



Gwich'in
Native
Elders

Not Just Knowledge,
But a Way of Looking
at the World

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Alaska Native Knowledge Network

GWICH'IN NATIVE ELDERS NOT JUST KNOWLEDGE, BUT A WAY OF LOOKING AT THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role, characteristics, and needs of Gwich'in Native Elders of Fort Yukon, Alaska. Using participant observer and ethnographic methodologies, the researcher was able to make a distinction between respected Elders and the elderly. Through the literature reviewed, it was established that strong and healthy Elders are essential in the healing of their communities. Many community-oriented development projects call upon the Elders to lead the community to a healthier lifestyle. This research focused on what the community could be doing to help its Elders grow, and on what part the Elders play in gaining respect from the community. The research documents specific roles that respected Elders assume and are given in the community, the character traits that they are expected to display in the fulfillment of these roles, and also points out what the Elders need in return from the community. Recommendations for the empowerment of Elders are also offered.

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CHAPTER ONE

Nature and Rationale of the Study

Introduction

In dealing with the impact of European culture on traditional life styles, some Native communities have neglected their Elders and the important contributions and assistance that these Elders could provide. The practical rationale for this study focuses on the belief that if Native Elders were returned to the position of respect and authority that they once held, then healing at a community level could and would begin to take place. This confidence in the power of Elders to restore the health of their communities is widely held in Native society. This is not only an assumption but reflects a cultural value which must be accepted in order for progress to be made in community healing (Mohatt & Blue, 1982). The National Native Association of Treatment Directors has stated that the role of the elder is necessary in the Native family system to set an example for the people to follow in order to ensure their survival. They state that it is the elders who the creator provided to help the people to learn the lessons that were necessary to ensure them a healthy, happy and productive way of life. (National Native Association of Treatment Directors, 1989)

Nature of the Problem

The townspeople of Fort Yukon, Alaska, perceive many problems facing their community. The problems include high unemployment, high rates of alcoholism, dissatisfaction with the school system, lack of recreational activities, high rates of depression, lack of personal safety, and a general lack of personal and community well-being.

In order to tackle these seemingly insurmountable problems, community leaders realized that a plan of action was required. With the combined assistance of a number of community volunteers, a group known as the Blue Ribbon Committee was formulated. The committee consisted of community

representatives, including Elders, town leaders, business people, and other concerned townspeople. This group planned a series of town meetings in which community problems could be discussed, and approaches to their solution could be formulated by community members. From the meetings a Fort Yukon community development plan could be established.

As one part of the development of the community plan, it was decided that the widespread and intense dissatisfaction with the school system could best be addressed by holding an education summit. Thus, the Fort Yukon Education Summit was held in March 1990. Everyone in the community, including Elders, parents, children, school personnel, and other interested people, were encouraged to attend the summit. I was asked to take part as a general helper and recorder. Residents of the community, several professors from the university of Alaska in Fairbanks, and a number of other “outside” guests were asked to make presentations. It was made clear that this was a meeting for and by the people of Fort Yukon and that those who came in were guests and not authorities on the community. This meeting was to belong to the community, for its thoughts and ideas, and would not become another in a long line of outside interventions.

As the education summit progressed, it appeared that a change had come over the elders who were speaking. They seemed to be taking a more active role in the summit as it progressed, becoming more self-assured and in control. They seemed to become more what I thought Elders ought to be, rather than simply elderly people.

It seemed that as the education summit developed, the elders had gone through a transformation from elderly to Native elder. Something at the summit had inspired this change in the elders, and they became more active in their role as community leaders. Perhaps it was the opportunity to express themselves as Elders rather than being seen as elderly that allowed the elders to fulfill their role. These Elders had regained the influential role that Elders once played in the community. What was it that changed their perception and the perception of others in the community?

This in turn led me to ask “what is a Native elder as opposed to an old person?” I was interested in the transformation that had taken place in the elders at the summit and wondered what had inspired the change. If there was something that could help more elderly Natives to become Native Elders, then what was it? How could it be promoted and enhanced so that more Elders are able to claim their prominent place and important role in the community?

Questions in the Study

Without attempts to understand what is now happening in Native communities and with Native Elders, there is little chance that new ideas can be generated that will help Native Elders to be empowered to fulfill their roles in the community. In response to my experiences with the community of Fort Yukon and to the existing research centered on Native Elders, I focused on the following questions for this study:

1. What are the characteristics of Elders that differentiate them from simply being elderly persons? (What is an Elder?)
 2. How do Elders realize their potential, what is their role in the community, and how can this role be enhanced? (What more could Elders be doing for the community?)
 3. Does the community play a part in the elder reaching her or his full potential and, if so, can the role that the community plays be strengthened so that more Elders can take their traditional places in the Native community? (What can the community do to meet the needs of the elders?)
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CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Community Development

As the world of Native people rapidly changes, the role of the Elder in Native villages and communities is becoming more and more crucial (Bopp, 1985; Maniiliq Association, 1982). In places such as Alaska, the encroachment of modern white society has occurred almost overnight, and as a result the Native people have not had time to adjust completely to the new lifestyle. There has been a focus on the detrimental effects of this lifestyle change and its resulting social ills (Kuttner & Lorinez, 1967; Sampath, 1974; Shkilnyk, 1985; Shore, Kinzie & Hampson, 1973). A notable exception to this is Hampton and Hampton (1987, 1990), who point out that most researchers do not often speak of the positive resources and coping mechanisms that are still available in Native villages.

Historically, Native communities had guidelines required for the well-being of the people. LaDue, Marcelley and Van Brunt have called this set of rules a “survival pact” (1981). This survival pact was not written or otherwise formalized, but was more of an understanding among the people that was passed down from one generation to the next. The Elders were responsible for verbalizing and modeling the way things should be done. People in each region had unique sets of rules. These rules were more strict where the environment was harsher and demanded greater cooperation and conservation. The rules were based upon a symbiotic relationship between individuals, the tribe, and their environment (Nelson, 1983).

The pact covered such areas as sharing and distributing of food and making sure that traditional ceremonies were carried out in the correct order, with no omissions. As this survival pact was responsible for more than basic survival, but for the mental and spiritual well-being of the community, it may be more accurate to call the pact the tradition of the people (Peter, 1989). The concept of traditions implies a more inclusive base, both historical and comprehensive, for this unspoken understanding which the

more narrow concept of rules may not. The traditions were not rigidly enforced or restrictive but allowed for community-sanctioned flexibility to meet the individual needs and differing circumstances faced in the community and in the environment (Berger, 1985).

These traditions included psychological and sociological survival skills that were necessary for strong kinship ties, solid leadership, and physically and psychologically healthy people (LaDue, Marcelley & Van Brunt, 1981). Thus the traditions were seen as the foundation of a healthy community, rather than merely what was necessary for its survival (Katz & Craig, 1987). It was the job of the Elders in the community to interpret the rules and tradition and to ensure that these rules were passed to the next generation.

Many people believe that it is the separation from this traditional base that often causes the chasms which lead to alcoholism, alienation, suicide, and other social ills (Bopp, 1985; Katz & Craig, 1987, Mohatt & Blue, 1982; Shkilnyk, 1985; Wilson, 1991). With increasing frequency, Elders are being recognized as those who hold the power to carry communities back to a place of synergism and well-being (Katz 1984; Katz & Seth, 1986).

Today, many communities in Alaska are attempting to revive their survival pacts through a process that may be understood as a form of community development. In these development plans for a healthy community, Elders play the key role. In the NANA region of western Alaska, a regional strategy has been developed from the Inupiat Spirit Program, which outlines Inupiat values, language, and culture and their use (Maniiq Association, 1982). In the interior village of Fort Yukon, the townspeople are working on one such community development plan of their own with the assistance of Carolyn Peter, the director of the Fort Yukon Campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Elders are recognized in these projects as important resources and as community leaders.

Literature on Native Elders

The extended family structure and the strong support that it provides is a tradition of great importance among many Native cultures. The Elder is a key component in this structure, as he or she “assumes care for” the family (National Native Association of Treatment Directors, 1990; Red Horse, 1980a). Elders are responsible for providing continuity between the world of the past and the new world of the present. In assuming care of the family, the Elders also assume care for the entire community as an extended family. They bring wisdom and knowledge of the past into current situations. The Elders are a reminder of the strength of the old ways.

The Elder defends the values of family life, not only through words and thoughts but through deeds. These actions are demonstrated in the life story of Johnson Moses. In 1924, a flu epidemic killed many people in the Alaskan village of Allakaket. Johnson Moses was a newborn baby of one week when two of his older brothers died. His mother decided that she was not able to care for the baby. A local Elder, Big William, and his wife took in the baby, and thus Johnson was immediately adopted into Big William’s family. When the Elder’s wife died soon after, Big William did not send Johnson back to his birth mother but to one of his daughters who would look after Johnson until he was old enough for the Elder to look after him himself. The structure of Big William’s family was strong enough to assume complete care for the baby, even after the death of the Elder’s wife (Wilson, 1990).

This example illustrates the care that Elders assume over the community as a whole, as an extended family. While the epidemic was raging, it was the Elders who went around from house to house, helping in whatever way they could. They carried water for those too weak to carry their own, cooked for those who could not, and nursed those who needed their help. The act of taking in the child of a mother who was unable to care for it and assuming complete care of that child also shows the extended family responsibility that Big William and his wife reflected in their actions.

Having a strong heritage and cultural identity has been identified as being important for psychological well-being (Red Horse, 1980b). Some consider the loss of cultural identity to be directly related to the loss of self. Many

successful programs implemented to raise children's self esteem have a strong cultural component. In many areas the Elders are the only remaining people who carry the language. In the language is embedded the culture (Wilson, 1991). More and more, Elders are being called upon to teach the Native language to their children and grandchildren, for if their offspring lose the use of their mother tongue they will lose a vital link to their culture. The effects of modern-day culture contact are powerful and real. These contacts tend to dissolve the ancient traditions, leaving the younger generations disconnected from their past. Their connection to the Native culture is oriented to the present and lacks the depth that the Elders can provide. Since members of the younger generation have not been fully acculturated into the American society, they are at risk of remaining marginal members of both societies. Helping them to utilize the Elders and their knowledge seems to me the way they can establish a solid sense of worth.

Literature on Traditional Community Healing

It is understood that traditional Native Elders have contributed a sense of harmony and well-being to their communities. As long ago as the seventeenth century, Sagard, noted that the Native way of life was conducive to serenity and the avoidance of tensions which plagued whites. "What also helps them much to keep in health," he wrote, "is the harmony which prevails amongst them and the older people in their tribes" (Sagard, 1939).

Studies have already shown that some indigenous peoples believe that they possess methods of intervention within their own communities (Mohatt & Blue, 1982). They believe that although Native people face more social and psychological problems, they have the traditional methods to both prevent and treat these problems if given the proper environment to nourish their skills.

Red Horse (1982) looks at the prevention of mental health problems in Native communities through the use of a community model. He believes that the interaction between the individual and the community is vital to an understanding of American Indian mental health. As a part of understanding

the community model, it is important to understand the role that the extended family plays in the community.

The extended family acts as a strong social support network. As part of the NANA regional strategy, Elders are called upon to work with families to reestablish extended family support networks and remind families of the roles and responsibilities of various family members. Change in individuals, they believe, has to come from within the individual and be supported by the family (Maniiliq Association, 1982). Community support networks can be established, but it is up to the Elders and families to give the special concern and care necessary to help people cope with rapid social and economic changes (Katz & Craig, 1987).

A part of the NANA regional strategy involves restoring the traditional authority that Elders held, so that they will once again be able to set standards of behavior in village and families. In today's world of institutionalized education and certification, the Elders' wisdom is not always recognized by their people (Wilson, 1991). Some agencies are beginning to recognize the importance of the Elders in Native communities. In modern institutions, such as hospitals, penal institutions, and schools, Elders are being used as resource persons. One program in Fort Yukon, the Youth Survivors Program, is designed for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse and calls on the Elders to share their stories, legends, and experiences with youth (Rural Alaska Community Action Program, 1985). Elders tell traditional stories, talk about food gathering during different seasons and how to make use of the things nature provides, and speak of and encourage traditional dancing and drumming.

This contribution to health, harmony, and healing has been recognized by a number of medical facilities that employ native Elders as resource persons. For example, the North Battleford General Hospital in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, has on staff at all times Native Elders who can be called upon for advice and often for traditional healing ceremonies within the hospital. The Alaska Native Elders project on suicide prevention also recognizes the holistic views espoused by Native Elders. Rather than the Western medical

model of intervention, the traditional focus used in this program is based on early education of children to prevent sickness (Alaska Native Health Board, 1986). This prevention model is becoming more and more prevalent as Elders gain recognition for their beliefs that physical, mental, and spiritual health cannot be fragmented and treated as separate entities.

In Alaska there has been a movement towards recognizing the traditional counselors who have been active in their communities. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation has made an effort to commend these natural community resource persons through a certification process. If one looks at the characteristics selected as important for the traditional counselor to possess, it becomes apparent that these are the same criteria that are essential for becoming an Elder. The health corporation definition is: "An individual who is a Native Alaskan and/or who has been raised with traditional Native values and who has a knowledge of Native culture, and who has demonstrated counseling knowledge in the area of substance abuse, and who has been recognized by a majority of his or her peers as a force in positively influencing substance abusers" (Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, n.d). The only difference between this definition and that of an Elder is that Elders are responsible for the well-being of the entire community, not only for substance abusers.

Other agencies, such as the Four Worlds Development Project, are attempting to restore the role of Native Elders in an effort to return health to dysfunctional communities (Bopp, 1985). In order to achieve the project goals, Four Worlds advocates work on healing the entire community. Specific persons or specific problems may be only manifestations of the larger issue of culture loss and lost sense of identity. Four Worlds recognizes that the Elders must be utilized as a resource for the recovery of the entire community (Bopp, 1985).

CHAPTER THREE

Setting and Methodology

Setting

The setting in which this research took place is important in understanding the context in which Native Elders live and interact with their surroundings. My research took place in the small community of Fort Yukon, Alaska.

Alaska

The state of Alaska covers a land mass of approximately 586,000 square miles and thus is the largest state in the United States. The state is populated by about 540,000 people. Anchorage is the largest city, with a population of 248,000. Alaska Natives comprise approximately 64,000 or 14% of the population (*Alaska Almanac*, 1988). The largest income producer in the state is the oil and gas industry, followed by local, state, and federal governments and then tourism. Because of its vast size, the state is usually divided into six distinct regions, which are Southeast (Panhandle), Southcentral, Southwestern, Western, Arctic, and Interior. The interior region of Alaska covers roughly the area between the Brooks and Alaska mountain ranges. Fort Yukon is located in the Interior, and is a hub of the smaller villages in the area. This is the area in which my study took place.

Fort Yukon

Fort Yukon is located on the north bank of the Yukon River at its junction with the Porcupine River. The city, which is eight miles north of the Arctic Circle, is about 145 air miles northeast of Fairbanks, Alaska. It is accessible only by air or snowmachine during the winter months. During the summer a barge brings in supplies to the village by the river, but air remains the largest transporter of people and goods. There are no roads that access Fort Yukon. Fort Yukon is the hub of a number of villages in the Yukon Flats area of interior Alaska. Fairbanks is the nearest city to Fort Yukon, approximately

fifty minutes away by air. The Fairbanks borough has a population of seventy-five thousand.

The community of Fort Yukon was founded in 1847 as a Hudson Bay trading post. The trading post became a major trading center for the Gwich'in of the extensive lowlands of the Yukon Flats. A mission school was established in 1862, and the Alaska Commercial Company took over operation of the trading post shortly after Alaska was purchased by the United States. Major epidemics of introduced diseases struck the Fort Yukon population from the 1860s until the 1920s. In 1949 a flood damaged or destroyed many of the homes in Fort Yukon. Fort Yukon was incorporated as a second-class city (based on its population) in 1959.

A 1986 census done by the City of Fort Yukon found that there were 640 local residents. In 1980, 56 per cent of the population were males, and the median ages were 26.6 for males and 23.9 for females. The average household size was 2.35 persons. In 1980, 71 per cent of the population were Alaska Natives, drawn from the original Yukon Flats Gwich'in as well as Gwich'in from other areas.

The economy of Fort Yukon is highly dependent on government spending. Of the more than one hundred full-time jobs in Fort Yukon, more than half are government-funded positions. The Yukon Flats School District is the largest employer in the community, but most of the employees are non-Native teachers who do not live in Fort Yukon during the summer. The city of Fort Yukon, the Native village of Fort Yukon, the Tanana Chiefs Conference, and the Fort Yukon village corporation (Gwitchyaa Zhee Corporation) are the other major employers in the city.

Trapping is also an important source of livelihood for many of the residents of Fort Yukon. The economy of the community is supported by a blend of subsistence hunting and fishing and cash income activities. Fort Yukon residents place a high value on subsistence because of strong cultural traditions (Darbyshire & Associates, 1990).

Methodology

In this section, the rationale for the chosen methodology is presented. Characteristics of the methodology will be discussed and aspects specific to the data collection for this study will be detailed. First, however, I must tell something of myself.

Researcher's Background, Bias and Perspective

In order to understand the bias that I bring to the research and the perspective that I take in the research, I think it is important to say a bit about myself. I am a Cree Indian from The Pas, Manitoba, Canada, where I grew up on a reserve. Because my mother is white and my father is Native, I have had many experiences with racism from both Caucasians and Indians. Part of growing up for me was coming to terms with this racism and with the effects that it had upon me.

I can see the effects that racism and forced assimilation have had on my people, and I can also see the effects of culturally insensitive research (St. Dennis, 1988). Therefore I do not pretend to be unbiased in my research, but I also realize that the accuracy of my research is important if it is to be of any use. Thus I believe that I have a vested interest in the integrity of the methodology and the reliability of the results. I think that my research must be accurate in seeing both the good and bad sides of the culture if it is to be useful in bettering Native society.

I was raised to believe in the rights of individuals and the value of people's thoughts and words. I bring these beliefs to my research, and I hope that they are reflected in the methodology of the study. The ethnographic and participant observer approach to research is consistent with a respectful approach to both individual and cultural values (St. Dennis, 1988).

In order to understand my motivations, I searched my memory for clues to the personal importance of the topic (Hampton, 1990). Shortly before the

Education Summit took place in Fort Yukon, my grandfather (moosoom) passed away. That affected me in several ways. I was saddened by the loss of my *moosoom*, but also missed the presence of an Elder in my life. Because he was addicted to alcohol, I never got the chance to know *moosoom* very well. The alcohol also prevented him from becoming the Elder that he was capable of being. My grandfather had a great store of cultural and traditional knowledge and really desired to pass that knowledge on. But before he could pass on that knowledge to help his grandchildren, he would have to heal himself. He was not able to do that before he died, and this was a great loss, not only to me but to many others who might have benefited from his wisdom. I think that it must have saddened him to know that he could not fulfill his role as Elder in the family and in the community.

It was very exciting to see the Elders at the Education Summit reclaiming the power and respect of their position as Elders. Many Natives have lost the influence of Elders in their lives, be it due to alcohol, violence, epidemics, boarding schools, or from changing social conditions. I think that we miss our Elders when they are not there and really feel the loss in our lives. The Elders, too, must feel their loss of place in the communities in which they live. This is why the subject of this study is so important. If it is possible to affect the life of even one Elder in helping him or her to recover his or her place in the community, I think that it will go a long way towards the healing of not only that Elder, but of the whole community to which he or she belongs.

Searching for a Method

In order to document events within a given context, a specific inquiry method must be used (Erickson, 1986; Spindler, 1982). In choosing a particular research method, I wanted to look beyond the survey questionnaire, which is best suited for well-defined situations where the questions and potential answers can be specified in advance (Heller, Price, Reinharz, Riger, & Wandersnan, 1984). A more open-ended and dialogue-based interview method (Spradley, 1979) was used in a preliminary exploration that might get closer to the heart of the subject. Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan (1988) state that “qualitative research invites us to look at

things not ordinarily looked at, from perspectives not ordinarily taken.” I wanted to get an insider’s view of the subject that I was studying (Narrol & Cohen, 1970). Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, I wanted the methodology to allow the salient points to emerge as I conducted the research. By observation of the community and the people in the community, and following interviews of individuals within the community, I hoped to get this picture of “things not ordinarily looked at, from perspectives not ordinarily taken” (Spradley, 1979). I believe that ethnographic methodology allowed me to take a more in-depth look at the community. Spradley (1979) states that the first step in ethnographic research is to “set aside our own assumptions about what other people’s world is like and begin to appreciate the meanings that members of a cultural setting attach to objects and events in their own world.”

Jacobs (1987) gives further insight into ethnographic methodology and the importance of this approach. She believes that ethnography is a description of a member’s knowledge--the skills and abilities that people in the society or community must employ to act acceptably in that community.

Wilcox offers yet another definition of ethnography:

It is a naturalistic, observational, descriptive, contextual, open-ended, and in-depth approach to doing research. The goal of ethnography is to combine the view of an insider with that of an outsider to describe a social setting. The resulting description is expected to be deeper and fuller than that of the ordinary outsider, and broader and less culture bound than that of the ordinary insider (1982, p.462).

Consequently, the ethnographic researcher begins by examining even very commonplace groups or processes in a fresh and different way, as if they were exceptional and unique (Erickson, 1986). This exceptional perception allows investigation to discern the detail and the generality that are necessary for credible description (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

Participant observation is an action-oriented ethnographic approach which particularly seemed to fit the objectives of this study. Participant observation refers to research in which the field worker both observes and participates in the day-to-day life of the community, organization, or group that he or she is studying (Heller, et al., 1984). This approach is action-oriented in that it is critical for the researcher to become involved with the people by maintaining face-to-face relationships and sharing in daily experiences. Participant observers immerse themselves in the lives of the people that they wish to understand. Although the community members know that the participant observer is conducting research, the close contact minimizes social distance and language differences that typically might exist between the researcher and his informants (Heller, et al., 1984). This process allowed the beginning of my data collection to be more tentative, requiring a less detailed hypothesis and allowing theories to be developed from the perspective of the people. Using this method I was able to develop, revise, and test theories as I learned more about the people and the setting.

Data Sources

Participants in this study were individuals and groups who were interviewed in a semi-structured or informal in-depth and detailed manner while remaining in their natural setting. Individuals were chosen for the study on the basis of their personal attributes. Such attributes included access to certain kinds of information or knowledge that itself was a function of such things as social status, position in the community, or comprehension of cultural knowledge. I identified the people to be interviewed by asking community members which older people they thought had community influence and cultural knowledge. I will describe the process in more detail later in this section. The individuals who were chosen to be interviewed were not necessarily a representative sampling but were the most informed sample, as chosen by the community.

Because I wanted to get a more holistic view of the community, the sources of data for the study were purposefully widespread and yet interconnected through their community relationships. I took the role of participant observer

at the Education Summit in addition to interviewing local community members in order to obtain this more holistic view of the community.

In my role as participant observer at the Education Summit, questions were raised that the research might help address. Thus the summit became an important source of data in different ways. The final Education Summit Report gave me a transcript of the proceedings that I could use directly. Actually taking part in the summit gave me a sense of the general feeling and mood of the community. The changing ways that the Elders were fulfilling their roles as leaders of the community was an especially important observation. This gave me a good starting point from which to proceed with the other data sources.

After examining the data obtained from the summit, I was able, with the help of Carolyn Peter, a longtime Fort Yukon community member, to make up a list of questions that I would be able to ask several people in in-depth interviews. Carolyn's help was essential in ensuring that the questions were culturally sensitive and appropriate to Fort Yukon's people. Interviews with the community members became the major source of information for this study. I was able to examine the transcriptions of the interviews and identify common themes from different participants. I could then find a view that was indicative of the community as a whole, rather than the views of individual community members.

Through the combination of the interview and participant-observer sources of data, and with the help of a case illustration, I was able to come up with what I believe to be a more complete and holistic view of the community and especially of the questions that I wanted to pursue. The information gained from these different perspectives enabled me to provide a more complete ethnographic picture of the community and a broader framework or background from which to view the research question.

Selection of Subjects

Rather than seeking a representative sample of the Fort Yukon community, I was seeking to interview the people who were most knowledgeable about the issues that I wanted to discuss. Consequently, I used a selection approach that identified key informants (Johnson, 1990). Following the lead of Mishler (1989), I will refer to the people whom I interviewed as participants rather than informants, thus focusing on their interactive role in the research. With the help of an established Fort Yukon resident, Carolyn Peter, Elders were chosen to be interviewed based upon their knowledge of the culture and traditions of the community and their willingness to participate in the study. Unfortunately, since I was not able to speak Gwich'in Athabascan, the Native language of the community, the ability to speak English was also important. According to the community person who helped make the selection, the Elders that I interviewed were respected and recognized in the community.

Since many of the problems in the community of Fort Yukon appeared to involve the social and psychological well-being of the community and its members, I chose to talk to someone at the Mental Health Center. This person was a community mental health worker. The church appeared to hold a prominent position in the community, so I chose to interview the pastor.

I then chose to interview the students at the high school, since they were the target of most of the programs that called upon Elders (youth-Elder programs) for direction and assistance. I interviewed twenty-six students in four groups in different grade levels.

Interview Procedures

While conducting the interviews for this study, I traveled by small airplane from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Fort Yukon. I made this trip five times in the spring and fall of 1990. While in Fort Yukon, I stayed at the home of Carolyn Peter, director of the Fort Yukon campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks and was introduced to members of the community by her. As a result of being involved in the Education Summit, I began to be known around the community. After it had been decided who would be interviewed,

meeting places were chosen that would be convenient for both me and the interviewees.

I interviewed the mental health care provider and the local pastor first. I was able to sound out my questions first with these people. It was here that I found that the questions that seemed perfectly logical and concise on my questionnaire just did not seem to work in real life conversations. I will discuss the implications of this in a later section. These interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes each.

I next interviewed the Elders who had agreed to participate. I was able to establish what I thought were much better interviews with the Elders since I had decided to let the questions become less direct and to let the conversations follow their own courses. I was still able to get to the points that I wanted to discuss but found it much easier to get to these points through conversation and mutual information sharing rather than through a question-and-answer formatted interview (Mishler, 1989). These interviews ranged from one to two hours in length.

The students were then interviewed in groups according to their classes. Even though the teachers were absent from the room while I talked with the students, the interviews here seemed to be more stilted and awkward than the others. This may have been a result of the more formal classroom setting. These interviews took more of a question-and-answer format, as the students seemed to be more comfortable answering specific questions than with a more informal conversation. These interviews lasted about 30 minutes each, with one lasting only 20 minutes.

Three of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees. The students were interviewed in their classrooms at the Fort Yukon High School, with the permission of the principal. One of the Elders chose to visit me at the university building and the remaining interview took place at the Mental Health Center.

All of the interviews were audio taped and transcripts later made of the tapes. The transcripts, along with field notes taken at the times of the interviews and directly after, were examined using a content analysis approach in order to seek the answers of what an Elder is and how the community affects one becoming an Elder. The interview with Simon Francis was especially helpful in reflecting a complete picture of the responses of all the participants. Therefore, he is presented separately as a case illustration for the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Case Illustration

Simon Francis

Before analyzing the information that could be extracted from the interviews I conducted, it was necessary to choose a method of analysis. One method that I found appropriate was the narrative interpretive approach advocated by Mishler (1989). In this approach, each interview is treated as a separate conversational dialogue. As such, each has its own major plot with sub-themes. Mishler believes that it is important to recognize the entire context (plot) that each sub-theme is a part of in order to obtain a more holistic view of the data. To analyze the sub-themes without the setting of the plot would give a fragmented view that could be taken out of context or could offer a distorted view of the narrative context. I decided that I would use the narrative approach with one of the interviews in order to show a holistic view of the Elder with whom I was talking. Presented below is the entire interview that took place with Simon Francis. After discussing this interview, I will present findings of the interviews with the other participants.

Narrative of Simon Francis

Respected Elder Simon Francis was born in Rampart, Alaska. Most of his life has been spent out in the woods, hunting and trapping. He was raised by Old Francis Adams, his grandfather, and Bella Thomas, out on the Porcupine River. While being raised by Elders, Simon listened to the stories of the old times and learned from them. The Elders told him their visions of the future, and he learned to make everything that he needed to survive in the woods. He was educated by his life in the woods and by the Elders, not in a school. In 1937 he moved to John Herbert Village (Old Village), where he still traps to this day. Old Village is about 150 miles up the Porcupine River from Fort Yukon.

Simon is married to Bella Strom, and they have six children. Simon is still a trapper, and although his main source of income is from a pension, he uses this money to supplement his subsistence lifestyle. He does volunteer work at the church and with the local Elders group in Fort Yukon. He still loves to be out in the woods, though, because in town he “gets no rest.”

What follows is an interview with Simon Francis. This interview is presented verbatim. I have used this method of presentation because I feel that Simon is able to convey a sense of holism that I cannot easily re-create. The themes that he expresses are interwoven throughout the narrative, and each time that they are brought up, more is conveyed and a deeper understanding reached. Most of my part of the conversation is omitted, as it is unnecessary in conveying the themes of the conversation. In the next section I will discuss a combined analysis of Simon’s narrative and the interviews of the others.

I began the interview by introducing myself and the research that I was doing, and by telling Simon about what I was interested in learning; that is, the role of Native Elders and getting the Elders and their communities, especially the youths, working together. Simon began:

Yeah, [the kids] don’t learn nothing at school. Just like the old time--all the kids go out in the woods, learn something every day. Like snare, fishing, like that, you know. And now it’s too easy a life.... Should do that every chance they get, take the kids out and make something. One tree we can make a lot of things with, but we don’t now. We can use the old way.... Long time ago, no axe, no gun, people make living out in the woods. Nowadays they can’t. Gotta have everything. I’ve never been to school. I raised out in the woods. So I know out in the woods. Life, work. I can make snowshoe and toboggan, sled, can make boat--make everything.

School--keep go to school, all right, but what is good later on? Later on, know no other life, no job and no way to make living.. . like pipeline. All age people up there.... I worked up there--a lot of people quit this work, you know. Money is good when you get it. But it’s no good after that. And no

home. Money is a gamble--fool you someday. Yeah, even I work up there. Come down here and trapped. Got used to trapping you know. Better life. No boss. Yeah. And everything's free. So what do you want? That pipeline, you got too many boss. Good money, but even now, I'm 66 years, I still trap. I don't have to, but got used to it. I'd rather go out--too much town.

Sometimes I go out, come back and feel like I'm 21 years old. See, nice and quiet. Peace, it's what we need.., not money, but just good exercise and you sleep good and eat good and, you know, just feel better. But this kind of life, I think I get older and older every day. People make you tired, phone make you tired, I'm miserable. Life in town.

Last couple of days I worked at the church. I didn't get paid. Nobody else do it. ... All the kids want to go out in the woods. Just got to go out and teach the kids. School--can't take one or two kids out. They learn something. But nowadays they want big money. Big money--money, money. You know, old people, they can't live forever. What's that kid going to make a living. Good chance to teach them now, to make a living, before alcohol kills them.

“Alcohol really a bad thing. I got 16 grandchild. . . [take them] out there a little bit, learn something. But now, pretty soon, I'm going to kick over.... But all that, we got to go with them and teach them how to do it. When I was growing up, I just trapping, fishing, hunting, so on. What my father teach me, I'm sure glad. I'm still thanking my father and my mother today.

I told my wife, I told all the women down there, my mother--I see my mother do something right way. And they can't do it. How come you guys forget all the things? And my father do all that I remember. I do it. . . just because I know, it's easy for me, I guess. I can tan skin, everything. I tan skin for my wife, she sew it. So I make snowshoe, she help me. She helped to build like brother and sister. That's the way it's supposed to be--man and wife. So we marry 1947, and we still work together.

Really hard to get--you know, old life teaching nowadays. I see that up--they make their first bark canoe. Old guy teach them how to make it so whole

village people made it. That's a lot of work the old time way. But that is good. [Get] knowledge that way. But that's work. That's the way people should be, help together. Gotta have love, gotta have faith to do that. We don't get no favors when we're not strong enough. We're not strong enough, we give up easily. That's the main thing. That's why people don't help together--no love--just fight each other. How the heck kids going to learn? That's why kids learn a lot of bad things....

Young kids don't even treat the Elders nice. Long time ago, young people work for old people, Elders. Nowadays not like that. Just good time, that's all. Drinking, dope... that's all the kids living for. It's really too far gone, I think, to go back. I mean, drugs and drink, people got to help together. We try, we can make it, but we don't try, we can't make it. . . . It's like--village. It's good, nice quiet place. But the young people bring their drink, or smoke--nighttime just drink, fight. That's the village people. We should all work together and just fight the alcohol.

That drink it's really bad. "Gotta have it"--gone: commit suicide. After a while you feel that way. I drink a long time. I drink lots. Day and night when I was young. I quit about fifteen years ago. I quit that drink so anybody can quit.... At the time I didn't know, but now I know it. I don't know why I drink, but just too much a problem--that's why I drink. I make it worse.. . so finally I quit.

Well, only way, all the people, the young people--help together. Who sell the drugs? Go report them. Who sell the drink? Report them. You tell each other so you know together. We know who drinks and after that, call the council together, I think that's how.... Get out of town or in jail. There's a lot of drugs around this town.... Nobody can do nothing. City cop, town council, nobody didn't say nothing right away. When there's something like that, somebody's gotta holler about it. Just like everybody work together, you know, all the crooks--so everyone hide.

[Working together for the wrong reasons.]

Yeah, right. The only way--gotta help city cop, help the council--work together. Get rid of the crooks. It's the only way.

Nowadays there's not much [respect]. Yeah, you got to teach them how. Parents telling kids "help the old people," long time ago. They do it. The old people, that time it's not an easy life. Got to cart water, no machine. So I helped the old people that way. Kid got used to it. And nowadays there's a machine for it--even running water. But people nowadays--too easy life--kid don't want to work, even money. "Work for me?"--nobody work for us. Yeah, whole town like that, all the people. Even sometime fill out the paper--application, income tax. It's pretty hard to get that, someone to do income tax for us. . . . [Native Village] they can help us, but it's busy there. But sometimes we talk about it and leave one office there open. To help with paper-work.

This summer, had this hut, over upriver--cut wood, loaded wood. A wino down there laugh at me--really crazy, work on a hot day. Every time I get a little wood. This fall had seven cords, you know, piled up. Think I'm crazy, but that's the way to do things like that. Do good work and they think you're crazy.

I see up Canada, Old Crow. He teaching kids good. All that hunting, fishing, working, all that. It's really good like that.

Yeah, I think for a kid to raise, tough time, he learn from.., just like me. I raised a lot of the time with hunger--I never forget yet. That's why I like to eat... [he laughs]

But here, a kid growing up is not too short. All the kids have got money. Heck, every month, check. Government really spoil people. Nowadays nobody work, get food stamps. Why they want to work? One boy stay with me, my youngest. He's got high school education. Don't know what he's doing. Can't get no job. He can't get good job, but he's drinking you know--long time. Who want him to do this job, drinking all the time. And now he quit drinking, but hard to get job. Yeah, I like to--I don't want to work no

more. I got the pension. So I like to stay out in the woods in the summer time. Not very easy life. It's all I need. I got good place out at Porcupine River. Good cabin. Nice place to trap. I'm teaching my kid trapping. He beat me with traps. Yeah. He's very good, but he don't use it right. Have enough, make money, go straight to Fairbanks, drink it up, come back, just do it over and over.

Out in the woods, when I go out trap line, I see the country. Beautiful country. God just made it for us. The animals. Just got to do work to have a good life. Drinking, can't see it. Money is the same thing. You want money, work for it-- feels alright. They don't live like this, it's worth nothing.

Praying story. All the old people listen. Sick and tired of my mother and father tell me a story and go tell somebody else. Some of them are really interesting. So I'll never forget that either. But nowadays, I tell Elders, "Go up to school and tell kids old story." Nobody do it. Lot of kids interested now.

Other day I see my friend. ... He got that pension. That check, he could buy good clothes. Every time he go to Fairbanks, drink it up, come back... . Last two or three years do that. Yeah, all my people my age, just about all gone. I got two friends in town. All drinking--don't see them. Why I don't see them, talk to them. . . alcohol killed all my friends--die of alcohol.

Alcohol really hard for school kid. School kid--parents drink all night, make noise all night. How they going to sleep good? They go to school not all there. Minds not all there. And same time don't eat nothing. Nothing to go to school on. Hungry you can't learn.

When there's Elder meeting down there, and nobody didn't say nothing every week, don't know why. It's because people can't talk with a lot of people there. Never got used to it. That's hard like that. Every meeting I got to say something. Yeah, it's like that, it's bad.

Lot of old people still drink, can't think. Well, I'll tell you. When I drinking, I thought I was smart. I felt really smart, I can do anything I want. I know what I doing. It nobody's business. I don't want to help nobody, don't want nobody to help me. That's what people think. When the Christian life, he can see it. He can help people, he can see it. All the people don't-can't see it. . . . Really interested, they can listen good and you know what you talk about. Not interested-don't want to help nobody. People make their own living, that's what people think. I always think that way.., when I was drinking. After I quit drinking, I find out what I was doing wrong.

So when I was, when I got saved, I changed my life to the Lord. That time I don't know what I said but I went down to church. Tell preacher, "Pray for me so I can help people. So I can help people in village and our church." That's what I said. Preacher told me that it's so hard to do, but I say I'll try. That's what I do now. It's hard but try. That's what I learn from helping. Church. But council meetings different. Church meetings true. Council meetings not true. Right?

[Kids learning about spirituality] Go to Sunday school, but yeah, I learned lots from my parents, old people. Old people taught me, you know. Raised me good. They don't give me a bad time, and so I grow up that way so' I live that way. I live a happy life. There's like--very hard to talk to anyone. Really hard to explain--talking, just like you and me--church. Hard to explain to people. Just have to live it. You make an easy living. Used to be easy. Hard today-- hardest--hard to really explain to them and do it, you know. I hate when you talk but they can't understand you. Can't get it. That's hard.

After, I told council you guys have got big problems. I just told them: you guys, you gotta change your life. Start a new life. Forget about old life. Old life is crooked life. Talk good now. They just cover up--crooked. Have to make it over in the open again. Start over again. That's the kind of life these guys-- otherwise, have to change their life. Start new one. Just talk, talk--talk for nothing. "Money problems." Too much money problems. Everybody like money more than God. That's why. But I don't know why we like money. Money.. . we don't make enough. After I change my life, quit drinking and

nothing to worry. Nothing. Well, just little things.... Lord take care of them. Not me. I barely made it. He take care of them.

Well, they should, they should ask the Elder “Anything you want me to do for you?” They should say that. You know, just get used to it that way. A lot of old people want to do something and can’t do it. Got money but nobody work for them or helping them. So that way, the kids are going to learn more-- more and more from old people. So Elder tell story and the kids want more. You see that one old lady up Old Crow, tell all the story, make a good time for the young people--young girls. All the girls. And when the potlatch and dance--speak to them. Talk to them. “My children, you do this and you do that in the future.” But all the young people respect that old lady.

“Grandma, Grandma.” So that’s the one, up to Old Crow, for making young people strong. So make us strong Old Crow. Even come down here and pray at church. She lost all her kids--lost a husband. But still strong. Good story, good talking. Now all the people at Old Crow like me. Everybody took care of me. I can see up at Old Crow, see that, make young people strong--work together that way. That’s a good way to do it.

Nobody listen. I think one or two kids do. Take them out to the trapline. Teach them. Talk to them. That’s the way we lived one time. Maybe learn something... . Same time we should talk about the Christian life. How to make a living, how to make a good life, make theirs easier. Who will think that way? Nobody. Let me help--but who’s going to do it? That’s really hard. All the kids going to suffer.

Some kids want to learn. You know that I think three, four kids really try. You see, that’s the one they want to learn. But the rest don’t care. What you want to learn, you gotta learn. You don’t want to learn, don’t learn.

There’s a lot of money for the camp, teaching kids. But nobody’s teaching kids. Well, when I make snowshoe, I make good money. Make a ton.... I wish someone would take over.

Comments on Narrative of Simon Francis

Simon's narrative contains clues to many of the categories that I chose to focus upon in the study. One cannot look merely at the literal value of his words. Each sentence can have several meanings, depending upon the way it was said and what the listener reads into it. Simon conveys the feeling behind his ideas, thus it is hard to pick out concrete examples of his thoughts to study.

A number of themes become evident as Simon's narrative proceeds. These themes are often presented in one fashion, then later returned to in a different manner which allows one to gain further insight. This circular style of speaking reflects the holism with which Elders approach problems. This holism reveals a nonlinear pattern of thought that is admired and respected in Elders. Therefore, this holism in itself became one of the categories that was focused on in the study.

Although Simon does not state it directly, one can infer that one characteristic of Eldership is this holistic approach. Simon talks about the characteristics that he expects Elders to display and that he himself tries to live by. Elders must be willing to share their knowledge with the community, especially the youth. They must show a genuine concern for others.

Simon discusses the role that Elders have played in his life as well as the role he thinks they should have in the community. Elders are the teachers of the community. They teach not only specific knowledge, but the wisdom and culture behind the knowledge. Simon shows that Elders are expected to model their teachings in their daily lifestyle. Along with transmitting the culture and heritage of their people in this way, Elders are responsible for the maintenance of social values in the community. They provide a sense of continuity between the past and the present which can help the community look towards the future.

Simon expresses some of the needs of the Elders in the community. He speaks often of the respect that community members, especially youths,

should show towards Elders. If Elders are to fulfill their role in the community, they need respect. After all the change and loss that Elders have lived through, they need to heal themselves. This is illustrated in a particularly moving part of the interview, Simon's depiction of the deaths of his friends from alcohol. Another need is for the community to forgive them of mistakes they have made in the past. Once Elders have healed themselves and have been forgiven, their respect in the community will begin to be restored.

In the next chapter, I will further examine the roles, characteristics, and needs of Elders. To do this, I will combine the narrative of Simon Francis with the information gained from interviews with other Fort Yukon community members.

CHAPTER FIVE

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Method of Analysis

A subsequent technique that I chose to use was the content analysis approach described by Miles and Huberman (1984). This method looks at the content of the interviews of all the participants and searches for common themes and ideas. This allows a comparison and contrasting of themes that run through all of the interviews. I chose to use this approach because it allowed me to get a more complete view of the entire community of Fort Yukon. The narrative approach provided me with a holistic view of the community from one perspective, and by looking at and comparing the views of the other interviewees, I obtained a more complete and rounded view of the community. Thus, I believe that I was able to get a view of the entire community process. The threat of obtaining fragmented themes that might be taken out of context was limited by the participant observation portion of the study, which filled in any gaps to allow complete and holistic conclusions about the community. The combination of the narrative of Simon Francis and the content analysis of the other interviews allowed me to look at the questions of the study: what characteristics differentiate Elders from the elderly, what is their role in the community, and what role does the community play in the making of respected Elders?

Analysis: Role, Characteristics, and Needs of Native Elders

As the interview with Simon Francis proceeded, a number of themes became apparent. When the data from the other interviews were added, the coding themes I saw formed themselves into three categories. The first category included roles that respected Elders are expected to play in the community. The second category included the personality characteristics that respected Elders displayed in their lives. The third category included the things that Elders needed from others in order to fulfill the roles that came out in the first category. After several revisions, I coded the data into several areas

inside each category. Because each of the areas and categories overlap and interrelate, it was very difficult to present each one individually. In the interview with Simon, after the themes were initially presented they were repeated and built upon to form a greater understanding of their meaning throughout the interview. I hope that the reader will understand that the whole of the interviews and ideas expressed are greater than the sum of the parts that I will present below. Each individual area is discussed below. In the final section I will attempt to re-create a more holistic view.

The Role of Native Elders

As Simon talked, I became aware that one role of the Elder was that of acting as teacher to the community. Elders are responsible for passing down cultural and traditional knowledge to future generations of their people. Simon felt responsible for helping in the teaching of everyday life skills and for providing specific knowledge to members of the community. He spoke of how he can make snowshoes, toboggans, and sleds. He wants to teach these skills to the younger generations. Elders are sought out when someone wants to learn how to set a snare or to do beadwork. They are also looked to for more general cultural knowledge such as teaching the lifestyle of the people through history. Other people that I interviewed expressed this theme in the following ways: An Elder is “a person that shows you their culture and what they grew up on. They try to get you to grow up like they did.” Elders “play the role of teaching. They teach you basically everything that has to do with outdoor life, teaching kids.” Another person said, “They talk to you and you don’t get a chance to talk till they’re done. It’s sorta like they’re driving a nail into your head--making you learn... Pounded it into my head until I learned.”

Elders also act as models for the way people should be living their lives. Not only do they tell the people what they should be doing, but if they are going to be respected Elders, they must be living that way themselves. By modeling correct behavior, Elders are able to set community standards of behavior. In the interview, Simon shows an example of this modeling by constantly stressing his commitment to his family. He not only speaks of this commitment, but demonstrates his family values in his community life.

Simon also demonstrates the value of hard work in his daily life. Another interviewee described Elders by saying, “They’re old, they’re nice, good attitude, never get mad. . . basically trying to teach you how they live, how their mothers and fathers raised them.”

Modeling sobriety becomes a key issue in Fort Yukon. Many of the interviewees said that an Elder will not be respected if he or she is still drinking. If Elders are going to help individuals and the community overcome alcohol related problems, they cannot be drinking themselves. Simon talks in the interview of his own struggles with alcohol and how he has fought to overcome the problems associated with it.

Other interviewees expressed the same sentiments regarding sobriety. One said, “Sobriety-can’t be an Elder and be drunk, too. And some longevity in sobriety.., a couple of years anyway, sobriety, and the respect begins to be restored within the community.” Yet another expressed this by stating:

I see a lot of different people that’s way older than me that don’t have any respect because they’re drinking and out all hours of the night. Some of them even got sno-go and drive around crazily. And these Elders, the other Elders that I’m talking about--they go to church, they go to potlatches and they have respect. You can see the difference in that.”

The maintenance of social and family values is a part of the cultural survival work for which Elders are expected to assume responsibility. Elders differ from a chief in that their role is apolitical. A chief can be expected to make popular decisions, but the Elder will make moral ones. Elders are recognized not just by a vocal few but by the entire community for their wisdom. The community expects Elders to be the conscience or superego of the village and to give guidance and direction on moral and spiritual issues. Simon talks about the whole community needing to work together if they are going to solve some of their problems such as alcohol and drug abuse. He explains that the solution to this problem needs to be probed further than what the council is doing and that the entire community is needed to go this extra step.

By talking about the work of other respected Elders, Simon demonstrates that the responsibility that Elders hold towards the village extends to the people as a whole. Elders hold responsibility beyond that of anyone else in the tribe for preserving and passing on the heritage and culture of their people. They do this by teaching traditional values, teaching traditional skills, and teaching the culture and language of their people. The methods used to carry out these tasks vary between villages and between individual Elders. Simon tells of the accomplishments of Elders in Old Crow and other communities. What is important is that this heritage is passed on.

In one of the interviews the theme of community service was expressed by saying, “An Elder is to me someone who has lived a long time and has wisdom and whose heart is not self-centered or self-serving. It seeks to serve the overall community. . . . I know that they aren’t just thinking for themselves, but they’ll be thinking of everyone involved.” Another person stated that Elders have “a role of helping make decisions, helping to resolve conflict, helping to look at the future, helping to make plans, and that type of thing.”

Elders are also responsible for providing a sense of continuity in the community. Elders are a link to the history of the people that the community can look towards. This link can allow the community to deal more effectively with issues in the present and to look towards the future. An interviewee reflected this theme by saying:

Generally, they’re folks too who have the wisdom of tradition, yet are not so lost in it that they can’t see the present times, that they don’t have some understanding of what’s going on with the kids and so forth. Some folks who are older just sort of shake their heads and say, “I don’t understand, I can’t relate to what’s going on with the kids. If they just respected us, they’d be okay.” I think an Elder is someone who knows that respect just doesn’t happen like that and that there are some real differences in age groups now and also understands and tries to bring the wisdom of the past to the present, doesn’t necessarily just log out the present.

One of the other Elders also expressed this theme by saying that Elders need to:

Be able to talk to the younger people. I'm reflecting back to when I was around Elders. Elders would gather in front of the store, got couple benches in front of them, and we'd listen to them. And they know we're listen to them. So that's the kind of stories that a kid should hear, is what's being discussed. The Elders would try to promote the way that would include the younger people. That's not done any longer.

Characteristics of Native Elders

In order for the Elder to fulfill his or her role in the community, they need to display certain characteristics. It is not possible for just any old person to take over the role of respected Elder in the community if his or her personality is not suited to the role. Indeed, the characteristics displayed become incorporated into the role of the Elders. Of course they must have reached an old age or have become a grandparent, but this is not the only criterion that is necessary for the person to become a respected Elder.

Elders must be willing to share the knowledge that they have. The members of the community need to know that they can come to the Elder when they need his or her help or want to learn, and that the Elder will be glad to help them or to tell them what they know on the subject. Simon tells the story of one old lady up in Old Crow. The entire community loves her and knows that they can come to her for help. The Elder must be willing to share his knowledge with others in order to contribute to his role in the community. Others that were interviewed explained, "They're quite willing to explain... . He's knowledgeable about it and certainly willing to teach. He's taken on that role." "The ones that still contribute are the ones that I consider an Elder."

Another characteristic of respected Elders that all the interviewees said was important is a concern for the well-being of other people in the community

and of the community as a whole. This characteristic closely relates to the role of being responsible for the entire community rather than just themselves. A respected Elder can realize when someone in the community is in trouble and is available to help that person in their healing. Simon shows his concern for the rest of the community when he talks of how alcohol and drugs need to be attacked. One of the youths interviewed said, “The Elders [are] responsible for basically everyone in town--an Elder is an Elder--they’re pretty kind-hearted and you can talk to them and they talk to you. They’re pretty much willing to take you in once you get to know them well-- only takes a week or so.” Another youth said, “Friends came in from out of town, they sat down, they treated them like their own kids, it doesn’t matter who you are.” Another interviewee said:

People that you can go to when that [bad things] happens is the Elders because if it’s your grandma or grandpa, it’s their kids that are having problems. You could probably stay with them if you’re having problems with your own family. You could go to them and they’ll talk to you, make you forget about your own problems, take you away from it.... Elders understand this drinking. They probably didn’t have it back then, but they saw it coming. Grandchildren are coming to them, they’re like one family, so they’ll help you out.

One person stated that he would like to see more of this characteristic of looking out for others in the community. He said:

The role of protector in the community, I don’t see that happening very often, at least not in Fort Yukon. The role of protector is the role of sort of putting your foot down sometimes when a foot needs to be put down in the community.

Elders are also expected to bring a holistic approach into view in examining problems. What this means is that they consider not only the physical or technical aspects of what is going on but also consider the spiritual and moral side of the issues. Elders bring a knowledge of life and its complexities to the concerns of the day. Simon was able to express this

holism throughout the interview by the way he talked and related to me. Others expressed that this knowledge of life is very important in an Elder. One person said that an Elder “knows everything there is to know about life, and seems to me you go to them--always seem to have an answer for you.” Another said, “There’s one old lady over here next door who teaches me lots. She talks to me about God. . . . She tells me that all of us--all drunk alcoholics--all of them are God’s children, that I should treat them as God’s children.” One of the youths expressed this by saying, “I know some other people, like older, but somehow don’t consider them an Elder, I respect them too, but they don’t seem to be an Elder. . . . They’re not as wise as the other Elders are. Basically knowing about life and how to experience it.”

This holistic view of life and way of experiencing it was very important to one of the interviewees. He said, “A lot of the Elders are folks who have been educated in some form or another by other Elders, that pass on that not just knowledge, but way of seeing things and looking at the world.” This becomes a key statement in differentiating between an Elder and an old person--a difference in the way of looking at the world.

Needs of Native Elders

It is necessary for the community to address the needs of Elders. The relationship between community and Elders must be reciprocal if the community is not to live in dependence on the Elders.

Elders must be shown respect by their community. The need to show this respect for the Elders was expressed by all of the interviewees. The community can show respect for the Elders by supporting them in their decisions, listening to their counsel, and supporting them in their everyday living and needs. Simon talked a good deal in the interview of how Elders should be respected within the community. One youth stated, “They tell you about things--you gotta respect them.... That’s what makes them an Elder.”

One of the interviewees provided insight into the importance of respect in the community by saying:

I think to identify them first is important. Second to go and seek their counsel. ... So the more respect offered, the more respect will probably develop over time. And the more their ability will be and they'll become good at being an Elder. So I think that's one thing that I can do is actually going to talk with these Elders. Symbolically lift up our Elders at every opportunity. Be that within the worship, be that at speech time at a gathering, to always seek counsel of the Elders, put them first in things at a meeting. Always ask them first.

This difference in respect shown towards the Elders in the community was also expressed by another interviewee. She said:

I see the difference in the way the Elder--the kids treat that [drinking] Elder and in the way they talk and the way they act around them. They act like he's not around. But a respected Elder--when kids are around them I see that they're respected. They say hello to them and talk to them in a respectful way, which this other Elder that drinks doesn't get that kind of respect.... These Elders that are respected, they go to school for bilingual, and these Elders that's there to teach them how to sew, how to make sled, they're all respected. And the kids listened to them. They act like they want that Elder to have all their attention. They focus their attention on that Elder and listen to everything that he's got to say. . . . When an Elder goes to school, they're all waiting. They all wait anxiously for that person to come . . . because they want that person to teach them the things that they want to know. . . and they really love that."

Another important need that became apparent in the interviews is the need for the Elders to engage in their own healing. Community members need to be concerned with the Elders' well-being. If the community is to get the full benefit from the Elders, the Elders must be as strong as possible. Many of the Elders have gone through very hard lives, and they need to heal their own emotional and spiritual wounds in order to help other people. Simon talked in the interview about his own healing from alcoholism, and how returning to the church has helped him to regain his place in the community.

After he began this healing, he was better able to see the problems around him and to begin to help others.

Another interviewee talked about this need to heal not only the personal wounds of the Elders, but the wounds of all the community when she said:

The Elder seems to understand alcoholism more than anybody else that I know. And it doesn't matter that they never drank in their life before, as they seen a lot more changes than I ever did. They seen how the alcohol started in this community. When the first time the boat came to Fort Yukon, there was a whole bunch of booze on there. And all the people got drunk and they seen all that. They seen what it done-done to the old people, their own children, and who might know better than them... . They've seen that--they seen how it used to be before. How peaceful it was before the alcohol affected us. And I think the Elders went through a great, great change. The white people weren't shooting us up by guns, but they were shooting theirselves by alcohol. And that's what this camp is about. Be out there in the woods--live out in the woods where it's peaceful and quiet without booze, without drugs. It's peaceful out there. I'm sorry to say that to live out there rather than here in my own home town. Then this Elder that I talked to about it, she said she prays every day about it. That she can live there with me, away from all the alcohol.

Along with the personal healing that the Elders need to undergo is the need for the community to forgive them for things they may have done wrong in the past. This forgiveness can in itself help to further promote the healing of the Elders. One interviewee stated:

The other thing is to help in the forgiveness process that needs to go on. A lot of times, by the time someone in our community reaches Elder status, if they live that long, they are going to have a lot of history that will have to be forgiven. Most of the Elders I know of have had struggles with alcoholism and have had family problems, struggles with their kids. . . abusing somebody or something is going on, you know. And somehow the community has to forgive that, to free that person to be trusted again.

Somehow help people deal with the past and forgive it so we can move on to some new lives.

Summary of Findings

Through combining the narrative interpretation and the content analysis approaches to analyzing the information contained in the interviews, I believe that I have reflected the general ideas of the interviews in a suitable manner. This information was reinforced by the field observations I made while I was a participant observer in Fort Yukon. The participant observer portion of my data gathering did not lead to any formal conclusions but helped to guide the focus of my research.

I found that a Native Elder is defined by the role that he or she assumes in the community, by the characteristics with which this role is performed, and by the needs that the community can fulfill. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER SIX

Implications and Recommendations

Review of Findings

Elders are important in a Native community, but what is it that differentiates an Elder from any elderly person? I believe that the act of living to an old age is important in that it shows that the person can adapt and has the skills to survive to be elderly in a harsh environment. It is perhaps more important that an Elder have a good knowledge of the culture and traditions of his people. Even more crucial, an Elder is one who is willing to share this knowledge by passing it on to the younger generations through the teaching and modeling of correct behavior. The community must recognize and respect the Elder as being knowledgeable in the ways of the people.

It is not enough to know about the culture and traditions of the people. Elders must convey a spiritual continuity of the past, present, and future. It is the special ability to apply this knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality to the well-being of the community that makes the Elder such an important and unique individual. It is the Elders' responsibility to interpret the events of today into the cultural framework of the traditions of the people.

Elders are concerned with the well-being of the entire community as well as with the well-being of individuals within the community. This concern for others must be returned to the Elders in the respect and support that the community gives to them. The community must recognize that Elders are unique individuals, with their own strengths and weaknesses. The community must be willing to forgive the Elders for the mistakes that they have made in the past if the Elders are to heal and become stronger.

Implications of the Study

Restoring the traditional role of the Native Elder in the community seems to be a significant first step in community healing, since Elders are responsible for the transmission of the culture and traditions of their people. Elders are

an important part of the social structure and psychological values of their people. Consequently, this heritage that Elders pass on is necessary for the health and survival of entire Native communities. Without the Elders, the impact of the white culture upon the community could be overwhelming.

It is clear that Native communities need to work harder at making the connection between traditional knowledge and future well-being by utilizing the wisdom of Native Elders. In many areas the Elders are the only remaining people who carry the language. In the language is embedded the culture. More and more Elders are being called upon to teach the Native language to their children and grandchildren, for if their offspring lose the use of their mother tongue they will also lose a vital link to their culture. Senator Eli Taylor, a Dakota Elder, eloquently explained this by saying:

The Native message is the language. . . . In it are embedded a value system and a system of human relationships--between age groups--among family members--among a wider kin group. The language reflects social structure, how people relate to one another. If you destroy the language you not only break down these relationships, but also those pertaining to Man's connection with the Great Spirit, Nature, and the order of things. Language therefore, is intertwined with the maintenance of social order. (Wilson, 1991)

With the transmission of the culture and traditions of the people, Elders are not only passing on knowledge about specific skills and events but are conveying a way of life and a specific world-view. Elders need to model not only correct behavior but a mental and spiritual philosophy that gives this behavior meaning. In order for future generations to realize the importance of a Gwich'in lifestyle, for instance, they must learn this lifestyle in a method that reflects the philosophy upon which it is based. In practical terms, this means that the traditions of the people cannot be taught using European teaching styles but that the Elders need to let the youth in the community learn the traditions of their people in the traditional style.

Several of the Elders who were interviewed related the experiences they had when they were younger, learning from their Elders. This learning took place mainly through observation and participation. No one taught them how to do specific tasks, but they went out and tried it for themselves. Some may have watched someone else who was knowledgeable demonstrate the task, but it was up to each individual to devise his or her own style of working. In this traditional way, it was up to students to learn what they wanted, instead of being forcefully taught what the teacher thought was important. This style of learning reflects the Gwich'in philosophy of living. Students were not dependent upon their teachers, but instead had an interactive relationship in which both teacher and student could prosper. Student and Elder respected one another. The student showed his respect by sharing the fruits of his learning to help support the Elder.

It is the unique world-view of Native people that differentiates them from other people around the world. This view of life includes cooperation rather than dependency, along with mutual respect for all members of the community and for the environment in which they live. If Native communities are going to survive in good health, then I believe they must first return to the philosophy of life that makes them Native in the first place.

The philosophy of working together and mutual respect is all too often lost in the schooling of today. Students are taught to compete with each other and are dependent upon the teacher for learning what is important to the teacher, not the student. It is small wonder that the youth of today seem to have less respect for the Elders in the community when they have learned that teachers are the only important people in the classroom and that they are dependent upon them to receive the knowledge necessary to succeed. This dependency is carried over into the everyday lives of the students as they mature, and I believe is partially responsible for many of the social ills that face Native communities today. Students need to learn to respect their Elders again. School can be of tremendous help by acknowledging the significance of the Elders in the community and thus legitimizing the Elders' role as teachers.

In order to overcome the dependency relationships that plague Native communities, it will be necessary to relearn the lifestyle of mutual respect and interrelations. If the youth of today are to learn this respect, then it is up to the Elders in the community to revive the teachings in a manner which reflects a Native world-view. Through regenerating the role of Native Elders in the community, the entire community will be able to begin a process of healing and returning to a place of health. This community healing will in turn strengthen the Elders further, leading to cycles of regeneration. Each cycle would become more profound than the previous one. Once the Elders in the community are strong and well-supported, they can lead the community in the revival of their Native lifestyle.

This study may have further implications through helping the youth in Fort Yukon to realize the role that Elders have played in their lives. The more the students talk about the role of the Elders in their lives, the more they may realize just how important that role is and how much they rely upon the Elders. This may help to open the door to further discussion among members of the community.

When this report is completed, it will give written reference in an otherwise oral tradition. Thus people from outside who are entering the community will have some explicit information about the role of the Elders. This may help to validate the role of Native Elders in the community to those who do not understand their importance. The more people recognize and support the Elders in the community, the more those Elders will be able to help the community.

Methodological Implications

As I progressed through the interviews, I became aware of a need to reflect a Native world-view in the methodology of the research. After spending so long in the European style of learning through the university, I had to ask myself: if it is the Native world-view that Elders are responsible for transmitting, then is it possible for this Native philosophy of learning to be reflected in the methodology of this study?

As I was reviewing the information obtained from the interviews, it became clear that the interviews contained a holistic view that was not being represented entirely by the content analysis approach. Thus I decided to choose one interview, Simon Francis', and to present it in its entirety. I sense, and I hope the reader does as well, a much deeper comprehension of the subject through the presentation of the entire narrative than is possible with the presentation of only the main themes. In certain ways, the entire narrative expresses much more than the sum of its parts would suggest. I believe that this in turn reflects the Native world-view that Simon was expressing.

The next dilemma was to present the research in a style that would reflect this holistic Native world-view and yet at the same time be acceptable to conventional scholars. The academic style of writing would suggest that arguments are to be made in a linear fashion. Each point is to be expressed and then fully delineated before moving on the next area. In the Native style, all the points might be expressed right away, and then further clarified in a cyclical or circular manner. With each new cycle, greater understanding is formed (Hampton, 1988). The greatest challenge became combining these two styles to prepare a report that would be understandable in either framework.

Another dilemma that became apparent to me is the style of my writing. Native methods of teaching and relaying information rely upon a very personal approach. Information is given as it is seen through the eyes of the reporter. The reality of the information becomes very personalized through the telling, and it is up to the listener to make this reality part of his or her own being as he or she sees fit. I could not relay the information that I received in this personal fashion from the participants in any fashion that did not express my own personality. To take peoples' personal experiences and change them into abstract conceptualizations would be going against the philosophy the Elders try to convey. I hope that readers can understand that this report reflects my personal experience with the people of Fort Yukon, and can choose which parts of my reality to make a part of their own.

Future Research

The combination of participant observation and an ethnographic style of research was the only method available to me that accurately reflected the respectful interrelationship between researcher and participants. Since this is an essential part of the Native lifestyle, it seems appropriate that this relationship should be an integral part of any further research.

The methodological implications of the Native philosophy of holism and interrelations would also suggest that in future research there needs to be more focus on the positive coping mechanisms that are in place in the community instead of only on the negative and detrimental effects of rapid lifestyle change. By exploring only the negative aspects of Native community life, the beneficial aspects of the change in lifestyle are being ignored. Along with the many ills that were introduced into Native society by contact with the White culture, there were also many advances. One thing that we can learn from a more holistic world-view is that issues have more than one side. Future research should focus more on this holistic perspective.

Recommendations

One of the most practical implications derived from this research is the need for youth and Elders in Fort Yukon to meet with each other more often. In order for the Elders in the village to pass on their knowledge and world-view, the youth must be willing to listen and interact with the Elders on a regular basis. Ways of accomplishing these meetings will have to be creative. Everyone involved must realize that the world has changed greatly from the times when the young people in the village could sit on benches outside the store and listen to the Elders tell them stories. Television, snowgos, alcohol, and video games are all competing with the Elders for the time and interests of the youth. The Elders themselves expressed that sometimes they would rather watch television than talk with the young people.

Even though many people in the community are dissatisfied with the schools and the way they are teaching the youth, the school could be playing an important role in fostering relationships between the Elders and youth in the

community. By allowing Elders to participate in the school's functioning, and indeed inviting them to do so, the school could be helping to bridge the gap between formal Western education and the traditional Native methods of learning. If the schools are able to utilize the Elders to provide a cultural reference or framework to education, learning will become more relevant to the students.

It is up to the schools to take the initiative in asking the Elders to participate, not only in the specific classes but also in the running of the school. It is not enough for the students to see the Elders for one or two classes per week; the entire educational system in the community needs to reflect the traditional values and world-view that the Elders can help emphasize. Many of the Elders and other community members have had numerous negative experiences with the schools, and it will be difficult to establish a new working relationship between the community and the school. By inviting the Elders to take part in the education of the youths, it will be setting an example of the school's willingness to cooperate in the development of a more culturally relevant form of community education.

The best way to teach the basic values and skills of a traditional Gwich'in lifestyle is through the traditional camps. At the traditional camps, the people live in the style that their people have lived for centuries. The activities undertaken at these camps encourage not only the survival of the traditional skills, but also the moral, spiritual, and psychological well-being of the people. Once learned in the traditional setting, it will be much easier to carry these lessons into the life of the modern village.

The Elders must also be used to interpret other current events and happenings into a cultural and traditional framework so that the whole community can gain an understanding of these events. Alcoholism, youth alienation and depression, and a lack of community well-being as well as education need to be better understood in a way that is applicable to the culture. If the Elders are able to express their views on the changes that they have seen throughout their lives, as well as what they have learned from

their parents and grandparents, it might help others to see some of the community problems in a more culturally relevant way.

Looking beyond Fort Yukon, it would seem that the regional and state conferences that are taking place in Alaska for the Elders are excellent forums in which greater understanding of community problems can be worked out. With greater peer support and sharing of ideas, Elders will be able to further express and expand their views, needs, and visions of the future. Thus Elders from different areas will be able to help each other overcome common problems.

In addition to peer support and sharing, it is equally important for the community to show support for their Elders. It is important to not only feel respect for the Elders but to show this respect. This respect can be expressed through formal ways such as always calling on the Elders to say blessings at meetings and making sure that the Elders are first in everything. It is also important to show respect in informal ways by going to the Elders for advice, making sure that they have enough cut wood, and paying attention when they are talking.

As a further show of support, Elders need to be forgiven for their past mistakes in order for them to move on to other things. It would be impossible to live to an old age without making mistakes along the way. The community needs to recognize that Elders are human and that humans make mistakes. Elders cannot be expected to be perfect, and it is up to the community to accept the Elders as they are. Once the Elders can be forgiven for their mistakes in life, they will be better able to help with the things that they are good at, instead of being criticized for things that they may have not done well.

Concluding Remarks

Native Elders serve as the key in a natural social support network, and communities can gain greatly from their wisdom and advice. Elders have the experience of having grown up and survived in two different worlds. Few

others can understand what it is like to see a way of life forever changed in their lifetimes. By sharing this experience with younger generations, the entire community can benefit from their wisdom.

Walking with two spirits in one world has challenges far beyond what we can imagine. It is difficult to find service providers that understand that concept. Many of those in the helping professions have their own addiction problems to overcome. They find it challenging enough to be healthy within themselves to deal with one world, let alone two. (Alaska Native Health Board, 1989)

It is the role of the Native Elder to transmit the traditional and cultural knowledge of their people from one generation to the next. Thus the Elder acts as teacher of the younger people in the community. The Elder must also model the behaviors and standards of living he or she is trying to teach to the community. The role of the Elder is different from that of the chief in that it should be apolitical. The Elders are expected to extend their concern to the entire community and all of its members, as well as their people as a whole. Through their role in the community, Elders provide a sense of continuity from the past into the present. This continuity is important to help to establish a brighter future.

It is the holistic modeling of spirituality combined with wisdom and practical knowledge which seems to differentiate the Elder from the elderly. Elders are responsible not only for the transmission of knowledge, but for ensuring the passing on of the unique world-view that holds this knowledge in context. Thus the difference between Elders and the elderly is not only in the role they play in the community, but in the individual characteristics with which they make that role culturally relevant. The Elder must be willing to share his or her knowledge with the rest of the community. They must also provide this knowledge in a holistic manner.

One point that I believe to be most important in distinguishing the Elder from the elderly comes not from the role that the person claims in the community, but from the support that the community gives that role and

person. There can be no Elders without communities to support them. The community needs to show its respect for the Elders. Also, in recognizing the major importance that the Elders will need to play in the healing of Native communities, it becomes apparent that the first step is for the Elders to heal themselves. Often, Elders carry the brunt of many years of the oppression and cultural genocide of their people. They must be able to heal their own wounds before they can help others in the continuing process of healing their communities.

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