

THE SPIRIT MESSENGER AND THE TRADITIONAL EXEMPLAR: TWO FIGURES OF THE ELDER AMONG PLAINS CREE COMMUNITIES

Andrew R. Hatala

University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Canada, S7N 5A5
andrew.hatala@usask.ca

Michel Desjardins

University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Canada, S7N 5A5
michel.desjardins@usask.ca

Abstract / Résumé

Previous studies have attempted to understand the functions and characteristics of Aboriginal elders. Within contemporary literature, however, the characteristics and functions of elders are vaguely presented. This current study describes the experiences, characteristics and functions of elders from a Plains Cree perspective to address previous limitations. Eight interviews using Good's (1994) critical phenomenological theoretical lens were conducted with four Aboriginal elders residing in central Saskatchewan. The interviews revealed two categories of the Cree elder: the *honorable elder* and the *spiritual elder*. Each category demonstrates significant variations in experiences, characteristics and functions, both among themselves and within broader Canadian society.

Des études antérieures ont tenté de comprendre les fonctions et les caractéristiques des aînés autochtones. Toutefois, dans la documentation contemporaine, ces fonctions et caractéristiques sont présentées de manière vague. La présente étude décrit les expériences, les caractéristiques et les fonctions des aînés selon le point de vue des Cris-des-Plaines afin d'aborder les limites antérieures. En utilisant la lentille théorique phénoménologique et critique de Good (1994), nous avons procédé à huit entrevues avec quatre aînés du centre de la Saskatchewan. Les entrevues ont révélé deux catégories chez les aînés cris : l'*aîné honorable* et l'*aîné spirituel*. Les deux catégories indiquent des variations significatives en termes d'expériences, de caractéristiques et de fonctions, que ce soit entre elles ou par rapport à la société canadienne élargie.

Introduction

Canadian Aboriginal Peoples—including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis—consist of 3.7% of the entire Canadian population, or just over one million people (Statistics Canada, 2006). Within this diverse group there are eleven major languages; including more than fifty-eight dialects, distributed among some 596 bands, residing on 2284 reserves, or in cities and rural communities (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000). In Saskatchewan alone, census reports identify 141,890 Aboriginals on reserves, in cities or rural communities, constituting this population as one of the largest minority groups with about 14.9% of the total Saskatchewan population (Statistics Canada, 2006). Aboriginal ethnicities or cultural groups most common in Saskatchewan include Cree, Assiniboine, Saulteaux, Dene and Dakota. Previous research into Aboriginal traditions highlights the remarkable diversity that is often grounded in specific languages, places, lifeway rites, and communal relationships embedded in a unique ethnic history, often overshadowed by the more pervasive history of religious and political suppression (Irwin, 2000).

While this diversity is acknowledged, the elder remains a common and important individual among all Aboriginal groups in Saskatchewan and throughout other parts of Canada. Within Aboriginal communities, elders are often respected and cherished individuals who have amassed a great deal of knowledge, wisdom and experience over many years (RCAP, 1996). Moreover, Aboriginal elders are commonly seen as cultural educators, assisting their families to discover hope within a difficult history of European colonization in Canada. Most notably, elders are seen to not only teach and inform others of the traditional Aboriginal cultural ways, they are understood to embody them. Although there is an abundance of literature that refers to Canadian Aboriginal elders, many authors have yet to clearly define the term. Subsequently, the term “elder” is usually discussed inconsistently (NAHO, 2003). Thus many questions remain: Who is the Aboriginal elder? How does one become an Aboriginal elder? What is the function, role or status of the Aboriginal elder in today’s modern society? And lastly, what are the similarities and differences between the elders of our time and those of the past?

The current objectives of this exploratory research are to better understand the functions and characteristics of, as well as explore the meanings associated to, the Aboriginal elder. This objective is pursued not only within the current literature, but also more fundamentally from within the perspective of the elders themselves. This paper intends to build on previous studies while simultaneously opening up new avenues of scientific endeavor. The primary purpose then is to offer a working

definition of the term “elder,” and furthermore help clarify the meanings of this term, assisting future studies to be more consistent in both their language and understanding of the Aboriginal elder.

Literature Review

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “elder” is defined as both a person that is older than you are and a leader or senior figure in a tribe. Similarly, within the *Gathering Strength* volume of the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) elders are defined as:

Keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers. While most of those who are wise in traditional ways are old, not all old people are elders, and not all elders are old. (RCAP, 1996, Vol.3: 527)

If not all old people are elders and not all elders are old, and if the term is not understood as a category defined by age, what then are the prerequisites of being an elder? Interestingly, the Inuit refer to the elderly as “inutuquak,” whereas those considered “elders” in the traditional sense are referred to as “angijukqauqgatiit,” which translates to “union of elders” (RCAP, 1996). This again suggests a definitive distinction between those simply of old age and those who are “elders.”

Apart from age, studies have also defined Aboriginal elders through their characteristics or their function in society. Stiegelbauer (1996) notes that elders often serve as a symbolic connection to the past, and carry the knowledge of traditional ways, teachings, stories and ceremonies to help facilitate this connection. Moreover, Stiegelbauer suggests that elders are the personification of tradition. Additionally, Wilson (1996) proposes that Aboriginal elders are people who are recognized by others to hold the power required to carry communities back to a place of synergism and well-being. Recognition and respect of the community are fundamental to being an elder, and that respect in turn is a kind of “proof” of the elder’s quality (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Who has the power to assist in the reintegration of the Aboriginal peoples, authors Katz and Seth (1986) question, if not the ones who have survived and sufficiently healed from the many years of abuse and colonization? These authors also assert that to be an elder you must have both knowledge of traditional ways and the ability to bring that knowledge into the world in a practical manner. Therefore, elders must defend tradition not only through words alone but also through deeds (Wilson, 1996). This action component is important and, markedly, it is action that allows one’s role to be acknowledged and accepted by the larger community. One common action component of the elder is the education or transfer of knowledge to subse-

quent generations. This understanding reflects what McLeod (2007) calls the storyteller, who offers traces of experience through which the listeners make sense of their lived experiences. The elders' knowledge, experience and wisdom serve as a means to help guide others to the "good life," or a moral way of existing in the world.

In like manner, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) has attempted again to define the Aboriginal elder as follows:

Respected and cherished individuals who have amassed a great deal of knowledge, wisdom and experience over the period of many, many years. They are individuals who have also set examples, and have contributed something to the good of others. In the process, they usually sacrifice something of themselves, be it time, money or effort.... Elders, Old ones, Grandfathers and Grandmothers don't preserve the ancestral knowledge. They live it. (RCAP, 1996, Vol.4:109)

One Métis community in Canada describes the elder in a similar fashion. The Métis people living in central Manitoba posed the question to a group of elders during a conference in 1997; their definition involved reference to those individuals as "old folks." To them, elders were clan leaders and historians that had to earn the respect of others to acquire good sound reputations (Shore & Barkwell, 1997). There are wide ranges of perspectives that suggest elders do not seek status; instead, it flows from the people. This appears to be a key characteristic of the Aboriginal elder.

By contrast, as a result of working with several elders in Saskatchewan, researcher James Waldram advocates that spirituality is a fundamental aspect or characteristic of the elder. Waldram (1997) notes that elders who remain connected to their spirituality act as significant guides for others, helping to facilitate a healing process from many years of pain. Accordingly, the power of the elder comes not only from the people and the healing of the past, but also from their spiritual aura. From this perspective, elders are often defined according to their role during ceremony; they help to ensure that the correct traditional ceremonies and procedures take place. In other words, the Aboriginal elder has an important role in sustaining the spiritual life and vigor of the community, as well as ensuring that spiritual practices are continuing to be upheld and people maintain regular access to them. Furthermore, Waldram (1997) suggests that elders are usually seen as special spiritualists, whose knowledge of the sacred rises above the more common practical understanding of the rest of the community. Thus Aboriginal elders often serve as the connection for many individuals to the sacred aspects of life, and

to the stories, prayers and teachings that facilitate this connection.

Waldram's understanding of the elder is reminiscent of another Canadian researcher's description of the Aboriginal Shaman, David Mandelbaum. Mandelbaum (1979)—who lived and worked among a Cree community in central Saskatchewan for several years—describes shamans as individuals with supernatural powers, who assist others primarily by healing them from spiritual afflictions understood to be limiting their connection to the spiritual world. In this way, the shaman is similar to Waldram's (1997) definition of the elder, in that they are both characterized by their connection to the spiritual realm. Indeed, the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) notes that within the literature, the terms "elder" and "healer" are used interchangeably, since the role of the healer and the elder are to care for the mind, body and spirit of the people (NAHO, 2003). However, NAHO also admits that the term "elder" is another term attached to traditional medicine that is discussed in a vague and inconsistent manner, thus needing to be clarified.

In summary, the elder serves the community in many ways, which could be equated with the Western understandings of social worker, therapist, counselor, mediator, healer, teacher, clergyperson and/or political leader. Additionally, NAHO proposes that Aboriginal elders are practitioners—often working as psychologists—or spiritual leaders who are parts of the living, evolving meaning system of their community (NAHO, 2003). The diversity of the elders' role is noted as an important and vital part of the community, offering varying means of assistance to those from differing backgrounds in order to maintain the stability and strength of the community (Stiegelbauer, 1996).

Critically speaking, the definition of the elder from within the Aboriginal worldviews is often difficult to specifically define. Many researchers do not distinctively deem the term elder to refer to spiritual leaders within Aboriginal communities (Mandelbaum, 1997; McLeod, 2007). Often the term storyteller, shaman or medicine man are applied to individuals fulfilling the traditional leadership role that is now associated with the term elder. It is also unclear from the current literature as to the beginnings of the terms elder as ascribed to the Aboriginal spiritual leaders. Historically speaking, since the beginning of the first century, the term elder has been used within Christianity in reference to church leaders (Harris, 2006). However, since much of our current knowledge about the Aboriginal populations comes after the advent of Christian influence, it is difficult to tell what the elder was, if anything at all, for the Aboriginal people. Research into this area continues to remain limited in the sense that clarity is not rigorously espoused. Hence, developing a better understanding of the Aboriginal elder is the goal of this current study.

To a great extent, the previous literature has attempted to outline the practical role of the elder in Aboriginal societies without attempting to grasp and include those societies' perspectives. Consequently, the previous literature has often viewed the Aboriginal elder almost exclusively from within the constraints of the Western worldview. The current understanding of the Aboriginal elder, therefore, is constructed through dialogue with the elders' own points of view in order to clarify this figure's function, characteristics and contributions to society.

Methodology

In order to address the question "what is an Aboriginal elder?" from an Aboriginal perspective, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with four plains Cree elders (two male and two female) from within and around the Saskatoon area, in central Saskatchewan. Their ages ranged from fifty-three to eighty-three, and at the time of the study they were all identified in the Saskatchewan Aboriginal community as elders. All were fluent in both English and Cree. Three of the participants were currently living in Saskatoon and the other within close proximity to the Saskatoon city limits. For the presentation of the interview transcripts, pseudonyms are assigned to the participants. Both women, hereafter referred to as Wapos (rabbit) and Sisip (duck), were married and had children. Both men, hereafter referred to as Piyesiw (thunderbird) and Ohow (owl), were also married with children. Ohow—being the eldest participant—was retired, whereas the other three participants were currently employed.

Life history and semi-structured interviews were the two techniques used to generate qualitative data (Rothe, 2000). Participants were interviewed individually and all interviews were recorded by way of audio recorder. The life history was conducted in an open-ended format in order to give the participants free reign to organize, explore and clarify the story of their experiences. The semi-structured interviews were shaped around four central themes: (1) elder identity/experience; (2) the sacred world and spirituality; (3) the modern world and Canadian society (Taylor, 2002); and (4) social relationships and community. Following the interviews, participants were given an opportunity to review their transcripts, after which transcript releases were obtained.

The experiences of these four Aboriginal Cree elders were then analyzed from a critical phenomenological perspective (Good, 1994). From this perspective, subjectivity is primarily intersubjective and secondarily individual. Hence, experiences and understandings of the world are relative to the particular cultural and historical context of the individual. Within this idea, Good outlines a concept of the lifeworld, understood as the

way in which the world is constructed and lived, which can exist in parallel forms. In fact, Good suggests, individuals usually live in multiple lifeworlds that continuously interact. As these lifeworlds are expressed through symbolic forms, there is a dialogistic process between cultural modes—such as religion, morality and politics—which influence the self and one's present experiences. Similarly, NAHO states that the variety of elders not only emerges from their cultural diversity, but also from their colonial history and location; urban, rural and remote Aboriginal communities have very different expectations and approaches in identifying and accessing elders and healers (NAHO, 2003). Subsequently, it is important for the current endeavour to understand the cultural and historical context that will have, or has had an effect on the construction and understandings of the Cree elder (Good, 1994).

Two Paths to Walk

A central idea uncovered during the interviews was that there appeared to be two differing figures of the Cree elder. The first designates someone of old age and prominent standing within the Cree community of Saskatchewan, particularly a person living a “good” and honorable life. This figure of the elder is abundant within current literature, as well as the most common understanding of the term elder today. The second figure of the elder incorporates these aspects and moves to include someone who has been given or handed down sacred spiritual teachings—often symbolized as carrying a sacred pipe—and who has the ability to run spiritual ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge. Three of the participants in this study—Wapos, Sisip, and Ohow—were closely related to the first figure, hereafter referred to as an *honorable elder*. Piyesiw's figure varied from the others, however, as he uniquely expressed his intimate experience of the spiritual world and his ability to run spiritual ceremonies. Thus, his narrative highlights what is hereafter referred to as a *spiritual elder*. These two versions of the Aboriginal elder highlight differences in both the social world of the participants—in their relationship to other elders—and in their own self-knowledge—or the way in which they understand and live out their current role.

To begin, it is important to note that both Piyesiw, the spiritual elder, and Wapos, Sisip and Ohow, the honorable elders, describe this distinction within the category of the Cree elder. The following excerpt from Piyesiw's narrative further outlines this categorical distinction:

The term elder is an awkward term. There is some people, who are honorary people with the good life. And are asked to pray at meetings and that sort of thing. Then there is a kind of spiritual elder that comes from a different background

you know.

This idea is further supported by Ohow as follows:

If you had anything to do with the past, if your ancestors were storytellers or medicine men, your background help makes you to become one of the storytellers or an elder. [Pause] Or if you had an experience—a spiritual experience—and you keep it to yourself, and you avoid certain things, you become an elder.

It is evident from these comments that one figure of the elder is characterized by his/her knowledge of the past and relation to traditional ways of living; whereas the second figure is grounded in one's relationship to the spiritual world or one's direct spiritual experiences. This duality is again supported by Wapos, as she describes herself unable to run the spiritual ceremonies, thus distancing herself from the spiritual elder:

When I was growing up I wasn't given to make a sweat lodge ...its very important that people, elders, give you [or] given you sweat lodge, and make a ceremony over that...they give it to you so you can go ahead and do your sweat lodge.

This excerpt from Wapos forces us to question how one's experience of being given the ability to run the spiritual ceremony differs from those, like her, who were not handed down that ability. Subsequently, much of the remaining paper explores this experiential difference between these two figures of the elder and how that difference manifests in the participants' lifeworlds.

As interviews with the participants continued, the vision of this categorical distinction, between the honorable and the spiritual, becomes more abundantly clear. After stepping back from the narratives, it was apparent that the primary distinction between these categories is best understood through their respective relationship to the spiritual or sacred world, described in this context as a subtle realm of existence that transcends ordinary everyday reality. Both categories of the elder outline an important relationship to the spiritual world, as this was a significant theme for all participants. However, the spiritual elder, Piyesiw, described this relationship from a heightened perspective. Within his narratives, Piyesiw was seen to present a worldview entirely saturated by spirituality; whereas the honorable elders were only loosely informed by the spiritual world—mostly in regards to moral reasoning and decision-making. Thus, this subtle difference in one's relationship to the spiritual world and daily life has become evident in different ways among the four participants. Therefore, the following sections of the paper explore five manifestations of this difference with regards to: (1) becoming an elder; (2) roles and functions of the elder; (3) variations in speech; (4)

qualities and characteristics of the elder; and (5) their social position.

The Process of Becoming an Elder

Within the narratives, the honorable elder is seen to become such through a slow and natural process, involving years of experience and living in alignment with the traditional Cree cultural ways. For these elders, learning of the traditional ways frequently occurs through one's family members—either parents or grandparents—or through organized schooling systems—such as high schools or university—and happens throughout a gradual process of association with these individuals and institutions. Hence, age within this category is critical as it signals to others one's direct personal experience and potential knowledge of the traditional cultural ways.

Looking to Ohow as an example of the honorable elder, much of his experience of becoming an elder is related to the education and schooling he received within the larger Canadian society. This gradual process of acquiring knowledge over many years is also the main way in which Wapos and Sisip portray their path towards becoming elders. A key milestone for Ohow on this path to elderhood was his ability for remembering stories, both traditional Cree and Christian. When asked if Ohow could relate significant events leading him to become an elder in the community, he responded with the following:

When we went to school we sang in the choir [and] we practiced at school. [Pause] There was a new church and the choir was up on both sides. Men on one side and women on the other, the boys and girls. [Pause] And the time came when the ministers, he read.... He had the Cree Bible, but his pronunciation was so bad that his words came to sound like bad words. So my father was one of the leaders, he told him that some of his words don't say right. So the teachers said one of the boys can read. So I was chosen to study the Cree syllabics. So of course we had the first chapter of St. John. [Pause] I was stuck in one place [and] everybody was doing it. The minister says, "I don't think he can get it." But the teachers said he will, we will make him. Ha ha ha. [Pause] So I had to memorize [and] that's how I started reading. So then I became an interpreter of sermons [and] at some times there was no minister, so I was taking services. That was about grade 11 or 12. [Pause] And the people accepted it you know.

In the case of Ohow, becoming an elder was intimately related to his ability to read, interpret and re-tell stories from within both Cree and

Christian societal perspectives. A second important aspect is the fact that the people accepted it. Recalling the literature review, an important element of elderhood was that there is no self-ascribed status. In this illustration, Ohow communicates the idea that his community began to accept him as a leader. As for the reading, if we understand the importance of storytelling in Aboriginal culture, as its central role in passing on the traditions of the past to the future, it could be the case that being able to read or tell the stories of the Cree Bible would mark one's status as a storyteller or elder within the community. To a great extent, Ohow's experience of becoming an elder is predicated on learning appropriate knowledge that allows him to give back to the community—understood as telling moral stories that help others make positive choices. Similarly, Wapos and Sisip communicate the process of becoming an elder as slow and gradual, dependent on age, and the recognition by the rest of the community as someone of knowledge and value.

As witnessed within all participants' narratives, the spiritual elder achieves his station in a different manner. Remembering for a moment Ohow's words, "If you had an experience, a spiritual experience and you keep it to yourself, and you avoid certain things, you become an elder," it is apparent that central to the spiritual elder is their relationship to and experience of the spiritual world. As age is often a requisite for the honorable elder, spiritual experiences are essential for the spiritual elder. For the spiritual elder, learning of traditional cultural ways most often occurs through direct contact with and resultant experiences of the spiritual world. These experiences were described to result from ceremonies, dance, prayers and fasting, but were also seen to develop within the spiritual world themselves and manifest as interruptions in the individuals' normal activities. For example, many of the spiritual experiences for Piyesiw were brought on against his will, and in several descriptions were invasive. Piyesiw explains:

I was an alcoholic you know. [Pause] And a year after I quit drinking, that was when my spiritual stuff started awakening within me, eh. And not because I wanted it too, but just because it came. And, eh, [pause] you're never ready to meet spirits when they come to you. [Pause] Your reality is torn to pieces, eh. [Pause] Or what we call reality. There is a whole other existence beyond that, eh. Spirituality is some pretty intense stuff.

Transformation into a spiritual elder can occur quite quickly. The long path of the honorable elder to acquire knowledge through experience is often drastically decreased for the spiritual elder to only a few short years. The epiphanies of the spirits, or "meeting of the spirits" as Piyesiw

describes it, become the experiences through which the necessary knowledge to be an elder is attained. Therefore, sometimes in contrast to the honorable elder, spiritual elders can be quite young. Indeed, the spiritual elder in this study was the youngest participant. Moreover, Piyesiw describes the feelings of these spiritual encounters with more detail as follows:

I had a very intense shift, eh. I had visions [pause] and they were very profound and I was afraid of them. The spirits were overwhelming you know. Your mind can't handle it. So I was boiling over with all this energy and I started going to people's ceremonies. Going here, there and everywhere, and I settled in. I eh [pause] used to walk to the sweatlodge in town. This old man there, I found out he called my grandfather uncle and they were both ceremonialists, which is what I am. And I tried the Sun Dance, eh. [Pause] And everything you do is in four; four years I did Sun Dance, and I did four years of fasting you know. After that you do whatever you need to kind of thing.

Initially, Piyesiw felt overwhelmed and unable to handle his connection with the spiritual world. The mood and tone of Piyesiw during these descriptive moments could only be described as mystical, and his life history narratives often resorted to metaphorical language, as in the above quote when he states that these spiritual interactions were as if he was like water about to boil over.

Moreover, the spiritual ceremonies—such as the sweat lodge and the Sun Dance—became important outlets for Piyesiw to release this spiritual energy and make sense of his relationship with the unseen world. In other words, Piyesiw's desire to attend the ceremonies was necessitated by his spiritual encounters. An important mentor, who—along with the spiritual ceremonies—helped him to interpret and to make sense of his often intense and overwhelming experiences, also assisted Piyesiw on his spiritual path. Uniquely, this spiritual mentor was not a part of Piyesiw's family, yet someone who came to Piyesiw during his initial years of meeting the spirits. In contrast, the honorable elders, most often described their teachers as being close family members or relatives who worked with them over many years and helped them have a strong foundation in traditional ways. Piyesiw, however, explained that he never asked to become an elder, learn the traditional ways of his people, carry the sacred pipe, or be given the ability to lead spiritual ceremonies; instead, life or spirits brought it to him as outlined below:

When you do ceremonial things, you do them in four. So I fasted for four years; mine was four years and four days.

There's a series of that you know, Sun Dances. And on the fourth one, I didn't ask for it or anything, these things come to you [pause] but a pipe came first, then the sweat lodge came to me. [Pause] You don't ask for things, they come to you.

If becoming a spiritual elder is something that came to Piyesiw, he still had to go through some preparation or training before officially receiving the pipe and the ability to independently lead a ceremony. After his first contact with the spiritual world, he delves into a mystical adventure of ceremonial participation over a four-year period. Throughout this time he continues to have intense visions, communication and guidance from his mentor and visits from the spiritual world. Songs, speech and ceremonies are all said to help dissipate this intense energy developed from these interactions. After these years of spiritual practice, Piyesiw received the pipe, then the sweat lodge; both as a gift from his spiritual mentor. Finally, Piyesiw received instruction as to the specific placement of the rocks and orchestration of the sweat and pipe ceremonies, thus marking him as a spiritual elder.

As illustrated, there are many variations along the path to becoming either an honorable elder or a spiritual elder. The former makes slow strides on the path of life, acquiring knowledge along the way mainly through intergenerational relationships; whereas the latter becomes an elder quite quickly on an accelerated path of spiritual growth guided by a spiritual mentor. In the end, it is the *type* of relationship to the spiritual world that dictates one's path towards becoming an honorable or spiritual elder.

The Elder's Functions and Roles in Society

The most common function of the honorable elder is cultural transmission, that is, the passing of traditional knowledge to subsequent generations. Sisip, Ohow, and Wapos describe this process primarily through storytelling. The following description from Sisip is also reminiscent of both Wapos and Ohow's narratives:

They have smudging at the school, and I tell them to ask anything that they want to know. So an elder is always there you know. It's nice to teach the kids what smudging means and all that. I tell them smudging when the smoke comes, put it on your head, so you can think right, and put it over your eyes so you can see, and put it over your ears to hear, and put it all over so you can move and whatever. That's what smudging is all about, and that's what I tell them. Now sometimes I see them, and they say they want to smudge

their heads. In the morning they all go there and sit in a circle and smudge. I like that you know. I don't let them forget they're Indians.

In this section Sisip illustrates how she understands her current role as teaching children important cultural knowledge, fundamental in the understanding of one's identity. Wapos and Sisip both currently work in the Saskatchewan education system. Therefore, their current functions are strongly related to education, acting to support children and help them with any life problems they should have. It is important to note that both Sisip and the other participants describe their current role and function as elders to assist and serve others. It is not conceptualized as a position of dominance or power-over, but as a position of service or power-with. All four participants describe the desire and willingness to offer up much of their life so that others may improve. Sisip, in particular, illustrates how she feels it is important to be there for the children, to encourage and offer answers to any questions they may have. She says, "That's the only way I could think of being an elder; they could ask me anything and I could answer what they want to know." Moreover, Sisip also recounted many instances when her traditional stories would help guide talking circles in her own home, in which members of her family would offer each other support for their problems.

Additionally, all participants acknowledge and suggest a healing component to their role as storytellers. This aspect was emphasized in Piyesiw's narrative, but present in the others as well. As a counseling professional, Piyesiw works with troubled children experiencing addictions issues or mental disorders, who are as a result marginalized from the larger Canadian society. Much of his effort stresses the removal of social and psychological barriers that have been constructed by his clients from many difficult experiences. Piyesiw often works with children from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent, and his narrative communicates that people from both cultural worlds can appreciate and find meaning in the ceremonies and stories he therapeutically offers. The following is an excerpt from Piyesiw's narrative that helps to articulate his current experience and role as an elder:

So what I do here is tell kids stories, do counseling, [and] go through experiential stuff you know. A lot of people expect that cultural programming will be, you know, make dream catchers and bead work. [Pause] I always thought that wasn't the heart of healing and it wasn't the heart of the culture. I wanted to do the therapy side. There is a slogan among Indian people that says: culture is healing. Culture is therapy. But if you look at how cultures, they all have their stories.

Whether it's a fairy tale or a legend or whatever, but they're not just stories, you know, they're guiding. Embedded in the story is life lessons, eh. And if you find the lesson in the story, it's better if *you* find it [rather] than somebody else tells you. Healing comes from inside a person, self-realization. Some people think counseling is telling people what to do. I get so frustrated with that you know. Me, like I work with young people, not everybody could do that. My dad couldn't get out of there fast enough, cause they're not the best of citizens you know. Thieves and hookers and drug addicts you know. But they are so lost. The storyteller reminds them of who they are, who they really are. [Pause] We're dealing with the extremes here. The work I do is with the extreme. Things are getting really dangerous hey, drugs out there are dangerous, prostituting...and...I heard horrendous stuff these kids will tell you. So that's what I work with you know, the extremes. But I think that the thing is if you see people as the problem or like a clinical case you know. [Pause] You got to be human. That doesn't mean you have a sponge for their pain, but there is that general balance you know. You find the good in them. We take them into the sweats you know. So in the journey something spiritual might help the person along, but the person has to make the journey. So I tell them, you're here on a journey. They're going to run into obstacles. It's like a little boy who has to run for four days to take a message to another camp. [He] ended up sleeping in a buffalo herd and kept going and going, all these obstacles. A cougar chased him, eh. And he went on the top of this mountain. [Pause] There's always a deeper meaning, multiple meanings for different people. So I tell them, we're on this journey together and there are obstacles. So what are the values in the story that you can use today to help you make the journey. That way it's not telling them what to do, but trying to set up the situation where they can learn for themselves. That's harder to do. It's easier to tell people what to do. You do this and you'll be okay. No man, that's sick! [Pause] Let them learn it for themselves, what's real to them.

This selection helps us understand an aspect of Piyesiw's current role in helping the "lost" children find their way. He tells stories so that the children can make meaning of their own personal experiences, which later facilitate growth and perhaps a return to the "good road." This is a strong point of similarity between the categories of elder, for they both

concentrate their work efforts on helping children acquire necessary skills to succeed in life. All participants acknowledge that “culture is therapy,” therefore their storytelling role—primarily understood as cultural transmission—has a powerful healing component. From Piyesiw’s perspective in particular, it is reclaiming traditional cultural knowledge that will help Canadian Aboriginal people as a whole calm the reverberations from years of abuse and illness caused by cultural subjugation. This cultural knowledge frequently comes in the form of stories, which act as meaning-making devices and guides for the discontented children and others to find their own path towards a more meaningful life (Geertz, 1973; Katz & Seth, 1986; Mehl-Madrona, 2007).

In addition to these shared functional aspects of being a Cree elder, Piyesiw also portrayed his unique ability of running the spiritual ceremonies as central to his position in society. Indeed, the context in which the spiritual elder often communicates healing stories is during the ceremony itself. This varies from the honorable elder, where, according to the participants, the context is usually a formal educational setting. Piyesiw describes one of his roles as creating the sweat ceremony in order to assist people who desire to connect with the creator or spiritual world. During these ceremonies, Piyesiw subsumes the role of leading the group in prayers and song, whereby the connection to the spiritual world is attained. Stories also frequent the lodge, in which the spiritual elder offers a metaphorical tale of life’s many struggles and triumphs, through the symbolism of which the listener finds new meaning from their own life events (Geertz, 1973).

Although storytelling is central to both categories of elder, a further distinction lies not only in the context of the story but also in the experience of communicating the story itself. For Piyesiw, visions, songs and other similar expressions of the spiritual world in the ordinary often accompany his intimate spiritual encounters. In telling the story, therefore, the spiritual elder acknowledges the spiritual world and suggests that those transcendent realities—littered with spiritual beings—use him as a medium through which the spiritual beings themselves communicate a necessary story to the listeners present. In this way, the spiritual elder is a servant to both the people present in the ceremony and the spiritual world. Piyesiw explains:

Anyway, there is so much humor in all things, eh. I was sitting in a bingo hall—a big yucky bingo hall—and I felt like I was starting to leave my body, eh. It was weird. It felt like something was coming. [Pause] And right away the man—a respected elder—took me to his house, and I started to sing. It wasn’t me that was singing. He took me in the desert un-

der this beautiful starry sky, you know. [Pause] And I remember the thunder coming and the rain [and] then I had a really overwhelming vision. Then I spoke, and eh, it wasn't me speaking, but the message was for him you see. [Pause] Something happened to me.

Storytelling for the spiritual elder in the context of the ceremony often occurs in a “trancelike” state, where conscious awareness of the moral teaching or lesson of the story is not fully recognized until after the event has occurred. In this way, Piyesiw allows the spiritual world to communicate to the listener through him as they see fit, which was also seen to have a healing emphasis. In contrast, the honorable elder was described to consciously think beforehand about what is important and communicate to an audience based on their own reason, learning, knowledge and experience. This conscious component of the storytelling act could be understood as a difference in type, with each category of elder respectively described a separate ‘type’ of storytelling. For the honorable elder, conscious awareness of the lesson and purpose of the story is present throughout the act. For the spiritual elder, no conscious awareness of the lesson and purpose is realized until after the story is told. However, this difference of type was not consistent throughout and only came into effect when the context of the ceremony was present for the spiritual elder. As we can see, each category of elder includes the role of storytelling and cultural transmission but they use different means—that is, to use Todorov's concepts (1981), different genres and voice registers—to achieve it. This idea of language is explored more thoroughly in the following section.

With regards to the elder functions and roles in society, the spiritual elder uniquely possesses a sacred pipe, with which he is permitted to perform spiritual ceremony and facilitate the spiritual vigor of community life. Moreover, the spiritual elder is distinctly given the ability to run spiritual ceremonies and carry the teachings required to ensure their success. *Figure one* visually presents central understandings of the roles and functions of Saskatchewan Cree elders, and integrates these current findings with that of Stiegelbauer (1996), adding the necessary distinctions.

Voice, Terminology and Interpretation

Varying relationships to the spiritual world amid elders led to concurrent variations in their respective speech register or style of communication. As noted briefly in the previous section, storytelling was different across elder categories, in both context and type, which opened the way for variations in speech. When describing life experiences and sig-

Figure One
Roles and Functions of Saskatchewan Cree Elders

General Category	Examples
Counseling (individual)	Community elders programs
Teaching (groups and individuals)	Meetings with school board / Teachers
Ceremonies*	Community sweats, smudging, other lodges
Healing (storytelling)	Counseling, storytelling “culture is therapy”
Advising	School committees, community support
Mediating*	Serving as the connection between the ordinary and spiritual worlds
Conflict Resolution	“Processing” disputes through group discussion
Storytelling	Helping others through presentation of traditional cultural values
Group Problem Solving	Family talking circles
Role Modeling	Personal involvement in community activities
Physical Presence	Participation in community events, visiting other organizations

* Running the ceremonies and the mediating function between this earthly world and the spiritual are again the central variations between the Cree elders in terms of their function. As a result, their elocution contexts, voice register and plot forms (Todorov, 1981; Good, 1994) displayed variations in their method of storytelling, wherein the spiritual elder often uses rich metaphors with regards to the supernatural more frequently than the honorable elder.

nificant events, Piyesiw would often switch back and forth between two differing styles of discourse, creating an interlocking weave of varying voices or registers (Todorov, 1981). On the one hand, Piyesiw's expression was that of normal or common style, or what Todorov signifies as its everyday usage. This common style was present within his narrative when describing life events not specifically related to his spiritual experiences, such as family relations, historical facts and occupation. On the other hand, Piyesiw would often become so immersed in the emotion of his descriptions pertaining to spiritual experiences that his language would consequently become more poetic and overflow with evocative metaphors. Here a correspondence was established between his experiences and those conveyed within the myth or metaphor in order to uncover, through a polyvalent connection (Todorov, 1981), the very essence of his experience of a particular situation. Such correspondences between Piyesiw's experience and the metaphorical story were most visible when discussing notions of the future, whereby Piyesiw used the traditional Cree story of the water panther to describe anticipated future relationships between the Cree people and the modern world. Below is an excerpt from that story:

There was this terrible spirit going around the world causing suffering, and that it was in the form of a cat, eh.... And this terrible cat was the symbol of England, eh, the British Empire and the British lion. But in the woodlands mythology, there is a terrible spirit, called *misi pishew*, which means the water panther or literally the big lynx. It's a horned cat with a copper tail, a horrible thing. And where it goes these big snakes come, snakes are not looked upon nicely.... And bits of its tail break off; its copper and Indians don't pick up copper. You know these modules of copper you find, don't touch it 'cause its *misi pishew*... anyway, this mythological beast. And they see the flag of England, and the coat of arms with the cat coming from that culture.... They see *misi pishew*... It's dangerous, really really dangerous.... And so this interpretation is that this cat is going around the world causing suffering.... Now spiritually you can't kill something, but you can change it... transform it.... So this bear bone grizzly, protector of the plains people, a spiritual creation... a protector of the plains Cree... and this medicine man is taken to that land, England.... And there's English people [who] help the Indians, 'cause they realize there is an evil in the world too.... And the [Indians] prepare this bundle and they sing these songs to attract the *misi pishew*... the English lion. And the

lion comes is angry and destructive...and up out of the bundle rises the grizzly bear enraged, eh.... And this battle takes place and the grizzly totally dominates the misi peshew and tears it to pieces, eh.... And all that's left is its little tip of its tail...and that's all that's left of misi peshew.... And from that time forward...the British Empire went into decline. See Britannia ruled the waves, misi pishew ruled the water.... People drown in the lake misi pishew took um...there is all kind of stuff in the stories.... Anyway, the colonies start to declare independence.... Britain's empire starts to break up... and it loses its power, just as the misi pishew lost its power. And they say when a Cree woman has a bad dream it's the misi pishew tail, the English lion trying to scare her.... Neat, hey?... Such interesting stories.... But of course the message is that the spirit of the land, the spirit of the Indian people will endure, will overcome the British, the colonizer... the water panther....

The discursive style or voice register of the spiritual elder was also more impersonal or indirect (Todorov, 1981). Piyesiw would frequently relate his own personal experiences through a traditional story or myth, thereby relating his perspectives, feelings or positions towards certain situations via his relationship to certain characters or happenings in the stories. This aspect of the indirect voice register was significantly more pronounced in Piyesiw's narrative and virtually non-existent within the discourse of the honorable elders, which was characteristically more direct.

The concept of voice registers as articulated by Todorov also underlines that an individual may, at times, fluctuate between differing voices depending on the intent or meaning of the communication. According to both Cassirer (1946) and Good (1994), those fluctuations usually reflect our transitions between the multiple lifeworlds (common sense reality, poetry, science, religion, etc.) we are all living in, each one of them being constituted by very specific symbolic forms, voice registers and plot structures. In Piyesiw's case, these two noticeable variations in speech register could be seen to represent two lifeworlds: that of common sense reality and that of the supernatural world. In other words, Piyesiw's voice register and plot form vary according to the aspect of his existence that he is talking about. Furthermore, Cassirer specifies that myth, as a symbolic form, stands apart from both the supernatural world and the truth of abstract determinations and relations found in the logical world, and that as such it is quite frequently used by people as a bridge between these two worlds. In that sense, the mythological as-

pect of Piyesiw's voice register (notably its indirectness and abundance of metaphors) can be seen as a mirror image of his actual function as a mediator between the ordinary and the spiritual worlds. This interpretation appears to be consistent with Piyesiw's experience, as for him the two worlds of the spiritual and ordinary are in a constant reciprocal relationship, as mediated through the mythic stories.

Qualities and Characteristics of an Elder

In terms of the qualities and characteristics of being an Aboriginal elder, a subtle distinction between the honorable and spiritual elder appeared. As outlined in previous sections, the honorable and spiritual elder walked two parallel paths to elderhood. When exploring the participants' qualities and characteristics, there appeared to be commonalities between the categories, including: knowledge of traditional stories and cultural ways, as well as acting in accordance to that knowledge; a recognized ability to remember the traditional stories and uphold the moral standard of the elder; kindness and compassion to all peoples, not just the Aboriginal populations; commitment to service and self-sacrifice; wisdom and experience of life; and lastly, effective communication in both listening and speaking.

As mentioned before, the honorable elder is noted to possess a depth of knowledge that comes with living a full life. Likewise, the spiritual elder supports this idea. However, the depth of knowledge is described in the second case to not only come from years of living a good moral life, but as we have seen it can originate from contact with the spiritual world. Let's examine in more details, first, the knowledge associated with living a good, full life.

In describing this characteristic of this form of knowledge, Wapos states, "An elder is an older person, but he knows everything that was happening years ago, right from a young person to an older person." Additionally, Sisip says, "The elder does the old teachings in an Indian way, and has lots of things from the years to offer, you know." Finally, Ohow maintains these ideas in the following:

An elder is one who...has a lot of experience. What are the qualifications of an elder, what they should be? [Pause] I say you know, good storyteller, a good learned man, [and] well respected by the community. Does not have to be a medicine man or anything like that. Most of all he is a storyteller [pause] and accepted by the community.

From the above excerpts, it is evident that elders in the study define the elder as someone with knowledge gained from years of living a good-full life. The "good-full life" is closely associated with what Sisip calls,

the “Indian way”; which is like a moral way of “being-in-the-world” — understood as adherence to traditional forms of social relationship and centered on compassion, balance and reciprocity. Here we can see that central to the participants’ understandings of the elder are the ideas of embodying moral values and being a positive role model for others. From this perspective, Cree elders are the personifications, or exemplars of traditional moral ways and act as symbolic connections to the past (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Hence a fundamental quality of the elder, as revealed by the participants’ narratives, is not only to know these traditions but also to practice them, thereby demonstrating to others how to live the “Indian way,” that is, a moral life in accordance with traditional cultural values.

Another interesting theme—related to the mastering of the “Indian way”—was the importance of possessing a special aptitude for remembering the ancient stories which convey traditional knowledge. Both Piyesiw and Ohow’s narratives reveal that they feel their families have a specified intergenerational aptitude for walking the elder’s path. This again reflects a bridge linking the honorable and spiritual elders. Ohow explains that, “If you had anything to do with the past—if your ancestors were storytellers or medicine men—your background helps make you to become one of the storytellers or an elder.” Piyesiw supports this, stating:

My grandfather was a great storyteller. And when my father and my uncles and aunties were little kids...people would come over with their bedding and stay for a few days. And they would share stories and the history and the legends, and my dad just soaked it up like a sponge, eh.... So it’s intergenerational.

Both of them describe this generational transmission of knowledge as crucial in one’s development of or progression towards becoming an elder. Ohow continues, “When I was a child, I got told a lot of stories. My father was a storyteller; his father was also storyteller, and his grandfather. I guess there was four generations of [storytellers] in the same house.” Piyesiw further supports this idea:

Some people have an aptitude for stories. I was like that. I can remember stuff and pick it up, eh. [Pause] There was a Cree named Horsechild, the son of Big Bear. Horsechild lived on Poundmaker reserve. [Pause] There was a lady who was raised by him — she is an elder now... — and I asked her about Horsechild. And she said, “I never listened.” [Pause] I thought, oh god how sad. The things she could have passed on, but you see she wasn’t one with the aptitude you know.

Piyesiw states that only some individuals have the aptitude required to be a storyteller, marking in this way a distinction between those simply of old age and those who are known as elders. However, it is previously evident that both Ohow—an honorable elder—and Piyesiw—a spiritual elder—recognize the important ability to soak up the stories told by the previous generations, in order to mark one's own ability to be a storyteller. This intergenerational characteristic of being able to remember the stories of the past is curiously witnessed across both developmental paths to becoming an elder. Therefore, although the ways in which the stories are communicated may be different, and the language may be distinct, the ability to remember the stories links the categories together.

By contrast with those similarities between elder categories, Piyesiw adds the idea of a personal burden while walking the spiritual elder path. For him this burden originated in the responsibilities that are coupled with possession of the pipe, the meeting of the spirits and the maintenance of running the spiritual ceremonies. Piyesiw says the ability to run ceremonies was given to him by the spirits in order to serve, heal and help disintegrated others become whole again. With that ability comes a great deal of responsibility, as Piyesiw relates:

We're a family that has kept our history. And again in our family line we have like a spiritual gift. I don't know if the word gift is the right word. [But] it goes generation to generation. Sometimes it skips a generation or shows up later on. The reason I don't want to use the word gift, is because there is a burden that comes from carrying that, eh. There's a lot of responsibility. Some people say it's about power, but it's not. It's about a burden. Carrying a burden that can be very hard to carry, eh. But me, I picked it up and worked with it eh, carried it. And I didn't do that because I wanted to or something I sought after. It was something that was dormant in me that awoke in me through some pretty powerful experiences. That's really common among people who have this burden to carry, this responsibility.

It is interesting to note that the idea of carrying a burden so that others can be healed is a prominent experience and symbol found in many religious or spiritual systems around the world (Comstock & Mayhall, 2004). From a Plains Cree perspective, this idea of sacrifice is commonly represented through the Sun Dance ceremony (Hatala, 2008), whereas in other religious systems, this dimension is evident in the lives of the religious founders themselves (i.e., Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Bahá'u'lláh). Much of Piyesiw's narrative was colored with experiences

of carrying a burden or suffering for the benefit of others. Piyesiw also describes his reward for carrying the burden as love, and seeing the people he works with excel. He says, “But if you love people and you love life then it’s very rewarding. My reward is when these young kids do well you know. See them laughing or smiling.” This reward, for Piyesiw, keeps him moving through the difficulties experienced along the path and helps to lighten the load of his burden.

Many qualities are comparable between the spiritual and honorable elders. Both are understood to be of good standing in the community and respected by the majority. Moreover, the ideas of having aptitude and the ability to remember the traditional stories serve as a bridge between categories. However, the ideas of carrying a burden were of central importance and unique to the spiritual elder. *Figure two* again integrates Stiegelbauer’s (1996) findings with the current study in order to visually present some important qualities of the Aboriginal elder.

Social Position

Another point of similarity between the two categories of the elder is their stance towards a third category of elders, termed commonly by the participants as *false elders*. Evident in all narratives are juxtapositions between their current role as an elder and those who abuse their elder status for dishonorable purposes. Most commonly, dishonorable purposes came in the form of certain individuals asking for money to perform prayers or other ceremonies. According to all participants’ perspectives, these actions exemplify abusing the privilege of being an elderly person in the Aboriginal community. Piyesiw speaks to this idea in the following:

I am not into elder worship; I don’t like that at all. ’Cause I think its putting people in a position that nobody should be put in. [Pause] Like those old guys from the past; they loved one another. They weren’t pushing their way to the front to get attention, or demanding 150 [dollars] before they do or say anything, you know. These are really tough times we live in right now. But the real people are still there, but they hold back, eh. They don’t push their way forward to get in the limelight.

Piyesiw communicates his perspective on false elders by suggesting the “real people”—the honorable and spiritual elders—are still present in the community. Wapos further supports these ideas stating, “There is a lot of elders just going for money, and they turn around and abuse it. They use it and abuse it. So that’s what became abused. Those people they lost who they are.”

Figure Two
Qualities and Characteristics of Saskatchewan Cree Elders

Qualities and Characteristics	Honorable Elder	Spiritual Elder	Both
Ability to balance tradition with modernity			X
Ability to communicate effectively			X
Ability to communicate with younger generations			X
Ability to remember traditional stories and teachings			X
Ability to travel and make time commitments			X
Ability to run ceremonies		X	
Carrying a burden of healing		X	
Commitment to helping versus looking for pay			X
Commitment to improve community quality of life			X
Commitment to traditional lifestyle			X
Good listener			X
Good teacher			X
Good understanding of self and others			X
In touch with today's reality			X
Intimate relationship with spiritual world			X
Interpretation of experience through traditional means			X
Kindness and compassion for all cultures			X
Knowledge of ceremonies and their effectiveness			X
Knowledge of spiritual healing methods		X	
Knowledge/practice of traditional ways			X
Non-judgmental, non-critical			X
Patience			X
Perspective role of service versus power			X
Possession of a sacred pipe		X	
Proven ability to work with people			X
Recognized by the community			X
Self-sacrificing			X
Spiritual mentorship		X	
Use of myth in language and stories		X	
Wisdom and experience of life			X

These chosen excerpts are but a few samples from many similar descriptions that help to illustrate a moral category existing in opposition to the “good life” or “Indian way.” Within the narratives, the participants often situate themselves in opposition to this “dishonorable” way of being, thus reinforcing their identity as ones who live the good “Indian way.” Interestingly, Piyesiw makes an explicit connection between the presence of false elders and the tough times Canadian Aboriginal people currently face. Piyesiw suggests elder corruption and the “strange days” or “tough times” are a recent construction due to the advent of modernity. Ohow and Sisip support these ideas and go on to describe how abuses of power were not common within the Cree community before European influence. Piyesiw further supports Ohow and Sisip’s perspective, and describes in the following how these “strange days” are directly caused by abuses of power:

I’ve seen cases where this lady was getting spirit offerings to pray over and she wanted sixty bucks for every offering! [Pause] That was unheard of! That’s demanding money, strange hey. These are strange days. An elder never thought himself better than anybody else. They were just old guys. They were kind and loved one another. They were just regular people, which I think we really are.

These ideas help illustrate the participants’ current experiences of living in the modern world, as much of their struggles are caused by people from traditional communities and the larger Canadian society alike.

The development of the “Indian Way” was seen to be a strong moral category, which informed the participants’ moral identity. The participants described this moral category as being affected by the new power relationships established between the Aboriginal people and the modern Canadian world, such as the Canadian government and the Indian Act. As illustrated, the false elders—who used their status for personal gain and financial benefit—were seen as recent developments that all participants expressed disdain towards. The figure of the “false elder” was thus often used as an opposing moral category through which the participants communicated their own social and moral positions by negative association. This idea can be understood in relation to what Todorov (1981) calls a discourse’s *figurality*: as some of the elders described their opposing position towards the false elders, they set up a type of *antithesis*. This idea also appeared in the form of *gradation*, wherein the participants outlined a continuum along which they progressed towards the “Indian way”: elder’s with a strong moral identity were higher in gradation as compared to the elders described as being corrupt or taking advantage of the old ways. Due to the inevitable influence of modern

ways on traditional Cree culture, the participants consider that there are very few people living today with a strong moral identity. Therefore, in many ways the articulation of the “Indian way” is expressed as a response and objection to the modern social and moral order.

Another subtle difference between the honorable elder and the spiritual elder lies in the participants’ identifications with the term elder itself. Piyesiw demonstrates conflict with the term elder, as he calls it an “awkward term” several times in his narrative. Piyesiw uniquely struggles with a word to use when describing his position within society, therefore utilizing the terms ceremonialist, teacher, medicine man and lodge keeper synonymously throughout his narrative. He explains:

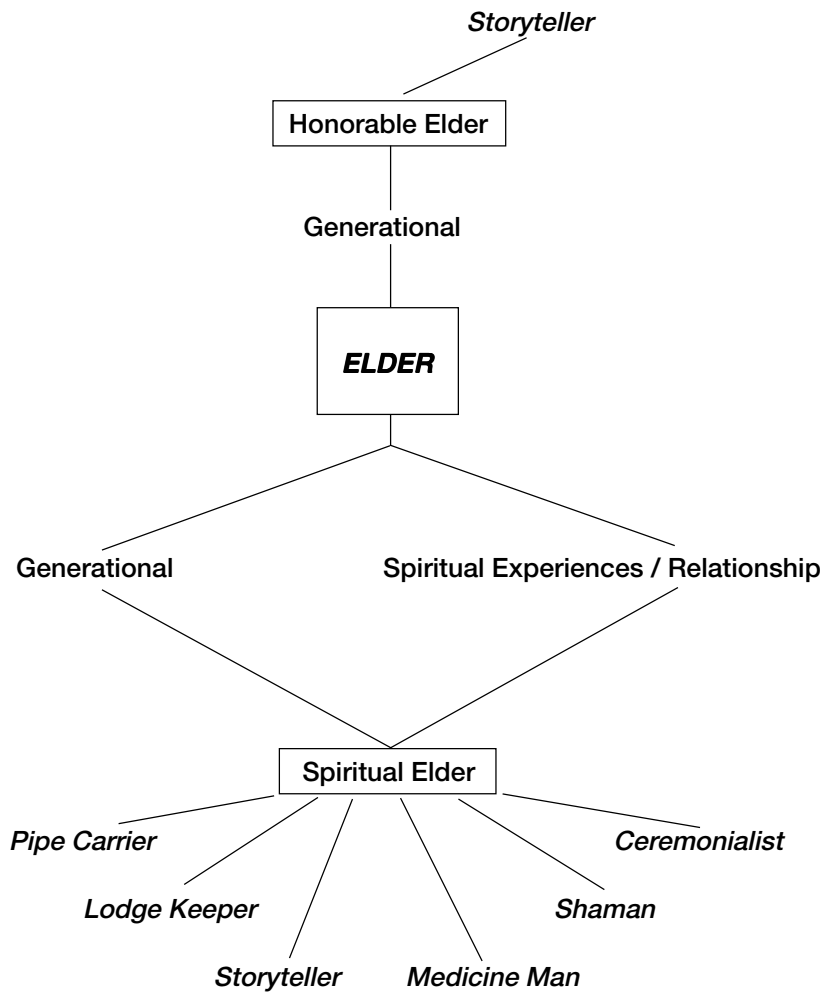
That word elder, I have a real problem with it. [Pause] I don’t know what the appropriate word would be. [Pause] It’s almost like a teacher, eh. I am a lodge keeper; I feel comfortable with that.

Additionally, Piyesiw uniquely relates his difficulty with the elder being entirely contained within the understanding of someone living the good life or walking the honorable elder path, suggesting the necessity of a separate category of the spiritual elder of which he is a part. Whereas the other participants—Sisip, Ohow and Wapos—clearly identify themselves as being elders several times within their narratives, and don’t stray far from this understanding of the elder as an honorable person living the good life.

Moreover, all participants in this study agree that the usage of the term elder is recognizably recent within Aboriginal communities. Describing the elders of the past, Ohow said, “When I was a child there was no elders; there were only storytellers.” From this understanding and from Ohow’s perspective, the term storyteller represents a construct similar to the more recent common perspective of the elder. It also became evident from the participants’ perspectives that the current concept of elder is a modern construction, only appearing in Cree language after increasing European influence, particularly within the last hundred years. In support, Wapos states, “An elder that just came out not too long ago. The name of elder; it’s only the people in the church, Mormons. They call their elderly people elders.” Similarly, Ohow describes, “The elder comes from the Bible...they were called, ‘the elders or presbyters.’ I think that’s where the word comes from.”

The literature suggests that within our modern context the term elder commonly refers to an elderly Aboriginal person whose role lies mainly in cultural transmission, preservation and moral education. Although the role of the elder seems to be fairly consistent over time, the label used to designate this social category for the plains Cree has evolved in response

Figure Three
Ways of Becoming and of Being a Cree Elder in Saskatchewan



Note: Extensions from categories represent words and terminology used both in the literature and by the elders to describe their role. They are not a description of their activities or functions (refer to Figures one and two).

to European Christian influence. The storyteller of the past has become the elder of the present. In short, the term elder is described as a modern construction that is perhaps still continuing to evolve. However, within this term we can identify two visible categories: that of the honorable elder and that of the spiritual elder. To assist the reader further, *Figure three* provides a visual representation of the differing ways of becoming and of being a Cree elder in Saskatchewan, as revealed from the participants' narratives.

Conclusions: Elderhoods, Forms of Expression and the Needs of Plains Cree Communities

This paper has made an attempt to define and understand the Aboriginal elder from both the perspective of the current literature and the perspective of the Cree elders themselves. As we have seen, Cree elders have many contributions to society. They are known not only for their knowledge of traditional ways and teachings, but also for their ability to embody that knowledge in order to effect positive change within their communities. To be an elder, therefore, involves both traditional knowledge as well as the practice of good deeds. However, within the current literature, there is little description between the two distinct categories of elders that this paper documents, that is, the honorable and spiritual. This absence is quite surprising when we consider that both categories of participants in this study did acknowledge this distinction. Overall, this paper provides a brief review of the main characteristics and functions of these two elder categories, thereby providing some future areas of inquiry.

In terms of shared aspects, both the honorable and spiritual elder acknowledge cultural transmission through storytelling and a way of acting as a role model in society. Moreover, both suggest that cultural revitalization can act as therapy for discontented or "lost" individuals, helping construct a more meaningful life. However, a distinction becomes visible when looking at both the context and type of their respective storytelling methods. For the honorable elders, storytelling occurred most often in institutional settings and in their home; whereas, the spiritual elder most frequently conveyed stories in ceremonial contexts. Furthermore, this difference of genre gave way to a variation in speech registers, in that the spiritual elder often used metaphorical language to describe rich experiences, which was indicative of his close relationship to the spiritual world and the realm of the unspeakable, at least through the means of ordinary language.

As illustrated, elders are not born as perfect teachers, nor does a special council appoint them. They emerge from the roots of society as

the sum total of their life experiences permit (Stiegelbauer, 1996). As witnessed, this emergence may vary across categories. For the honorable elder, this is a gradual process involving many years, in contrast to the spiritual elder who gains access to their status more rapidly. However, for both types of elders an intergenerational characteristic of being able to remember the stories of the past is fundamental to attaining this knowledge.

Elders are also experts on life and their expertise involves some aspect of traditional Aboriginal knowledge systems and ways of “being-in-the-world” (Stiegelbauer, 1996). In other words, being an elder involves the constant interpretation of experience from a traditional perspective. This perspective may vary between what we have called the honorable elder and the spiritual elder. The former being steeped in traditional stories of the good life and important relational values; whereas the latter, involves a heightened spiritual awareness necessitated upon deep spiritual experiences. Both encompass recognition from the community and both are invested with the power required to carry communities to a place of healing (Katz & Seth, 1986). Again, for the honorable elder this power comes from the community directly; whereas the spiritual elder receives power from an intimate personal connection to the creator or spiritual world.

As we have seen, the distinction between categories seems clear. However, the exploratory nature of this research does limit our ability to make strong conclusions or generalizations from the data. Perhaps this study could serve as a stepping stone, from which future investigations could better define the difference between these two emerging figures of being an Aboriginal elder, their respective categorical implications and their relationship to other Aboriginal moral or spiritual roles such as shaman, medicine man and traditional healer.

The conclusions from this research are based on the reconstructed narratives of four participants; therefore the findings are only indicative of those specific participants. This being said, it was witnessed and demonstrated that the overall vision of transformation for the participants differed across elder categories. Wapos, Ohow and Sisip reflected a similar plot structure, in that the process of becoming an honorable elder reflected a temporal procession with interruptions and transitions occurring along a common trajectory. Since it is acknowledged that this research is limited, we can only suggest the hypothesis that this pattern of transformation is typical to the stories of honorable elder. Future studies could investigate this hypothesis further.

For Piyesiw, however, sharp changes in life trajectory were evident at specific points along his life continuum. We suggest that this plot

structure could be prototypical of the spiritual elder's narrative. This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that Piyesiw himself identifies his experience as being similar to other spiritual leaders, such as shaman, medicine men, ceremonialists or lodge keepers. Again, future studies could investigate the validity of this hypothesis more rigorously.

This being said, we must ask a series of unresolved questions: What are the implications of these differing categories within the broader aspects of Canadian society? How can these variations be potentially helpful in assisting Aboriginal communities? We suggest the importance of this dual system of elderhood lies precisely in the diversity of leadership resources it provides to Plains Cree communities. First of all, diversity among elders offers choices to the individuals seeking their specific services. Offering different perspectives and different interpretations of experience can help reach a wider range of individuals with a diverse spectrum of backgrounds (Good, 1994). Not everyone is drawn to the rich descriptions of the spiritual world offered by spiritual elders, just as not everyone is satisfied with the stories from honorable elders. Secondly, to have access to two categories of elder can also be useful because it can satisfy individuals seeking help in different contexts. That is, in one situation the help of the honorable elder may be appropriate, whereas in another situation the spiritual elder may be appropriate. Different context can elicit different needs requiring different guidance, and the two figures of the elder can together reach a wider range of situations. Furthermore, among the research areas to be pursued as a result of this exploratory paper, the instances of elder use among Cree community members could be explored further. In other words, how does the perspective of the Cree elder held by the community members affect their decision to seek help from either the honorable or spiritual elder and what factors, both context or otherwise, might explicate this decision? Seeking to understand the situations and circumstances in which individuals seek help from their local elders could provide a better understanding of the roles and functions of the Cree elder, help clarify the distinctions between elder categories and assist in the overall understandings of Cree communities.

The Canadian horizon of the twenty-first century is colored with change. Consequently, the needs of Aboriginal people have shifted dramatically over time. The noticeable challenge of all Aboriginal elders—both Cree and otherwise—is arguably to continually adapt traditional concepts to fit new and different circumstances. The variations existing among categories of elders could perhaps represent an extremely beneficial adaptive advantage when making strides into the unknown future.

References

- Baldrige, D.
2001 "Indian Elders: Family Traditions in Crisis." *American Behavioral Scientist* Vol. 44 No. 9: 1515-1527.
- Cassirer, E.
1946 *Language and Myth*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Comstock, G. L. & W. C. Mayhall
2004 *Religious Autobiographies: John Fire Lane Deer*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Crotty, M.
1998 *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Geertz, G.
1973 "Religion as a Cultural System." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York Basic Books, pp. 87-125.
- Good, B.
1994 *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Harris, L. S.
2006 *The New Testament: a Students Introduction* (5th ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hatala, A. R.
2008 "Spirituality and Aboriginal Mental Health: An Examination of the Relationship Between Aboriginal Spirituality and Mental Health." *Advances in Mind Body Medicine* Vol. 23, 6-12.
- Irwin, L.
2000 *Native American Spirituality*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.
- Katz, R. & N. Seth
1986 "Synergy and Healing: A Perspective on Western Health Care." *Prevention in Human Services* Vol. 5(1), 109-136.
- Kleinman, A.
1999 "Experience and Its Moral Modes: Culture, Human Conditions, and Disorder." In G. B. Peterson (Ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

- Kirmayer, L., G. Brass & C. Tait
2000 "The Mental Health of Aboriginal Peoples: Transformations of Identity and Community." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* Vol. 45, 607-616.
- McLeod, N.
2007 *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing.
- Mehl-Madrona, L.
2007 *Narrative Medicine*. Rochester, VM: Bear & Company Press.
- National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)
2003 *Traditional Medicine in Contemporary Contexts: Protecting and Respecting Indigenous Knowledge and Medicine*. Ottawa: Author.
- Paper, J.
2007 *Native North American Religious Traditions*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Rothe, J.
2000 *Undertaking Qualitative Research: Concepts and Cases in Injury, Health and Social Life*. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press.
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)
1993 *The Path to Healing*. Canada Communications Group – Publishing: Ottawa, ON.
1996 Canada Communications Group – Publishing: Ottawa, ON. Vol.3:527.
- Shore, F. J. & L. J. Barkwell
1997 *Past Reflects the Present: The Métis Elders Conference*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Métis Federation.
- Stiegelbauer, S. M.
1996 "What is an Elder? What Do Elders Do?: First Nation Elders As Teachers In Culture-Based Urban Organizations." *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, XVI, 1:37-66.
- Taylor, C.
2002 "Modern Social Imaginaries." *Public Culture*. 14(1): 91-124.
- Titley, E. B.
1986 *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Todorov, T.

1981 *Introduction to Poetics* Trans. R. Howard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Waldram, J.

1993 "Aboriginal Spirituality: Symbolic Healing in Canadian Prisons." *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 17: 345-362.

1997 *The Way of the Pipe: Aboriginal Spirituality and Symbolic Healing in Canadian Prisons*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

Wilson, S.

1996 *Gwitch'in Native Elders: Not Just Knowledge, But a Way of Looking at the World*. Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Native Knowledge Network.

