The families had to adapt their shelter to temperature changes in the north according to the seasons. John added:

It depended on the seasons for what lodging was supposed to be like. We made houses from trees in the winter and branches for floor, moss tepees during the winter. During the summer was when we made tepees of canvas. For each season, the lodging would change. (John, 2011)

These types of shelters were useful for such a mobile lifestyle, but required regular upkeep. George elaborated, “We didn’t have wooden floors in my younger days. We used tree branches. We had to do this often because those branches were starting to get used in 3 or 4 days because it was hot. I had to do that” (George, 2011).

Once the family shelter was constructed, every member of the family had to contribute to daily tasks. It was a team effort to live a sustainable life. Men and women had clear responsibilities. Joanne alluded to this situation: “The male would go out and try to get game for food. While he’s out, the mother would be fending for the family and the household. Either setting up a net, or setting up rabbit snares. That’s how we would go through till the big game comes in” (Joanne, 2011). Since the men were constantly moving on the land, it was often difficult for families to communicate in a state of emergency. Scott explained how they utilized the land as a messenger:

Today since we have the telephone, it’s fast to get the word out, but in the past, because families were always traveling and hunting in their areas, when we were going down river, sometimes we wouldn’t know till much later that they had lost a child or their wife. Sometimes the only way we would know is if someone was coming that way or we would use birch bark and write down something that has happened

about their family and we would send it down river. We didn't make one copy but lots on several birch barks because sometimes it would get stuck on a branch along the river or go a different way. So we make a lot because most people were along the shores. We didn't go and get them because it was hard, we were just paddling because there were no motors so you couldn't just take-off and go find them. So it was like message in a bottle! (Scott, 2011)

The men and women had clear responsibilities to sustain the family but the children also had a role to play and needed to be well rested for the morning, therefore "all of the children would be in the house tucked in before sunset" (Christopher, 2011). They woke up early in the morning to accomplish different chores. John talked about his childhood responsibilities:

I never slept in. I was told to get up and not go to bed when there was work to be done. My first responsibilities as a little boy was getting water and make sure wood was inside the house and making sure kindling was available. The determined ones were the ones who would survive. The summer months were the fun ones because we had berries and all that. (John, 2011)

Children got used to an active lifestyle at a very young age. They would start with small tasks around the house and then their parents would introduce them to more arduous tasks:

When I was young, my father wasn't just sitting in the place, he would just take me out to show me how it feels to get the jobs done to keep myself alive. When I was 9, I was able to do most things. It took me two years to learn because he took me out when I was 7 or 6. He took me out to show me how to set traps or even how to build a camp, to build the place where I could sleep. (George, 2011)

Lara picked up on this point as well:

We teach the kids as soon as they start to pick it up, then they start doing it themselves. Even at chopping wood or bringing wood in, it starts at a young age. When they keep growing you teach them different things. Shooting a sling shot, setting up rabbit snare, beaver traps. Once they get into their teens, they start doing more and more, even hunting. Moose hunting, you have to keep track of the other hunters are and you have to know when it's a good time to go moose hunting and when it's not a good time. We usually prefer when it's windy. When it's windy

the moose can't hear anything that well. Sometimes we would use their snowshoes to find where the moose are. (Lara, 2011)

Being active on the land for several hours and having responsibilities of his own at a young age helped George build his work ethic for when he later started working for pay. He mentioned:

I started work in the morning say at 6 a.m. and then went home at noon and would come back to work at 1 p.m. then quit at 6 p.m. Today, people get paid everything in 2 weeks. At that time, I would get paid every day. I would get one smoked fish for 11 hours of work. The next job had I had, I was starting to get money from that. I only worked 8 hours a day so I would get paid every day. I would get a quarter and 2 plums. That was one day. Sometimes I would get 3 plums and a dime. That's the job I had in my younger days. (George, 2011)

In addition to teaching the youth about traditional activities, their recreational hobbies also kept them active. John suggested, "There were a lot of activities that we did way back. For example, I used to play bows and arrows, like target shooting and the prizes were the arrows. If your arrow was near the target, you would get the arrows. So a lot of people lost their arrows like that" (John, 2011). He also added that people danced at gatherings:

In a celebration, that was one of the things that that was done, square dancing. When I was younger, that was the main celebration tradition. I was always a part of that. A lot of people. Ohh, I also played the fiddle! Only two instruments were used: the fiddle and a big cooking pot wrapped in a blanket or something. A lot of us loved dancing, even my mom loved dancing. There was always one gathering a year and it was over Christmas and New Year. That was the celebration with the square dancing. Everybody had their own family there and everyone would come together. (John, 2011)

For several years, First Nations peoples in Canada relied on oral traditions for survival. Elders were the crucial knowledge-base of these non-literate societies. The Elders of both communities described the past, as being arduous and physical activity was a main theme. In order to travel the land efficiently and keep up with the daily tasks, Elders had the role of

teaching the younger generations how to accomplish tasks in the most efficient way possible.

Without the teachings of these knowledge bearers, it would not have been possible for families to survive on the land.

Life in the past: Off-the-land food sources

The second theme discussed by the Elders was the utilization of food from the land. The high level of physical activity described in the previous section was to satisfy basic life requirements, which most often centered around food. Joanne said, “An Elder would keep on trapping and hunting until they weren’t able to walk” (Joanne, 2011). A lot of work was invested in food procurement, and because of the high labour intensity, nothing was wasted. Joan emphasized how they utilized everything when she was young:

Way back, nothing went bad... meaning food, even though there was nothing like freezers and stuff like that. Nothing was ever thrown away, nothing went bad. We had ways of storing their foods. Like fish, we smoked it, dried it and then stored it. Even for storing it, we got everything from the land (Joan, 2011).

Since there was no store, the Elders explained that eating game was the only food source. “What I remember, I don’t know how old I was, that was before I was 5 or 6, there was no store. Back then I didn’t mind about those things that were in the store. Whatever we got, we ate; duck, rabbit, anything” (George, 2011). With the introduction of the permanent store came new food items. Joan remembered when she first stepped foot on the old settlement in Kasabonika:

I remember that old settlement, I was small and I remember my mom holding my hand going over there. There was this Elder Charlie that was living in that area there and I was told that it is Kasabonika by my mom. He was selling some stuff, tea but not in the bags, it was grounded tea and sugar, cube sugar (Joan, 2011)

John related a similar experience with trade where individuals travelled to make exchanges:

My first memory of buying something was somebody came to our camp on a dogsled selling stuff: flour, sugar, oats and tea. Sugar now is completely different. It came in a small round pill style and that was the sugar. Money was never used for the exchanges, it was pelts. The people in the dogsled, if they knew someone was living there, that's where they headed. They knew they would probably have a lot of pelts. (John, 2011)

In addition, some of the pelts were not exchanged but used by the women to make several items like moccasins, mukluks, slippers, mittens, hats and jackets. It was also used to keep warm at night:

We had rabbit skin sleeping bags. Those things are really, like when I'm thinking about it, even when it was -40, I lay there with just a few branches I had picked up from trees around and I slept there and I was OK. That's why I'm still alive. -40°C is really cold. Then I started to buy the sleeping bags from the store, I couldn't even sleep even when it was 10 or 15 below outside. That rabbit skin sleeping bag is really warm. (George, 2011)

A few of the Elders also explained how they made full use of the land and whatever the land provided. Mothers were said to be especially creative using moss for diapers and other natural resources for swaddling. Michelle explained that what nature provided was seasonally dependent so planning was required according to the seasons:

We would hang them [moss] on trees to dry out and whenever we would run out in the winter time, they would go out and get them. Some people didn't do that but then they would go asking around if someone had moss they could use. Also, with moss diapers there was less garbage, not like the garbage we get from the diapers today. (Michelle, 2011)

She also added that the land was a source of medication for newborns:

It's good for the kids, you don't have to worry about side effects. They don't give little babies medicine from 0-3 months but with Labrador

Tea, you can just give it to them. It helps with your cough too. That plant is purple and when you drink it, it makes you hot. We usually gave that to newborn babies after they were born. We gave them a little bit to open up their airways and help with their intestines. When they're inside the womb, they might swallow their own poop so that will help them. Even when their born, their poop is dark black-brown, so they gave them that and it cleared it up. (Michelle, 2011)

The Elders in Kasabonika and Wapekeka described a close connection with the land while they were growing up. Since there were no community stores to provide food and clothing, the families had to rely on each other and on the land to survive. Elders knew how to maximize the resources from the land to provide a healthy source of nutrition, medicine and clothing for their families. The family-oriented approach to daily living allowed the Elders to teach the younger generations from an early age how to be self-sufficient to stay alive and provide for their future families.

Life in the past: What does it mean to be an Elder?

The third theme that arose in the interviews was the meaning of being an Elder in the past. The literature on First Nations culture commonly depicts Elders as embodiments of strength as well as keepers and guardians of traditional lifestyles (Baldrige, 2001). These individuals are links to the past, which makes them vital holders of cultural knowledge (Kirk, 1986). All of the Elders that were interviewed agreed with these statements when reflecting on the past. There was a high level of respect, which was manifested in many dimensions of daily living. First off, Elders would generally provide guidance within the family unit:

When I was young, everyone followed the teachings and the wishes of the Elders. Things were OK because everyone knew their roles and responsibilities from the Elders, like what Elders were teaching them like how to raise their families. What the roles are as a man, a woman and the children. (Scott, 2011)

Elders would share their knowledge with children at a very young age. Christopher remembered, “We would go to bed early and get up early. Way back then, when they would put the kids to bed, that’s when the Elders roles would come up. That’s when the Elders would tell stories and legends. That’s what we did mostly every night” (Christopher, 2011). Scott also remembers his evenings as a child. “In my time, it was very peaceful and quiet. In the evenings, the Elders would tell legends. That was our form of TV. In our minds, we would see what they were saying, the legends” (Scott, 2011). In return for the knowledge being shared, the children were taught to honour their Elders by helping out when possible. Louise explained:

When I was growing up, there was a lot of respect for Elders. Like if you see an Elder chopping his wood or carrying in their wood, you would go right away and help them out. Even going to get water for them down at the lake. I think there was a lot more respect for them, but now it’s a bit different. (Louise, 2011)

Michelle agreed with this statement by adding that they did not expect to be compensated. “In the past, whenever we saw an Elder that needed help, we did. If it was to bring in water, getting wood for them, whatever, they would just immediately do it. Not wait to be paid or to be told over and over again to help them” (Michelle, 2011). In addition, Elders lived in their community for their entire lifetime. Two interviewees explained that the family respected the Elders by taking the responsibility of caring for their sick Elders. “In the past, they would look after them until they passed away” (Scott, 2011). “The people who would take care of an Elder were mostly family and the extended family. His kids, grandkids and great-grandkids would come together and take care of this Elder” (Christopher, 2011).

Guidance and leadership were not only given at the family level but for community living. Scott explained that Elders knew the right decisions to make due to experience:

In the past, we depended on the Elders. Even the council they had at the time, there might have been only one or two council members. People depended on the Elders, they were a rock for them. We listened to the Elders, it made our decisions stronger because we depended on them for guidance, support and their advice. Whatever they said, if you listen to the Elders, whatever you are trying to do is going to work. It's going to be strong and last long. If you don't listen to what they're saying, it might not work, it might not go well. (Scott, 2011)

Joanne also stated that they were consulted in the decision making process. "That's what council did, they would seek knowledge on some things like how to run their community or their people.

Whatever they were stuck with, that's who they got their advice from before" (Joanne, 2011).

Christopher added to the discussion in his interview by making a comparison with the situation today. "Back then, the Elders were more like leaders in the community. Making decisions on how communities should be run, to make sure to have a safe community. Now everything has changed. The younger people have more control than the Elders" (Christopher, 2011).

The roles of the Elders were clearly defined prior to the various stages of Euro-Canadian contact, replacing traditional land based lifestyles with a more contemporary permanent settlement existence. Elder knowledge was essential for survival, which naturally placed them in a position of leadership where they were valued and respected. Without technology such as television or radio to provide any type of outside communication, the Elders were commonly the source of entertainment and information, sharing stories to provide teachings and transmit cultural values to younger generations. They were consulted for advice, guidance and support, which were known to be essential in building a strong foundation for the family and the community. During the interviews, the Elders expressed that the constant changes in the communities have left them with a lack of purpose. The knowledge once required to live off the land is no longer essential for survival, yet many Elders maintain the strong affinity to the land

and are frustrated seeing this way of life disappear. Permanent settlement also increased the difficulty to sustain their roles within the family unit as well as in their community as a whole.

Conclusion

The First Nations peoples of Northern Ontario are amongst the last indigenous people of Canada to be contacted on their own land by Europeans. For several years, the land was essential for survival, not only for food, but also for shelter and other material resources. In many ways, their environment shaped their lives. The accumulation of Euro-Canadian interventions has created complex transitions in First Nations communities. The combinations of policies, laws and colonial mindsets have brought dramatic changes and Elders are experiencing the highest degree of vulnerability. The speed at which these transitions occurred, along with their severity, produced tremendous turmoil. The guided discussions that were conducted with Elders about their lives uncovered that they are caught between two worlds and are increasingly unsettled by their diminished abilities to influence either.

In a lifetime, the Elders who are currently living in the communities have experienced the vast majority of the changes that have occurred to First Nations peoples. Three primary themes emerged from the conversations with the Elders in Kasabonika and Wapekeka First Nations. The Elders described the intense physicality of life in the past. They agreed that life in the past was a healthier way of living. Their lifestyle was not a choice but rather essential for survival. The pace of life associated with hunting and gathering was not easy and required a high level of physical activity. The daily tasks were difficult and challenging, which required a team effort to live a sustainable life. The second theme that arose was the correlation between health and local foods. Since there was no store to provide food and clothing, the families had to

rely on each other and on the land to survive. The Elders knew how to maximize resources from the land to provide a healthy source of nutrition, medicine and clothing for their families. The last emerging theme from the data collection is the changing role of Elders. In the past, the knowledge of the Elders was essential for survival. They played a crucial role in every dimension of daily living, which naturally placed them in a position of leadership where they were valued and respected. In addition, the close-knit families created greater knowledge transfer opportunities. The Elders would teach the youth the essential skills to survive at a very young age and in return, the children would honor their Elders.

The Elders who live in the communities today were born in tepees, endured resource scarcity and struggled to maintain traditional knowledge that was vital for their own and their ancestors' survival. The rapid transitions that have occurred in Northwestern Ontario have created a sense of urgency amongst the Elders to preserve the traditional cultural knowledge. The installation of permanent settlements has slowly eliminated the critical role of Elders for survival. The Euro-Canadian lifestyle has created alternatives for food procurement, shelter and clothing that are having serious repercussions on the health of community members. Elders have shared a unanimous opinion about the future of First Nations peoples: Elders have a wealth of knowledge that has yet to be shared with their children. Their stories and teachings are essential for the good health of future generations. Many community members in both communities share this opinion, but finding ways to incorporate these traditional teachings into the ever-changing contemporary environment is clearly a challenge. How these challenges will be faced in these two remote First Nations remains to be seen.

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**Running head: PORTRAIT OF THE CRISIS SITUATION OF FIRST NATIONS
ELDERS**

**The Forgotten Leaders of First Nations Culture: The crisis situation of Elders
in two remote First Nations communities**

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Abstract

First Nations peoples have experienced dramatic life changes over the past half century. The process of change was not a conscious decision made by First Nations peoples but rather the result of successive stages of European contact and formal colonization by what is now the government of Canada. The legacy of colonization and disadvantage has resulted in a struggle to maintain local cultural practices while being influenced by contemporary western life (Warry, 2009). First Nations Elders, who were once crucial to the survival of a band, are now facing the highest degree of vulnerability and are desperately searching for a new identity that gives them purpose. The goal of this paper is to shed light on the present condition of Elders in two remote First Nations communities in Northern Ontario. The paper is based on three summers of ethnographic research, which involved participant observation of local cultural practices and 12 semi-structured interviews from 2009 to 2011. Meeting with Elders in their homes and at several community events provided insight into their lives and the challenges they are currently facing. These challenges and experiences are hardly one-dimensional, as they each have varying degrees of family support, financial stability and housing conditions. However, the consistent thread in all the cases was the ongoing struggle Elders have faced trying to reconcile traditional perspectives with the growing dominance of contemporary western lifestyle practices. Although there remains symbolic gestures of respect the historically unseen socio-economic conditions of Elders demonstrate that they are suffering from the myriad cultural transitions.

Introduction

First Nations peoples have experienced dramatic life changes over the past half century. The process of change was not a conscious decision made by First Nations peoples but rather the result of successive stages of European contact and formal colonization by what is now the government of Canada. The legacy of colonization and disadvantage has resulted in a struggle to maintain local cultural practices while being influenced by contemporary western life (Warry, 2009). First Nations Elders, who were once crucial to the survival of a band, are now facing the highest degree of vulnerability and are desperately searching for a new identity that gives them purpose. Elders are commonly depicted as the individuals they were, and in some cases remain: “relied upon to discuss and decide on all issues that affect the welfare of the community” (Dallin et al. 2000; p.174). As with many traditional societies, “old people have always enjoyed a privileged position based on respect, consideration, status and authority. But this is starting to be upset under the influence of modern trends and that privileged position is now being questioned” (United Nations, 2002:19).

There is a very limited body of literature on First Nations Elders in Canada (Dumont-Smith, 2002), which makes it difficult to fully understand the complexities of their existence. The goal of this paper is to shed light on the present condition of Elders in two remote First Nations communities in Northern Ontario. The paper is based on three summers of ethnographic research, which involved participant observation of local cultural practices and 12 semi-structured interviews from 2009 to 2011. From this ethnographic perspective, information was gathered about the lives of 12 Elders living in two different First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. Meeting with Elders in their homes and at several community events, I was able to gain insight into their lives and the challenges they are currently facing. These

challenges and experiences are hardly one-dimensional, as they each have varying degrees of family support, financial stability and housing conditions. However, the consistent thread in all the cases was the ongoing struggle Elders have faced trying to reconcile traditional perspectives with the growing dominance of contemporary western lifestyle practices (Spitzer, 2005; Waldram et al., 2006).

Methods

This paper is part of a larger research project being conducted by the Indigenous Health Research Group (IHRG) at the University of Ottawa, involving working with remote northern First Nations to develop local food-procurement and distribution strategies. Key strategies of the project were to increase local capacity to procure, process and equitably distribute off-the-land foods; and supporting the development and implementation of new skills, knowledge and interest in vegetable gardening. For effectiveness and sustainability, the project was structured around intergenerational sharing of traditional and new knowledge, with Elders as the foundation of the knowledge sharing process. My research was incorporated in the intergenerational sharing component of the project where I maximized the knowledge translation opportunities to meet with the Elders of Wapekeka and Kasabonika First Nations. The research for this project took place in Wapekeka First Nation and Kasabonika Lake First Nation. The study was conducted according to research protocols established in the initial planning phases with the Shibogama First Nation Tribal Council, Kasabonika and Wapekeka Chiefs and Band Councils and the University of Ottawa research team. All research activities underwent a complete ethics review and were approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa and Health Canada.

Data Collection

The data presented in this paper was obtained from an ethnographic study. Ethnographic methods were used as a means of capturing community members' multiple realities and immersing the author into daily life in Northern Ontario. Living in Kasabonika and Wapekeka First Nations during the spring and summer months over the span of three years afforded a unique opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of lived realities and about how individuals experience given issues (Kendall, Murray, Linden, 2000). The information presented in this paper is based largely on what was documented while participating and observing local cultural practices over the past three years.

Participant observation is an effective method of data collection because it takes place in a natural setting, where the researcher observes and takes part in the daily occurrences of the group of study (Jorgenson, 1989). This method focuses on the meanings of human existence as seen from the standpoint of those living within the cultural context (Stewart, 1998). The point of view of local community members can often seem obscure to those outside the culture; therefore, direct involvement is essential to learn aspects of local life routines and cultures. By becoming directly involved as a participant in peoples' daily lives, the researcher can observe and experience the meanings and interactions of people through the eyes of an insider. It is important to note that this method differs from both pure observation and pure participation. It can be viewed as a strategy and a method for gaining access to the inner, seemingly subjective aspects of human existence (Jorgenson, 1989).

The analysis of the data was also inspired by an issue-focused analysis. The aim of this analysis is issue focused, where the concern lies in what could be learned about specific issues

from the participants (Weiss, 1974). In this type of analysis, some participants might naturally contribute more to the analysis than others. The coding involved in this type of analysis depends on the research interests one brings to the project. Some coding categories were created before knowing what the interviews were going to produce because they were related to the problem that was being studied. The process involved a shift from reading and coding transcripts. The coding was developed and defined through interaction with the data (Weiss, 1974). During the analysis, it became evident that the testimonials were divided in two categories: life in the past and the reality of life today. These two themes became the structure of the article. This article is a result of the researcher's observations during her stay in the communities as well as the testimonials that were given during the interviews. Several themes could have been addressed in this second article but the predominant issues concerning the Elders that were chosen to describe are poor housing conditions, Elder abuse and the addictions rates in the community.

Description of Life in Both Communities

It is important to state that the information being presented here is derived from my interactions with Elders and from my discussions with them about life in the community. Given the Elders' mainly critical accounts of their life circumstances, much of the information gathered appears negative. Consequently, the information has been depicted in the voices of the people themselves, in part to provide a forum to the Elders in which they can express their feelings and concerns. A second goal is to engage these voices in a larger public discussion in order to raise awareness about issues First Nations communities are currently facing and to encourage efforts to ameliorate conditions and circumstances with which Elders in Wapekeka and Kasabonika are currently contending.

The Canadian population is aging rapidly. The number of seniors has more than doubled in the past 25 years and this trend is expected to continue for the next several decades. In 2005, 13% of the Canadian population was over 65 years of age. The projected trend for the senior population is that it will reach more than 23% of Canadian citizens by the year 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Canadians are now living longer due to a number of factors such as healthier lifestyles, improvements in disease detection and medical treatments. Extended life expectancies will result in a greater need for assistance with daily living and personal care due to higher rates of disability during the last stages of life. As a result, seniors who are living longer rely on their families to assist with informal care. Eldercare was manageable in the past mainly because of the baby boom generation, which created a balance between the individuals giving and receiving care. As a result, between 70 and 80% of the support and care for Elders living at home is provided as unpaid work by family members (Cranswick and Dosman, 2008). However, the number of seniors will increase as the baby boom generation reaches old age and will therefore shift the dependency ratio. This future demographic combined with lifestyle changes will likely result in family members becoming a less viable source of care for the elderly.

Families now rely more on professional care and privately paid assistance. Senior care facilities are becoming a popular concept in North American society, to assist with the crisis of aging due to the changing demographics and lifestyles of family members. Most seniors who move into a care facility have a health condition that requires more assistance than their personal network can provide. The types of facilities range from assisted living to nursing homes, where the level of care varies but family involvement still remains a crucial element in all cases. Caregivers perform a number of tasks in caring for seniors such as personal care, housework, transportation and medical care (Cranswick and Dosman, 2008). The crisis of aging is also

affecting the First Nations communities across Northern Ontario, but not in identical ways. Contrary to the Demographic data provided above, the Aboriginal population is significantly younger than the general Canadian population. In 2006, Aboriginal seniors accounted for only 5% of the Aboriginal population compared to 13% in the non-aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). In addition, a person of Aboriginal ancestry's life expectancy is similar to rates of the Canadian population 40 to 50 years ago. Despite the inverse in population demographics, First Nations communities are contending with how to respond to Elder care and are often turning to western models of Elder care. In an attempt to offer a greater range of services for Elders and help with the housing crisis, old age homes have been introduced in remote communities. However, the western response of professionalizing care is a foreign concept to the majority of Elders living on First Nations reserves.

Elders in indigenous communities across the country have always occupied a prominent role in the community. These individuals have substantial life experiences and possess an abundance of knowledge about their culture, their land and what is required for their people's survival. Elders are crucial to any traditional society because they are critical knowledge bearers and a link to the past. In Wapekeka First Nation and Kasabonika Lake First Nation, these values can still be recognized at different community events. During community feasts for example, there is an unspoken code of respect to let the Elders be the first individuals to be served. In addition, Elders are given the opportunity to open an event with a prayer or there is presence of an Elder that acts as an advisor during band council meetings. A sense of symbolic importance is manifested towards the Elders in both communities. Unfortunately, this affirmation of respect and power is not transposed in every dimension of the Elders lives. It is important to shed light on some of life's basic necessities that are deteriorating at an alarming rate.

Housing

Many Elders living in the communities today were born prior to the establishment of permanent settlements created as a result of the Treaty (Treaty 9) that was signed between First Nations in this region and the federal government. For much of their lives, Elders lived a semi-nomadic existence, moving about to follow their food sources and dwelling in tepees or small log cabins. As late as the 1970s, people were transitioning from life in the bush (for at least six months of the year) to life in settlements with permanent housing, a store, medical services and basic amenities.

Both communities in this study now have buildings that community members call the “Elders’ complex” or “old age home”. In Kasabonika, the complex was built approximately 10 years ago as a means of accommodating the needs of Elders by providing the basic necessities under one roof. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) provided the funding to build the two complexes. Each building holds four units that are wheelchair accessible. The units are also equipped with raised toilets, safety rails and all the necessary appliances. The Elders’ complex is a useful initiative to keep the Elders in the community as long as possible in a safe environment that suits their needs. A homecare nurse from Kasabonika explains the willingness of Elders to stay in the community during the last stages of life despite their poor health conditions:

They don’t want to go. It’s not fair that they have to go and be amongst strangers in a world or environment that doesn’t understand their language, their culture, needs and practices. A lot of times it’s taking them away from their family support even if the family doesn’t set foot in their house to visit them; the Elders still know they’re there. If you take the Elder out of the

community, you've taken their world from them. They usually go down really quickly and then they're gone. (Ruthⁱ, 2011)

Testimonials from Elders demonstrate that moving to an old age home can be difficult because it means they have to accept that they are aging and require more support. The Elders' complex, a community initiative, has enabled individuals to stay in their community and closer to their families for a longer period of time.

Vacant units in the residence are available to any of the Elders for a rental fee. Given the low monthly income of most Elders, especially those who are single, this rental fee poses a significant challenge. Based on conversations with the Elders in both communities, a single Elder receives, on average, \$900 to \$1,100 a month to provide for all his or her needs. To live in a unit in the Elders' complex, the tenant has to cover the rental fee of \$400 a month plus the hydro, oil and telephone utilities. These expenses leave very little money to pay for food, which is exorbitantly priced in remote northern areas. This is one of the reasons that Elders commonly live with family members who receive a monthly check and then divide the costs.

The cost of daily living and a housing shortage are definitely problems in the communities, and they have a direct correlation with the Elders' nutrition. The costs of food are generally double or triple the price of an identical product in a rural or urban area, which makes it difficult for Elders to eat well, so their diet is a particular area of concern. Their limited financial resources make it difficult to afford nutritious food items from the store, and as they get older, hunting, fishing and gathering sustenance from the land becomes increasingly difficult. Therefore many elders buy cheaper alternatives from the store, primarily processed foods that are

ⁱ All the names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

high in fat and sodium and low in nutritional value, such as processed meat like Klik© rather than lean ground beef.

Elders who are not occupying a unit in the old age home generally live in their homes with their spouse and/or family members. In fact, due to a shortage of housing in First Nations communities, households tend to be larger than in non-First Nations communities, with upwards of 80% of Elders living with other family members, and often in substandard housing (United Nations, 2005). In the Kasabonika and Wapekeka First Nations, the majority of Elders live in the oldest homes, which are typically brown in colour and finished with wood paneling. Due to their age, these homes do not require dwellers to pay rent—they usually own the home—but the conditions are not always safe. For example, an Elder named Isaac from Kasabonika (see Figure 1), lives in a home that cannot be heated properly, so plastic has been added to help retain the heat.



Figure 1. Home in Kasabonika Lake



Figure 2. Street View in Wapekeka

Elders will stay in these homes as long as possible because it is the cheapest way to live in the community. Most Elders do not have an income from employment and depend entirely on their Old Age Security payments of around \$700 per month to pay for their basic necessities. These older homes are heated by woodstoves that assist in reducing fuel costs, but that also require

significant physical labour to maintain the wood supply. Otherwise, the wood must be purchased, decreasing fuel savings. For example, Jacob explained that he used to go out on the land. “Here I use wood. I picked it up myself out there. That’s what I did all my life. Even here, we don’t have any running water, we only have lights for hydro and that’s enough” (2005). During the research conducted in the communities, it was noted that there were homes where the appliances such as the stove and refrigerator had never been used. When asked about this, an Elder explained that he grew up eating what his family had caught during the day. For this reason, he did not see a purpose in storing food in the house that would not be consumed immediately.

The more recent homes in the communities are finished with blue plastic siding and are available to rent. Elders who have acquired one of these dwellings live with several family members of multiple generations. These homes are in better overall condition than the older, owned houses but are not accessible to everyone in the community. Given the high costs of materials and transportation of supplies on the winter roads, there is a lengthy waiting list to obtain a new home in both communities. Many Elders are obliged to choose the cheapest housing option because of their low income. In sum, health and housing have a direct impact on seniors, as paying high rents would consume the majority of their income, which considerably reduces an Elder’s ability to pay for nutrition and other basic necessities (Kucharska, 2002).

Addictions

The crisis associated with aging in First Nations communities is not only affected by the limited housing alternatives available for Elders but also the general wellbeing of the community and the health status of its residents. Although there is limited reference to First Nations and prescription drug abuse in publications, there has been overwhelming evidence over the past

several years indicating a growing problem in communities across Canada (Dell et al., 2012). First Nations communities in much of northwestern Ontario are undergoing a serious crisis of prescription drug addiction that is having tremendous impact on the users, their families and the Elders who are witnessing the community upheaval.

Oxycontin, an opiate prescribed for pain relief, has infiltrated both Kasabonika and Wapekeka at an alarmingly high rate. The rampant spread of this type of addiction and the drug's limited access have created a market where a single pill costs more than \$400. Whether one is employed or not, the pills are unaffordable, causing people to take drastic action to get money to maintain their addiction. Elders are often targeted as vulnerable victims, either unwittingly giving addicts money to purchase pills or having money or goods stolen right from their homes. Since people know when government cheques are issued and that Elders are the first to receive government assistance, they become the primary targets for loans and/or theft. As a result, Elders are not only suffering significant financial loss putting them in dire economic straits, they are also living in fear of being robbed and potentially hurt in the process. This is causing tremendous anxiety as Elder vulnerability is intensifying under the spectre of drug addiction.

Addictions also have a negative impact on Elders' health. Before the prescription drug abuse epidemic, Elders had the option of having their prescriptions delivered to their homes. The medications were first brought to the clinic to be packaged in blister packs, then given to a driver who would deliver them to the Elders' homes. In the last three years, Elders and their families started to notice that their narcotics were missing from the blister packs. Since only a physician can prescribe these types of medications, Elders had to go without their pain medication for that month. The nursing clinic was forced to change its protocol to limit the possibility of abuse. Today, Elders have to go to the clinic by themselves to pick up their narcotics, or they have to

write a letter indicating that they give their authorization to two family members to pick up the drugs for them with a signature.

The addiction crisis is also putting tremendous burden on families and family relationships. Based on interactions and conversations with adults and youth in the community, it is apparent that several children are not living with their immediate families because of addictions. In a telling statement by the First Nations Caring Society, “more First Nations children are in welfare care today than at the height of residential schools” (McKenzie, B., 2010). Although there is an alarmingly high number of children in care today, the overall goal is to keep the children in the community whenever possible. Agencies such as Tikinagan Child and Family Services are mandated to provide culturally appropriate care in First Nations communities. Many of the addicted individuals are young parents who are unable to look after their children, so relatives—more often than not the grandparents—accept this responsibility and take over the primary care of the children. One-third of First Nations grandparents who are raising their grandchildren are taking care of two or more kids (Fuller-Thomson, 2005). These grandparents are burdened with their concerns about the well-being of their adult children as well as trying to manage their finances in order to provide a healthy living environment for their grandchildren. For this reason, it is common to have households of more than five individuals spanning over three or more generations.

In the last few months, the drug Oxycontin was taken off the market, as it is one of the most abused drugs in modern medicine, and was replaced by OxyNEO, which is designed to turn into a gel like substance and is harder to crush or inject into a syringe. Although pharmaceutical companies have made modifications to the medication to help decrease the abuse of their controlled narcotics, the inaccessibility of the drug has left individuals experiencing serious

withdrawal symptoms with very little support during the course of the rehabilitation process. Addictions are having a negative impact on the drug user's health but it is also creating a state of crisis amongst all community members. Elders are desperately trying to offer guidance and support to their family members who are feeling lost with their addictions but are struggling to manage the associated stress factors and most importantly, their own health conditions.

Elder Abuse

Elder abuse has been an unspoken topic, even considered taboo, for many years. As a result, there is a serious lack of research on the issue for the general Canadian population while the information available on Aboriginal peoples is scarce. "With the loss or erosion of Aboriginal culture, values and beliefs, the importance of the family and the role of each of its members, including Elders, has changed and diminished over time"(Dumont-Smith, 2002).

Due to the numerous changes that were discussed by St-Jean et al (forthcoming), the reality of Elders has been greatly altered over the years. The issue of elder abuse is only starting to receive national attention; therefore, the ethnographic observations gathered as part of the research presented in this paper is intended to shed light on the issue. The most frequently cited types of abuse are physical, psychological and financial, as well as neglect (Swanson, 1999). Neglect can be considered as the failure to provide an Elder with the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, safety, etc. Abuse is very rarely reported by the victim for several reasons that may include fear or even feeling the need to protect their family. Often, health professionals such as nurses will be the first individuals to identify signs that indicate an incidence of abuse. In remote communities of northwestern Ontario, home health-care nurses provide a range of services for Elders. They visit Elders in their homes on a regular basis and are trained to be

attentive to signs that might indicate abuse. During the period encompassing this paper's ethnographic work, suspicions of abuse were raised by the health professionals in the communities.

It is very difficult to estimate the prevalence of abuse amongst the Elders, but a few have stepped forward looking for help. Robert is a widower living by himself in an older home in one of the communities. His house is located off the main road, with easy water access, but it is not very well-lit outside in the evening. This 83-year-old gentleman has been experiencing abuse from certain young people in the community. Two individuals have repeatedly harassed him and broken into his home to steal money and valuable objects. The band council has attempted to put a stop to the misconduct but have been unsuccessful. As a result, Robert has felt the need to board up his windows and install padlocks on his door when he leaves the house in hopes of keeping people away. Due to past incidents, he does not feel comfortable staying alone at night and has his adult son sleep in the guest bedroom every night. Robert is a good example of a community member living in fear who has been deprived of a sense of security. Robert's case is not an isolated incident; the example is presented as a larger problem with which both communities' leadership are currently contending.

Although the situation seems dire, there may be some hope for the future. As a common saying states, "Knowledge is power." During the research for this paper, a nurse took the initiative to meet with the Elders to provide education on the topic of abuse and to launch a discussion on its rate of recurrence on the reserve. Elder abuse is a new phenomenon that most individuals do not know how to approach; therefore, this was an attempt to reassure the Elders that there are people who can help.

Current Initiatives

Government-provided home care currently provides a wide range of services for Elders in the communities. The first step in its mandate is to have clients accomplish as much as possible on their own and then to have the family assist whenever possible. If the family is unwilling or unable to help, home-care services will then make an assessment in the home to determine the Elder's needs. This type of health-care service is another solution to help keep Elders in the community as long as possible. If an Elder requires services it cannot provide, the last option is to recommend the client for long-term care in Sioux Lookout or in Thunder Bay. The decision to leave the community is often a difficult one for several Elders due to isolation from family members. The band and council will support the Elder's choice if he or she decides to stay in the community for the last years of life.

Social integration and participation of older adults in society are frequently seen as indicators of productive and healthy aging, and it is widely accepted that social support has a strong protective effect on health (Health Canada, 2004). In both communities in this study, the tepee represents a gathering place for several families. It was once used as a shelter for First Nations peoples who were travelling on the land but it is now reserved for cooking and smoking wild meat. This culturally significant space takes on a special significance when three to four generations gather to talk, have a meal and share stories. Yet not all Elders have access to an area like a tepee to meet with relatives and other community members. To correct this situation, a request for a community tepee was made to the band and council in Kasabonika to further socializing opportunities.

Another effort to help Elders suffering from isolation was the Elder's Day organized by the home health-care team in Kasabonika, which took place during this study. The goal was to

encourage the Elders to leave the house and to socialize with other Elders in the community. The day consisted of activities they enjoyed doing on a daily basis but included an element of friendly competitiveness. During the day, they chose from a goose plucking race, an egg carrying walk/run and a clothespin challenge to work on dexterity. In the evening, the Elders shared a meal of traditional foods in the common room at the Elders' complex. It was the first day of activities dedicated entirely to the Elders in Kasabonika. In fact, one of the Elders mentioned that the group really enjoyed the day because they rarely have the opportunity to get together. There are no social activities in the communities geared specifically towards the elderly population.

The Elders of both communities have also recommended implementing a drug-rehabilitation program on the land for abusers who want to quit. This approach would allow the individual to go into nature and live off the land like his or her ancestors once did. By eliminating the overwhelming temptations to take drugs on the reserve, the individual experiencing an addiction would be forced to keep occupied by hunting, fishing and setting up shelter. In addition, an Elder would accompany the individual on his or her journey to provide guidance and teaching. This type of rehabilitation program would be beneficial to all parties involved. First, the individuals in crisis would be able to take part in a structured program to increase their challenge of becoming "clean" and reintegrating into the community. The Elders would also benefit from this type of initiative because it would provide a sense of purpose, where they could transmit teachings to people seeking help. Lastly, the community would benefit as whole because the addiction rates would slowly diminish.

Conclusion

For several decades, First Nations peoples have lived in a society that valued extended family relationships, with Elders at the core as the living representation of the accumulation of practical knowledge transmitted from their ancestors. A number of transitions initiated by government and religious interventions have forever changed the function of the First Nations' family, as well as the vital and respected roles of the Elders. As a result, the role of Elders in First Nations has diminished and their place within contemporary society is being reconfigured from one of leadership to more marginalized status. From this ethnographic research and observations made over the three months, it was evident that some community members are struggling to care for their aging parents/relatives. Although there remains symbolic gestures of respect demonstrated at community feasts, where an Elder will say a prayer or to respect an Elder's wishes not to sell game because it is a gift from the creator, the historically unseen socio-economic conditions of Elders demonstrate that they are suffering from the myriad cultural transitions. Poverty is a common denominator for the Elders in both communities. The current generation of Elders never had the need to adhere to the westernized concept of a savings account. Currency had never been a priority for their families during their childhood because they relied on homemade material goods to survive. The introduction of permanent settlements encouraged community members to begin purchasing their goods such as clothing, food and shelter. As Jacob shared during an interview, if they worked during their adult years, they were paid a small sum of money or with food: "I worked 8 hours a day so I would get paid every day. I would get a quarter and two plums. That was one day. Sometimes I would get three plums and a dime. That's the job I had in my younger days" (Jacob, 2011). For this reason, the vast majority of Elders depend entirely on Old Age Pension cheques to survive. Their main priority is to put a roof over their heads and to have food on the table for their families. The least expensive housing

option in their communities is not always the most secure or ideal choice for the Elders. Bad insulation, no refrigerator or no running water are all common realities on the reserve. Housing is a rising crisis in several remote communities of Northwestern Ontario. Due to financial constraints, Elders do not always have access to the new shelters that are more secure such as the Elders' complexes.

In addition, the prescription drug abuse epidemic is not only causing a great amount of strain on family relationships, it is also having an impact on the Elders' health. Families are broken due to addictions, and the Elders inherit the role of the primary caregiver. In an attempt to keep the children out of foster care and in the communities, the grandparents put their own health problems aside to provide for their grandchildren. The sense of security in the community has also diminished as drug abusers desperately scavenge and steal money to support their addiction. Elders are common targets because of their vulnerability, and their family members sometimes go to extreme measures to take the Elder's money or items that can be sold. Hundreds of users in remote communities are trying to cope with their withdrawal symptoms without any support from trained professionals.

In short, the rapid changes occurring in First Nations culture affect the Elders' daily lives. The erosion of the role of Elders has forever changed family dynamics, which is portrayed through the increasing rate of elder abuse. The fight for adequate shelter, financial freedom and basic life necessities demonstrates the alarming need to address the issue of Elder care in remote First Nations communities. If the Elders' quality of life is to be improved, not only programs and services need to be implemented, but people's attitudes towards the ageing process and old age must be changed (Featherstone and Hepworth, 2005).

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Conclusion

It has been well documented that the Canadian population is aging rapidly. An aging population can be the product of a series of different factors such as increased life expectancy, decreased fertility rates and the effects of the baby boom. Adults are now living longer lives but are also choosing to have fewer children than the previous generations. Therefore, there is a current shift in the portrait of the population. The demographics of the Aboriginal population does not mirror the general Canadian population. In fact, the Aboriginal population is significantly younger where seniors make up approximately 5% of the population compared to 13% in the non-Aboriginal population. Although the Aboriginal population is still relatively young, the senior population is expected to triple by the year 2016 (Turcotte and Schellenberg, 2006). With an increasing number of seniors in Aboriginal communities, it is important to understand the historical, social, political and cultural influences that have shaped the lives of these individuals. The Elders have experienced the transition from the traditional ways to the new, which makes them vital holders of cultural knowledge about teachings, stories and ceremonies.

The fieldwork that took place during a three-year period was a unique opportunity to be submerged in the daily living of two remote First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. The weeks that were spent in the communities provided me with a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the living conditions of the Elders, but most importantly to obtain their insights about life today. By participating in a range of activities with families and community members, I gained a wealth of knowledge about the First Nations culture and their people. I greatly respect the stories that were shared and their hopes for future generations. The underlying message that was given during my conversation with the Elders was a deep sense of concern for their

communities as well as their families. They are eager to help by sharing their wisdom and their life experiences, but the target audience is unfortunately not always present. In the first article, I provided a detailed description of the conversations that I shared with twelve Elders in two different communities. They explained that life was very physically demanding in the past but was crucial to have a sustainable life. They travelled long distances on the land and worked diligently to build shelters, which forced families to remain active. The health benefits of physical activity naturally occurred. In addition, the land was their sole food provider. For this reason, they had the knowledge on how to procure food in an efficient manner and to maximize their catch by using the fur for clothing. The Elders all recognized that their roles within the family unit as well as at the community level has been greatly altered over the years. They are no longer viewed as playing a crucial role in every dimension of daily living, which has shifted their position of leadership. The Elders explained that the constant changes in the communities have left them with a lack of purposeful guidance opportunities.

The second article was founded mostly on participant observation and field notes that were accumulated during the three summers of ethnographic work. The goal of this article was to shed light on the current living conditions of the Elders. By living in the communities I gained important insights into the lives and the challenges Elders are currently facing. Although there remains symbolic gestures of respect demonstrated at different community events, the historically unseen socio-economic conditions of Elders demonstrate that they are suffering from myriad cultural transitions. The challenges and experiences that Elders are facing are hardly one-dimensional, as they each have varying degrees of family support, financial stability and housing conditions. As seen here community leadership is in part turning to westernized concepts such as old age homes to respond to the challenges of Elder care, but clearly this is not enough.

My research project was created in partnership with the Elders and most importantly, for their future wellbeing. I hope this thesis will give the Elders a voice and expose their current living conditions to make changes in a new positive direction. It is important to raise awareness about the current reality of Elders, a very vulnerable population in remote First Nations communities. The Euro-Canadian lifestyle has provided several amenities to facilitate daily life. It has become a simple and as many Elders mentioned, “easier” way of life but the side effects are not always beneficial. If the Elders’ quality of life is to be improved, not only programs and services need to be implemented, but people’s attitudes towards the ageing process and old age must be changed. This thesis provides a brief overview of very complex processes of change that have occurred in two First Nations communities. I argue that Elders are not simply a sector of the population that needs to be cared for, but critical for the very survival of their communities. Elders living cultural resources who have much to contribute to society, both locally and at a more global level. Research on First Nations people and aging is very limited. There are very few resources that explore the needs and challenges of caring for Aboriginal Elders living on-reserve. Important avenues for future research would be to continue to engage in conversations with Elders to obtain an in-depth understanding of their vision for the communities. Also, future work on exploring the roles of family members relating to Elder care and the accessibility of culturally sensitive health services would be important for Elders living on reserve. Creating knowledge exchange opportunities would be beneficial avenues to support the thoughts and the wellness of the Elders. I hope that this work will now lead to new dialogues on Elder care in First Nations communities. There are several strengths associated to the First Nations culture, but we must now move in a new direction by following the Elders’ guidance to help the communities

combine modern knowledge with traditional wisdom to ensure the continuity of care and wellness.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Personal Profile

1. Can you tell me a little more about yourself?
 - a. Age
 - b. Place of birth
2. How long have you been living in Wapekeka or Kasabonika? Did you live here all of your life?
3. Are you married, single, widowed?
 - a. Living alone or with your children?

Elders and aging (*Main objective: Role of the elder in the community and family unit: leadership, power, spirituality. Do the changes affect the ethic of care for elders.*)

1. What does it mean to be an Elder today? (Who gets the status, at what age, etc)
2. What is your role in the community?
 - a. Any specific responsibilities?
 - b. What do people come to your for?
3. What do you like about life today as opposed to life in the old days? (CHANGES)
 - a. Any traditional activities that you aren't practicing anymore?
4. What is your relationship with your children, grandchildren?
 - a. How was it before with your parents?
5. Do you get help from anyone? Go to the store, cook, clean, health?
6. What do you think are the most important aspects of aboriginal culture?
7. What is the value of traditional knowledge?
8. How is traditional knowledge communicated and passed on?
9. How can Aboriginal culture survive against the influences of the Western society?