

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

INDIGENOUS PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

BY

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF COUNSELLING

FACULTY OF HEALTH DISCIPLINES

ATHABASCA, ALBERTA

FEBRUARY, 2023

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## **Approval of Thesis**

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

**INDIGENOUS PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM:  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURALLY NON-INCLUSIVE PRACTICES  
AND HIGH APPREHENSION RATES**

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February 3, 2023

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to all the Indigenous families who have been separated and marginalized. My heart goes out to you.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank my husband and daughter for being so supportive and patient as I embarked on this thesis. Thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Murray Anderson for his guidance and wisdom. Also, thank you to Dr. Annette Lane, who helped me develop an interest in qualitative research; Dr. Karen Cook, who assisted me in reaching many thesis milestones; and Dr. Lyana Patrick, who provided invaluable feedback.

### Abstract

Canada has a long history of apprehending Indigenous children. These apprehensions continue today, causing severe disconnection from familial relations, culture, land, and language. The current literature has identified several barriers that Indigenous families experience within the child welfare system.<sup>1</sup> One of the most influential factors that determines a child's placement is the outcome of a psychometric test called the *Parental Capacity Assessment* (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). This Netnography study highlights the experiences of Indigenous family members involved in child welfare to examine the relationship between non-inclusive practices and high apprehension rates among Indigenous children.<sup>2</sup> The findings reveal stories of injustice and hardship, while illuminating the strength and self-determination that family members harnessed on their journey to heal.

*Keywords:* Parental Capacity Assessment (PCA), assessor, Indigenous social determinants of health, intergenerational trauma, colonization, psycholonization, decolonization, culturally inclusive practices, culturally responsive, culturally safe, self-determination

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term "Child Welfare" or "Child and Family Services" in reference to all child welfare agencies across Canada and I will use the term "The Ministry of Children and Family Development" (or "MCFD") in reference to child welfare agencies in B.C.

<sup>2</sup> This study was intended to look at the impact of the Parental Capacity Assessment among other experiences that families face within the child welfare system. A broader scoped study into this assessment specifically will be important in creating a thicker description of how this assessment functions in relation in Indigenous populations. Transformative participatory research will be an important step in furthering this research.

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## **Background**

Throughout my graduate program I have had the opportunity to broaden my awareness of social justice and how to engage in culturally responsive practices. My passion for Indigenous culture, personal experience, and drive for social change have greatly inspired this research. As a non-Indigenous researcher, I am an outsider to the Indigenous communities which I will be observing online. I was born a descendant of settlers to Canada, as my father immigrated from England, and my mother immigrated from Ireland. Unfortunately, I was not exposed to Indigenous history or culture during grade school, and I did not become aware of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization until I reached University when I enrolled in a First Nations history course for the first time. Being raised in a white family with a considerable amount of unearned privilege, it would be fair to assume that I am not the appropriate person to conduct this research as an outsider. At the same time, I am on a journey to unlearn harmful collective programming and take responsibility for my role within the colonial relationship. Mutual trust will take time and work. I hope to create a positive impact moving forward by addressing the adverse effects of colonization within myself first.

Despite being an outsider, I feel a deep inner connection to Indigenous culture. Many years ago, when I was in my undergraduate degree program, my classmates and I were invited to attend a Sweat Lodge with Elders and community members. I was moved by this experience, and it opened my eyes to Indigenous spiritual ways of being. Shortly after graduating, I sold most of my personal belongings and went to live in the Tofino rainforest with my husband for seven months. I felt deeply connected to all living things. My life took a very different direction after experiencing the Sweat Lodge. I began to study reiki (a Japanese method of hands-on healing through touch), and reflexology (a Chinese method of stimulating reflex points in the feet to

induce healing) and began offering these healing techniques to people going through trauma, chronic illness, and other physical/emotional issues.

While I am an outsider as a settler, I am also an insider to this research because I have personally experienced having my child apprehended from my care. As a young mother, I lacked knowledge about breastfeeding and how fast babies grow. As a result, my daughter failed to thrive and was apprehended by Child and Family Services when we took her into the hospital for care. During the six months that my daughter was in foster care, I was court ordered to participate in a Parental Capacity Assessment (PCA) with a psychologist. This experience gives me an insider perspective in many ways. I have felt the immense pressure of being examined, assessed, and judged as a parent. I have firsthand experience with the severe trauma that an apprehension can cause. Based on my personal experience, I have learned that having your child apprehended can cause extreme mental and physical stress and lead to parental shame and fear of authority. However, I am also aware that my experience may be very different from other family's experiences, especially within the context of colonization; an intergenerational experience which I am very much an outsider. This research is intended to reflect the work that I have done to transform my trauma into something meaningful. I hope it speaks to other families who have been through this; I wrote this for you.

## Chapter 1. Significance of the Problem

In the early 1800s, the Canadian government forced Indigenous children to live in Residential Schools where they were separated from their families and culture and abused and stripped of their cultural identity (Haight et al., 2018). When Residential Schools began closing their doors in the 1960s, a new colonizing approach to separating Indigenous families emerged during a time known as the *Sixties Scoop* (Haight et al., 2018). During the Sixties Scoop, Indigenous children were routinely apprehended from their families by the child welfare system and adopted by Caucasian middle-class families (Haight et al., 2018). It was not until 1996 that the last Residential School closed down in Canada (Anderson et al., 2018). The high apprehension rate of the Sixties Scoop has continued into what is now called the *Millennial Scoop*, where there are three times as many Indigenous children in foster care now as there were children in Residential Schools when they were in the peak of their operation (Peristerakis, 2014). According to the 2016 Canadian census, 52.2% of children (under fourteen) in foster care are Indigenous (Indigenous Services Canada, 2020). This is extremely high, considering Indigenous children (under fourteen) represent only 7.7% of the total child population (Indigenous Services Canada, 2020).

The historical and ongoing impacts of colonization go far beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is critical to note that the impacts of historical trauma continue to be experienced by Indigenous families today (Haight et al., 2018). Colonization directly impacts Indigenous social determinants of health as many families face institutionalized racism and oppression (Haight et al., 2018). When families in the child welfare system are assessed based on such conditions, child and family workers will undoubtedly discover an elevated risk in parenting (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018).

In the following literature review I will explore some of the most significant barriers and strengths Indigenous families report when involved in the child welfare system. These include the impacts of westernized parenting assessments, assessor biases, a lack of cultural context from family workers, systemic racism and colonization, and highlighting the emerging social transformation of self-determination among Indigenous families.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Child and Family Services agencies across Canada are apprehending Indigenous children at an alarming rate. Racism and systemic oppression from ongoing colonization harms Indigenous social determinants of health (Haight et al., 2018). Arguably, our society has failed to address the underlying impacts of ongoing colonization within the child welfare system. As a result, child and family institutions continue to operate with a colonial agenda, leaving a trail of separated families in their wake (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018).

The current literature fails to address the experiences of Indigenous children and families involved in child welfare cases (Haight et al., 2018). There is also a lack of attention to Indigenous perspectives of Child and Family Services, including different beliefs and practices around child protection (Haight et al., 2018). To address this gap, I will conduct a Netnography study to highlight the online experiences and perceptions of Indigenous children and families in the child welfare system. Exploring these questions is important because we are all responsible for reconciliation. Change begins with us. This study aims to engage in the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action for child welfare (section 1, i), which urges us to reduce high apprehension rates among Indigenous children across Canada by increasing awareness of inclusive services and resources that keep families together and, (section 1, iv), increase

awareness among child welfare workers of the history of colonization, Indigenous child welfare practices, and Indigenous cultural strengths (TRC, 2015).

### **Purpose**

The primary purpose of this study is to identify the relationship between non-inclusive child welfare practices and high apprehension rates among Indigenous children. I have created two sub-questions related to this purpose: 1) How do Indigenous families experience parental capacity assessments and the child welfare system? 2) According to Indigenous families, what needs to change in the Canadian public child welfare system?

### **Key Concepts**

- Parental Capacity Assessment (PCA): evaluates parents' capacity to meet the needs of their child, creates recommendations for skill improvement, and is a significant factor in determining whether a child is removed from their family (Choate & McKenzie, 2015).
- Assessor: A qualified professional who conducts a PCA; usually a certified counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist, or other professionals trained to administer a PCA (Choate, 2018).
- Indigenous social determinants of health: Indigenous social determinants of health are depicted by Reading & Wien (2009) as proximal, intermediate, and distal factors that interconnect to impact health. Proximal factors influence individual wellbeing, such as housing, education, income, and health behaviour. For Indigenous peoples, these factors often include health disparities such as overcrowded housing, barriers to education, poverty, and substance abuse. Intermediate factors are represented by structures such as education and health care, and these systems are affected by low funding and inadequate resources, creating stress on communities. Distal determinants of health include socio-

political and economic factors such as colonization, racism, marginalization, and oppression. Indigenous social determinants of health are impacted by all the above factors, resulting in considerable negative health impacts (Reading & Wien, 2009).

- Intergenerational trauma: Trauma that is passed from one generation to the next through colonization, oppression, and ongoing low social determinants of health (Haight et al., 2018).
- Colonization: Taking a power-over stance that diminishes or overlooks the wisdom and knowledge of another person or group of people (Paré, 2013). Acts of colonization have violently oppressed Indigenous people's cultural identity in Canada and worldwide (Collins, 2018).
- Psycholonization is a type of colonization that assumes psychological institutions hold universal knowledge, while subsequently devaluing other ways of knowing and being (Paré, 2013).
- Decolonization: uprooting, tearing down, and reversing acts of colonization and the negative impacts it has on marginalized populations (Paré, 2013).
- Culturally inclusive practices: Culturally inclusive practices are centered on understanding the context of a client's history, lived experiences, culture, worldview and way of being (Collins, 2018). Being culturally inclusive requires humility and a willingness to step outside of what is culturally familiar (Collins, 2018).
- Culturally responsive: in counselling, cultural responsiveness is how the client's cultural identity and worldviews are witnessed and reflected through the counselling process (Collins, 2018). It is also demonstrated by the counsellor's responsiveness to the clients' unique values and perspectives of the world (Paré, 2013).

- Culturally safe: creating collaborative and respectful interactions that acknowledge systemic power differences (First Nations Health Authority, n.d.). Culturally safe environments are places where people feel safe and are free from oppression (First Nations Health Authority, n.d.)
- Self-determination: a sense of agency (power, responsibility, autonomy, ability to change or influence) one's life, which increases one's overall well-being (Paré, 2013). Reading & Wien (2009) asserts that self-determination has a significant positive impact on all aspects of Indigenous social determinants of health. For example, increasing Indigenous authority and jurisdiction over First Nation land and institutional systems helps to strengthen individual and community freedom and decision-making. Furthermore, self-determination is major contributing factor to the strengths-based perspective of Indigenous social determinants of health (Reading & Wien, 2009).

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

The following literature review helps to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers Indigenous families experience in the child welfare system. I will focus on the following six topics: parental capacity assessments, evaluating the impact of Eurocentric assumptions, the significance of cultural context, systemic racism, naming oppression and ongoing colonization, and social transformation through self-determination and inclusive practices.

One of the most concerning practices that Child and Family Services utilizes to assess Indigenous parents is the Parental Capacity Assessment. This assessment holds a great deal of power in the courtroom, but it is also being questioned as a measure of Indigenous parenting (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). The impacts of non-inclusive practices such as the PCA will be discussed, as well as the debilitating impacts of ongoing colonization and the context that this creates for Indigenous families. This literature review also explores the benefits of First Nations jurisdiction over Child and Family Services and the importance of prioritizing Indigenous social determinants of health. This chapter sets the stage of this study by illuminating the context of my research, linking to previous research, and exploring how my study helps to broaden the existing literature on child apprehensions among Indigenous children.

### **Parental Capacity Assessments**

Choate & McKenzie (2015) discuss how the Parenting Capacity Assessment (PCA) uses psychometrics to gain insight into parental awareness, mental health, substance use, and character traits. The PCA must be administered by a professional with graduate level education who is specifically trained in PCAs (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). PCAs are considered a powerful tool for determining whether a parent is competent to care for their children. The problem, however, is that these assessments have not been validated as culturally inclusive or



safe for Indigenous families. Furthermore, these assessments are not developed in collaboration with the Indigenous community. The PCAs and the professionals who utilize them may be using an oppressive measure by forcing Indigenous parents to be assessed through the lens of the dominant culture (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). Using psychological assessments for Indigenous populations has been deemed a dire situation according to the Canadian Psychological Association Task Force on Responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report (TFRTRCCR, 2018). This task force acknowledges that the psychology profession lacks the proper training, cultural knowledge, resources, and culturally appropriate recommendations to provide valuable psychological assessments for Indigenous parents (TFRTRCCR, 2018).

### **Evaluating the Impact of Eurocentric Assumptions**

Styres (2017) illustrates how parenting assessment measures are based upon the Eurocentric lens of the dominant culture, which differs from the collectivist culture of many Indigenous families. The Eurocentric assumptions that create and disseminate the psychometric assessments in Western countries are based upon the ideals of Christianity, capitalism, imperialism, and expansionism. For example, Western perspectives on education tend to follow structured analytical learning, where students are taught to memorize knowledge, predict outcomes, and seek control over their environment (often ignoring spiritual or emotional elements of learning). Knowledge is seen as power, which is acquired through a system of educational imperialism. Western education forms the foundation of our collective beliefs and ways of being in the world, most of which conform to the perspectives discussed above. These core values naturally create unequal access to power resulting in a tendency to take advantage of socio-political, cultural, and economic factors among underrepresented populations (Styres, 2017).

Furthermore, the assumptions held by the colonial narrative that are reflected within the PCA create ongoing psychologization, which is overtly expressed through the theories and practices of social work and psychology in the child welfare system (Collins, 2018). It is important to acknowledge the power that psychology holds in society to influence institutional practices and policies. Questioning psychological theories and practices (such as the colonial version of the PCA) will help bring actionable change to agencies who carry out these assessments. Policy makers in high level positions within the field of psychology are responsible for listening to feedback and staying accountable to the public.

Mainstream discourses often contradict Indigenous ways of being, which are rooted and experienced through the land, plants, animals, and people, and are guided by principles of interconnection, interrelatedness, and synergy (Styres, 2017). Indigenous ways of being also include (but are not limited to): storytelling, ceremonies, spirit names, historical knowledge of ancestors, and the meaning of existence and experience (Styres, 2017). The theoretical framework of the PCA, which is grounded in empiricism and focused on quantitative tools such as standardized testing, holds very little meaning to Indigenous ways of knowing (TFRTRCCR, 2018). Assessments focused on empirical evidence, concepts, and linear thinking tend to minimize and ignore Indigenous worldviews that focus on relationality, circularity, and holistic ways of being (Styres, 2017). Similarly, Mertens (2015) suggests the content of most Westernized testing reflects values that conform to middle-class Caucasian participants, and do not include questions or culturally responsive activities that reflect diverse ethnicity or inclusivity.

According to the literature, to increase the efficacy of PCAs, the assessment questions must include culturally inclusive language that holds contextual and semantic meaning to

Indigenous parents (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). For example, to increase Indigenous cultural inclusion, a team of researchers from across Canada developed a Native Wellness Assessment (NWA; Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2017). This assessment was created through an exciting three-year research project consisting of researchers from diverse backgrounds (including Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, cultural professionals and service providers, and Elders) to create an instrument that could measure the benefits of Indigenous culture as a central tool and intervention for mental health and well-being. The NWA has proven to be an effective psychometric assessment in its ability to understand mental health and substance abuse through an Indigenous paradigm.

In addition to being a culturally safe and effective assessment tool, the NWA also assists in guiding client treatments through cultural-based knowledge. Clients spend time learning alongside Elders and engaging in cultural activities such as storytelling, land-based therapy, or sweat lodges. One of the most significant results of the NWA pilot test was discovering that clients who learned their Native language reported higher levels of well-being (Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2017). The development of the NWA is inspiring because it was created from both Indigenous and Western worldviews. It addresses the lack of Indigenous-based assessments in Canada and provides an excellent model to learn and build from. It also opens the door to co-creating strength-based assessments with Indigenous communities. A similar holistic assessment could be created in partnership with Indigenous children and families for understanding parental capacity.

### **The Assessor**

A PCA can only be conducted by certified counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, or other qualified professionals trained to administer the tests (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). In my

search online, I struggled to find Indigenous professionals in the field of counselling psychology within Canada, not to mention Indigenous professionals trained explicitly in PCAs. Current statistics indicate that only a few psychologists in Canada offer assessments within Indigenous communities (TFRTRCCR, 2018). A lack of Indigenous assessors can pose a major barrier to equitable representation within the child welfare system. Cultural biases from non-Indigenous workers may result in assessments that are inappropriately judged or dismissed (Mann, 2018). This is mainly because most professional counsellors in Canada are Caucasian and have little to no personal experience of Indigenous ways of life (Mann, 2018). Although assessors are highly trained and regulated in their field, they often lack first-hand knowledge of Indigenous worldviews and the myriad expressions of their cultural intersectionality (Collins, 2018). Without a culturally responsive lens, cross-cultural interactions may lead to misunderstandings and distrust when working with Indigenous families (Collins, 2018). Indigenous families have reported feeling distrustful of professionals who approach them with an air of superiority, as they feel it minimizes their family's strengths and leads to disengagement (Haight et al., 2018).

First Nation communities are understandably apprehensive about assessors, often associating distrust and familial separation with the image of a settler (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). This distrust and exasperation are evident in a study by West Coast Leaf (2019) where most Indigenous parents expressed frustration over the lack of accountability from social workers during their experience with Child and Family Services. This lack of accountability reported by participants resulted in vast disparities in treatment within the system, often eroding the worker-parent relationship by increasing authoritative interactions instead of cultivating trust and collaboration through preventative care.

When the assessor is biased, the interview process becomes tainted with assumptions, increasing the risk of discriminatory apprehensions (West Coast Leaf, 2019). For example, Indigenous parents who have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are more likely to experience discrimination from the child welfare system, and as a result, are more likely to have their children apprehended (Choate, 2013a). This discrimination stems from an underlying assumption that families with a history of substance abuse or disabilities are not capable of caring for their children (Choate, 2013a). Another example of assessment bias occurs when professionals assume that Indigenous community involvement is a form of parental neglect, subsequently determining that community involvement is not within the child's best interest (Byle, 2019). Many workers and agencies within Canada still restrict co-sleeping, a common practice among many Indigenous families (Mann, 2018). These examples illustrate how the rights of Indigenous parents have been ignored, and as a result, their ability to develop efficacy, agency, and self-confidence to raise their children has been severely damaged (McKay-Panos, 2018).

The current literature suggests that a culturally safe and fair assessment should ideally have an Indigenous assessor. If an Indigenous professional is unavailable, then the next option should be a professional who understands Indigenous child development, perceptions of mental health and wellness, and cultural models of care (Choate, 2013b). This aligns with Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to action for proper education and training for professionals conducting assessments and child welfare investigations (TRC, 2015). A culturally safe approach to assessing Indigenous parents would involve asking Indigenous community Elders or extended family members what types of questions or activities they would recommend as valuable to include within the assessment (TFRTRCCR, 2018). This type of community

inquiry would create space for inclusive assessments that respect and honour the rights of the Indigenous peoples (TFRTRCCR, 2018). Additionally, this collaborative approach would allow Indigenous families to engage in culturally inclusive assessments, while increasing the chance for culturally safe parental training, and intervention practices that nurture resilience and empowerment (Byle, 2019; Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2017).

### **The Significance of Cultural Context**

There is no cultural context or culturally appropriate framework within the PCA for understanding Indigenous peoples' behaviour within their community or family homes (TFRTRCCR, 2018). Presently, the PCA assesses three main parental concerns. First, it evaluates the parent's capacity to meet their child's needs (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). If this is not possible, the next step is to offer recommendations and opportunities for increasing the parent's skillset through parenting classes and counselling (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). If the parent fails to meet the parental standards set by Child and Family Services, the assessment determines whether the child should be removed and how much involvement they will have within their lives (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). This may sound like a straightforward process, but there are many considerations and ambiguous areas when considering the intersectionality of culture and family dynamics.

It is critical to note here that there are "no pre-determined series of questions regarding the assessment" (P. Choate, personal communication, October 15, 2019). In other words, the assessment questions are left to the professional's discretion. When considering the potential risk of bias from a non-Indigenous assessor, it is fair to suggest that PCAs are not culturally safe or empirically validated for the use of underrepresented populations (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). For example, PCAs are not designed to assess the Indigenous connection to the spirit world, their

connection to Elders and community, the tradition of purpose-finding in names, the sweat lodge, the vision quest, or their bond with deceased Elders (TFRTRCCR, 2018). PCAs also lack cultural context, such as acknowledging the *medicine wheel* as an approach to health and wellness, or honouring Indigenous models of care, such as communal child rearing (Choate, 2013a).

Parental assessments for Indigenous families may include risk factors that are not culturally contextualized and do not effectively measure risk (Choate, 2013a). Additionally, assessments may not fully recognize culturally based protective factors (Choate, 2013a). For example, during a PCA, parents are often asked to do a genogram, not considering that Indigenous systems of care do not map in the same way (P. Choate, personal communication, October 15, 2019). Another example of culturally inappropriate context is when the assessor asks questions regarding dyadic attachment, not considering that they are assessing parents from a collectivist culture (P. Choate, personal communication, October 15, 2019).

Similar assessment concerns have been discovered in psychometrics used to assess discrimination among marginalized sexual populations. For example, researchers conducting a psychometric review of underrepresented sexual populations have raised concerns about questionable content validity that was not corroborated by members of the sexual identifying community (Morrison et al., 2016). In a systemic review on cross-cultural adapted health assessments, Uysal-Bozkir et al. (2013) found a lack of relevant content in relation to the specific population being assessed. Despite being cross-culturally adapted to the population being assessed, researchers still found that psychometric properties in most assessments remained unclear. The authors of this study emphasized the importance of testing assessment scale properties in collaboration with the relevant population, enabling researchers to gauge the

relevance, context, and effectiveness of an assessment for a specific population (Uysal-Bozkir et al., 2013).

The PCA is an ineffective tool without socio-cultural and historical context (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). For instance, when clinicians assess cases of maltreatment within a family living in poverty, the PCA would evaluate the family stress as it is experienced through interactions, personality, and other factors that elevate risk (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). These scores (if taken at face value) would reflect a low capacity to function as a parental figure (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). Without a broad contextual understanding of colonization and ongoing oppression, the PCA is a narrow lens at best (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018).

Assessments conducted within a limited and stressful context do not create a realistic picture of how parents behave when they are relaxed, in their home environment, or their community (Di Pasquale & Rivolta, 2016). The PCA assessment places tremendous stress on parents to perform within an artificial environment (Di Pasquale & Rivolta, 2016). Under duress, parents are often defensive and, therefore, more likely to alter their conduct to conform to socially acceptable standards (Budd, 2001, as cited in Di Pasquale & Rivolta, 2016). Parents usually feel pressured and frightened of failing the assessment and losing their child permanently (Budd 2001, as cited in Di Pasquale & Rivolta, 2016). This creates a major problem with the overall validity and reliability of the PCA with any population.

To ensure a culturally safe and inclusive measuring instrument, the assessment must have an appropriate context as well as a professional assessor who has intimate cultural understanding of the family being assessed (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). As previously mentioned, culturally inclusive mental health practices for Indigenous peoples should support the involvement of the Indigenous community. Relationships are the cornerstone of the Indigenous worldview; thus, it is



imperative to advocate for the inclusion and collaboration of the Indigenous community within the safety planning of child welfare (Choate, 2013a).

A culturally appropriate assessment may emphasize the parent's natural aptitudes (or gifts) as a strengths-based approach, placing less importance on traditional western diagnostic questions (TFRTRCCR, 2018). In a recent study, Indigenous parents expressed a sense of hopefulness in knowing that they could regain jurisdiction over their community child welfare (Byle, 2019). Focusing on hope through self-determination may help professionals create a strengths-based approach grounded in decolonization, authenticating an appropriate context for an Indigenous parenting assessment (Byle, 2019). For example, the experience of *post-traumatic growth* is constructed from a strengths-based lens (Collier, 2016). This concept is founded in positive psychology and may assist professionals in identifying areas of positive growth and transformation that have emerged as a result of trauma (Collier, 2016). It is important to note that positive psychology has been criticized for ascribing to an individualistic ideology that is value-neutral in nature and does not account for cross-cultural variations (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). This is not to say that the concept of post-traumatic growth has no merit, however, it is important to acknowledge that the concept is rooted in an individualistic ideology, which may not be relevant for all Indigenous families, depending on their specific cultural worldviews. Due to the collectivist nature of many Indigenous families, it may be more relevant to look at the post-traumatic growth of the family system or community rather than the individual. The concept of post-traumatic growth was chosen for this research because it aligned closely with the data I found on self-determination.

Addressing cultural context within the PCA may assist in keeping families together while also creating awareness of the historical effects of intergenerational trauma (Byle, 2019). This

awareness of historical context supports the call to action that ensures professionals working with Indigenous families are properly educated on the historical impacts of colonization, including the trauma caused by Residential Schools (TRC, 2015). Increasing cultural context may help create space for and encourage Indigenous ways of being, providing a nurturing and inclusive environment for children and families.

According to McKay-Panos (2018), discriminatory parental assessments stem from a much larger systemic issue. The author discusses findings from The Ontario Human Rights Commission report that states that neglect is the main reason Indigenous children are apprehended from their families. Furthermore, the source of this neglect is rooted in the broader systemic issues of ongoing oppression and inequitable access to resources. For example, intergenerational trauma from ongoing colonization has created chronic issues such as poverty and unsafe housing, mental illness, disconnection from community and culture, and substance abuse (McKay-Panos, 2018). Mosher & Hewitt (2018) state that these ongoing problems are compounded by a substantial disparity of resources, creating organizational shortcomings and additional adversity for Indigenous children in care. The authors also highlight how separated families must face unprecedented hardship with the loss of their child, including the erosion of their familial system and the loss of their cultural identity, community, and language. Racism is deeply rooted in the larger legal systems that trickle down into the institutions, practices, and professionals who carry out their policies (Mosher & Hewitt, 2018). These larger systems share responsibility for unnecessary apprehensions, which continue to devalue Indigenous populations (McKay-Panos, 2018).

Evidence indicates that Indigenous child welfare on reserves receives 38% less funding than anywhere else in the country (McKay-Panos, 2018). Cindy Blackstock (2016), who is a

strong advocate for Indigenous children across Canada, states that funding for Indigenous Child and Family Services is insufficient to provide the necessary resources to keep families together safely. The Assembly of First Nations and The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (Blackstock's organization) have been addressing these funding inequities in court since 2007 with the Government of Canada through the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. Thanks to Blackstock and her team, the Canadian Government was found guilty in 2016 of discriminatory practices such as failure to enact the Jordan Principle, as well as provide critical funding to child welfare services on reserves. While this is a positive step, our government still has a long way to go. A severe lack of on-reserve funding continues to cause many problems such as service rejections, interruptions, delays, operational and staffing deficits, inadequate training for culturally appropriate services, and knowledge of current legislation (Blackstock, 2016). These continuing problems serve as a reminder, once again, to adhere to the TRC call-to-action (section 1, i) to reduce the number of Indigenous children in care by adequately assessing and monitoring neglect investigations (2015). Reports from The Ontario Human Rights Commission (discussed above) help to provide evidence of systemic discrimination by analyzing assessments, statistics, internal policies, processes for decision-making, organizational practices, and workplace culture (McKay-Panos, 2018). Creating transparency through data collection and reporting is one way to effectively assess and monitor neglect cases across Canada.

Indigenous parents previously involved with Child and Family Services expressed deep concerns regarding the lack services their family's received (West Coast Leaf, 2019). Parents shared that even when services were available to them, there were additional barriers in receiving them (West Coast Leaf, 2019). The combination of intergenerational trauma, loss of community and family support, and lack of healthy parental role modelling has been linked to the over-

representation of Indigenous child neglect charges in Canada (Barker et al., 2014). These systemic problems are further exacerbated by complicated child welfare mandates that differ in each province and do not hold a collective definition for child maltreatment (Haight et al., 2018).

### **Systemic Racism**

Byle (2019) states that systemic cultural racism is evident when Indigenous children are removed from their homes and communities and placed into Caucasian homes where little effort is made to keep them close to cultural support. The author also found that Indigenous mothers are at higher risk of having their baby apprehended. Vicious systematic oppression is experienced by many Indigenous mothers who have had their children apprehended or are at risk of apprehension due to a history of addiction or mental health problems (Byle, 2019). The effect of losing a child to the system creates irrevocable damage to the mother's mental health (Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). Research has shown that losing a child to the system can be more detrimental to a mother's mental health than losing a child by death (Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). These negative impacts feed into the already existing trauma remaining from hundreds of years of colonization, including the Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the current Millennial Scoop (Mann, 2018).

Indigenous families are forced to walk through rigid western protocols and procedures that can be overwhelming and difficult to understand, all in a desperate attempt to gain back the custody of their children (Byle, 2019). Some mothers may unwittingly forfeit their parental rights without a full understanding of the law, child welfare procedures, or social supports (Byle, 2019). These travesties must be remedied through the call to action to keep Indigenous families together safely whenever possible while ensuring that children stay in culturally safe environments if they reside in foster care (TRC, 2015).

Research has found that the increasing rate of displacement and mobility among young Indigenous peoples is directly linked to intergenerational trauma and colonization (Goodman et al., 2018). As a result, Indigenous youth are experiencing more familial disconnection, lack of communal supports, and housing instability (Goodman et al., 2018). Systemic problems such as poverty, unsafe housing, substance abuse, or mental illness make it almost impossible for Indigenous families to successfully reunite with their children (Byle, 2019). In most child welfare cases, families are typically given a precise period (usually five to 18 months) to make significant changes in their lifestyle and parenting before their children become permanent wards of the system (Byle, 2019). This timeframe is unreasonable when considering the systemic effects of colonization that continue to plague Indigenous families. Sadly, involvement in the child welfare system is a significant predictor of visible homelessness among Indigenous peoples (Alberton et al., 2020).

The systemic issues discussed above create a major problem for the validity and reliability of the parental capacity assessment. As a result, specialists in social work and Indigenous studies have come forward to state that the current PCA assessments do not meet the *R. v. Mohan* test for being accepted as evidence in Canadian courts (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018). The concern being voiced is that the PCA is not relevant or culturally safe for Indigenous populations. Furthermore, it does not consider the impact of Indigenous social determinants of health including ongoing marginalization, inequity, and intergenerational trauma (Choate & Lindstrom, 2018; Collins, 2018).

### **Naming Oppression and Ongoing Colonization**

The individuals and institutions using psychometric measures to determine parental capacity must exercise caution and due diligence to name colonial oppression while

acknowledging the decision-making power of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous-led agencies to support children within appropriate cultural frameworks (Byle, 2019). The effects of colonization have had a highly adverse impact on Indigenous parenting (Mann, 2018). In addition, Indigenous families continue to experience dehumanization through the colonial practices of Child and Family Services (Mann, 2018).

Residential School survivors were exposed to extremely unhealthy role modelling and as a result, the parental capacity of Indigenous parents has sadly diminished over time (Barker et al., 2014). Racism in Canada is alive and well and plays a significant role in creating policies, funding family programs, and finalizing decisions on child placement (McKay-Panos, 2018). The Calls to Action from the TRC (2015) serve as a positive step for government and church bodies to take responsibility for ongoing colonization and to make reconciliation a priority in every facet of Canadian society. However, there is still a lot of work to be done and the public must hold these powerful systems (and the people that shape them) accountable for systemic change.

As professional counsellors, we must take full accountability for our role within the profession of psychology. It is important that we maintain self-awareness, while taking responsibility for any unethical conduct (TFRTRCCR, 2018). It is our responsibility to be actively involved in social justice, which means aligning ourselves as partners in a full reconciliation process with the Indigenous peoples of Canada (TFRTRCCR, 2018). Being accountable as a professional requires that we engage in critical self-reflection while nurturing cultural awareness with our clients (Collins, 2018). Engaging in self-reflection means that we are aware of rigid thoughts, and we challenge our assumptions to promote flexibility and cultural safety (Collins, 2018). Educators can teach self-reflective practice and promote social justice

through cultural inclusivity. It is important that we recognize the history of oppressive governmental policies and be aware of any current laws or policies that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples in Canada (TFRTRCCR, 2018). By doing so, we can play an active role in decolonization and cultural healing (TFRTRCCR, 2018).

### **Social Transformation Through Self-Determination and Inclusive Practices**

The literature on First Nations child welfare focuses on advocating for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples' right to jurisdiction over their child welfare (Blackstock et al., 2006; Walkem, 2020). There is a focus on self-determination as a pathway towards Indigenous jurisdiction, with the recognition that Indigenous peoples are best equipped to create laws and practices regarding child welfare (Blackstock et al., 2006). Restoring Indigenous laws has the potential to reshape how Indigenous children and families experience child welfare (Walkem, 2020). The literature on First Nations child welfare focuses on advocating for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples' right to jurisdiction over their child welfare (Blackstock et al., 2006; Walkem, 2020). There is a focus on self-determination as a pathway towards Indigenous jurisdiction, with the recognition that Indigenous peoples are best equipped to create laws and practices regarding child welfare (Blackstock et al., 2006). Walkem (2020) states that restoring Indigenous laws has the potential to reshape how Indigenous children and families experience child welfare. This work is critical in supporting the agency of Indigenous communities and reducing the high levels of child apprehensions (Walkem, 2020).

Professionals can advocate for social transformation by approaching child welfare from a culturally safe and inclusive mindset. A powerful example of this can be seen at the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Center in Winnipeg (Byle, 2019). This center has developed an Indigenous-based model of care that places the power of child protection decision-making with the Indigenous

family and community. This unique model has produced a successful reunification rate of 79%. The center also addresses problems related to systematic oppression and intergenerational trauma by providing resources such as food, housing, counselling, and treatment for substance abuse. In addition to wrap around services and resources, Ma Mawi W I Chi Itata integrates ceremony and community responsibility into their daily activities, making this center a special place of healing for families (Byle, 2019).

Addressing Indigenous social determinants of health through equitable resources and services demonstrates a powerful example of macro level change (Collins, 2018). This center is a positive example of how culturally appropriate and inclusive services can reduce the number of Indigenous child apprehensions and decrease subsequent trauma experienced by Indigenous children and families (Byle, 2019). Promoting this type of system level change can be accomplished through inter-organizational collaboration by creating ongoing dialogue with family agencies supporting Indigenous families (Collins, 2018). Initiating collaborative dialogue among organizations may help to facilitate cultural inclusivity of the PCAs and the agencies (TFRTRCCR, 2018).

To create decolonizing methods, transformative researchers are finding creative ways to foster agency and self-determination. For example, a group of university and community-based researchers conducted a participatory action research project that held art workshops in six different First Nation communities across Canada to explore the relationship between culture, community, colonization, and HIV (Flicker et al., 2016). The results were inspiring; youth participants felt empowered by gaining ownership over their artistic message, raising awareness, communicating emotion, challenging stereotypes, obtaining new skills, and developing self-determination (Flicker et al., 2016). This type of strengths-based approach could also be applied



to child and family institutions to promote decolonization, culturally inclusive practices, and self-determination among Indigenous children and families.

In a recent participatory action study by West Coast Leaf (2019), Indigenous parents expressed a sense of hopefulness in knowing that they could regain jurisdiction over their community child welfare services. Parents in this study voiced that child and family prevention programs should be founded on self-determination, including the right to exercise full control over decisions that affect Indigenous children and families. The participants shared that the most effective prevention-based programs were local community-based wrap-around services grounded in Indigenous child-raising knowledge that offered culturally appropriate, strengths-based, and family-focused care. Furthermore, the community was a significant hub for accessing critical resources, developing creative solutions, and initiating action for social change (West Coast Leaf, 2019). This study highlights the importance of supporting Indigenous agency and self-governance as a path to self-determination and inclusive assessment practices.

The above examples align well with the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action for child welfare (section 1, i); to help reduce the high rate of child apprehensions among Indigenous peoples across Canada by providing proper services and resources that keep families together, and (section 1, iv); to increase awareness among child welfare workers of the history of colonization, child welfare practices, and Indigenous cultural strengths, and (section 3); ensuring that Canada is implementing the Jordans Principle so that no child is waiting for services available to the rest of the public due to federal and provincial funding conflicts (TRC, 2015). These are essential steps in the reconciliation process found in the literature.

In addition to this approach, another framework for applying reconciliation practices within child welfare has been created called *The Touchstones of Hope* (Blackstock et al., 2006).

This framework provides an opportunity for *truth-telling*, which centralizes the experiences of children and families who have been impacted by the child welfare system (Blackstock et al., 2006). It encourages an *acknowledgement* of learning from the past, moving forward anew, and being open to diverse perspectives (Blackstock et al., 2006). The Touchstones of Hope framework also focuses on *restoring* by healing the damage that has been created by changing the direction of child welfare to ensure past mistakes are not repeated (Blackstock et al., 2006). Lastly, this approach highlights a new path forward that is collaborative, responsive, culturally respectful, and committed to the application and oversight of a more equitable and socially just child welfare system (Blackstock et al., 2006).

### **Summary**

The PCA discussed throughout this paper is highlighted for not meeting adequate reliability standards or cultural inclusivity in assessing Indigenous families. As a result, these assessments should be considered an inappropriate and oppressive instrument for measuring parenting capacity. The impacts of non-inclusive practices are further compounded by ongoing trauma, systemic racism, and inequity. The literature highlights the benefits of addressing Indigenous social determinants of health and moving towards First Nation jurisdiction of Child and Family Services.

### Chapter 3. Netnography

My original research plan was to conduct a transformative participatory action study in partnership with a local Indigenous community. Unfortunately, after spending eight months reaching out to local and national Indigenous organizations, I could not connect with any interested parties to embark on this project. With the beginning of my thesis program quickly approaching, I had to make the difficult decision to switch directions. The pandemic created a significant barrier to conducting participatory research, as many communities face unprecedented challenges, including ongoing lockdowns and restrictions. As a result, I decided to switch my methodology to Netnography.

Netnography is a similar approach to ethnography in that it seeks to understand the ways people move in the world (Kosinets, 2015). While ethnography traditionally involves in-person research, netnographers study human behaviour and interactions on the internet (Kosinets, 2015). Netnography is becoming increasingly popular in different fields of study and has been found effective in highlighting human communication, experiences, alliances, creative works, collaboration, opinions, online rules of engagement, internet practices, individual stories, community discourse, and personal digressions (Kosinets, 2015). My strategy of gathering information involved observing publicly accessible data on the internet. All the data I collected was from social media sites and online news outlets.

One of the benefits of using Netnography is its effective in bringing forth the voices that reside outside the dominant narrative (Jeacle, 2020). My study is well suited to use Netnography, as it offers the opportunity to centralize the voices of Indigenous families, while protecting their identities through anonymity (Jeacle, 2020). The online users I observed did not disclose what specific First Nation community they were from (and most videos were blurred to be

anonymous), so I was not able to ascertain any specific Indigenous cultures. It is for this reason that my sampling population includes people who identify as members of Indigenous families. I used purposeful sampling and intentionally selected the resources and users to collect data from based on their relevance to my research questions. The primary purpose of this study, which is to identify the relationship between non-inclusive child welfare practices and high apprehension rates among Indigenous children, is my guiding force throughout this research. My two related sub-questions helped me find 1) How do Indigenous families experience parental capacity assessments and the child welfare system? 2) According to Indigenous families, what needs to change in the Canadian public child welfare system?

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a practical way to illuminate issues pertaining to inequity, while also dismantling dominant narratives and structural racism (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). This theoretical framework is an effective fit for this study, as it foregrounds the experiences of Indigenous family members who have been marginalized in society. CRT aligns with this research, as it centers on issues about discrimination and oppression and is deeply rooted in social justice (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010).

CRT also helps contextualize and highlight these relevant issues, while examining the root causes of health inequalities and identifying opportunities to bridge these gaps (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). For instance, social determinants of health are an important topic throughout my study, as structural inequities are evident throughout the literature.

Deconstructing the status quo and questioning racial or power structures is challenging, but I believe it is necessary for human growth. Identifying discrimination and racial hierarchies in the

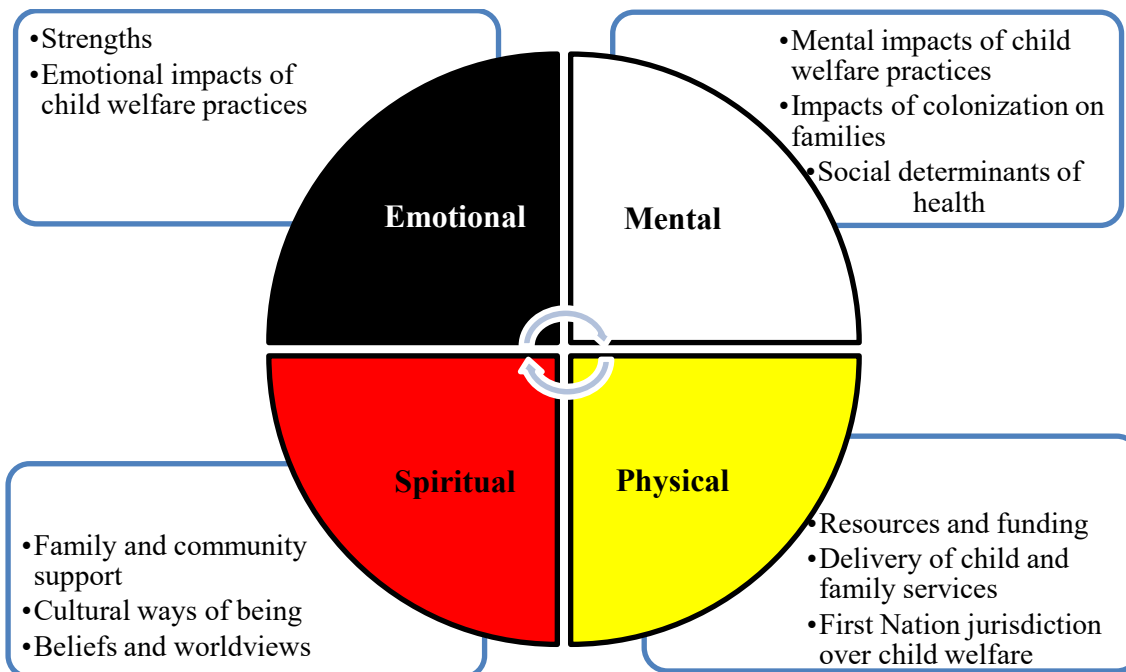
data helps to expose sociocultural biases, assumptions, and values that are entrenched in our society (Collins, 2018).

This research study is also guided by the knowledge of Critical Allyship, which is described by Nixon (2019) as an interconnected relationship. This relationship is depicted as a coin, representing the social structures that fuel ongoing inequality. This coin has two sides; the top of the coin represents unearned advantages (advantages that were not earned, but that we have simply because of who we are), while the bottom of the coin represents unearned disadvantages (disadvantages that were not earned, but that we have simply because of who we are). The visual of the coin helps to contextualize inequality and increase awareness of the symbiotic relationship between unearned advantage and unearned disadvantage. The author highlights the importance of finding collective solidarity in Critical Allyship by using the “coin” as a guide for resisting injustice in the system. For example, Critical Allyship helps me reflect on how I am benefiting in society from unearned privileges. It urges me to work with others to address oppression and inequality in the system. There is no blame or fault for having unearned disadvantage or unearned advantage. Critical Allyship is a practice of raising awareness and cultural safety so that we better understand the mechanisms that contribute to inequality (Nixon, 2019).

### **Conceptual Framework**

My conceptual framework is based upon the Medicine Wheel Conceptual Framework by Mashford-Pringle (2016). The author describes how this framework was developed to demonstrate the circular relationship between the structure and delivery of health care, the context of history, and the level of perceived self-determination within four First Nations communities and their health system. This medicine wheel is based on Algonquin tradition and

was developed by the Blood Tribe (Alberta), Wasagamack and Garden Hill First Nations (Manitoba), and Lac La Ronge Indian Band (Saskatchewan) (Mashford-Pringle, 2016). The medicine wheel is one of many Indigenous expressions of health and healing. There is a broad spectrum of cultural diversity within the Indigenous population across Canada and it would be very complicated to embody all of them in one framework; it is not intended to be a 'one size fits all'. This conceptual framework was chosen because of its roots in Indigenous culture and because it provides a simple, yet holistic framework for organizing and understanding the data. The medicine wheel conceptual framework was effective for three of my themes, allowing me to use a theory-driven (deductive) approach. However, two of the themes required a different perspective. I needed to be flexible and use an inductive approach (finding patterns and allowing the theory to emerge) when the data did not fit into the medicine wheel. Figure 1 illustrates my conceptual framework.

**Figure 1***Conceptual Framework*

*Note.* Adapted from “Is there self-determination in Canada’s First Nations communities?”, A. Mashford-Pringle, 2016, *Journal of Northern Studies*, 10(2), p. 112.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992\\_Is\\_There\\_Self-](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)

[Determination\\_in\\_Canada's\\_First\\_Nations\\_Communities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)). Copyright 2016 by the Journal of Northern Studies.

### **Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis**

My sampling population includes data from online users who identify as members of Indigenous families (including youth, parents, extended family members, Elders, and family advocates) who have been involved in the child welfare system due to an apprehension within the last ten years. I searched terms such as “Indigenous parents”, “Indigenous youth”, “Indigenous families” and “Indigenous AND parental capacity assessment”, “Indigenous families AND child welfare”. I found the most relevant and rich information by using the term

“Indigenous families AND child welfare”. I collected information from 40 data samples, which included over 40 stories from Indigenous family members.

My research began by searching various social media sites. However, the information I found on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit was not specific enough for my research questions. The data was sparse, and it was difficult to verify users Indigenous background or how long they had been involved in the child welfare system. As a result, I decided to use these social media outlets as a starting point to locate other sources of information. This led me to Indigenous news articles and video interviews with parents, youth, and other family members, where I found the richest data and the most reliable information. I collected data until I reached a saturation point where the data began to repeat itself.

The data was collected and analyzed through Thematic Analysis (TA), which is a practical method of organizing, categorizing, and making meaning of large quantities of information (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I chose this method because of its flexibility, accessibility, and the ability to offer insight by identifying patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I created 223 codes from the 40 sources of data. The data I collected was carefully read, coded, and categorized into themes and subthemes connected to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This stage was critical, as I interacted with the data, actively listened for patterns and insights, and made interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analyzing the data through TA helped me identify shared experiences and meanings voiced by Indigenous families within the child welfare system.

TA was appealing for my study because it allowed me to utilize both an inductive and deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This was beneficial because I observed the data from multiple different angles while also reducing the potential for bias. For example, during the



coding process I used an inductive approach to allow space for new theories and information to emerge, such as families expressing their awareness of child welfare conduct, which is not currently found in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Identifying new themes required flexibility and even letting go of a conceptual framework so that I could allow the data to speak for itself. For instance, as I was working on the theme of self-determination and post-traumatic growth, I repeatedly tried to organize the codes into the medicine wheel, but it was not aligning well. So, I decided to let go of trying to fit the data into a structure, and when I did this, the data started to speak for itself. I realized in that moment that I needed to let go of structure and concepts to hear the voices in the data. This was a big epiphany during the research because I realized the application of this in a broader sense. Forcing the data into a conceptual structure is like assessing Indigenous parents from a Eurocentric framework, which seems ineffective. This insight helped me understand the importance of being flexible in perception by moving beyond conceptual structure to embrace a holistic perspective (Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2017).

I was also able to use a deductive approach in TA by utilizing the information I gathered in my literature review and drawing upon the philosophical underpinnings of CRT. This approach was effective for highlighting themes from the lived experiences of families and exploring the impacts of colonization in the child welfare system.

### **Ethical Considerations**

On February 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, I received an ethics exemption approval from the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB). The Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans states that "research does not require REB review when it relies exclusively on information that is...(b) in the public domain and the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy" (Canadian Institutes of Health

Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018, p. 15). This can be achieved by adhering to the rule of online access; that is, if registration is required to access a site, then it is no longer considered public domain; it is considered private domain (Kozinets, 2015). I conducted non-intrusive passive Netnography, which means that I always maintained an observer position and did *not* interact with users (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2014). Kozinets (2015) acknowledges that it is possible to maintain ethical research as a passive observer without the need for permission if data is collected from publicly accessible content.

To ensure ethical practice, I have safeguarded confidentiality by gathering information anonymously, and removing as much identifying information as possible (including source information and URLs) (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2014). Quotations have been paraphrased to reduce tracking identification through search engines (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2014). Informed consent was not required for this study as I was not interacting with users, and the project was strictly observational research using publicly accessible sites.

### **Role as Researcher**

As I started the research, I became very aware of my insider perspective. I came across a video of a birth apprehension, which triggered me. I soon discovered that videos of apprehensions are rare (I only found one). I took time to reflect on my reaction to the video in my reflexive journal, which helped me process my emotions and come back to the data with more purpose and clarity. While some of the other stories that I heard were very hard to hear, none of them had the same impact as the video did. Seeing that video reminded me of why I am doing this thesis. It was a powerful reminder.

**Trustworthiness**

I found Netnography to be a practical methodology for this study, as I could collect data from a variety of sources, which provided a wide breadth of information that was not limited by geographical location (Hearne & Van Hout, 2016). Being able to research on the internet gave me a lot of freedom to access information that would not have been available to me, such as the ability to collect a large sample size (223 data samples, including stories from over 40 different family members across Canada). This diversity and range of information helped increase the trustworthiness of the data, as I was able to capture the experiences of many different Indigenous families and was not restricted to one specific group or number of people.

To increase the trustworthiness of my Netnography study, I made sure to include a variety of diverse viewpoints, ways of being, personal truths, and narratives (Lehner-Mear, 2020). For example, family members had a wide spectrum of different experiences within the child welfare system (including barriers, supports, and family history in the system). There was a diverse collection of perspectives on the child welfare system and how it impacted family members. Collecting a large amount of information helped me to hear many different perspectives and reflect on potential assumptions that arose from my insider and outsider perspectives. For example, when I noticed that most of the information I was collecting indicated harmful outcomes for families involved in child welfare. I noted this pattern and paused data collection to reflect on this. I wanted to ensure that I was not collecting information with a biased perspective. Upon further reflection, I realized that I was making a conscious effort to collect information that was different, surprising, and outside what seemed to be the common trend. Looking deeper into the data I had collected, I discovered stories of youth raised in supportive and stable foster families. I also found stories of youth who experienced exceptional support

from social workers. Although these stories were not a reflection of many cases present in the data, pausing periodically during data collection was an effective exercise in awareness for me to reflect and ensure that I was open-minded and reflective. Participating in self-reflection can help researchers clarify their worldviews and identify rigid thoughts and beliefs (Collins, 2018).

The reflective process illustrated above helped me to increase the study's transparency and trustworthiness. Keeping a reflective journal was also helpful for tracking my challenges, thought processes, and ongoing questions that arose during the research process. I enjoyed the challenge of reflecting on my role as an insider and outsider and how these different lenses impacted my perception of the data. As an insider, I found myself relating to the data on a deep level. Many of the experiences were very similar to what I experienced with Child and Family Services (such as feeling judged, or not receiving counselling). On the other hand, I was also aware that my experience with child welfare would have been very different if I was Indigenous and had to contend with institutional racism. As an outsider, I can only imagine how extremely oppressive that would be.

### **Summary**

Passive Netnography proved to be an effective alternative to transformative participatory research. I captured a broad sampling population including Indigenous youth, parents, extended family, Elders, and family advocates. Netnography was instrumental in strengthening anonymity and fore fronting the voices of marginalized Indigenous families. Critical Race Theory helped to inform my data collection and analysis by deconstructing issues about race, oppression, and structural inequity. In addition to this, the Indigenous medicine wheel provided a simple and holistic framework to organize and conceptualize a large portion of the data. I enjoyed using TA,

as it was a flexible and effective way to organize and make meaning of the data while providing ample opportunity for self-reflection.

## Chapter 4. Findings

I discovered five themes during the Thematic Analysis, which are summarized below. They include 1) how Indigenous families experience the PCA, 2) how Indigenous families experience the child welfare system, 3) family awareness of child welfare conduct, 4) self-determination and post-traumatic growth, and 5) what needs to change. I paraphrased all quotes to protect anonymity.

### **Theme 1: How Indigenous Families Experience the PCA**

I found the least amount of information on the PCA, most likely due to child and family privacy laws. It is possible that parent's felt hesitant to speak out, knowing that the PCA holds a tremendous amount of power in final custody decisions. For instance, one parent was ordered to have two PCAs, at which point it was determined that they were unfit to parent. This illustrates how influential the PCA is in determining whether families will get their children back or not. The following four subthemes were discovered in the data.

#### *Non-Indigenous Assessors*

Parents voiced concern regarding their experience with the PCA. They expressed unease working with non-Indigenous assessors unfamiliar with Indigenous culture and who held harmful biases. One Elder working with families indicated how unsettling it was to hear feedback from parents regarding the PCA. The Elder reported that parents are often judged and pathologized through a Western lens. One parent disclosed their concern after learning that their assessor was non-Indigenous and had never conducted an assessment with an Indigenous person before. In another case, a parent was denied their request to obtain an Indigenous assessor.

### ***Deficit-Based Perspectives***

A community Elder reported that a parent who did not speak during their assessment was judged negatively by their assessor. This Elder reported his concern about a lack of focus on Indigenous strengths. One parent described how their fighting spirit to reunite with their children was framed as aggressive and offensive by their assessor.

### ***Non-Inclusive and Inappropriate Assessments***

Three parents reported that they were asked to complete exercises during the PCA that measured their math abilities. In one PCA, a parent was judged for not understanding the division and multiplication questions they were given. In another assessment, a parent was tested on her vocabulary and asked to identify various numbers, shapes, and colours. Some of these exercises were timed and had certain rules, such as making sure items were flushed together. Another parent described her experience with the PCA as more of an IQ test than a parental assessment. There was an overall confusion present among these parents as to why they were being assessed for skills that have nothing to do with being an effective parent. One parent reported that they felt unfairly judged based on stereotypes of intergenerational trauma. Parents were not only assessed on their math abilities but were also judged on how clean their house was (despite the context of being a single parent and having infants or toddlers), and how they ate their food (one parent was pathologized for not using utensils to eat fast food).

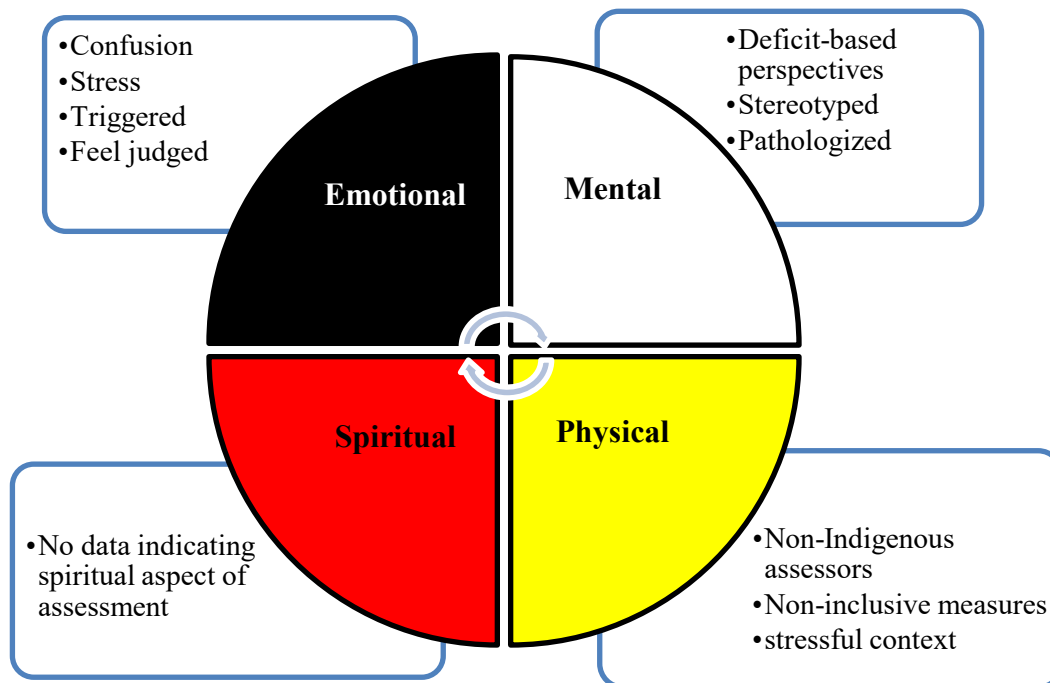
### ***Questionable Validity***

During the PCA, one parent was pushed to their limit and found themselves stressed beyond what they could handle. This parent eventually gave up and was labelled in the PCA as unable to parent. Another parent reported that they found the PCA extremely triggering because they had to discuss family history. It was a reminder of the lack of support they had received

growing up, and the lack of support they were receiving from Child and Family Services throughout the apprehension. This suggests that the high stress that parents are under to perform optimally for the PCA places this assessment under highly questionable validity.

## Figure 2

*How Indigenous Families Experience the PCA*



*Note.* Adapted from “Is there self-determination in Canada’s First Nations communities?”, A. Mashford-Pringle, 2016, *Journal of Northern Studies*, 10(2), p. 112.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992\\_Is\\_There\\_Self-](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)

[Determination in Canada's First Nations Communities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)). Copyright 2016 by the Journal of Northern Studies.

## Theme 2: How Indigenous Families Experience the Child Welfare System

The second theme I will explore is *how Indigenous families experience the child welfare system*. I will use the lens of the medicine wheel to help conceptualize the various lived experiences, including the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects.



*Mental Aspects*

The mental aspects include the mental health effects of child welfare practices, the impacts of colonization on families, and social determinants of health. The mental health experience of Indigenous families in child welfare was characterized by significant historical and ongoing trauma from colonization. Within the data, there were seven parents involved in the child welfare system who had a parent or family member that survived Residential School, and there were two grandparents who had been taken in the sixties scoop. Four parents had been in the foster care system as children, and now their children are currently in the foster system.

Many parents reported experiencing a birth alert apprehension, and several of these parents mentioned that the birth alert was due to a previous apprehension in their family. One parent reported that they were deemed unfit to parent by Child and Family Services due to a mental health condition caused by intergenerational trauma. Several parents mentioned becoming dependent on substances to cope with the intergenerational trauma (poverty, domestic violence, and parental stress). Despite requesting these services, six parents reported that they never received mental health support from Child and Family Services. One parent reported having to pay for their counselling.

Indigenous parents reported mental health issues such as shame, distrust, distress, depression, lack of hope, feeling defeated, fatigued, easily triggered, having flashbacks and nightmares, severe anxiety, grief, and traumatization from their child being apprehended. Parents also reported feeling devastated, angry, hopeless, shocked, and stressed. There were multiple reports of parents saying they were afraid of Child and Family Services, fearful of sharing anything in groups, terrified of hospitals, and worried about racism. One parent described the separation from her child “like being in hell; just looking at other parents with their children was

torture” (paraphrased). Another parent reported that being involved in Child and Family Services “felt like being imprisoned” (paraphrased). One parent voiced how difficult it was to travel and participate in the programs ordered by Child and Family Services when she was struggling to meet her basic needs.

Youth in care reported mental health concerns such as ongoing distress and substance use to cope with trauma from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, often from the foster families that they were placed with. Youth aging out of care reported stress in preparing to live on their own. Some youth face homelessness or poverty (or both). One youth reported no encouragement or acknowledgement of his strengths where he was in care.

### *Physical Aspects*

The physical aspects discussed below include the delivery of Child and Family Services. Many youths reported shuffling through multiple home in foster care (one youth reported living in 20 different non-aboriginal homes). Youth also reported living in hotels and group homes where they suffered abuse. Many parents expressed facing barrier after barrier to get their children back. Despite making attempts to change, several parents report that their case continued to get renewed by Child and Family Services. Other parents reported that their attachment to their child was severed through the apprehension and any opportunity to mend the attachment was restricted through sporadic visits and limited supervision access.

### *Spiritual Aspects*

The spiritual aspects include the impacts of child welfare practices on family, community, and culture. The data illustrates how children were separated from their spirituality, families, community, culture, language, education, and cultural teachings. Nine family members reported being disconnected from their traditions, family, culture, and Elders. Several parents

report that that their children were placed in non-aboriginal homes. One parent reported that her efforts to transfer her file to a culturally appropriate child welfare agency was denied. Another parent reported that the parenting classes she was required to take were not culturally inclusive.

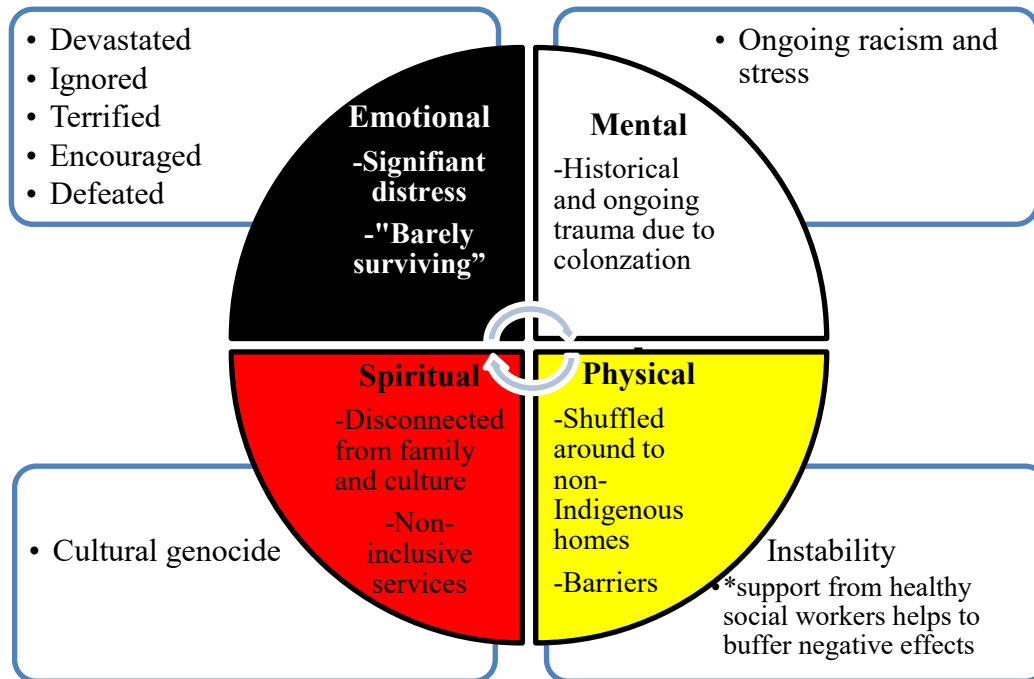
### *Emotional Aspects*

The emotional aspects include strengths and emotional experiences families reported in the child welfare system. Parents reported feeling defeated and fatigued. One parent described their experience as “barely surviving” (paraphrased). One mother reported being completely devastated when her child was taken from her only one hour after given birth. Another mother shares her experience of keeping her birth secret because she was terrified that her child would be taken at the hospital. Parents voiced that they felt ignored by social workers and abandoned by the system.

Some positive experiences were reported from parents. One parent expressed gratitude for learning and having a caring caseworker who treated her like a human being. This support was seen as helpful. Another parent voiced feeling encouraged when a social worker helped him move into a culturally appropriate residence with his children. Another parent reported feeling supported from a social worker who helped him get basic necessities for his family. One youth shared appreciation towards their social worker who planned a camping trip, which provided connection to other Indigenous youth, as well as experiences with culture and nature. This was reported as a life changing experience for the youth. Two other youths reported experiencing a healthy foster family where they found stability. One of these youths also reported having a supportive worker that encouraged her to advocate for others.

**Figure 3**

*How Indigenous Families Experience the Child Welfare System*



*Note.* Adapted from “Is there self-determination in Canada’s First Nations communities?”, A. Mashford-Pringle, 2016, *Journal of Northern Studies*, 10(2), p. 112.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992\\_Is\\_There\\_Self-](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)

[Determination in Canada's First Nations Communities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)). Copyright 2016 by the Journal of Northern Studies.

### **Theme 3: Family Awareness of Child Welfare Conduct**

#### ***Child Welfare is Harming Indigenous Families***

The Indigenous families reflected in this study have identified that the child welfare system is harmful. I will explore how families have come to understand this harm in the subsequent subthemes. At the root of this harm, Indigenous families have recognized that the child welfare system fails to support them. Families are also aware that Child and Family Services is profiting at their expense. One family advocate expressed how Indigenous children

are being used as commodities while non-Indigenous families receive the financial gain from fostering them. One parent reported that child welfare is a profit-making system that benefits from apprehending children. There is a general sentiment that the current child welfare system is harmful, corrupt, and disconnected from its impact on families (like the old expression, “it’s just business”). One Elder spoke up to condemn the violent act of child apprehensions by saying that it is the most horrendous action you could ever inflict upon a family.

### ***Lack of Transparency***

Parents voiced a general lack of transparency from Child and Family Services. For example, two parents in the data were not informed promptly by Child and Family Services that their child was taken to the hospital for serious health concerns. Families expressed that they didn’t know their rights because they were never communicated with them. Several Indigenous family members voiced that they were ignored and dismissed. For example, letters of support were ignored, as well as personal stories that could provide valuable contextual information about the family. One story I ran across was particularly illustrative of the lack of transparency families face: an Indigenous child was taken from her family (due to problems relating to intergenerational trauma) and grew up in foster care. She was never informed that her parents were fighting to bring her home for years. After she aged out of care, she wanted to reconnect with her parents and so she did a freedom of information request to locate them. Upon doing so, she discovered that her parents had been denied the right to adopt her years ago. This story illustrates what many families must face as they endure a veil of secrecy through no transparency from Child and Family Services. Our society teaches us that knowledge is power. When institutions keep critical information from the people they serve, they hold a dangerous amount of power.

***Biases and Power-Over Dynamics Experienced by Families***

Another subtheme that Indigenous families identified was the presence of bias and unhealthy power dynamics with caseworkers. One parent shared that when she read her caseworkers notes, they revealed condemning comments and biased perceptions. This parent felt like they were not even given a fair chance. Other parents reported feeling like they were being judged and looked down upon, which caused distrust and an unhealthy relationship with their caseworker. Another parent reported experiencing slander and lies from their caseworker. The common pattern here is that parents are acknowledging the unhealthy power-over dynamics they are experiencing with family workers and how this is creating a negative impact.

***Being Deceived by Child and Family Services***

Indigenous parents and youth in the system share an awareness of an underhanded reality; that they are being deceived by Child and Family Services. Many parents share their stories about constantly jumping through hoops, facing barrier after barrier, only to be met with broken promises and a lack of support. There is a consensus from families that the current child welfare system is not here to help. One youth reported that child welfare promised to find him a placement with his biological family, which never happened. Youth feel passed around and several family members believe that shuffling Indigenous children around at a high rate allows Child and Family Services to cover their tracks. Several Indigenous youths reported being highly aware of how they are being deceived. Trust is absent in these experiences of deception.

***Child Welfare is not Prioritizing Family Reunification***

Another subtheme that arose was an awareness that child welfare does not prioritize family reunification. Parents who were struggling noticed that extra support was given to foster families, when those resources could have been used to help their families meet their basic needs

and keep them together. Instead, parents reported that foster families are given the lions share of available resources. One parent had her child waitlisted for specialized care for two years. Once her child was apprehended from her care, the child began receiving the specialized services the family was waiting for within days. Parents are aware that child welfare is not focused on keeping families together or providing needed supports for Indigenous families; instead, the majority of money in the child welfare system is invested in separating families and creating unstable environments for Indigenous youth “in care”.

### ***No Justice or Accountability in the Child Welfare System***

Indigenous families reported injustice and a lack of accountability from child welfare. While families are expected to keep up with every mandated request, Indigenous parents expressed that Child and Family Services holds little to no accountability in return. One parent was informed that her child attempted suicide and was in the hospital, but she was informed two days later. Families reported feeling like they are constantly operating within double standards. For example, one Indigenous youth shared their foster parents abused them and that child welfare did nothing to bring justice to their abusers.

In another case scenario, two parents trying to locate their child in the foster system were told that their child was adopted out. However, the parents reported that no documents were provided to support this adoption claim. This story speaks to the lack of accountability and injustice that Indigenous families are experiencing. Based on hearsay, several parents reported having their child taken for no reason. Another Indigenous family reported having their child returned with gift certificates after Child and Family Services was unable to prove the accusations that caused the apprehension in the first place. The apprehension severely damaged the family, and the act of giving gift certificates was not only terribly inappropriate, but it added

insult to injury. This example illustrates the lack of humanity that Indigenous families experience in the child welfare system.

### ***Never Good Enough for Child and Family Services***

Families communicated feeling like their actions failed to matter because it was never good enough for Child and Family Services. Parents voiced they are constant jumping through hoops with the hope of reuniting their family, but their efforts seem to go unnoticed because they can not get their children back. The message parents seem to be getting is “you’re not good enough”.

### ***Punished for Requesting Help***

A prevalent subtheme that emerged within the data was that families were punished for requesting help. Many stories in the data describe a similar scenario: parents who struggled and reached out for support would have their children removed from their care. One mother requested services to help her with house duties because she was struggling as a single parent. Once the workers were in her home, they apprehended her children due to unsanitary conditions, even though she asked for help addressing this issue.

Several parents reported having their child taken due to mental health issues caused by trauma. One parent sought help for substance abuse and no support was provided. However, child welfare was quick to offer their “support” to this parent a short while later by apprehending her children when they discovered she was drinking. Parents are voicing their awareness of this dire situation: if they ask for help, they will suffer for it. Some parents realized that it is better to hide or suffer in silence if the agency supposed to help families is causing more harm than good. One parent reported that she knows Child and Family Services is not a support agency for families, it is a policing agency for families.



***Nothing has Changed: No More Faith in the System***

Many family members voiced that the current child welfare system continues to proliferate the Indigenous experience of the Residential School system and the Sixties Scoop. There is a common message among parents that nothing has changed over time. Family members reported feeling a lack hope and faith in the system. Indigenous youth acknowledged that they are being stolen from their families, just like many grandparents were. Parents conveyed feeling uprooted and robbed of the opportunity to raise their own families.

**Figure 4*****Family Awareness of Child Welfare Conduct***

**Theme 4: Self-Determination and Post-Traumatic Growth**

Six subthemes arose in this theme: community support, raising awareness, asserting jurisdiction and legal rights, empowered action and advocacy, strength and determination, cultural and spiritual healing.

***Community Support***

Indigenous families engaged in receiving and giving support within their community to assist with family reunification efforts. This support allowed youth and their families an opportunity to overcome adversity within the child welfare system. Community efforts appeared in various forms. For instance, parents would help other parents. One mother joined a support group for other families involved in the child welfare system to share cultural knowledge, assist with resources and legal work, and witness supervised visits. In another case, an Elder supported a family in court. One parent attributed his family's reunion to the wrap around services that he received at a cultural residence. This residence offered him 24-hour supportive services such as counselling, family programs, child minding, wellness checks, and hands-on learning; giving him and his family the support they needed to stay together. Another parent voiced the benefits of wrap around services and shared how she found encouragement and safety from the supportive services that were provided to her and her family. In both stories, the community cultural residence with wrap-around services helped these parents reunite with their children.

***Raising Awareness***

The data illustrates how family members are keen to raise awareness of how their experience with child welfare has impacted them. One grandfather went on a hunger strike to raise awareness. One mother refused to be silent and took her voice to social media. Parents are

speaking out for several reasons: to educate other families, to increase hope, to let parents know that they are not alone, and to encourage other families to speak up.

### ***Asserting Jurisdiction and Legal Rights***

The data suggests a strong movement towards First Nations jurisdiction. Cowessess First Nation (Salteaux- SK) recently publicly announced legal and jurisdictional sovereignty of their Child and Family Services system. Another First Nation community asserted their authority by defying provincial orders to protect a child in their community from social workers. This collective stance against the system was a powerful demonstration of unity. Members of the community expressed that taking their power back provided a sense of relief and empowerment. In addition to an increase in jurisdiction, the data also revealed several ongoing legal investigations against Child and Family Services. There was two class action lawsuits and three human right complaints found. Issues concerning birth alerts, low funding on reserves, unnecessary apprehensions, and discrimination were among the legal concerns being addressed.

### ***Empowered Action and Advocacy***

Many family members (including parents, youth, and family advocates) demonstrated strong advocacy. One mother decided to start a support group to help other parents find empowerment. Another mother became a volunteer at an agency that advocates for families in child welfare. Several youths that were previously in care became advocates for children in the foster system. They focused their advocacy on Indigenous rights, creating mentorship programs, and initiating new programs for family members. Parents also acted towards creating empowerment in their personal lives, such as gaining employment or going back to school. Family members report that being an advocate enabled them to be a voice for others, while creating meaningful change.

Another form of empowerment was found in the data through the work of an organization called West Coast Leaf (also mentioned in my literature review). West Coast Leaf provides advocacy for parents by providing socio-cultural context to family workers and by acting when Child and Family Services abuses its power (West Coast Leaf, 2019).

### ***Strength and Determination***

Indigenous family members demonstrate significant strength and determination despite all the challenges they face in the child welfare system. There is an intense determination to succeed in getting their children back home. The courage and capability of Indigenous parents is found in comments such as “I will prove to them that they can’t break my spirit” (paraphrased). Another mother who was previously involved with MCFD had a strong desire to protect her family by strengthening her parental abilities, support network, and witnesses.

The data also indicates that family members have an inner awareness of strength. Comments such as “this experience has made me stronger” (paraphrased), or “my strength will help me rise above oppression” (paraphrased). Determination can be heard in comments such as “I’m determined that my children will never go into the foster system” (paraphrased), or “I intend to stop the cycle of intergenerational trauma in my own family” (paraphrased). Some parent’s expressed gratitude, excitement, and a sense of optimism about their future.

### ***Cultural and Spiritual Healing***

Families found healing through various mediums. One parent began to learn the art of beading to heal from the trauma of being separated from her children. She taught her children how to bead during their supervised visits, and eventually shared this art with other parents to help them heal through their pain as well. This story demonstrates a meaningful way of healing through relationships and culture. One youth who was previously in care found healing by

learning his traditional language with his biological father. This is another example of how family members promote healing through relationships and culture. Parents expressed a need to find healthy coping strategies, stability, and a connection to self and spirit. Healing programs for families provided supportive staff such as doulas or Elders for support. The data strongly suggests that creating relationships based on trust is paramount. Storytelling and healing circles are part of this relational healing process.

Family members reported that sharing their story helped increase hope, gain strength, learn, heal, and regain control. One program I found in the data was for mothers with children in care and focused on land-based healing, traditional medicines, cultural ways of being (such as the medicine wheel), and holistic activities for mind and body healing. Mothers in this program found connection, spiritual awakening, joy, pride, and cultural identity in their experience through the land-based experience.

**Figure 5***Self-Determination and Post-Traumatic Growth*

*Note.* I found self-determination and post-traumatic growth traits within the data (as illustrated with Figure 5). I have **bolded** self-determination and the correlating subthemes I found in the data in the figure. I have used *italics* to illustrate the co-existing themes of post-traumatic growth.

Self-determination is a sense of agency (such as power, responsibility, autonomy, or ability to change or influence) one's life, which increases one's overall well-being (Paré, 2013). On the other hand, post-traumatic growth is a theory in positive psychology that helps to explain how some people who experience trauma can experience a subsequent transformation or positive growth (Collier, 2016). The experiences I noticed from families within the data seem to correlate with the five items found on The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory; a scale used to determine if

and how an individual has achieved growth after experiencing trauma (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, as cited in Collier, 2016). The items on the scale include an appreciation of life, improved relationships with others, new possibilities, personal strength, and spiritual growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, as cited in Collier, 2016).

### **Theme 5: What Needs to Change?**

#### ***Mental Aspects***

The data reflects voices from families and community members who are calling for accountability from the government for unnecessary apprehensions. Parents expressed hope that government accountability will help to reduce the stigma and shame experienced by other parents in the child welfare system. Parents have identified that child and family support need to be safe, culturally focused, and strengths-based. Parents shared that child welfare needs more mental health support and culturally supportive services for intergenerational trauma.

#### ***Physical Aspects***

The physical aspects of change are focused on helping families meet basic needs, prioritizing prevention, and delivering accountability. The data indicates that parents involved in the child welfare system would like access to and support addressing basic needs such as food and transportation. Families shared that they want access to resources for mental health that include allyship support, safe social workers, band representation, trained mediators, educators, and coordinators. There is a clear sentiment from family members that apprehensions should not be the first option, and that child welfare should work with families to prevent apprehensions from occurring. Families expressed their desire to break out of the cycle of involvement with child welfare and increase First Nation jurisdiction, giving Indigenous communities the chance to identify healthy homes for their children. Indigenous parents also want to increase children's

advocacy by having workers who can help First Nation families with access and custody matters. This includes having access to programs that help families unite, encourage hope, and honor bonding experiences for parents.

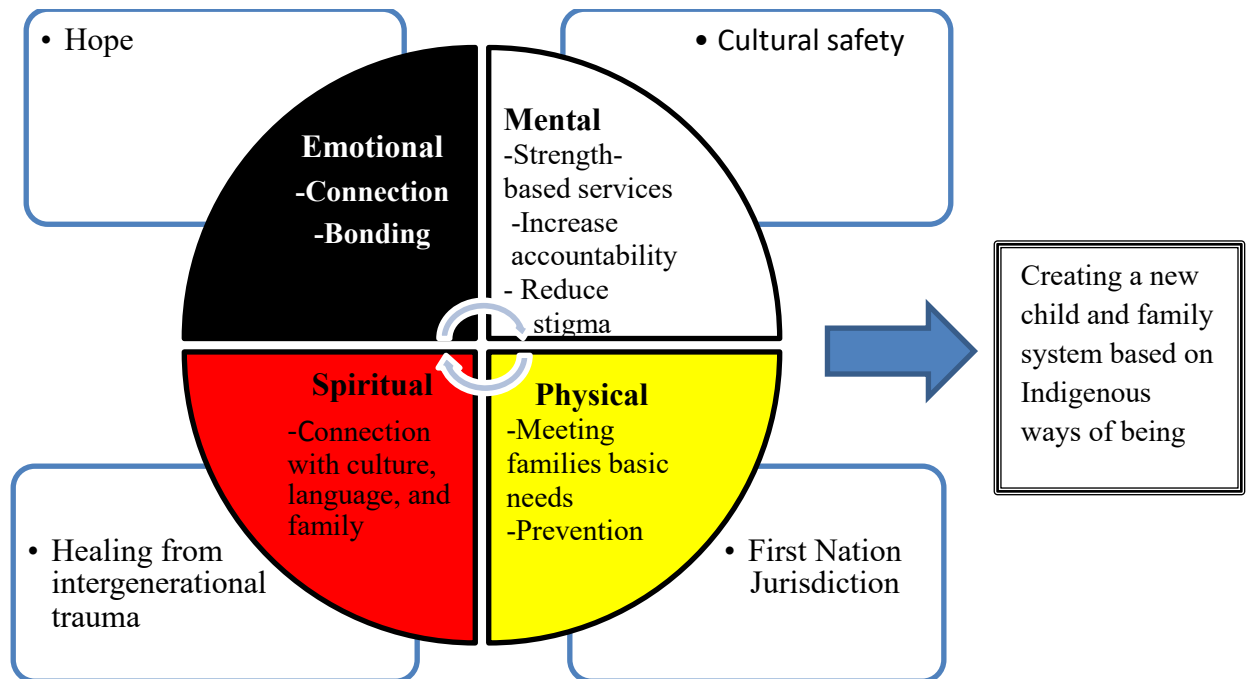
### ***Spiritual and Emotional Aspects***

The following suggestions for change address both the emotional and spiritual aspects of the medicine wheel, as these two aspects were deeply interconnected in the data. Families are seeking opportunities for land-base healing and connection to family, language, and culture. One youth who recently aged out of care reported that kids should receive better support in staying connected to their cultural identity, land, family and elders, and traditional food. Another youth who recently aged out of care voiced the significance of understanding ones unique First Nation community, including the shared values and worldviews. Several Indigenous youth expressed a yearning to learn about their ancestors, land, and traditional language. Positive emotional changes (such as hope and connection) were strongly reflected in the data when family members had access to these relational and cultural experiences. This data supports the findings of a strengths-based research study revealing how American Indigenous youth feel safe, free, comfortable, and connected to culture and family while living on reserve (Wood et al., 2018).

### ***Dismantling and Re-Building a Healthy Child and Family System***

A couple of parents voiced that the current child welfare system needs to be dismantled and re-created in a new way. Some parents reported that they are determined to stop heinous acts from child welfare from happening in the future. One of the most significant problems identified was the power that Child and Family Services has over Indigenous families.



**Figure 6***What Needs to Change?*

*Note.* Adapted from “Is there self-determination in Canada’s First Nations communities?”, A. Mashford-Pringle, 2016, *Journal of Northern Studies*, 10(2), p. 112.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992\\_Is\\_There\\_Self-](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)

[Determination in Canada's First Nations Communities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317567992_Is_There_Self-Determination_in_Canada's_First_Nations_Communities)). Copyright 2016 by the Journal of Northern Studies.

### Summary

The impacts of intergenerational trauma are evident in the experiences shared by families throughout this research. Unfortunately, this collective trauma does not seem to be considered when working with Indigenous families. As a result, families continue to experience mounting distress from racism and injustice in the child welfare system. The findings from the PCA help to provide further understanding of colonial perspectives and how they impact assessment procedures. Family members are keenly aware of the deception and injustice that are

systemically built into policies that inform child welfare practices and the professionals that deliver them. Despite the adversity that Indigenous families face, the findings clearly illustrate the incredible self-determination and post-traumatic growth that family members exhibit. The findings from this study help to illuminate the changes that Indigenous family members want to see in the child welfare system, including the removal of the child welfare system altogether.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The key findings of my study represent the voices of over forty Indigenous family members and their experiences within the child welfare system. Family members include parents, youth, grandparents, Elders, and family advocates. The data was collected using non-intrusive passive Netnography and analyzed using Thematic Analysis. I will begin this chapter with a short description of my experience with Netnography and my experience with the research process. Following the key findings, I will discuss recommendations for future research, implications for counselling, limitations of this research, and conclude the final chapter of this thesis.

### **Experience**

I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the process of Netnography. Despite being doubtful of this methodology at the start, I admit that it gave me the freedom to cast my data collection net wide into a sea of information. Some of the experiences that parents shared were difficult to hear as I could relate to the stories and the feelings on a deep level. In these moments I could sense being an insider and an outsider at the same time. Experiencing both lenses brought a sense of humility and closeness to the subject matter. I will carry this valuable lesson in perspective-taking into my work as a counsellor.

### **Research Questions**

My first research question is: how do Indigenous families experience the PCA and the child welfare system? I explored this question in two parts by first looking at Indigenous parents' experiences of the parental capacity assessment and then exploring Indigenous family members' experiences of the child welfare system. My second research question is: According to Indigenous families, what needs to change in the Canadian public child welfare system? I will

discuss the findings of my second research question under the section entitled *what needs to change?*

### ***How Indigenous Families Experience the PCA***

There was a deficit of information on Indigenous experiences of the PCA. I believe that confidentiality laws are a significant deterrent for families speaking out. For example, in Manitoba's Child and Family Services Act, it is illegal to publish any information that identifies any person involved in Child and Family Services (Government of Manitoba, 2022). Failure to comply with this law can result in a \$5,000 fine for individuals, or \$50,000 for corporations (Government of Manitoba, 2022). Individuals can face up to two years in prison for violating this law (Government of Manitoba, 2022). Consequently, this is why most of the interviews I watched were blurred, and pseudonyms were created for family members so no one could be identified.

This suppression of information could be highly intimidating to family members, making it very difficult for the public to understand how families are being treated in the child welfare system. During most of the interviews that I observed, I could see that family members were careful (even fearful at times) about what they were saying. The data indicates that family members were forced to hide their identity due to confidentiality laws, but they were highly motivated to go public, share their stories, and raise awareness. Many family members reported feeling uninformed, ignored, dismissed, and unaware of their rights due to a lack of honesty, open communication, and transparency from support workers. While confidentiality is important in protecting the privacy of children and their families, it can also be problematic because it creates secrecy around oppressive practices.

The findings illustrate how Indigenous parents experienced judgements, power-struggles, and biases from their PCA assessor. This reveals important information about how assessors' approach Indigenous families with a deficit-based perspective. This approach fails to see the families' strengths, which is critical. This supports the current literature that found deficit-based perspectives from family workers create authoritative relationships resulting in distrust and disengagement from Indigenous families (Haight et al., 2018). Another research study found deficit-based narratives such as stereotypes and related stigma had negative health impacts for youth living on reserves (Wood et al., 2018). Similarly, research has identified that when an assessor is harbouring biased views and assumptions, it increases the risk of negative outcomes, such as discriminatory apprehensions (West Coast Leaf, 2019). These findings highlight the importance of addressing harmful stereotypes and biases, while creating space for narratives of strength, hope and healing (Wood et al., 2018).

There was no mention in the findings of Indigenous parents being assessed for their strengths or cultural context, indicating no cultural inclusion evident in the data for the PCA. Since the PCA is left to the discretion of the assessor, this data suggests that assumptions and biases stemming from a lack of cultural safety are the root of the problem with the PCA. Indigenous families voiced that they were aware of biases and power-over dynamics from workers and how it created unhealthy and distrustful relationships.

Parents reported feeling distressed during the PCA. I hypothesize that most parents would feel similarly distressed if they were being assessed as a parent, especially when the assessor is from another cultural background. These findings align with the literature that found the PCA places much stress on parents to perform within an artificial environment (Di Pasquale & Rivolta, 2016). Most counsellors do not understand how stressful a PCA is (as they have never

experienced one themselves), how much added pressure it places on parents, or why a parent may give up. As an insider, I can understand the stressful aspects of the PCA. However, as an outsider I can only imagine how difficult it would be to be assessed as an Indigenous mother who has experienced racism.

Indigenous parents expressed their frustration and confusion about being assessed for their math abilities during their PCA. This also supports the findings in my literature review, particularly the research conducted on cross-cultural adapted health assessments, wherein researchers found a lack of relevant content about the specific population being assessed (Uysal-Bozkir et al., 2013). Even when assessments were adapted to be culturally responsive, psychometric properties in most of the assessments remained unclear (Uysal-Bozkir et al., 2013). Unfortunately, I could not find any evidence of cross-cultural adapted assessment questions in the PCA from my research.

While examining these findings, another question came to mind: why are we judging *any* parent, regardless of their race, for how they eat? Or, how good are they at long division? Furthermore, Indigenous parents reported that they were stressed and triggered during their PCA, so why are professionals continuing to assess parents under duress, especially when these tests are so heavily weighted in court? The literature identifies western psychometric assessments to be founded on Eurocentric assumptions, which are based upon the underlying beliefs of Christianity, capitalism, imperialism, and expansionism (Styres, 2017). These underlying beliefs form the foundation of colonized thinking, which leads to colonized behaviour. Therefore, when professionals disseminate an assessment based on a Eurocentric mentality, they are perpetuating colonization through the field of psychology (also known as psycholonization) (Collins, 2018). This begs the question; is an assessment based on a colonized mindset healthy for any family,

regardless of race? I would argue that continuing to use a colonial assessment is unhealthy for any family because it is a very narrow scope to view a family with. As my research has demonstrated, the PCA does not encourage meaningful context (for example, assessing a family in a relaxed and natural setting, such as their home). It has proven to be an oppressive tool that continues to do parents injustice. If the PCA was conducted in a humane and contextualized way, it could be an effective strength-based tool for identifying ways to assist families and reunite them.

### *Indigenous Family Members' Experiences of the Child Welfare System*

The findings from this study support the current literature; the negative impact of intergenerational trauma is positively correlated to the high child apprehension rates among Indigenous families (Haight et al., 2018). The literature has identified that colonization directly impacts Indigenous social determinants of health due to oppression and systemic racism (Haight et al., 2018). When families face systemic problems such as poverty, unsafe housing, substance abuse, or mental illness, apprehension risks are higher, and family reunification is much more difficult (Bye, 2019). Sadly, I was not surprised to find so many Indigenous families involved in child welfare struggling with low social determinants of health with histories of foster care and previous apprehensions. This reflects continued oppression through inequality and inequity.

The literature identifies neglect as the main reason Indigenous children are apprehended from their families (McKay-Panos, 2018). It is disheartening to know that the source of this neglect is caused by ongoing oppression (McKay-Panos, 2018). I was surprised by the high volume of movement Indigenous youth experience in the foster care system. One youth reported living in 20 different non-aboriginal homes during his childhood. How can Indigenous children

form healthy attachments if they are constantly being uprooted from their caregivers, friends, and community?

Through this research, I learned that child welfare services allow children to live in hotels. This was a shocking discovery. Further, most of the youth represented in the data suffered abuse and ended up homeless after aging out of the system. This supports the literature that finds involvement in the child welfare system to be a significant predictor of homelessness among Indigenous peoples (Alberton et al., 2020). How did an institution, created to help children and families, become the instigator of abuse? The child welfare system was created with good intentions; to keep children safe against harm. Unfortunately, it has become a very powerful institution, which changes the function of the system itself. With an immensity of power, families are often perceived as “less-than” in the relationship. More power tends to result in more control and less accountability and transparency for Child and Family Services agencies.

Indigenous youth realize that they are being stolen from their families, and they are aware that this is a continuation of what happened to their parents and grandparents. Youth are aware that this system is unjust and deceptive, and they feel it deliberately keeps them from their families, their culture, and basic human support. Similarly, family members participating in the West Coast Leaf study (2019) are aware of the factors that increase their chances of being involved with MCFD.

There were, however, a few exceptions present in the data. Stories of supportive social workers who changed the lives of youths provide inspiration. These social workers are making a difference in the lives of Indigenous youths by encouraging a connection to their culture, family, and caring support. A participant in the West Coast Leaf study (2019) reported having a positive experience with their social worker who was genuine and asked important questions to find out



what they needed or if they were ok. The data suggests that when youth have access to supportive social workers, it can help to buffer some of the adverse mental health effects they experience, while promoting positive outcomes for the future.

Indigenous families' experiences in child welfare are nothing short of cultural genocide; experiences point to disconnection from family, land, culture, traditions, and spirituality. The literature indicates that intergenerational trauma, loss of community and family support, and lack of healthy parental role modelling have been linked to the over-representation of Indigenous child neglect charges in Canada (Barker et al., 2014). The data illustrates that when families are separated, judged, and denied the basic human rights needed to raise a healthy family, it is almost impossible to thrive. However, when families are encouraged, supported, and given the necessary resources to stay together, they can flourish.

Importantly, there were a couple of stories of parents who were taking legal action against First Nation Child and Family Services. This made me check my assumptions on cultural safety. Just because an Indigenous community is running an institution, does not mean that it is immune from problems such as non-inclusive care or biased workers. I believe that if a First Nation child welfare agency is a carbon copy of a public institution with colonizing policies, it will produce similar results. Mann (2018) found families involved with First Nation child welfare agencies across Ontario reported very little change with Indigenous agencies. The author founds that Indigenous agencies are intended to have access to more culture, however, most of the time the workers are Caucasian and provide pan-Indigenous approaches instead of culturally specific care. Nation-run agencies face additional challenges, such as lack of funding; a report from the Representative for Children and Youth (2022) identified a lack of transparency in how MCFD funds are allocated, making it almost impossible to see how funds are distributed. This

report also found that youth living off reserve are provided the least amount of funding, highlighting problems with fiscal discrimination. For example, underfunded Aboriginal agencies often lack resources for families, which can lead to an increase in children in care (Representative for Children and Youth, 2017). Underfunded agencies also tend to have problems with staffing and service delivery issues, making it difficult to offer cultural-based prevention services (Representative for Children and Youth, 2017).

There was a consensus among family members that the child welfare system is harmful and is not intended to help. Parents are expected to live up to extremely high standards and, in return, treated as less than human. The theme “Family Awareness of Child Welfare Conduct” was the most revealing, insightful, and transparent part of the research. Family members communicate their experiential awareness of the child welfare system. They share their perceptions of child welfare as a corrupt money-making business, intended to police parents and their children. Family members aptly recognize that they will be punished for asking for help, and that family reunification is not a priority. Unfortunately, most of the data I collected supports this assertion.

The mental health impacts for Indigenous family members involved in the child welfare system were concerning. I noticed that many of the mental health symptoms experienced by family members fit the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For example, re-experiencing a child apprehension in flashbacks, or feeling fear and avoidance of all things related to Child and Family Services. Other examples of PTSD symptoms include hyperarousal (feeling triggered by the PCA), and negative cognitions and mood (shame, hopelessness). Exposing families struggling with intergenerational trauma to more trauma is incredibly inhumane and does nothing but perpetuate the cycle of colonization.

### *What Needs to Change?*

There is a silver lining in this complex issue: Many family members voiced that they want to stop these acts of injustice. Indigenous family members showed strength and determination to change the pattern of history moving forward. While some family members have lost all faith in the system because they see how history is repeating itself, others are actively attempting to change it. Additionally, some family members are advocating for an entirely new system that acknowledges Indigenous ways of being and cultural inclusion. They recognize that unnecessary apprehensions can be avoided if families are supported, which means that prevention must be a priority. As a result, First Nation communities are asserting jurisdiction over Child and Family Services and standing up against provincial law.

Indigenous parents want more mental health support and culturally supportive services for intergenerational trauma. The data strongly indicates that Indigenous support services need to be safe, culturally focused, and strengths-based. There was a lot of positive feedback from parents on their experiences of wrap-around services. Parents found these services help them meet their basic needs, while being in an encouraging and safe environment. These findings support West Coast Leaf's study that found Indigenous families benefited from community-based wrap-around services based on prevention, cultural safety, and Indigenous ways of being (West Coast Leaf, 2019). The Ma Mawi W i Chi Itata Centre in Winnipeg (discussed in the literature review) provides an excellent template for this Indigenous-based model of care, while ensuring child protection decision-making stays in the First Nation community (Byle, 2019).

I found it inspiring to hear about the growth experiences from parents, often accompanied by a sense of gratitude for receiving support and wrap-around services. This indicates that meaningful change is initiated by helping families meet their basic human needs. These findings

support evidence from a West Coast Leaf study indicating that the most effective prevention-based programs were wrap-around services grounded in Indigenous ways of being that were strengths-based and family-focused (West Coast Leaf, 2019).

Family members shared ways that they take action to address the lack of transparency and accountability from child welfare by raising awareness and encouraging other families to do the same. Raising awareness in the public is an act of healthy resistance against oppression. It helped family members embody courage and empowerment, while speaking their truth and connecting with others. Families also used cultural and spiritual traditions such as storytelling and healing circles to help them increase hope, gain strength, learn, heal, and regain control. This also involved connecting with their community through giving and receiving support. These findings suggest that these cultural ways of being form relational connections, which provide healing from the distrust and power differences families experience with child and family workers.

Family members from this study also voiced that creating relationships based on trust is vital. Trust and openness will help to end the power struggle that seems to be a common theme among families and workers in the child welfare system. Healthy therapeutic alliances are key to nurturing well-being in all human beings. The feedback from families suggests that they want relationships based on mutual trust and connection, which helps to promote the healing process.

It is encouraging to see Indigenous youth standing up, getting stronger, becoming mentors for other children in foster care and being advocates for change. Pure determination was evident among these youth and others who voiced that they wanted to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Indigenous youth from this study clearly want to stay connected to their unique history, culture, family, Elders, land, language, and traditions.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

My findings suggest that transformative participatory research with Indigenous communities would be highly effective for understanding the benefits of First Nation jurisdiction, wrap-around services, preventative care, family-focused treatment, and strengths-based approaches. Future research needs to focus on how Child and Family Services can increase preventative strengths-based care within their policies and family practices. There is some positive movement in this direction with the development of the Ministry of Children and Family Development Collaborative Practice Decision-Making, which is based upon a trauma-informed model (Poole et al., 2017). This approach centers collaboration among children, caregivers, parents, and extended family, while helping family members identify their strengths and ways to cope with trauma (Poole et al., 2017).

My literature review and findings demonstrate the impacts of westernized assessments on Indigenous families, suggesting that future research should include a partnership study with Indigenous peoples to explore Indigenous ways of understanding parental capacity. This would provide valuable information on how social workers can approach parental assessments with an Indigenous worldview. Future research needs to emphasize the importance of testing assessment scale properties in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to ensure that assessors effectively measure the context and relevance of a parental capacity assessment for Indigenous family members (Uysal-Bozkir et al., 2013).

Future research should focus on how to assess and help Indigenous families in the context of intergenerational trauma. The current literature has identified the PCA as an ineffective means of assessing families if it does not address socio-cultural and historical context (Choate &

Lindstrom, 2018). Transformative participatory research is highly recommended to further this understanding and create positive collaboration and social change.

As discussed in the literature, to increase the efficacy of PCAs, the assessment questions must include culturally inclusive language that holds contextual and semantic meaning to Indigenous parents (Choate & McKenzie, 2015). The Native Wellness Assessment (discussed in the literature review) is an excellent example of a partnership research project that resulted in a culturally inclusive assessment and treatment program using an Indigenous paradigm (Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2017). Hopefully this project will inspire future research on developing an Indigenous parenting assessment, which may provide a fair and appropriate cultural context for Indigenous parents, while potentially lowering the occurrence of harmful and unnecessary child apprehensions. Additionally, future research is recommended to investigate how assessments may be perpetuating psycholonization for all families, regardless of race.

My findings suggest that Indigenous families did not receive the care they needed or asked for from Child and Family Services. However, the data reveals that when families connected with agencies that provided resources and services to meet their basic needs, they felt supported, safe, and encouraged. If Child and Family Services could include preventative wrap-around services, I believe they could greatly reduce apprehension rates and increase family reunification.

### ***Implications for Counselling***

Child and Family Services needs to ensure that the professionals they are employing (or contracting) are humble individuals who are culturally competent and self-reflective. Ensuring that professionals are culturally competent aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action for proper education and training for professionals conducting

assessments and child-welfare investigations (TRC, 2015). Cultural training for service providers may help to raise their consciousness and prepare them to effectively identify structural racism and promote inclusive practices (Walkem, 2020). Educating counsellors and other family workers on Indigenous family practices may help to address biases. Teaching students to unlearn their assumptions and question themselves can promote humility, self-awareness, and empathy (Collins, 2018). I believe these inner traits are essential in helping professionals shift from a deficit-based perspective to a strengths-based perspective.

Inclusive practices will require counsellors to actively work with and involve Indigenous communities (Walkem, 2020). When efforts are made to involve Indigenous communities in child welfare decision-making, the child is more likely to stay connected to their culture and find a placement with Indigenous caregivers (Walkem, 2020). For example, rather than simply meeting the minimum service requirements, counsellors can become more proactive in co-case management with Indigenous communities or arrange follow up visits with family members to ensure culturally appropriate treatment plans (Walkem, 2020). Counsellors can go beyond sending a referral for service; they can make efforts to connect the family with the service or offer transportation (Walkem, 2020). This type of active work requires the counsellor to have a solid understanding of the family's needs and community resources. At times, this active practice may require advocacy or activism.

Some families risk losing their children due to socio-economic conditions such as the inability to access counselling or secure safe housing (Walkem, 2020). Counsellors can help remove these barriers by assisting families in locating free or affordable childcare, vocational training, food hampers, treatment for substance use, and other resources (Walkem, 2020). Counselling students should be taught how to adopt an anti-oppressive stance by challenging

oppressive dominant discourse to increase equity in society (Collins, 2018). In doing so, students can learn how to position themselves as allies to create social change (Collins, 2018).

Counselling education should highlight using a culturally responsive and socially-just approach when working with Indigenous children and families (Collins, 2018). This approach will help budding professionals understand different trauma responses experienced by Indigenous families, while embodying cultural and relational connection and safety in their practice (Walkem, 2020). In addition to this, counsellors and other service providers should conduct PCAs using a trauma-informed approach, which will require them to have a solid understanding of the psychological impacts that assessments may have on Indigenous parents (Walkem, 2020). Supervised role-playing may be a good option for helping counselling graduates learn about assessment stress and cultural context. Adopting a trauma-informed approach includes connecting and engaging with Indigenous community members and working to empower Indigenous decision-making over child welfare practices (Walkem, 2020). This may involve advocating for and assisting Indigenous communities who want to create and conduct PCAs (Walkem, 2020).

The findings suggest that professionals working with Indigenous families need to have a solid understanding of the historical impacts of colonization, including the trauma caused by Residential Schools and how this has impacted parenting (TRC, 2015). Understanding cultural context is the cornerstone of a trauma-informed practice (Walkem, 2020). Being involved with organizations like West Coast Leaf could be valuable, as they assist families by providing socio-cultural context for child welfare agencies.

Counsellors need to seek knowledge from Elders, knowledge keepers, guides, or Indigenous advocates to expand their cultural safety and to collaborate in PCAs or create



treatment plans for Indigenous families. Additionally, it would be beneficial for counsellors and service providers to participate in Indigenous culture to expand their understanding of Indigenous ways of being. Healing methods such as smudging, storytelling, or healing circles could be integrated into counselling to honour Indigenous strengths and ways of being.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of self-determination. Counsellors can promote self-determination by helping Indigenous family members nurture their sense of agency, personal power, and autonomy (Collins, 2018; Paré, 2013). They can also acknowledge the decision-making power of Indigenous families to support children within appropriate cultural frameworks (Byle, 2019). This creates a preventative family-focused approach that can decrease power struggles and promote collaboration between family members and service providers.

### ***Limitations***

The most significant limitation of this study is the lack of collaboration and partnership with Indigenous family members. This will require a broader scope of study, which was not possible within this master's thesis. Further work will be necessary to initiate partnership research projects with Indigenous families in the future to create positive social change such as capacity building, self-determination, reciprocity, and mutual trust.

One of the limitations of using Netnography as my methodology was the inability to explore Indigenous identity. I also had to accept the risk of encountering fictitious online users and comments. I wanted to ensure that the data represented Indigenous family members who were involved in the child welfare system within the last ten years. Therefore, I decided to retrieve data from credible news sources instead of relying on ambiguous messages in forums or social media comments. By doing so, I was able to significantly lower the risk of fictitious information, while increasing the study's trustworthiness.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper I have illustrated the oppressive impacts of discriminatory child welfare practices by centering the voices of Indigenous family members in the child welfare system, many of whom advocate for cultural and relational safety. Family members in this study shared their perspectives, concerns, and frustrations about the ongoing challenges they face in the system. From birth apprehensions to constant barriers faced by parents, to Indigenous children abused in foster care, it is clear to Indigenous families that MCFD does more harm than good and should be held accountable for their unconscionable actions. This study highlights the importance of trauma-informed practices and strengths-based approaches when working with Indigenous families. Respectfully engaging and participating with Indigenous communities while actively working to remove barriers for Indigenous families is a positive step towards social change. In reflection, it has been a humbling experience to write this thesis. I have deepened my understanding of systemic racism and enhanced my appreciation of the strengths of Indigenous peoples. This discussion has solidified the importance of being an advocate and ally for anyone who is marginalized and oppressed by systemic racism and inequality.

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