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Cast All Imaginations: *Umbi* Speak

Thesis submitted by

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in June 2009

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies

James Cook University

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Statement of Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help

The Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences at James Cook University provided a Postgraduate Research Scholarship over the course of my candidature.

A professional administration service, Al Rinn Admin Specialists, was engaged to prepare the thesis for submission. Al Rinn's brief was to format and proof-read the document.

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Abstract

Cast All Imaginations speaks from the heart of human experience as a contemporary narrative of Aboriginal women's agency in Australia. It offers a unique opportunity to discover the incredible wellsprings of strength, resilience and hope found among Aboriginal women by examining their potential to live lives of their own choosing and that reflect their own valued ways of knowing, doing and being in the world – their ways of transcending survival, flourishing in life.

While these extraordinary women inhabit lifeworlds unprecedented in a colonised space, their potential and productivity is not always revealed in the demographic portraits of all Aboriginal Australians. Pockets of survival marred by social exclusion and entrenched disadvantage continue to stain the landscape of contemporary Australian society. For Aboriginal people, mere survival, poor quality of life has long been associated with social exclusion - colonisation laid the foundations for it; misguided policy and programs perpetuated and exacerbated those experiences; continual pledges of change for Aboriginal people made by successive governments have generally not come to fruition; and the personal incapacity of many Aboriginal people themselves now consolidates and sustains those experiences. Thus, this research narrative was prompted by the need for Aboriginal people to take up the challenge of change and improve the circumstances of their own lives within the context of oppressive and restrictive policies and social practices. It sought to provide a response to social exclusion by identifying practical applications based on empirically founded knowledge, which aligns with, and holds meaning for, Aboriginal people and their aspirations of living healthy and productive lives and becoming self-determining subjects in a contemporary world.

Methodologically, most research concerning Aboriginal issues overwhelmingly emanates from a deficit model of research which identifies the 'Aboriginal problem' and imposes a White cultural framework of meaning and interpretation to the findings. As a result, this type of research not only views the issue in problematic terms, but also fails to adequately capture the perspective of the Aboriginal research population. In contrast, this study was a strengths-based model of research which let *Umbi* speak, listened carefully and analysed and interpreted the findings through the eyes of an Aboriginal woman. The imperative in this research was to understand how Aboriginal women themselves have developed narratives of agency and navigate the process of change to achieve quality of life so as to know what is required to teach others who have been less fortunate, to become self-directing and ultimately garner the skills to change the circumstances of their existence. Therefore, the study aimed to explore and document the specific strategies orchestrated by a particular cohort of Aboriginal women who have adequately transitioned the process of change within the bounds of patriarchy and colonisation. The purpose of the study was to develop a substantive theory of these phenomena as they evolved in naturalist settings, in the everyday. Critically examined was the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women at the nexus of social discourse, power and personal experience in the contemporary context. The study, grounded in a critical emancipatory imperative, makes use of the tools of feminism and poststructuralism to interrogate the performance

of Aboriginal women as agents in a contemporary narrative of development with a view to identifying the underlying social psychological process.

A constructivist grounded theory was used in the analysis of life-history narrative interviews conducted with twenty Aboriginal women. 'Being Aboriginal' infused the lifeworld of the women, who participated in this study, with meaning and strengthened their life purpose. *Performing Aboriginality* was conceptually identified as the core category and encompassed the women's concern for carving out a fulfilling life and carrying out their perceived responsibilities as Aboriginal women. The analysis also led to the identification of a specific ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment, conceptually identified as *Becoming Empowered.* The subsequent process, represented by a bricolagé of four signifying facets, articulated how the participant women developed multiple models of personal and socio-cultural adaptation and growth, which was negotiated through retrospective mechanisms and in interactions between self and others, self and history and self and their environment and which, in turn, led to the exercise of personal agency. The substantive theory of *Becoming Empowered*, while confirming much of the extant literature on empowerment, also offers new insights and makes a unique contribution to theories of empowerment by identifying new dimensions – the process was underpinned by an ethics of care and morality and a spiritual sensibility. The study can be acknowledged as an original endeavour in the area of Aboriginal women's empowerment. Significantly, the findings have practical implications for improving quality of life by informing the development of social and health policies and interventions that resonate with Aboriginal women's ways of knowing, doing and being.

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Definition of Terms

Umbi — Translated as Aboriginal women in the language of the Gungarri people of South Western Queensland.

Fit, relevance, modifiability and work — Grounded theory research may be evaluated against four integrated and interdependent criteria – *fit, relevance, modifiability* and whether it *works* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992). *Fit* is achieved when the data under analysis is well-reflected in the developed categories and in "the realities under study in the eyes of the subjects, practitioners and researchers in the area" (Glaser, 1992, p15), thus avoiding the imposition of preconceived concepts onto the study.

Findings are deemed *relevant* when the researcher allows the emergence of categories that constitutes *fit*. As such, the theory proffers explanations of the core concern or basic processes in the substantive area under study; that is the theory has *relevance.*

As variations are presented to the researcher in new data, the emergent theory is modified to engage those emerging understandings. The flexibility of the theory to accommodate changing conditions by the integration of new concepts is what is referred to as *modifiability* (Glaser, 1992).

When fit, relevance and modifiability are present the grounded theory is said to *work*. Work means that the categories "are meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behaviour under study" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.3) in terms of "variations in behavior in the area with respect to the processing of the main concerns of the subjects" (Glaser, 1992, p. 15).

Genocide — In this thesis, the meaning of genocide is consonant with its legal definition as advanced by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948. At the hands of colonisers, Aboriginal people were massacred, raped, tortured, deliberately exposed to disease and poisoned; legislation was passed to impose stringent conditions on the lives of Aboriginal people (forced assimilation) and reproduction of culture despite the exclusion of Aboriginal people as Australian citizens until 1967; measures such as sterilisation were imposed to prevent births within the group; and children were forcibly removed from their families and communities (Tatz, 1999).

Trauma — The nature of trauma experienced by many Aboriginal people today is transgenerational and derived from the genocidal practices of the colonisers and ongoing depravation in terms of housing, education, social and economic opportunity and health care (Tatz, 1999).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are advised that there is a possibility this document contains the transcribed voices of people who have passed away.

Prelude

Coming to the Story

Honouring Protocol

Like others who have come before me, I adhere to Aboriginal Australian protocol by firstly introducing myself "to provide information about one's cultural location, so that connections can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established" (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. xv). I claim a space as the researcher, participant and author of this work with the following poem, *Lacewood.* Sometimes known as silky oak in Australia, lacewood is the raw material used in the construction of my grandmother's dining table; a table that holds generations of memories for both me and my extended family. Today, I have guardianship of the table. The poem, *Lacewood*, reveals abstractions of my personal narrative – who I am and how I became the person I am today. To complete this narrative, my story also appears alongside that of the many women with whom I engaged to produce this thesis.

Oak-like rays and silky lustre
Caressing the past, present, the future
Once the epitome of elegance and grace
Now a raw beauty
A timeless creation
Resonant of tradition
Mirror for today, tomorrow
Memories of past ingrained in her being
Secrets forbidden, stories and dreams

Happiness overflowing heartbreak and sorrow

Soul of nature

Embracing my heart

Capturing my essence

Carving a space

Weaving the fabric of my life

Into self

Sensitive, spiritual, strong-willed

Multiple lives, one soul

Embodying spirit

Sensing, knowing, understanding

The hue of my skin

Contour of my nose

The grey in my eyes

Without the veil of colour

White, but Black as my Father's heart

She knows me that old girl

She grew me up

She knows my Ancestors

She knows how I came to be

My Grandmother's granddaughter, my Father's daughter

She knows my Mother, sisters and brother

Aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins and friends

She knows my children, and my grandchildren

Ritual and tradition

Etched in her scars

Descendent of Country

She knows my Grandmother's way

Narrating, singing, painting, teaching

Reconstructing the past

Sculpting grand narratives

Shaping the future

Instilling knowledge and belonging

Power of being

Impassioned by life

She knows where I come from

Where I belong, where I'm going

Claiming, becoming, being

My story, my life (Bainbridge, 2007, p. 55)

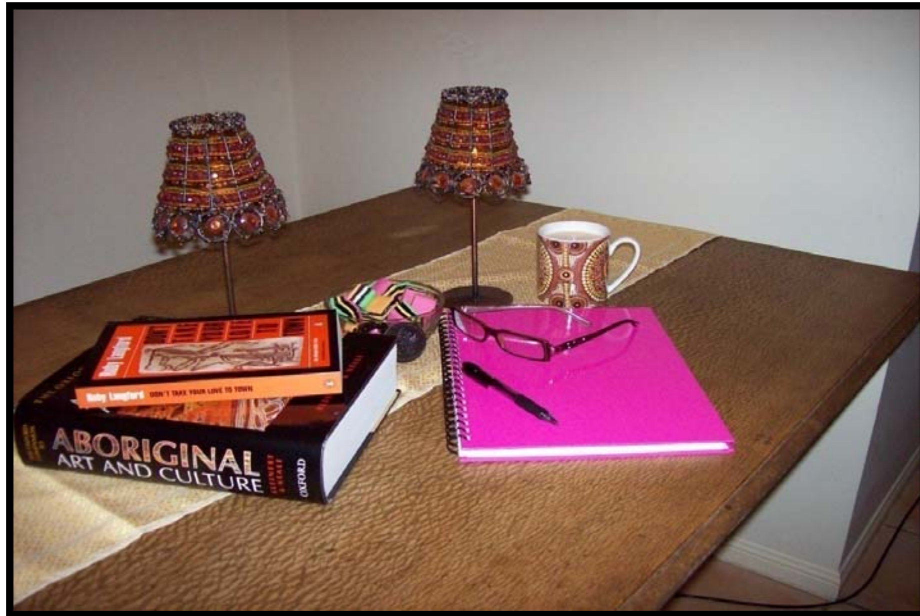

Figure P.1 Lacewood

I have ancestral ties to the *Gungarri*, *Kunja* and *Wadjalang* nations from the Country around Charleville in south-western Queensland, north to Stonehenge near Longreach. The term 'Country' (with a capital 'C' in this thesis) means the area of land, river and/or sea that is the traditional land of each Aboriginal language group or community by virtue of affiliation; for example, birthplace or matrilineal/patrilineal descent. It is the place created by the Ancestral Beings to which each language group belongs, as custodians, and with which members of each group share deep spiritual affinity. Thus, Country has connotations that transcend simplistic notions of the

physical landscape. My father is an Aboriginal man, born in Longreach, and my mother is of Scottish ancestry. For most of my life, I have resided in an urban context, predominantly raised in and around Brisbane with my two older sisters, younger brother and extended family members. I was raised in a modest housing commission home; while materially deficient, our home had, at its core, the love and wellbeing of family. The richness of family relations provided support, shelter from the world, a sense of belonging and values, which enabled the transfer of basic skills required for rudimentary survival. In stating that, what we were provided with were solid foundations, both meaningful and enduring, and for that I am eternally grateful. Without those foundations, I would not be who or where I am today.

The emphasis in my own narrative to that point in my life was on survival, for beyond that we were inadequately prepared, lived in relative fear of authority and social exclusion and lacked the capacity to engage efficiently in the lifestyle of the broader community. Having your life regulated by the outside world, in ways that are unfamiliar and from which you are largely excluded, is not conducive to the desire to participate within its boundaries. However, increasingly significant in a globalising world, it is not enough to live within the protective confines of your family network and yet not know how to participate in life. Survival, in this sense, must be viewed as limiting life potential. In saying this, I also recognise my own privilege in having a protective, loving environment. However, currently, I am reflecting on my own struggles in life and communicating why and how I came to this research. It is not sufficient to be sent to school without adequate preparation for the awaiting journey; to experience social exclusion and not understand why; to enter the workforce without knowledge of the expectations required to fulfil that role or, worse, to be controlled by the alienating

society through welfare dependence. Perhaps, most constraining, is accepting such positions as the norm in life and live without hope or choice, merely surviving in life without the freedom of living the truths that are your own. A vast difference, then, can be observed between surviving and flourishing in life. By transcending survival, to flourish in life, alludes to experiencing good health and wellbeing; having access to that which is fundamental to functioning healthily in the world such as education, health, and economic opportunity; having access to necessary knowledge and skills; and, of particular concern in this thesis, having the relevant knowledge and ability to access critical resources that enable the possibility of making 'real' life choices and take up opportunities in life.

The limitation of life potential, which I refer to as survival, is transgenerational and embedded in the usurping of control of Aboriginal people through the continuing processes of colonisation, often perpetuated by Aboriginal people by alienating themselves from the knowledge that was once their freedom. Survival, then, indicates a real deficiency in quality of life for people. The lack of personal capacity and opportunity presented for Aboriginal people to learn to become self-determining and competently work inter-cultural boundaries at the interface of Aboriginal, and the dominant Australian society, liminal spaces which can be exploited for their benefit, manifests itself today in the many social ills that continue to plague Aboriginal people. Health (including mental health), educational and parenting deficiencies, alcohol and substance misuse, suicide, violence and high levels of unemployment and incarceration are just a few. The complexities of the situation go far deeper. I do not mean to say that, in isolation, self-determination and broader engagement is the panacea for all social ills endured by Aboriginal people but it is the foundational work that is required for

individuals to begin to move forward; to begin to transcend survival. To understand how Aboriginal people have negotiated this process is to know what is required to teach others, less fortunate, to become self-directing and ultimately garner the skills to change the circumstances of their existence. Understanding this process can inform how people working in an Aboriginal context, such as policy-makers, program developers and those working in the helping professions, can improve their ways of knowing, doing and being in professional practice.

The pathways of learning to transcend survival, a process identified in the analysis of this study as *Becoming Empowered*, are the concerns of the current research. Although the story of survival is commonplace among Aboriginal people, there are also vibrant and remarkable pockets of strength from which to draw. It was from these well-springs of Aboriginal women's energy that life-history narratives were collected and analysed through the utility of grounded theory methods. Analysis identified the common core concern of the women participating in the study as *Performing Aboriginality*. *Performing Aboriginality* captured how participants assumed the task of being an Aboriginal woman in the everyday. *Becoming Empowered* was categorised as a specific and unique process of empowerment that facilitated *Performing Aboriginality*.

Rights of Narration

Ian Anderson (1997) states, "Aboriginal protocol usually links the right to tell a story with a declaration of involvement or connection to the story" (p. 4). I aver that etiquette by claiming my connection to the story of this thesis. A strong sense of connection with the past, expressions of meaning and purpose in the present and

visionary regard for the future confirms the transcendental survival and resilience of Aboriginal women in a contemporary world. However, some women are able to construct their social realities relative to their understandings and desires of who they wish to be; most women fall into realities selected from available social discourses (Josselson, 1987). It is the former category of women with whom this thesis concerns itself. At this particular point in time, having experienced such a life process, I confidently position myself alongside those women participating in the current study. It is from this critical Aboriginal feminist standpoint that I approach this research. In this view, my personal struggle to move beyond survival stands out as a life-altering event; a transformation that continues and has pervaded everything I have done and accomplished in life and a position that inevitably shapes the theories of, and gives meaning to, my research.

My engagement with the focus of this research was originally embedded in personal experience; the research topic grew naturally out of my own life experiences. For as long as I could recall, I resisted others defining the terms of my reality. Resistance most commonly manifested itself through passive strategies but, very occasionally, through confrontation. Neither achieved the desired outcome. Instead, I remained trapped in struggles that only served to reinforce the relative powerlessness I was experiencing. This short narrative is an account of personal transformation and relates the personal discovery of new ways of knowing, doing and being in the world and the genesis of the current thesis.

New Narratives

The Queenslander pulled into the train station. It was bound for Cairns. My son and I said our farewells and boarded the train; I had no idea where that journey would lead. When we left, I was forty-two and my son was only eight years old - that was eight years ago. Finally settling in Cairns, I applied to enter university as a mature-age student but my application was rejected. This was perhaps understandable given that I was previously employed in the horseracing industry and hospitality. My motivation to gain a university education, however, was not entirely personal. I also saw the achievement of a university education as partial and necessary requirements to fulfilling my community responsibilities as an Aboriginal woman. This purpose inspired in me renewed motivation and confidence to pursue and attain university entry through alternate avenues. I completed a certificate course that provided entry into a degree course. At university, I majored in Anthropology and Indigenous Australian Studies graduating with a Bachelor of Social Science (Honours1) four years later. I then embarked on an intensely personal doctorate journey.

This is not to say that my enculturation into university life passed smoothly. To the contrary, while the Indigenous Studies Unit provided the support required, mainstream classes in anthropology triggered some of the anguish experienced in my earlier education. The negative emotions engendered in participation in mainstream subjects were alleviated through continuous contact and support from the Indigenous School and my new found determination to achieve my goal. For me, the heavily feminised nature of the Indigenous School was, and is, a site of continuing academic support and mentoring within an Indigenous

> cultural context. I found myself surrounded by women who had engendered a cycle of personal growth and demonstrated enormous agency in their day-to-day lives. It was here that I experienced an academic and professional mentoring relationship and witnessed how these women facilitated and enacted positive personal agency. For me, the negative emotions that once triggered feelings of inferiority now engendered personal proactive responses. It is to these women I am eternally grateful for providing the foundations that induced an individual process of empowerment. However, my personal journey is part of whom I am today and for that, I am also grateful.

This brief story relates the imperative of knowing; the significance of opportunities for acquiring formal and informal knowledge. Over recent years, I have gained more direction and meaning in life and achieved a positive sense of self and agency. Through my own agency, I have repositioned myself to shape my own future on my own terms. I pondered, however, why I could not come to this realisation much earlier in life. I turned to questions of identity and pondered the meaning of being a woman in contemporary Australian society and the meaning of being removed from the notion of the 'universal' woman, to be an *Aboriginal* woman. I realised that what I did have, from personal experience, was a deep appreciation for the value of personal growth and an astute awareness of the personal conflict that can be created by oppressive forces.

Evidenced therefore, is an inextricable connection between my personal narrative and my research. As such, it is likely that I shared a similar and/or partial subject position to that occupied by many of the research participants in this study. My

life experiences were instructive in terms of my current research. My own journey led me to ponder how other Aboriginal women forged a positive sense of self, community and agency in contemporary Australian society; to negotiate power in a contemporary world? What have been the experiences of women in achieving this position? What catalytic events engendered their journeys toward change and fulfilment in life? What were the conditions in which such processes developed? What strategies did they employ to enable survival and beyond? What processes underlie the process of agency for Aboriginal women? What are the current circumstances of their realities? Where did the journey lead? Perhaps most critically, how can understanding these processes assist others to facilitate positive change in their lives; to transcend survival?

Pathway to Nowhere

The intention of this research has remained constant since its inception; however, it was originally approached quite differently. As an Aboriginal woman, it was critical that the research was immersed in, and honoured, Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing; what *Quandamoopah Noonuccal* woman Karen Martin, following Lester Irabinna Rigney (1999), terms culturally respectful and culturally safe research (Martin, 2003, 2008). It is significant to mention here that this doctorate journey initially proceeded by studying the research phenomenon through the lens of Indigenous feminism, a reference I encountered in my Honours research (Bainbridge, 2004). While Indigenous feminism resonated well for some women, confusion around the tenets and irrelevance of White feminism to Aboriginal women developed for other participants, and unfamiliarity with the term ‘feminism’ was made apparent at other times. In particular, non-engagement, and at times antagonistic rejection, of the concept

of feminism by older women especially, both in early interviews and in conversation with Elders and peers, alerted me to the need to reframe the study.

Following this pathway led nowhere and was both painful and unsuccessful but, most importantly, reiterated to me the critical need to conduct research that is culturally respectful and culturally safe and the imperative to claim and name our realities in our own terms. The current research, allowed to develop more organically and attuned to grounded theory methods, demonstrates a re-thinking of its conceptual terms. The re-conceptualisation of the research considers how Aboriginal women experience themselves as agents in a contemporary world. The term 'agent' denotes a particular subject position occupied by Aboriginal women by virtue of negotiating power relationships to achieve whatever it is they deem relevant. While the study remains true to its original form, it is approached differently, through the developmental narratives of Aboriginal women. Thus conceived, the realities of Aboriginal women are brought into full relief in a more culturally oriented and ethical manner, reminding us of the significance of beginning research from experience rather than theory.

An Epistle to the Reader

The simple, the mundane, the ordinary, the everyday, this naturalistic scene sets the context for the current research presentation; a grounded theory study of Aboriginal women's experiences of agency in contemporary Australian society. Agency is defined, initially, as "the ability to define one's goals and act on them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). However, it is viewed as more than just an observable action according to Kabeer. Agency also relates to the "meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to

their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within'" (p. 438). Thus, agency starts to expand in meaning and its implications, and certainly warrants further attention.

The centring of women's agency in this thesis attempts to evade parochial visions of socialisation that perceive humans as empty vessels in which ascribed concepts, such as gender and ethnicity, are deposited (Jones, 1997). In this study, agency draws on a critique of humanism, which submits to a view of identity that is seen as the result of an individual's human essence, as opposed to being influenced by social and/or cultural factors. The utility of an anti-humanist perspective offers new possibilities and conceptualisations by encouraging acknowledgment of difference and choice (Hughes, 2002). In this sense, agency can be considered as:

> […] having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and be heard […] as author of their own multiple meanings and desires […] as having a sense of oneself as one who can go beyond the given meaning in any discourse and forge something new from a combination of previously unrelated discourses, through the invention of words and concepts that capture a shift in consciousness that is beginning to occur, or through imagining not what *is*, but what *might be.* (Davies, 2000, pp. 66-67)

To this extent, one becomes a significant actor in the social world in which one exists. It is clear that people's actions are contingent upon their creative capacity for self-reflection and awareness of their socio-political environment and to make new identifications; this, in turn, engages new actions relative to the new subject positions one assumes (Davies, 2000). Theorised in this way, transformations of the self and

social relations are possible. Thus, the expansion of activities and new social practices may be established.

This, then, is a study of change and empowerment; of virtuosity and freedom; of the construction of knowledge; of discourse and power; of the constitution of subjectivities and engaging subject positions; of the interplay between structure and agency. It represents a journey of discovery and personal development of women *Performing Aboriginality* at the confluence of cultures in a contemporary world. This research is neither a study that seeks to establish fixed truths and prescriptive propositions of Aboriginal identity, nor does it seek to offer determinations of an essential core self or "a notion of an integral, originary and unified identity" (Hall, 1996, p. 1) that is, today, the subject of anti-essentialist critiques of notions of ethnic, racial and national identities. Instead, I wish to supplant those notions with a concept of self that is a dynamic process of becoming; the self transcending static notions of being, constructing and reconstructing identities along life's continuum (Giddens, 1991). For these reasons, it is crucial that the narratives presented in this study are viewed as fleeting snapshots of my own and the participants' life journeys, which shaped and re-shaped the terms of our individual subjectivities.

To avoid potential misinterpretations, understanding the utility of terminology in the present study is critical. Necessary at this point is the definition, as used in this thesis, of sometimes contentious understandings of 'Aboriginal'. It is not the intention of the current research to attempt to impose definition upon what 'Aboriginal' means. I therefore hesitate as I attempt to define the term 'Aboriginal' for to do so is to perpetuate essentialist categorisations and, further, how does one delineate a term that

comprises such multiplicity, complexity and fluidity in a constant process of being made and remade. Within the bounds of this thesis, however, and for introductory purposes, an understanding of 'Aboriginal' is taken from government definitions.

The utility of the term 'Aboriginal' distinguishes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as discrete groups of Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal people are acknowledged as the Traditional Owners of the Country regarded as the mainland of Australia and Torres Strait Islander populations are identified as the Traditional Owners of the Island group in the Torres Strait to the north-east of the Australian mainland. An Australian Aboriginal person is identified by the Australian Government by a three-part definition that includes descent, self-identification and community recognition. Aboriginal academic, Professor Colin Bourke (1998), discusses the meaning of contemporary Aboriginal identities and adapts the government definition stating, "[t]he officially accepted definition of an Aboriginal person is one who is of Aboriginal descent, who identifies as being Aboriginal and who is recognised by his or her community as being an Aboriginal person" (p. 175). Further to this interpretation, 'Aboriginal' not only makes reference to, and is inclusive of, Aboriginal Australian people, but also their associated discourses. Therefore, it should be noted that Aboriginal Australian is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people. However, in contexts made apparent in the reading of the text in this thesis, the term 'Indigenous Australians' will be used to refer to both groups in unison. Conversely, for practical purposes the term 'White' will reference all people and discourses not of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin. The term 'Indigenous' is used to reference all Indigenous groups in the world.

In addition, I wish to acknowledge that while identification of individual language groups is desirable, the multiplicity of language groups represented in this study makes the appreciation of inner group diversity difficult. As such, the participant women, the storytellers in this study, are represented under the generic term 'Aboriginal'. These women all identified themselves within the boundaries of the government framework when they made identifications about being an Aboriginal woman.

Finally, as we commence this research journey, I wish to acknowledge the relationship between the author, the reader and the text; the author's responsibility in the production and representation of the text and the reader's response-ibility in responding to the text through the transmission of the acquired knowledge. I realised the full significance of author responsibility as a concept as part of my privilege in working with my dear friend and colleague, Noela McNamara, in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies. Noela's work considers her own experiences of S*tepping out of her 'White' Dress* (McNamara, 2008) and the significance of doing so, or indeed failing to disrobe, in the transmission of knowledge about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in an Australian literary context. The reader, too, has response-ibility. The reader's response is shaped by their individual assumptions and interpretations and, as such, I can not do more than request that the reader *Cast All Imaginations* and *listen* carefully while *Umbi* – Aboriginal Women - *Speak.*

Chapter 1

Framing the Study

1.1 Introduction

The lifeworlds of Aboriginal women were once powerfully and exclusively positioned in relation to the historical narratives created by the Ancestors. The Ancestors passed down rich and diverse traditions that circumscribed meaning in the everyday and profoundly affected the construction of narratives through which subjectivities were produced and performed. However, emanating from the historical circumstances of colonisation and expanded discursive boundaries, the twenty-first century holds new challenges for Aboriginal women in constructing life-meaning and purpose, defining self and performing in accord with their perceived responsibilities in contemporary Australian society. At the heart of this challenge are two primary developmental tasks. The first task is negotiating life-meaning and purpose by integrating two critically ascribed elements of identity, ethnicity and gender, to produce a meaningful sense of self (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Burr, 1995; Erikson, 1968) in a society that largely continues to denigrate both Aboriginal cultures and women. Secondly is the task of reconceptualising, negotiating and performing personal power bound within the colonial project—learning to "walk this tightrope between two worlds" **Bree (38: 357-358)**, as one of the women who shared her stories in the study expressed (see Section 6.2 for referencing of participants' transcripts).

The increased visibility of Aboriginal women in the public gaze is testament to the agency of Aboriginal women in the everyday and is continually evidenced by their amplified undertaking of leading public positions and roles, for example Magistrate Patricia O'Shane, Member of Parliament Linda Burney, Professor and Chancellor Yvonne Cadet-James, Professors Marcia Langton, Larissa Behrendt and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, historian Dr Jackie Huggins, community leader and bureaucrat Kerry Timm, actor Debra Mailman, criminologist and Young Australian of the Year 2007 Tania Major, Olympic athletes Nova Batman (formerly Peris-Kneebone) and Cathy Freeman, performing artist and author Leah Purcell and singer Jessica Mauboy to name but a few who currently sustain relatively high public profiles. While these women hold high profile public office, another critical mass of women projects a very different portrait of agency. The agency of these extraordinary women is demonstrated and verifiable in their tireless work to sustain self, family and community through adversity, for example women who play critical roles in the development of local initiatives to ameliorate issues affecting community wellbeing, such as alcohol and substance abuse and associated violence, or those women who, despite experiencing socio-economic adversity, maintain family wellbeing. The capacity of these women to perform such roles is, unfortunately, not always reflected in the experiences of all Aboriginal women in Australia. To understand their performance of agency in a contemporary world, this thesis turns to Aboriginal women who have transcended survival.

1.2 Focus of the research

Critically examined in this grounded theory study is the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women at the nexus of social discourse, power and

personal experience in the contemporary context. The potential to capture each participant's experiences over time is an acknowledged strength of grounded theory methods. This enables exploration into the interrelatedness of personal, socio-cultural, historical and political dimensions of Aboriginal women's realities. Life-history narratives were conducted as a strategy to render visible the unfolding experiences of agency for the women. The voices of twenty women (including my own voice), aged between eighteen and sixty-six, embody the spirit of this investigative journey.

The current study responded to the overarching research question which inquired:

What process underlies the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society?

The primary aim of the research was to examine, in all its complexity and heterogeneity, the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women. Consequential to the primary research question, a number of objectives were explored in the study. The objectives, designed as subsidiary to the overarching research question, were to:

- identify the dimensions of the process underlying Aboriginal women's performance of agency
- develop a substantive theory of the process underlying Aboriginal women's performance of agency
- identify how understanding this process might assist Aboriginal women to facilitate positive change in their lives.

The research was both shaped and compromised by personal assumptions developed in formulating its design. Those assumptions included:

- Individuals have untapped reserves of strength and capacity that can be utilised to improve the circumstances of their lives if so desired, if opportunities are made available and if personal capacity is stimulated to take advantage of those opportunities.
- Relevant and meaningful resources need to be made available to assist people in the process of change.
- Change is a time-oriented process.
- Change cannot be imposed upon individuals, rather, it must be stimulated and emanate from within individuals.
- The performances of individuals in the everyday constitute their subjectivities.
- Subjectivities take flow from historically, socially, culturally and materially shaped lives.
- Subjectivities are continually constituted and reconstituted and are context specific.
- Individuals can comply with and resist dominant discourses and practices simultaneously.

1.3 Validating the research direction

On Wednesday 13 February 2008, the world had the privilege of bearing witness to a significant moment in Australian history—'The Apology' of the current Australian Government to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people for the implementation of "laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss" (Prime Minister of Australia, 2008, n.p.) on

individuals and communities and, in particular, for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, communities and Country. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also extended visionary leadership toward reconsidering Reconciliation and undertaking to "close the gap" (Prime Minister of Australia, 2008, n.p.) between the experience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and White people relative to health, education and economic opportunity. Mr Rudd's words of contrition expressed this sentiment:

> […] A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity. A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed. (Prime Minister of Australia, 2008, n.p.)

Continual pledges of change for Aboriginal people made by successive governments over many decades, generally, have not come to fruition. Profound exasperation with the continued experience of disadvantage for many Aboriginal people and the imposition of myriad attempts to 'close the gap' (as Mr Rudd put it) was the impetus for the current research. More specifically, the driver behind this research was the sheer frustration that emanated from the failure of governments to address social change for Aboriginal people in a holistic way, through material, human and intellectual resources. This oversight negated any attempts of empowerment and sustainable change for Aboriginal people (Batliwala, 1997).

Deemed critical in any attempt to improve the socio-economic conditions experienced by many Aboriginal people, therefore, is to address, in unison, identified material, human and intellectual dimensions of any given circumstances. Angus and Lea (1998) identified this need a decade ago. They state:

> If the health and well-being of Indigenous Australians is to improve at all, then the Indigenous perspective needs to be heard - especially at all levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy and, perhaps as importantly, we need to be given the resources with which we can go about 'fixing our own health'. (p. 636)

To achieve the reality of social change, however difficult, Sen (1999) espouses that "individual agency is, ultimately, central to addressing deprivations [disadvantaged conditions]" (p. xi). Supporting Sen, in a paper prepared for the World Bank on gender and poverty, Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002) express the significance of agency in overcoming disadvantage. They argue that there were multiple examples in the literature of "cases in which giving women's access to resources does not lead to their greater control over resources, where changes in legal statutes have little influence on practice" (p. 9). Thus, resources alone will not necessarily bring about change unless individuals are able to recognise and utilise those resources in their own best interests. Indeed, Sen also argues that when people have knowledge, skills and resources, they will act in their own best interests.

Thus, identifying the process of Aboriginal women's performance of agency inherent in their development narratives—the emergent subject positions, the facilitating environments and the actualisation and outcomes of agency—is to go some

way toward addressing the disadvantaged conditions of life experienced by many Aboriginal people in Australia today.

Implicated in notions of agency is the concept of emancipation, which is in turn implicit in strategies of resistance (Ali, 2002; Sen, 1999). Davies (2000) indicates that, while substantial personal change is invoked by repositioning self within new discourses, the individual also experiences a degree of resistance between belief and everyday practice. This translation of knowledge to action is a concept also raised by Freire (1970, 1973) as praxis. This is why there is an imperative to understand the strategies deployed by those Aboriginal women who have adequately transitioned this process within the bonds of patriarchy and colonisation and to further understand how notions of self, power and discourse are implicated in change processes.

Giving credence to these submissions, the premise of the current thesis is grounded in the belief that it is not the programs and policies alone that fail to make inroads into improving the contemporary position of Aboriginal people. Problematic, also, are the gaps in knowledge around what permits programs and policies to be effective; what makes them work. Essentially disregarded is the human condition; the social psychological determinants that enable the opportunity for personal transformation and social change and which, ultimately, facilitate becoming self-determining subjects who have the capacity to recognise and utilise resources that have individual relevance, to grasp opportunities and to become agents in their own processes of change.

1.4 Relevance of the study

Few studies undertaken subscribe to resilience models of research in Aboriginal contexts, regardless of the topic. Cultural context is positioned at the centre of this inquiry and Aboriginal women's standpoints are privileged; stories relating the life journeys of twenty Aboriginal women who not only survive in a contemporary world, but who have also transformed the conditions of their lives and that of others to experience their desired quality of life. Utilising grounded theory methods, the study developed a substantive theory of Aboriginal women's performance of agency as it evolved in naturalist settings, in the everyday. This was the significant purpose of the study.

The significance of this research is manifold. The study, while acknowledging the uniquely positioned minority status of Aboriginal women, rejects notions of Aboriginal women as casualties of colonisation by exploring the nuanced elements of personal agency demonstrated in their developmental narratives. Initial significance lies in disrupting essentialist accounts of Aboriginal women by theorising them as agents and not in 'absolute truths' that add up to a prescriptive set of propositions about the performances of Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society. It is anticipated that this research will contribute to the creation of relevant and effective points for intervention targeting change for Aboriginal women, their families and their communities.

The standalone fact that there is a paucity of research relating to Aboriginal women in general makes this research a worthwhile enterprise and specifically contributes to new knowledge by addressing the significant gap in knowledge of

Aboriginal women's experiences of agency. The study may find further significance and readership in the helping professions, particularly health and education professionals working with Aboriginal people, policy makers and researchers. The findings may be used as an instrument through which others have the opportunity to reconsider the role of women in Aboriginal communities and the broader society and examine its future. Finally, the findings of the study offer an opportunity for me and/or others to begin theorising about self-development practices and educational and program development in light of those findings. Fostering empowering development for individuals has the potential to improve outcomes of social policy and programs in Aboriginal communities, raise the socio-economic status of Aboriginal women and the profile of associated community issues and interests. Thus, there is vested interest in this research for the ongoing development of Australia as a nation.

In terms of innovation, the authorship of this study, by an Aboriginal woman, supports the uniqueness of the research. I am unaware of other studies that have examined the performance of agency for Aboriginal women and certainly none that have used autoethnographic method as a self-reflexive tool of examination to complement that of the participants. Autoethnographic method opens up possibilities for innovative ways in which Aboriginal researchers, who are 'complete insiders', may represent realities, themselves and their research participants in their texts (Bainbridge, 2007).

1.5 Research paradigm

There are a multitude of approaches to social science research; none are privileged above the other but, instead, represent "different ways of looking at the world

– ways to observe, measure and understand social reality" (Neuman, 2003, p. 70). Methodologically speaking, the aim of the study was to understand the performance of agency articulated from Aboriginal women themselves by generating data primarily through the conduct of face-to-face life-history interviews to understand how the participants interpret and construct their realities through language, shared understandings and practices; through the interplay of historical and contemporary discourses (Crotty, 1998). The research aim reflected a constructivist epistemology, which is "*antithetical to objectivism*" (Bryman, 2008, p. 19) and, at a fundamental level, assumes that "social phenomenon and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman, 2008, p. 19). Constructivist assumptions accommodate multiple constructions of social realities, avoid essentialist categorisations and acknowledge the creation of knowledge from personal experience, thus linking action to praxis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000); all of which are embedded in the theoretical structure and the methodology of this study.

The study, grounded in a critical emancipatory imperative, makes use of the tools of feminism and poststructuralism to interrogate the performance of Aboriginal women as agents in a contemporary narrative of development. Largely, the interpretive aspects of this research flow from feminist understandings of Foucault's poststructuralist appraisals of power, discourse and self. Foucauldian work in these areas also resonates particularly well with feminist theorising that interrogates Western feminists' ethnocentric premises and notions of the 'universal' woman; a dominant feminist elite whose agenda served that of the white middle-class woman (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981, 1984, 1989; Huggins, 1998; Mohanty, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

This study uses a grounded theory approach drawing primarily from the works of Glaser (1978), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Charmaz (2006). Methodologically, substantial reasons exist for electing to use grounded theory in the conduct of this study. Firstly, I wanted to find out what was happening for the women in the study. Grounded theory enables the researcher to discover the central concern of participants and the basic social psychological process that facilitates that concern. It is therefore inductive in the sense that there is no overarching or theoretical hypothesis to be proved and is invaluable as an explanatory tool that explicates all constituent elements of the research phenomenon as well as their interrelationships (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hildenbrand, 2004; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006; Morse & Field, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Secondly, one of the objectives of the study was to identify the process underlying Aboriginal women's performance of agency and develop a substantive theory of the research phenomenon—the facilitating environments, actualisation and outcomes of agency. Grounded theory assisted to go beyond "descriptive capture" (Glaser, 2002, p. 2) and construct analytical explanations of what it means to be an Aboriginal woman in contemporary Australian society for a particular group of women; their experiences, interactions, developmental processes and behaviour evidenced in the descriptive life-history narrative accounts provided by the women. Thus conceived, a theory with fit and relevance to the experiences of Aboriginal women could be generated. Vital to the conduct of the current study was the imperative of having practical importance and value to the women themselves and those practitioners working in the substantive area under study. Grounded theory also fulfilled this expectation.

1.6 Storyline

This thesis is presented in eight interrelated chapters. The first three chapters lay the foundations of the research. The Prelude provides space to observe cultural protocol and position myself in relation to the topic of this thesis and elaborates on the meaning of the most significant terms used in the study. Chapter 1 provides a synopsis of the development of the study. It reveals the rationale for undertaking the study, a brief background on the theoretical underpinnings and references the methodology. It outlines the aim, objectives and assumptions underscoring the research, as well as the significance of conducting the research.

Chapter 2 is a historical portrait of Aboriginal women's life and agency. The narrative sensitises the reader to the realities of life for Aboriginal women by exploring the historical, socio-cultural, economic and political structures that produce their performances of agency and, thus, their subjectivities in the everyday. The sensitising narrative also provides recent background information on health, social and economic demographics for Aboriginal people in Australian society.

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the knowledge-building processes employed in this study. It contextualises the research trajectory, provides the rationale for the research design, locates my epistemological position in relation to the study, elaborates on the theoretical underpinnings and establishes grounded theory as the methodology of choice.

Chapter 4 enumerates the investigative processes that link the theoretical framework and the analysis. It provides the rationale for method selection and

delineates the utility of the methods. It finishes with the ethical considerations proposed in this study.

Chapter 5 details the application of grounded theory method in the analysis of the women's narratives.

Chapters 6 and 7 introduce the participants to the reader, then acquaints the reader with the narratives of the women who shared their stories in the production of this research. The two chapters are organised around the processual model of *Becoming Empowered* that represents the basic social psychological process negotiated by the women to facilitate their core concern in life—*Performing Aboriginality*.

In culmination, Chapter 8 revisits the research objectives and significance outlined in Chapter 1, details the limitations and strengths of the study and presents an appraisal of the quality of this grounded theory research. The unique contributions of the study are followed by an overview of the emergent theory of *Becoming Empowered.* A discussion of the significant findings is advanced and situates the study within its broader context. To achieve this aim, the findings are contextualised within existing and relevant theories, literature and research. The manner in which the findings confirm, extend and contribute to current knowledge is highlighted. The implications of the findings drawn from the study in providing evidence for the original intentions of the research and the identification of the conclusive findings precede the recommendations for expanding future research directions that have arisen from the study. The thesis closes with a brief reflection of the research journey.

Chapter 2

Sensitising Narrative

2.1 Introduction

Contemporaneously positioned within a patriarchal colonising society, Aboriginal women struggled to have understandings of how their world is constituted, experienced and legitimated. Despite having long cultivated, articulated and expressed particular and unique epistemic and ontological positions that have preserved gendered, ethnic, political, social and cultural practices of long standing, this struggle continues. The current chapter provides a portrait of Aboriginal women that situates them within the historical, socio-cultural and political contexts that came to shape their subjectivities, the most salient themes and concepts that have held sway in the development of their life experiences and, subsequently, their agentic behaviours and capacity. The introductory sections provide a historical overview of pre-contact Aboriginal gender roles and the status of Aboriginal women within Aboriginal society. Following on is an examination of the way knowledge about Aboriginal women has been historically constituted and represented through essentialist, androcentric and colonialist discourses and looks toward how they engaged with those particular discursive regimes to negotiate new subject positions and subjectivities. The focus then moves to the ways in which Aboriginal women articulate their particular philosophies by examining the history of Aboriginal women's agency and leadership roles. Contemporary demographics of Aboriginal people, as well as insights into the headline indicators influencing quality of life and wellbeing, complete this review. This critical

account of literature situates the study in its historical, socio-cultural and political context and traces that which is known, and what remains to be known, about the performance and meaning of Aboriginal women's agency through to the twenty-first century. Prior to embarking on this historical journey, the utility of literature in this grounded theory study is explicated.

2.2 The utility of literature

Different proponents of grounded theory espouse their individual approaches to the utility of the literature in research. The inductive nature of grounded theory approaches is one of its defining features and, inherent in this understanding, is the goal of 'discovery' as opposed to imposition of a theoretical framework that has the potential to force data into preconceived categories (Glaser, 1992). From the outset of this study, it was my intention to avoid theory-driven research. It was important that preconceived notions and imaginings were cast aside and that *Umbi* were afforded the space to speak.

The approach to literature used in this study aimed to strike a balance between practical applications, an allegiance to the fundamental tenets of grounded theory methods and, perhaps most importantly, attuned with my ways of working. The literature was reviewed responsively and intuitively and may appear scant by comparison to the utility of literature in other qualitative approaches to research that aim to establish the context for the research prior to establishing the emergent theory. Consequently, upon commencing the study, literature relating the representation and positioning of Aboriginal women in Australian society was examined with a particular focus on their agentic capacity. This narrative should not be considered as a review of literature in which the context for the study is established; rather, it should be viewed as

sensitising literature for the purposes of understanding the contemporary position of Aboriginal women.

As the concurrent process of theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis progressed and categories were discovered, defined and refined, a scoping of literature in these fields took place and a review of literature in the prioritised area of empowerment was undertaken after the core social psychological process of *Becoming Empowered* was identified and the emergent theory established. This method is in accord with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) utility of literature, in which they propose a review of relevant literature to stimulate theoretical sensitivity and assist in directing the researcher toward relevant concepts and relationships between those concepts. It was not until the emergent theory was identified and written that a substantive review of literature, guided by the emergent theory, was undertaken. This method has the advantage of delimiting the literature so that a more focussed comparison can be conducted (Glaser, 1998).

2.3 Gendered representation in Aboriginal oral traditions: creation narratives

Aboriginal cosmology is centred on a sense of interrelatedness, interdependence, harmony, reciprocity and responsibility. "Everything and everybody, all space and all time, is intertwined and interdependent, and all are kin" (Voigt & Drury, 1997, p. 23). Voigt and Drury (1997) observe the interrelatedness deeply embedded in Aboriginal cosmology:

> There are no gods, no religious hierarchies, no segregation of 'good' and 'bad', no unsavoury bits, and no separation between the physical and the spiritual or

nature, humanity and culture. All came into being at the one time, and all of these dimensions are reflections of each other. (p. 26)

In Aboriginal tradition, the Spirit Ancestors, who are perceived differentially by diverse tribal groups across Australia, “defined all spaces and time” (Voigt & Drury, 1997, p. 24) from a shapeless and featureless plane. The female presence features prominently in sacred spiritual beliefs about Creation and lives in the deeds of Spirit Ancestors and their descendents who came forth as identities such as Wunggud, Rainbow Serpent Women, Sisters from the Sky and Mulga Seed Women (Voigt & Drury, 1997). Women then, are significant actors in the Creation narratives. For example, the creative journey of the *Djang’kawu* sisters from North Eastern Arnhem Land tells of sisters who travelled long distances with their yam sticks, shaping the country as they went (Kleinert & Neale, 2000; Voigt & Drury, 1997).

The most pervasive and significant Creation narratives in Aboriginal societies are the stories surrounding the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Serpent is most commonly portrayed as a female entity (Noonuccal, 1988) although, in various contexts, she holds both male and female characteristics (Charlesworth, Dussart & Morphy, 2005; Taylor, 1996; Voigt & Drury, 1997). The Rainbow Serpent is “the sacred embodiment of the Earth…the Ancestor of all forms of life, the Mother of all Being” (Voigt & Drury, 1997, p. 35). James Barripang, from the Kimberley region, explains:

Inside the earth lives – today and always – Wunggud, a big snake. She is the earth and of the primeval substance from which everything in Nature is formed.

> She is female, njindi, ‘*her*’. Before Creation, she was tightly coiled into a ball of jelly-like substance, ngallalla yawun, ‘*everything soft like jelly’*. Wunggud is the Earth Snake, the name, body, substance and power of the earth. All of nature grows on the body of the snake. (cited in Davis, 1994, p. 99)

The Creator Beings not only fashioned and named everything that is visible, but also that which is not visible. They created the sacred teachings of the Dreaming—The Lore. Spirit Beings established customs, taught humans how to hunt, utilise fire and make cooking utensils, how to dance, perform ceremonies, care for Country and use language. Those who are knowledgeable can tap the power held within the Creator Beings through ritual. Essentially, the creation period is seen as an eternal blueprint for how life should be lived. After completing their creative journeys, the Spirit Beings returned to the land, sea or sky, transforming themselves into distinctive features of the landscape and becoming an ever-present living reality that is past and future. Eminent Australian anthropologist, Stanner, attempts to capture the notion of the Dreamtime as it has come to be known:

> A central meaning of The Dreaming is that of sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; …The Dreaming conjures up the notion of a sacred heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present. One cannot ‘fix’ The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen. (1989, p. 225)

In Aboriginal cultures, female deities of great significance are respected and revered in a manner consistent with the Christian God of the colonisers. The spiritual

guidance engendered by Creation narratives is not only very specific in its account concerning the beginnings of life and the foundational patterns for living, but also provides a "cumulative body of knowledge that links all Aboriginal peoples with the events of the Creation" (Voigt & Drury, 1997, p. 31). Through these narratives, the creative powers of feminine entities are evidenced. Women are associated with perceptions of the 'Great Mother' or the Rainbow Serpent as the Sacred Creator and nurturing body of all species and the interconnectedness of all life forms. Aboriginal narratives portray women as having identities, relationships and knowledge equal to that of all other beings in the universe.

2.4 Pre-contact gender relations in Aboriginal society

Documented knowledge of the pre-contact era in Australian Aboriginal history remains fragmentary for two main reasons. Firstly, the nature of White contact stemmed the transference of some knowledge and, secondly, the rich oral traditions of Aboriginal society meant that resources documenting Aboriginal history and the nature of Aboriginal society prior to colonisation were configured through alternate discourses and artefacts. Relying on analogies of sources, including colonial records, oral recordings of contemporary Aboriginal women's traditions and understandings of Aboriginal societies today, Williams and Jolly (1992) provide a glimpse into the gendered existence of Aboriginal men and women in the pre-contact era. They indicate that Aboriginal men and women functioned in predominantly independent but intersecting spheres, further noting this arrangement characterised many Aboriginal social structures in Australia.

In a similar vein to Williams and Jolly, Merlan (1988) constructs a comprehensive account of women in pre-contact Aboriginal society. Merlan, through a re-reading of traditional, and often White, androcentric literature on Aboriginal societies, systematically critiques many anthropological theories and research into gender relations in Aboriginal societies. She reveals Aboriginal gender relationships as characterised by relative equality and complementarity with an emphasis on sexual segregation; a characterisation that is relatively consistent with many hunter-gatherer societies. Merlan's stance on Aboriginal gender relations leans towards the feminist perspective of Bell (1983), who studied the lives of Aboriginal women in the Central Desert region of Australia. Specifically, Bell sought to understand "the origins and mechanisms by which gender hierarchies and such cultural dogmas as sexual asymmetry are established and maintained" (p. 244).

Bell's feminist ethnography, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, and similarly Kaberry's (1939) colonial anthropological text, *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane*, give authority to the testament of Williams and Jolly and Merlan. In two of the most politically provocative feminist ethnographies produced in Australia, Kaberry and Bell's groundbreaking works have frequently served both as points of reference and criticism. Kaberry and Bell both envisage Aboriginal male-female relationships as emphasising the cooperative in balanced and communal aspects of Aboriginal life in the economic, political, social and spiritual domains - property and food are shared, leadership is largely specific to organisational roles, social relationships fundamentally egalitarian, rights to resources and knowledge are considered more a negotiated outcome than a right and, complementary but largely separate and different spiritual roles are assumed. Concurring with findings advanced by Kaberry and Bell, renowned

husband and wife anthropological team Berndt and Berndt (1999) also assert that Aboriginal societies were traditionally characterised by gendered separatism, complementarity, equality, balance and interdependence.

Contemporaneously however, Aboriginal people are writing their own histories and representing their own knowledge systems. Interpreting knowledge systems in Aboriginal societies and supporting the notions of feminist anthropological cohorts, Aboriginal academic, Martin (2001), states that gender determines the types of knowledge individuals acquire, along with the purpose and application of that knowledge. Such forms of gendered knowledge are commonly referred to as 'Men's Business' and 'Women's Business' (Martin, 2001, p. 45). Martin further states that the gendered knowledge of the community complements one another; neither is considered superior and both are essential to the maintenance and nourishment of the community (Martin, 2001).

Female Aboriginal author and Elder, Elsie Roughsey (Roughsey, Memmott & Horsman, 1984), also supports the consensus of gendered separatism, complementarity, equality, balance and interdependence advanced in several Aboriginal and White commentaries. In her 1984 autobiography, Roughsey discusses Aboriginal gender relations, highlighting mutual respect as central to the male-female relationship and, in particular, to the reverence of women. She states, "[t]he young woman must closely be loved by all […] see that no trouble comes upon her. She must be treated with love and care, and above all is that respect. Anyone who breaks the law of this matter is punished by tribal fights" (Roughsey et al., p. 91). Roughsey emphasises the complementarity of

men and women's existence, particularly noting women's valuable contributions and equal participation in the social, economic, political and spiritual life of the community.

2.5 Colonial ethnographic constructions of Aboriginal women

The general consensus across both Aboriginal and White literary texts indicates that, historically, the position of Aboriginal women has been largely under-researched, under-represented and, in large measure, misinterpreted and misrepresented (Bell, 1983; Huggins, 1998; Langton & Barry, 1998; Larbalestier, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). As these authors suggest, early colonial ethnographies were predominantly executed by male researchers and essentially introduced resistance to accurate interpretations and representations of gendered differences and similarities regarding divisions of power, labour and spiritual affiliations in Aboriginal societies. Hence, many critiques of pioneering research focussing on Aboriginal cultures suggest that the resulting ethnographies commonly reflected the prejudices and expectations of the researchers. As alluded to by Williams and Jolly (1992), colonial interpretations of Aboriginal women "reveals more about the ideal model that European men held of their own society than it does about Aboriginal society" (p. 15).

Malinowski (1963), renowned male anthropologist of the early twentieth century, supported the claims of much pioneering research on Aboriginal gender roles in his account of Aboriginal society, *Family Life among the Australian Aborigines*. Malinowski's research represented gendered dimensions of Aboriginal women's tribal life by making reference to their slave status as wives (Malinowski, 1963). Accordingly, as Hamilton (1981) asserts, through a patriarchal lens Aboriginal women were all but

rendered invisible, and often viewed as "pawns, chattels and slaves of their menfolk, maltreated and neglected" (p. 72).

Androcentric narratives about Aboriginal women became widely accepted, thus perpetuating their misrepresentations, which not only impacted the lived realities of these women within the construct of the wider Australian society but also within colonial bound Aboriginal societies. However, it is important to note that these misperceptions were often dispersed between both male and female researchers. A point in case is evidenced in the work of Barwick (1974), who was incited to argue that Aboriginal women, in fact, gained their emancipation from allegedly patriarchal and oppressive Aboriginal societies under colonial influence. Barwick inaccurately claims that, subsequent to the early contact era, there was a period of rapid social change for Aboriginal societies, which essentially saw a shift from a patriarchal to a matriarchal structure (Barwick, 1974).

2.5.1 Feminist approaches to colonial ethnographic constructions of Aboriginal women

Discursive constructions of Aboriginal women's lives largely remained intact until the mid-twentieth century. During this time, feminist politics were influential in redressing misrepresentations and misconceptions of women's status in Aboriginal society. Contradicting the representations of Aboriginal women advanced by many pioneering researchers and anthropologists were the works of female anthropologists such as Kaberry (1939), Berndt (1950) and Bell (1983). In historical succession, these women mounted challenges to the androcentric bias and authority prevalent within the

discipline of anthropology; specifically, its knowledge and representational practices of Aboriginal women.

Transcending the patriarchal and anachronistic preoccupations of her predecessors, Kaberry (1939) and, similarly, Berndt (1950) and Bell (1983), systematically criticise and undermine previous representations of Aboriginal women. Utilising gender as a structuring principle in human societies, Kaberry and other female anthropologists of this ilk, represent Aboriginal women as part of a living, emotionally-charged culture. Kaberry, as do those following her lead, not only refutes the myth of culturelessness in Aboriginal society but also situates Aboriginal women outside “the meaningless and perhaps barbarous activities of primitive man” (1939, p. 269). Furthermore, through a systematic study of the economics, politics and rituals of Kimberley tribal life, Kaberry illuminates and confirms the position of Aboriginal women within Aboriginal society as both ‘sacred and profane’. Kaberry portrays Kimberley Aboriginal women as “a complex social personality, having her own prerogatives, duties, problems, beliefs, rituals and point of view […] exercising a certain freedom in matters reflecting her own interests and desires” (1939, p. ix). She states further that, through their respective ceremonies, men and women contribute equally to the maintenance of society according to Ancestral Law, which stemmed from the Dreamtime; or in her terms, *A Time Long Past*.

The implications of Kaberry’s (1939) work are manifest in Bell’s (1983) provocative feminist ethnography, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, produced some forty years later. Bell concurs with, and elaborates on, the findings of Kaberry. Bell’s findings were that Aboriginal women of the Central Desert maintained unusually strong

traditions of independence and cultural autonomy; a status of functional complementarity, which worked to the benefit of the entire community. This status, she maintains, positions Aboriginal women well within the confines of religious, social, economic and political activities of their community. Bell further asserts that the position held by Aboriginal women is achieved even though their social structures are characterised by the extreme separateness of men and women's domains. She claims these gendered domains simultaneously reflect inextricably intertwined and interwoven lives that maintain the social fabric of Aboriginal society through ritual practice.

Significantly, Bell (1983) documents the centrality of Aboriginal women's roles as custodians of land, in rituals, decision-making and nurturers of culture and community. Her testimony concerning the *Walpiri* also validates respect as part of Aboriginal women's power. Bell is adamant that "women do have an important base which is respected by men" (p. 247). Further, in Bell's astute assessment of ritual she states, "[i]n the rituals staged jointly by men and women, men's respect for the independence of women's worlds is amply demonstrated" (p. 247). However, she also highlights that patriarchal colonial interventions, such as authoritarian dealings between males and the stereotyping of Aboriginal women's role and status based on androcentric representations had somewhat diminished Aboriginal women's political activity. Elaborating, Bell states that the patriarchal traditions of the colonising society have influenced both the inclusion and exclusion of Aboriginal women by bureaucratic departments at particular moments in history. Bell thus theorises that Aboriginal men have dominated at the cultural interface.

Aboriginal Women's Critiques of Feminist Representations

Feminist studies, such as those conducted by female anthropologists, provided literature through which equilibrium was maintained in formative understandings and interpretations of Aboriginal culture, particularly male-female relations and roles. Even so, Langton (1997), contextualising the issue of the effectiveness of feminist research methodologies in Native Title, warns that inserting a woman researcher does not guarantee accurate representations of Aboriginal women and their interests. Langton proclaims that introducing White female researchers may bring cultural bias to the research and thus influence their findings.

Elaborating on Langton's (1997) perspective, Aboriginal academic, Moreton-Robinson (2000), insists that not only should inquiries into Aboriginal society be analysed and interpreted by taking the researcher prejudices into account but also by prioritising the impact of colonisation on the social fabric of Aboriginal societies. Moreton-Robinson contends that representations of Aboriginal women promoted by White middle-class women anthropologists remain problematic. She avers that White female anthropologists have created a binary opposition of 'traditional' versus 'contemporary'. This perspective, she claims, essentially "privileges certain groups of Indigenous women as culturally and racially authentic" (p. 75) while positioning others as "racially and culturally contaminated" (p. 75). Moreton-Robinson denounces this approach and argues that such methodologies are flawed because they depend on specific ideological constructions of culture and race (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). These methodological discrepancies have, in turn, erased Aboriginal women's subjectivities and objectified them in texts that are then validated in both public and academic discourse (Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

2.6 Aboriginal women’s role and agency in colonial Australia

The historian Evans (1982) describes the extreme changes in Aboriginal women’s role and status with the onset of colonisation:

> With the onset of white colonisation, women’s traditional functions were either severely truncated and rendered marginal in a reconstituted social environment or utterly destroyed as their populations were decimated and their society and culture dismembered and fragmented. During this process the position of black women plummeted from being co-workers of equal importance to men in the balanced use of the environment to that of thoroughly exploited beasts of burden. It fell from being valuable human resources and partners within traditional sexual relationships to that of degraded and diseased sex objects and from being people of recognised spiritual worth to that of beings of virtual animal status in the eyes of the belief systems of their exploiters. (p. 9)

Colonisation and its associated disruption to Aboriginal culture and lifestyles meant that Aboriginal women (regional variations excluded) generally experienced erasure from religious, social, economic and political status in early colonial society. This experience restricted Aboriginal women’s prospects for full participation and social action in such spaces, both within Aboriginal and the dominant societal contexts. Despite this fact, Aboriginal women have historically demonstrated persistent resistance as active negotiators of their personal, familial and community lives. However, as shall be explored in the literature to follow, Aboriginal women contributed significantly to colonial development of the wider Australian society and also tended to Aboriginal community aspirations and needs.

Huggins (1998) notes the gaps and silences in written history surrounding the participation of Aboriginal women in the Australian colonial society. Langton and Barry (1998) add that, in relatively recent times, the role and contributions of Aboriginal women in Australian society have been paid much needed attention in historical and anthropological literature, thus projecting increased visibility of Aboriginal women's activism. Commenting on Aboriginal women's roles, Langton and Barry (1998) assert that the contributions of "Aboriginal women have been critical to the welfare of their hearth groups and their kin and affines and not just confined to the domestic domain" (p. 3).

Numerous sources reveal that Aboriginal women forcefully interacted with the colonising society through their capacity to contribute as child-carers, sexual partners, domestic labourers and pastoral and agricultural labourers (Jebb & Haebich, 1992; Huggins, 1998; Langton & Barry, 1998; Reynolds, 1982; Rowley, 1970). Langton and Barry (1998) note that the nature of such work was relatively consistent with Aboriginal women's traditional roles, particularly in the economic sphere. The engagement of Aboriginal women in the economic realm of the colonising society provided particular advantages that could be transferred to their already traumatised and dispossessed communities. Jebb and Haebich (1992) state that the relations between Aboriginal women and the colonisers were a necessary part of survival. The initial invasion, and its associated dispossession of land, massacres and disease, posed serious threats to the daily existence of Aboriginal communities. Langton and Barry, concurring with Jebb and Haebich, suggest that Aboriginal women's liaisons with the colonisers should be seen as frontier resistance through which Aboriginal women assured the survival of themselves, their families and communities.

Early colonial documents indicate that colonisers regarded Aboriginal women as a means by which to harness the potential of Aboriginal society as a source of labour and, further, women's knowledge of land resources were the key to pastoral and economic success (Langton & Barry, 1998). This notion, Jebb and Haebich (1992) suggest, was implemented through the "forceful incorporation of Aboriginal people into various industries" (p. 23). According to Reynolds (1982), Aboriginal women worked as outdoor labourers, as nannies to station managers' children and as domestic help, while Aboriginal men undertook seasonal work, often away from the stations. Langton and Barry state that this practice, combined with government policies of protection, saw Aboriginal women undertake a vast range of community responsibilities.

Torney-Parlicki (2001), and similarly Barwick (1974), contextualise the eventual political emancipation achieved by Aboriginal women at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station. Both reveal the rebellious nature of the Coranderrk Aboriginal women who achieved remarkable social change and status in the late nineteenth century. Such achievements, it is alleged, were encouraged by Aboriginal men to accommodate their own needs. However, it was also true that Aboriginal men from Coranderrk were simultaneously mounting their own defence in the political domains of the broader colonising society.

Colonial invasion and the subsequent intrusion into Aboriginal society, in many instances, brought with it unprecedented challenges of negotiating power and constructing life-meaning and purpose for Aboriginal women. While many historical texts have claimed Aboriginal women as strong advocates for their communities, the

impact of the colonising society on their status as women and human beings should not be overlooked.

2.7 Aboriginal women's role and agency in the twentieth century

Contemporaneously, many Aboriginal women have taken the initiative to shape their own futures. Aboriginal historian, Huggins (1998), notes that in the first half of the twentieth century under the policy of protection, Aboriginal people were relocated to reserves where government officials closely monitored their movement. She further states that the policy of protection, combined with the depression period in Australia, effectively removed Aboriginal people from participation in the wider labour force. Significantly however, despite a life of subjugation and exploitation, Aboriginal women living under these adverse conditions "managed to retrieve their rightful and elevated position in Aboriginal society" (Huggins, 1998, p. 6).

According to Aboriginal academic Bin-Sallik (1989), the latter decades of the twentieth century witnessed a public renaissance of Aboriginal culture and the resurgence of Aboriginal activism. Aboriginal activism focused on, and challenged, the continuing oppression experienced by Aboriginal people through two centuries of White contact. Remarkably, as Larbalestier (1998) points out, Aboriginal women were prominent in these ameliorative initiatives, publicly demonstrating their leadership within their own communities, the wider Australian society and the international arena. Aboriginal male writer, Gilbert (1977), strongly verifies the prominent role of Aboriginal women in the Aboriginal movement in the latter half of the twentieth century stating, "[i]t seems to me that the women have taken precedence in meetings. I feel that women are going to, more and more, lead the movement" (p. 116). Grimshaw

(1981) notes that, in Australia, Aboriginal women's reformative activism paralleled the development of the White feminist movement. However, it is important to note, as Grimshaw contends, that the White feminist movement and Aboriginal women's activism emanated from different sources.

2.7.1 First wave feminists and Aboriginal women

Of frontier relations between White Australian women and Aboriginal women, female anthropologist Tonkinson (1988) writes:

> No Aboriginal woman whose life-history I have elicited has reported anything that could be described as friendship based on equality with a white woman. Rather, there are relationships of mistress and servant, custodian and charge, teacher and pupil, occasionally mentor and protégé, or co-workers. Often they were rivals […] That white men had access to both did nothing to bridge the gap; rather it probably contributed to the perpetuation of it and to a compounding of the hypocrisy of colonial relations. (pp. 38-39)

Early colonial relations between Aboriginal and White women were strained. Historically, the status of Aboriginal women was greatly diminished in the early colonial period with the imposition of new political, economic, social and cultural systems (Pettman, 1992). Anthropological claims of Aboriginal women's oppression in 'traditional' tribal life was seen by White women as "the evolutionary precursor of contemporary forms of patriarchal power within white society" (Paisley, 1996, p. 111) of which they were now a part. Paisley (1996) asserts that middle-class White feminists of the early twentieth century drew on the androcentric theories of Aboriginal women's

alleged oppressive experiences in tribal life to justify their expressed interest in improving the conditions and status of Aboriginal women.

Paisley (1996) claims vacillating support for Aboriginal women among White women during the development of the Australian feminist movement. Paisley states that early twentieth century White Australian feminists, Mary Bennett and Constance Cooke, advanced a specific interest in improving the conditions and elevating the status of Aboriginal women, which they believed had deteriorated through the imposition of patriarchal Eurocentric Australian law and policy. Bennett and Cooke repudiated state and social science claims of Aboriginal people's inevitable extinction. Opposing such claims, they "anticipated a future for Aboriginal people as culturally significant members of the Australian nation state" (Paisley, 1996, p. 108) and, accordingly, mounted a feminist critique of government Aboriginal policy. These early White Australian feminist activists advocated a responsibility for Aboriginal welfare, specifically focusing on the removal of children, freedom of choice to marry and the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by White Australian men (Paisley, 1996). They further advocated for the rights of Aboriginal people to participate in "self-determining economic and social relations with white society" (Paisley, 1996, p. 112). Huggins (1998) reveals that Aboriginal women interpreted this interest in Aboriginal affairs as an extension of the paternalistic attitudes and assimilationist practices experienced by Aboriginal people as a result of British colonial enterprise.

Simultaneously, women and men representing the social ideology of that time, and hence the interests of 'White Australia', lashed out at feminist activists contesting Aboriginal policy and, in particular, Aboriginal women's rights. Women of this ilk

contentiously argued that, in critiquing Aboriginal policy, these feminist activists failed to understand that "Aboriginal society was a remnant of the primitive world and should be preserved on reserves" (Paisley, 1996). Attending the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in 1930, Cooke continued to advocate the agenda of change for Aboriginal women, vehemently demanding Aboriginal women be accorded citizenship status (Paisley, 1996). Paisley (1996) credits these early feminists as instrumental to the development of Aboriginal affairs and the subsequent policies of protection and assimilation.

It is evident that first wave feminists actively pursued an agenda for change, addressing what they perceived to be the oppression of Aboriginal women. Noteworthy points to be made are, firstly, White feminist perceptions of oppression were not necessarily those of Aboriginal women; that is, Aboriginal women viewed their source of oppression as being that of the racist and oppressive nature of the dominant society, not Aboriginal men. Secondly, these feminists utilised an oppressive framework in the analysis of Aboriginal women's oppression by including them in a White model of resistance. Thirdly, the ameliorative solutions to the oppression of Aboriginal women, in this case protection and assimilation, were themselves oppressive by their very nature.

Power Dynamics between White Feminists and Aboriginal Women

The largely 'White' modern feminist movement was conceived out of resistance to hundreds of years of patriarchy embodied in the capitalist system and the nuclear family unit (Pritchard Hughes, 1994). In Australia, White feminism has been critiqued by Aboriginal authors, such as O'Shane (1976), Huggins (1998), Larbalestier (1998)

and Moreton-Robinson (2000), as an inadequate and inappropriate application for Aboriginal women. Huggins provides a very blunt and confronting critique of the role of the White feminist movement's continuing oppression of Aboriginal women. She points out that the most powerful criticism of White feminists centres on the omission and distortion of the experiences of Aboriginal women as an ethnic group.

It is argued by authors such as Paisley (1996) that, historically, White feminists engaged the interests of Aboriginal women. While such interests are validated by historical accounts, acknowledgement of conflicting interests and social positioning between White feminists and Aboriginal women has not been realised. Aboriginal women, such as Huggins (1998) and Moreton-Robinson (2000), have argued that Aboriginal women and White women exist in separate sets of power relations and experience realities far removed from each other. Aboriginal woman activist and historian, Huggins (1998), expresses her view of the power relations between White feminists and Aboriginal women:

> […] a lot of Aboriginal women don't participate fully or don't have anything to do with the white women's movement here in Australia, because they see it as assimilationist and they haven't yet given us the respect and dignity that we deserve as women in this country. (p. 62)

Furthermore, Huggins accused White Australian feminists of further oppression by "offering to raise Aboriginal women to the lofty heights" (p. 74) of their position. Therefore, it is not surprising that Aboriginal academic Moreton-Robinson (2000) contends that intersubjective relations between White women and Aboriginal women

did not emanate from a commonality of knowledge and experiences, or mutual reciprocity, but rather are situated in a juxtaposition of distinct sets of historical, cultural, social and material circumstances. This intersubjective relationship, Moreton-Robinson argues, is inextricably linked to the "exercising of white race privilege derived from colonisation" (2000, p. 95).

A Critique of White Feminism by Aboriginal Women

Moreton-Robinson (2000) claims the fundamental White feminist concept of gender equality, through the perspectives of Aboriginal women, differs from those of White women because of various cultural, social, political and historical factors. Consequently, over the past three decades, White feminist notions of patriarchy and homogeneity amongst women have drawn considerable attention, and been consistently critiqued by women of colour, as for example African American feminists hooks (1989) and Hill Collins (2000) and, in Australia, by Huggins (1998) and Moreton-Robinson (2000). Oppositional critiques of feminist knowledge projected by Aboriginal feminists claim that 'women', as expounded by White feminism to imply universal unity and similarity of female experience, fails to address the diversity of women's experience. In the 1970s and 1980s, Aboriginal women protested that the basic tenets espoused by White feminism was antithetical to their needs and rendered them invisible (Huggins, 1998; Larbalestier, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Larbalestier (1998), Eveline (1998), Huggins (1998) and Moreton-Robinson (2000) all argue that Aboriginal women's concerns and struggles have been marginalised, slighted and even ignored within the agenda of the White women's movement. Debating the relevance of the White feminist movement to the positioning

of Aboriginal women as Australian citizens, O'Shane, in her 1976 article in the feminist journal *Refractory Girl*, inquires whether the "aims of white women were necessarily those of black women" (p. 34). Miller (1993), in response to her mother's 1976 article, states that White feminists had done nothing to include Aboriginal women in the feminist movement in the two decades since her mother's paper was published and, therefore, remained irrelevant to the interests of Aboriginal women. Miller summed up the relevance of the White feminist movement to Aboriginal women by writing, "[a] movement is relevant when it is fitting, pertinent or applicable to the participating individuals" (p. 66). Substantiating Miller's claims, Pettman (1992) argues that second-wave feminists were typically "white, middle class and of the dominant culture" (p. 152) and validated that experience as being a universal reality for all women. Almost a decade later, Moreton-Robinson contends that 'Whiteness' still remains ingrained in White feminism.

It is apparent, as Pettman (1992) contests, that the White understanding of women's issues involving gender equality, access to resources and employment and anti-discrimination legislation is too narrow an agenda in the Aboriginal context. It neglects too many social tensions that impact Aboriginal women, such as genocide, land and citizenship dispossession, stolen generations and mass incarceration (Huggins, 1998; Larbalestier, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). In this way, Aboriginal women's critiques contend that White feminism is an extension of colonisation. Representative of this point, O'Shane (1976), argues that elements of White feminism are not only oppressive and irrelevant to Aboriginal women's needs, but are also detrimental to Aboriginal culture. The detrimental effects to Aboriginal culture, alluded to by O'Shane, demonstrate the heightened consciousness of Aboriginal women regarding the

potentially divisive qualities of White feminism in terms of the Aboriginal movement (Eisenstein, 1996; Grimshaw, 1981). O'Shane continues, with urgings directed toward the women's movement, to "take head-on the struggle against racism, which is the greatest barrier to our progress" (p. 33). Huggins (1998), too, notes that there is "little apparent recognition of the extent to which racism in Australia or its continuing devastating effects on Aboriginal women *and* men, and an ignorance of the complexities involved in asking Aboriginal women to act politically apart from their men" (Reade, 1996, p. 121). Despite differences in life experiences and priorities between Aboriginal women and White women, Grimshaw (1981) states, "[t]hey [Aboriginal women] still experience a 'feminine consciousness' and solidarity with other [Aboriginal] women" (p. 94).

The Politics of Difference

The concept of difference has most commonly been used negatively and divisively in many critiques of feminism. Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Huggins (1998) critique White middle-class feminism from an Aboriginal post-colonial feminist perspective, not only challenging androcentric and Eurocentric consciousness, but also urging the perspectives of such thoughts to be incorporated in White feminist discourse. To this end, Huggins and Moreton-Robinson claim that White feminists are themselves parties to the same forms of oppression that they allegedly challenge. In doing so, they re-examine and re-evaluate the feminist canon. The focus of Huggins on these issues indicates an agenda of reconciliation that, in this instance, calls for alliance with White feminists as part of the solution to Aboriginal women's oppression (Huggins, 1998). Even so, she still concurs with her contemporaries and insists that collaboration between Aboriginal women and White women can not occur until White power and racism are

addressed. The views of other women of colour correspond with Huggins and Moreton-Robinson and recognise that criticism of White feminism should not diminish the efficacy of feminism. Instead, they should work to incorporate additional discourses that deal with difference within feminism (Hill Collins, 1990, 2000; hooks, 1981, 1989).

2.8 The contemporary circumstances of Aboriginal women: a snapshot

The positive contributions of Aboriginal women in a contemporary world have raised the profile, and given prominence, to issues at hand for their communities. In large measure, the way Aboriginal women articulate their particular sense of agency is given meaning by their performance as full participants and contributors to both Aboriginal society and White society. Throughout the history of colonisation, Aboriginal women have mobilised along and across gender lines and cultural boundaries to negotiate stakes for Aboriginal communities. They have been articulate in making political decisions in progressing Aboriginal circumstances by communicating the position of Aboriginal people, rejecting colonisation, engaging in political activities, rejecting decisions that negatively affect Aboriginal people and caring for family and community. These activities are given expression through Aboriginal women's movements organising in women's groups and as individuals. However, these well-springs of Aboriginal women's strength are matched by Aboriginal people's experiential circumstances that reflect vulnerable demographics. As such, a diversity of contemporary circumstances is evident in the demographic profile of Aboriginal populations.

The historical circumstances of colonisation in Australia played a significant role in the decline of the Aboriginal population, their cultural practices and their socio-

economic and political status. Political developments and changing social attitudes have, more recently, led to increased public identification of Aboriginal people and, thus, more accurately reported demographics in census counts. Moral accountability and increased attention directed toward the plight of Aboriginal people has been more regularly reported as a result of the conduct of government-sanctioned research in an endeavour to 'close the gap' between the quality of life experienced by Aboriginal Australians and the quality of life experienced by White Australians. Even so, micro level demographics are not always accurate or available for Aboriginal populations as a discrete group and, thus, distinctions are rarely made between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations; instead the two groups are often represented as one homogenous population group identified as 'Indigenous' Australians. The accuracy of information is compounded by increasing levels of intermarriages. At the turn of the twenty-first century, 40 percent of Indigenous households were mixed (Altman, 2001).

2.8.1 Demographics

As at 2006, Indigenous Australians constituted 2.5 percent (517, 200 people) of the total Australian population. Of these, 90 percent of people identified as Aboriginal, 4 percent as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 6 percent as Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008a). Of the entire Indigenous population, only 12 percent spoke Indigenous languages at home (ABS, 2008a). Unlike non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians reflect a considerably young population, with a median age of 21 years, compared to 37 years for the non-Indigenous population. A further breakdown of these statistics showed that 37 percent of Indigenous people were aged less than 15 years, compared with only 19 percent of non-Indigenous people (ABS, 2008a). This statistical indicator points toward a need for a

specific focus on Indigenous child and youth developmental services. Figure 2.1 (below) provides a clear comparative indication of the distribution of age and gender across the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian population.

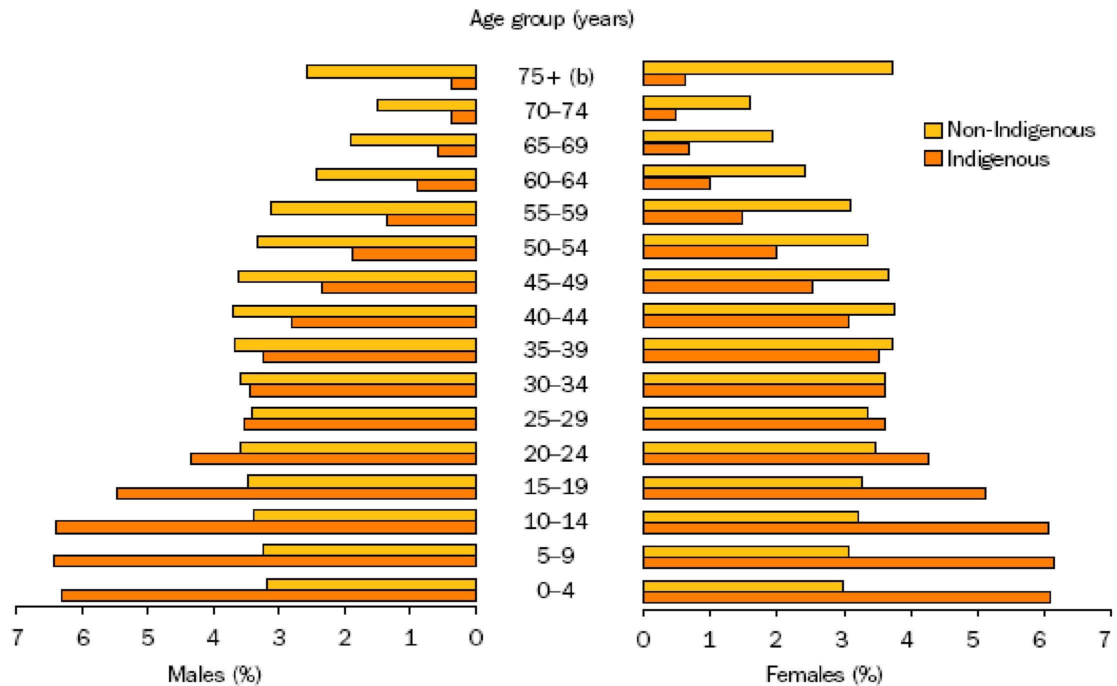

Figure 2.1 Statistical information of the Indigenous population (June 2006)[1]

The ABS reported that data collated as of June 2006 indicated a geographic distribution of Indigenous Australians in which 29 percent lived in New South Wales, 28 percent in Queensland, 15 percent in Western Australia, 13 percent in the Northern Territory, 5 percent in South Australia and 4 percent or less in other states and the Australian Capital Territory (ABS, 2008a). Figure 2.2 (below) provides a pictorial representation of the distribution of the Indigenous population.

[1] **Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2008c)

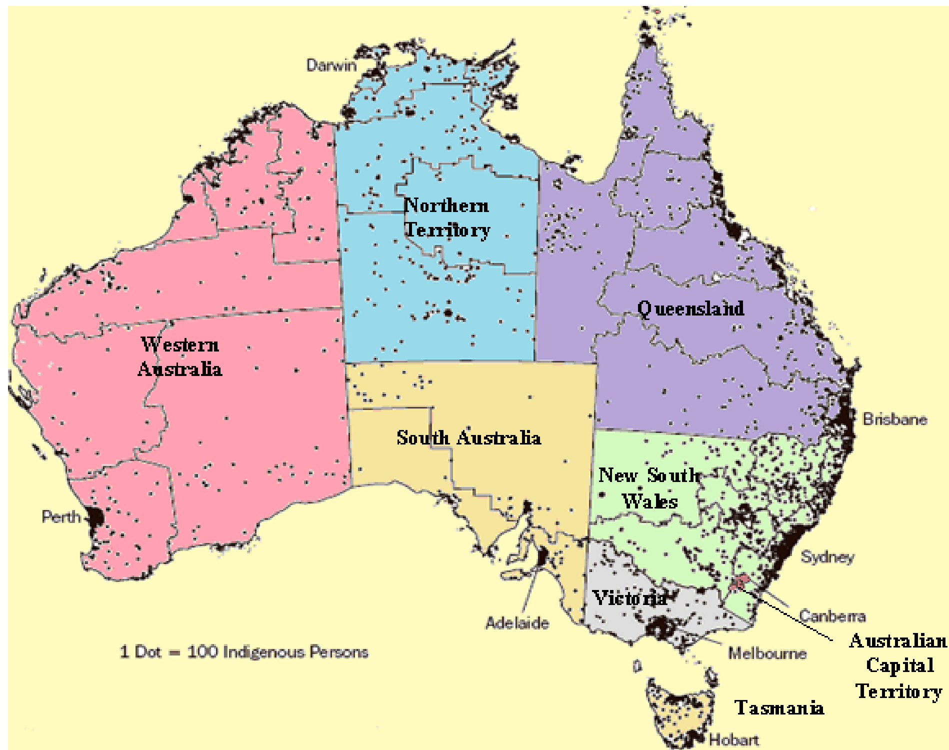

Figure 2.2 Population distribution of the Indigenous population (June 2006)[2]

2.8.2 Key socio-economic and health indicators

Substantial disparities between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians exist across a multitude of key socio-economic and health indicators. Aboriginal people experience considerable disadvantage in comparison to the non-Indigenous population (ABS, 2008a). The social determinants of health are decisive headline indicators that influence life circumstances and include income levels, education, employment and the quality of the physical and social environment (ABS, 2008a). Critically, life expectancy, viewed as an indicator for the long-term health and wellbeing of a population, is approximately seventeen years below that of the non-Indigenous population for Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2008a). Similarly, other headline indicators of health and

[2] **Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2008c)

wellbeing, such as disability and chronic disease, are present in the non-remote living Indigenous adult population at twice the rate of non-Indigenous adults (ABS, 2008a).

Secondary and post-secondary educations are viewed as key contributors in self-development and in gaining employment; thus alleviating poverty. Those individuals neither studying nor working are predisposed to experiencing long-term disadvantage (ABS, 2008a). In 2006, non-Indigenous students were twice as likely to go on to secondary and post-secondary education as were their Indigenous counterparts, while Indigenous people were three times more likely to be unemployed than non-Indigenous people (ABS, 2008a). Consequently, in the period 2002 and 2004-05, gross household income for Indigenous adults ranged from $308 to $340 compared to $618 for non-Indigenous adults (ABS, 2008a).

Deficiencies across a range of social-economic and health indicators contribute to Indigenous people living under conditions of severe adversity. Overcrowded housing and alcohol and substance misuse also contribute to these vulnerable circumstances (ABS, 2008). Indigenous women living in non-remote areas reported long-term ‘risky’ to ‘high risk’ alcohol consumption. Almost one-third of the Indigenous population in non-remote areas reported illicit substance use. Indigenous populations were 50 percent more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to smoke (ABS, 2008a). From 2005 to 2006, Indigenous children were almost four times more likely to be subjected to abuse or neglect than other children in Australia (ABS, 2008a). During the period 2004-05, 15 percent of Indigenous people were victims of homicide and 16 percent homicide offenders; they were also hospitalised for assault at seventeen times the rate of non-Indigenous people (ABS, 2008a). Significantly, Indigenous females were hospitalised

from assaults at forty-four times the rate of non-Indigenous females (ABS, 2008a). Thus, the Indigenous population experiences significantly higher rates of representation in the criminal justice system—thirteen times more likely to be incarcerated while Indigenous juveniles were twenty-three times more likely to be detained (ABS, 2008a).

Improvements were evidenced in some areas, in particular, in that of Indigenous child health (ABS, 2008a). Even so, mortality rates for Indigenous babies remain two to three times higher than non-Indigenous babies. Indigenous babies are twice as likely to have low birth weights, four times more likely to be hospitalised for preventable diseases and injuries, and a high prevalence of hearing conditions, arising from chronic ear infections, is evident (ABS, 2008a).

On the other hand, some indicators rated highly for Indigenous people. A massive 90 percent of the Indigenous population reported that they sustain support from close social networks, 49 percent stated they participated in sport or physical recreation activities in the last twelve months and 28 percent had undertaken voluntary work in the last twelve months (ABS, 2008a). Nevertheless, disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations remain critical.

Necessarily, it can be ascertained beyond doubt that headline indicators influencing quality of life and wellbeing for Aboriginal women, and Aboriginal people more generally, indicate that these demographics are vulnerable and well below the standards of other populations in Australia. It is well-documented and statistically recorded that Aboriginal people experience lower income and standards of living, poorer outcomes in health, education and employment and the justice system.

Compounding this position, they are also affected by an array of social determinants of health including "[…] State violence and intergenerational trauma, imbalanced power relations and limited access to services within the mainstream population, and systemised and individualised discrimination and racism" (Henderson, Robson, Cox, Dukes, Tsey & Haswell, 2007). It is therefore not surprising that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is committed to 'closing this gap'.

2.9 Summary

There is negligible information provided about gender relations in pre-contact Aboriginal society. Accordingly, it is difficult to distinguish what is ethnocentric and/or androcentric bias and what constitutes and represents pre-contact relations and practice. At one end of the scale, gendered relations in Aboriginal societies have been characterised as autonomous, while at the other extreme, they are considered intensely patriarchal. Based on a synthesis of historical, descriptive and interpretative research, Aboriginal society was, and in the most part appears to remain, characterised by harmonic balance in social spheres. Studies indicate that Aboriginal women are, in large measure, acknowledged, valued and respected as individuals for their contributions and participation in all aspects of life within their own communities. This is not to say that Aboriginal women experience power and influence that transcends that of Aboriginal men. To the contrary, these proportions of power and influence evidenced in Aboriginal societies resemble that of balanced reciprocity. That is, while Aboriginal men and women operate in separate domains, these roles are not perceived as hierarchal but contribute to the equilibrium of the world and, thus, the wellbeing of the whole community. Further evidence indicates Aboriginal women's status in Aboriginal society

strengthens with knowledge and age and is consistent with other members of Aboriginal society.

Historically, there is a distinct lack of commentary regarding Aboriginal women and their actions. What is documented is myriad constructions of Aboriginal womanhood that have been largely grounded in anachronistic and androcentric discourses. Androcentric anthropological theorising of Aboriginal women was mobilised to produce visions of gender asymmetry in Aboriginal society. However, feminist anthropological constructions of Aboriginal women revealed very different perspectives and ideologies of gender relations and roles present within Aboriginal societies. Feminist accounts share a more richly textured view of Aboriginal gender relations. What may be discerned, as feminist anthropologists pointed out, is that Aboriginal women were active and influential participants in the spiritual, economic, social and political lives of Aboriginal communities.

In considering the critiques of many anthropological studies, the inadequacies of White research methodologies and the subsequent contradictions and misrepresentations of Aboriginal women have also been highlighted. It appears allegations claiming an intensely patriarchal Aboriginal society emanated from the sexist and racist underpinnings of that era, that is, patriarchal colonial enterprise and Social Darwinism. Therefore, the larger proportions of literature relating to gender relations in Aboriginal societies are regarded as containing a gender bias. Feminist critiques of androcentric representations of the status of Aboriginal women have, to some extent, redressed that male bias, although female Aboriginal theorists now advance critiques of those feminist interpretations.

Traditionally, Aboriginal women were framed through androcentric Eurocentric supremacist discourses and, accordingly, have been portrayed by many contradictory images. Such images may be viewed as an oppressive force, which contemporaneously confines Aboriginal women within the broader Australian society. Today, Aboriginal women are resisting this image. Androcentric analyses hinder accurate interpretations of Aboriginal women's status. The feminist re-interpretation of androcentric ethnographic constructions of Aboriginal women provides a deeper understanding of the contemporary position of Aboriginal women in Aboriginal society. Even so, condemnation of feminist re-interpretation remains in Aboriginal women's critiques of methodological approaches.

A number of strands of literature relevant to the contemporary position of Aboriginal women were reviewed. The insights gleaned from an examination of the socio-economic and health circumstances of Aboriginal women provide conceptual linkages for understanding their constitution as social actors that expanded on the possibilities for change and action in an environment in which they were able to reproduce and transform historical and contemporary socio-economic, political and health conditions.

Chapter 3

Research Design

3.1 Introduction

> In many projects the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination. (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 128)

In the spirit of sharing Tuhiwai Smith's commentary, I place much significance on the writing of the current and ensuing chapters, which illuminate the research design of the present study. I most certainly anticipate that this research will provide the conceptual stepping-stones towards understanding what is valuable and relevant to the needs of Aboriginal women to transcend survival in a contemporary world and thus "lead one small step further towards self-determination" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 128) for Aboriginal people.

I devote a considerably large proportion of this thesis to the explication of the rationale of the research design and its application, to make explicit from the outset the trustworthiness of this research endeavour. I also find favour in locating the research design near the beginning of the thesis so that readers may critically assess the

remainder of the study based on methodological insights that guided the production of knowledge. Without going into too much detail here, I anticipate that the description and insights of my particular research journey, detailed in the ensuing chapters, will bring into full relief how I achieved the desire to produce anti-colonial research using the tools of the colonisers and adapting them to suit the purpose of the research undertaking.

In the previous chapters, the current study was introduced as grounded theory research. This chapter elucidates the research design, the philosophical substructure and knowledge building processes that position me in the context of the research and the set of guidelines linking theoretical paradigms to strategies of inquiry and methods of data generation and transformation. It begins with a concise discussion of social research conducted *on*, not *with*, Aboriginal people to contextualise the research trajectory taken in this study. A brief background of qualitative research introduces the approach. Following on is a consideration of my epistemological positioning as researcher; reflexively elaborated on is my insider/outsider status in the research enterprise and, in particular, offers the rationale and implications of the research position on the overall research design. A discussion of the theoretical perspective assumed in the study leads into a rationale for methodological considerations.

3.2 Averting the western gaze

The words of Tuhiwai Smith relate the continuing problematic of conducting research in Aboriginal contexts. She states:

> Research has not been neutral in its objectification of the Other. Objectification is a process of dehumanization. In its clear links to Western knowledge research has generated a particular relationship to indigenous peoples which continues to be problematic. (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 39)

In the past, White researchers largely initiated and carried out research *on* Aboriginal people as either part of the curiosity of the 'exotic Other' or in the interests of colonising practices. Consequently, for Aboriginal people, White research methodologies continue to be largely perceived with suspicion and as part of historically oppressive practices. Because interpretation occurred from a White ideological platform, the resulting knowledge produced fragmented truths and realities, distorted histories and identities, assimilative standards and practices and cultural and intellectual appropriation (Irabinna Rigney, 1999; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Therefore, an urgent need exists for structural change in current practices for conducting Aboriginal research. This change involves simultaneously attending the deconstruction of hegemonic White research projects and the reconstruction of anti-colonial projects (Mohanty, 1991). The reconstruction of the latter should embrace an ethics of practice such that the research group and their concerns take priority in investigation by foregrounding Aboriginal voices, knowledge and worldviews in the research endeavour.

However, there is no way of escaping the reality that, in an Aboriginal Australian context, 'research' is itself an instrument and product of the colonisers. Conceptualisation of how to undertake research, for me, brought with it some anxious moments of resistance in the first instance. I was exploring the nuanced elements of personal agency demonstrated in the developmental narratives of Aboriginal women. I

asked myself how one moves from White research scholarship to anti-colonial practice in the search for this knowledge. I pondered how my methodology would differ from conventional methods of research; after all, I was using current White research practices. I did not wish to replace the errors of colonial practice with the errors of another; as Dei (2005) articulates it, "[w]e must not replace the hegemonic order with one that suffocates life and does not allow each of us to flourish in ways that we may not even be able to begin to imagine" (p. 12). For me, as an Aboriginal researcher, an internal dialectic of deviance evolved at an intellectual level as I began to consider the realities of operationalising the research act with Aboriginal women. In an effort to relieve this personal tension, I took solace in Tuhiwai Smith's expectations of the research process and, like many Aboriginal researchers before me, I approached this research process, initially, with a consciousness informed by an Aboriginal woman's standpoint.

As a point of departure, I once again turned to the writing of Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who states:

> Decolonization […] does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes. (p. 39)

Tuhiwai Smith understands that the decolonisation of research methodologies requires more than a simple shift in conceptualisation of the process. Indeed, we need to build a coalition of knowledge that has practical application and vision for Aboriginal

people and, in the process, transcend “the bland politics of inclusion to a new politics of transparency and accountability” (Dei, 2005, p. 5). Anti-colonial research needs to move beyond theory to inform the ethics of practice and the practice of ethics in everyday action. This is not to diminish the significance of theory. To the contrary, at a conceptual level, research presented in an anti-colonial framework must problematise both colonial relations and practice and create a critical link between theory and practice (Dei, 2005). At this level of understanding, the term ‘colonial’ connotes notions of imposition and control as opposed to foreign (Dei, 2005).

The politics of knowledge production was also considered, specifically, the power relations of knowledge production as fundamental to the purpose of anti-colonial research. Sarantakos (2005) simply asserts “research produces knowledge, and knowledge is power […] it follows that controlling research means controlling power” (p. 13). I began to view research as an opportunity for the participants and me to become ‘controllers of knowledge’, or perhaps, more appropriately, the constructors of new and alternate discourses and the deconstructors of old (Sarantakos, 2005) and move “one small step further towards self-determination” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 128). Simply, we become the authors of our own lives, both the subjects and agents of theories of our own realities. Moreton-Robinson (2000) also provided a moment of clarity and encouragement, stating “[*t*]*o know* an Indigenous constructed social world you must experience it from within: to *know about* such a world means you are imposing a conceptual framework from outside” (p. 185). While a vast array of complexities exists in any discussion of the nature of power, it was these revelations that were the genesis of my thinking as I attempted to reconcile my thoughts and

accommodate the internal relentless pressure about a way forward in embarking on this project.

In recent years, Indigenous researchers worldwide have focussed on decolonising conventional research methodologies by strongly asserting and testing the validity of their own diverse and unique ontologies and epistemologies in the construction of knowledge. It was not the intention in this research project to develop innovative methodologies to challenge and/or reject White systems of knowledge that largely influence my ways of researching. Instead, the present research makes use of Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) notion of decolonising methodologies, in that this study is focussed on "centering our concerns and world views and them coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (p. 39). The study was designed to gain insights into Aboriginal women's narratives of agency with a view to developing a substantive theory of the underlying process. I needed to look beyond a simple interpretation of Aboriginal women's experiences and concrete realities and 'listen' to what was not expressed to gain a more intimate understanding of the research phenomenon. A critical assessment of the circumstances under which the women's lived realities were constructed and experienced, including the power relations inherent in their performance of agency and their subsequent negotiation of new subject positions, was required. It was critical that the research phenomenon "be studied from the point of view of the historically and culturally situated individual" (Denzin, 1997, p. 87). This study is therefore located in the broad paradigm of qualitative research. More specifically, it makes use of a constructivist grounded theory methodology informed by critical and poststructuralist feminist perspectives.

3.3 Rationale for a qualitative approach

Qualitative research pursues rich, detailed, insightful understandings of specific social contexts, the results of which are descriptive rather than predictive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). From the outset, the current research was conceptualised as a qualitative study. A multi-disciplinary approach best describes this study, drawing from a range of feminist and grounded theory practice principles. The primary method of data generation was life-history narrative interviews because it was paramount to learn about the realities and behaviours of Aboriginal women from the generation of richly textured data spoken from the hearts of Aboriginal women themselves. Further, it was critical to enable documentation of behaviours across time to identify the process inherent in the women's performance of agency in the everyday. Direct reporting by the women allowed this documentation to occur. It is in these data that the underlying processes of agency were revealed through a grounded theory analysis.

Grounded theory was considered in opposition to the many other qualitative methodologies, for example phenomenonology, to provide the best means by which to achieve the intentions of this research; to develop a substantive theory of how Aboriginal women exercise and negotiate power in their developmental narratives. The particular processes of working with the data, as espoused in grounded theory, ensured the development of *theory* grounded in the studied life as opposed to the thick *description* produced by, for example, ethnographic approaches to research (Charmaz, 2000). A grounded theory approach provided a much-needed balance for the richly textured descriptive narratives of the women's ways of knowing, being and doing. Further, the capacity to explore the shared processes of development of personal agency

for the women while simultaneously maintaining the perspectives of each as individuals was made available.

3.3.1 The development of qualitative research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) broadly define qualitative research as:

> […] a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world […] turn the world into a series of representations […] qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (p. 3)

The underlying philosophy of qualitative research "stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 13). A qualitative approach has the potential to produce both exploratory and descriptive knowledge, simultaneously directing emphasis away from more traditional and often privileged causal models and explanations in research (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2006).

Specific to the study of social relations, the field of qualitative research has experienced rapid growth and expansion in recent decades and owes this increased interest to "the pluralisation of life worlds" (Flick, 2006, p. 11), which continues to

confront researchers with new social contexts and perspectives. Subsequently, a proliferation of interest in qualitative research has engendered a vast number of sensitising principles and practices that continuously evolve with current trends in society and in the social sciences (Flick, 2006). Because qualitative research has developed in keeping with the rapid pace of social evolution, it has emerged as a complex and contested field in the twenty-first century. No single prescription exists for the conduct of research in a field that knows no boundaries and, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) claim, there is an increasing "embarrassment of [methodological] choices" (p. 18) that abound in the associated literature.

3.3.2 Eight historical moments in qualitative research: locating the study

The apparent flexibility and multiplicity of qualitative research approaches was particularly attractive in terms of application to the context of this research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005) reviewed the development of qualitative research traditions in historical terms. An overview of their review is presented to enable contextualisation of the methodological orientations of the current research. This overview intends to be foundational; locating the study rather than being methodologically prescriptive.

The Traditional Period (1900—1950): Positivism

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) make specific identifications of eight different phases or 'moments' through which qualitative research evolved and "that overlap and simultaneously operate in the present" (p. 3). By their own admission, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state that although these phases are "somewhat artificial" (p. 2), they provide a useful means by which to understand the temporal development of qualitative research paradigms. The beginning of the first historical moment of qualitative research

starts at the turn of the twentieth century and progresses until shortly after World War II (1900—1950). This phase, identified as the *Traditional Period,* relates to the era of ethnographic research beginning with that of Malinowski and the sociological research of the Chicago School, which established qualitative research as significant in studying and understanding "human group life" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.1). During the *Traditional Period*, ethnographic researchers were interested in the 'Other', the 'exotic' and in relatively objective description and interpretation; positivist leanings.

Positivism is premised on the assumption that the social sciences can be as scientific as the 'natural' sciences (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). It is a broad perspective incorporating a range of theories that disregard qualitative methods and adhere to a deductive approach to research, that is, hypotheses are generated from theory and tested in research. Positivists most often prefer "quantitative methods, to measure things [...] structuralist explanations and avoid interpretivist explanations that refer to human intentions and emotions" (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 15). Epistemologically speaking, positivism holds to a naïve realist position concerning reality and its perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 11). This implies the positivist tradition maintains that there is a reality 'out there' that is "observable and independent of human consciousness" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 13) and that can be studied, captured and understood through "the application of methods of the natural sciences" (Bryman, 2008, p. 13). These objective approaches and assumptions, challenged late in the following moment of qualitative research development, had no grounds for connecting to the interests of the current study or my epistemological position.

The Modernist Period or Golden Age (1950—1970): Postpositivism

The second historical moment locates the development of grounded theory in what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe as the *Modernist Period or Golden Age* (1950—1970); a period associated with emerging postpositivist arguments. However, the *Modernist Period* was characterised by both positivist and postpositivist arguments. This era, initially typified by the rise of sociological research methods, for the most part was concerned with "improving the accuracy of measurement and the rigorous testing of theory" (Blaikie, 2007, p. 99) to the exclusion of concepts and hypotheses relevant to the topic under investigation. Thus prioritised, during the initial stages of this period, were quantitative methods rooted in positivism. However, challenges to the *a priori* theoretical orientations and objectivism of sociologists increasingly emerged (Blaikie, 2007; Charmaz, 2003; Creswell, 1998). Approaches developed that were less modest in their claims; value-free and objective research spoke of "probability rather than certainty, claims a certain level of objectivity rather than absolute objectivity, and seeks to approximate the truth rather than aspiring to grasp it in its totality or essence" (Crotty, 1998, p. 29). Approaches holding positions that accept degrees of uncertainty and unpredictability are postpositivist in nature (Crotty, 1998).

The development of grounded theory in the 1960s resulted as part of the challenge to the 'hegemony' of positivism (Sarantakos, 2005). Postpositivist's critique of positivist methods saw them re-orient their methodological approaches to research in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions and methods. The co-originators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967), developed an approach to research that had its genesis in both Strauss' orientation to symbolic interactionism and ethnography and the positivist leanings of Glaser (Charmaz, 2006). Hence, grounded theory,

spawned from the mixed methodological insights of its proponents, integrated quantitative methods with the qualitative tradition of symbolic interactionism. Dey (1999) succinctly describes the premise and intentions of Glaser and Strauss in the development of grounded theory. He states that "the marriage of these two traditions [...] was intended to harness the logic and rigor of quantitative methods to the rich interpretive insights of the symbolic interactionist tradition" (Dey, 1999, p. 22).

Symbolic Interactionism

The epistemological foundation of grounded theory commonly links to symbolic interactionism; a way of knowing that holds much relevance to the current study. Although Mead's student, Blumer, is often credited with originating the term and used as the reference (Jeon, 2004; Joas, 2000), the work of Charles Darwin in behaviourism and pragmatism influenced Mead, the principle developer of symbolic interactionism. Fundamentally, pragmatists believe humans actively interpret their environment according to its usefulness rather than responding to it and, therefore, focus on human action (Charon, 2007). Behaviourists understand humans "in terms of *what they do* rather than who they are" (Charon, 2007, p. 35). Symbolic interactionists thus hold that "[*t*]*o understand human action, we must focus on social interaction, human thinking, definition of the situation, the present, and the active nature of the human being*" (Charon, 2007, p.30).

Blumer (1969) propounds three basic premises underscoring symbolic interactionism:

> The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that things have for them […] The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows […] The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with things he [or she] encounters. (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

However, Sandstrom, Martin and Fine (2000) state six other implicit assumptions that support the philosophical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism. These assumptions are:

- *People are unique creatures because of their ability to use symbols*.
- *People become distinctively human through their interaction*.
- *People are conscious and self-reflexive beings who actively shape their own behaviour.*
- *People are purposive creatures who act in and toward situations.*
- *Human society consists of people engaging in symbolic interaction.*
- *To understand people's social acts, we need to use methods that enable us to discern the meanings they attribute to these acts.* (p. 218)

Thus, people are conscious self-reflexive beings who engage in social processes. Socialisation enables people to learn the meanings of objects, including moral principles and ideologies, and develop and redefine those meanings as they relate to the individual through self-reflective action. Symbolic interactionists understand that meaning is negotiated and constructed through interactions with others through the symbols around

them, thereby constituting individuals as active participants in constructing their realities (Charon, 2007). This view allows for the possibility of human agency, a critical concept in this study. Hence, human action, interaction and meaning construction in the everyday are of specific interest for those subscribing to the tradition of symbolic interactionism; the individual and their environment "inextricably linked through reciprocal relationships" (Benzies & Allen, 2001, p. 542). Because ideas and behaviour are dynamic and dependent on individual interpretation, the symbolic interaction perspective places emphasis on process (Benzies & Allen, 2001). Indeed, the process of Aboriginal women's performance of agency is the defining research question of the current study. Symbolic interactionism supports not only understanding the underlying process of Aboriginal women's agency but also assists in understanding the meaning attached to this process and how their interpretations and interactions influence and transform behaviour.

Grounded theory maintains links with symbolic interactionism in its focus on process and human behaviour. It also furthers the reach of symbolic interactionism by raising possibilities to include macro level analysis. It adds a focus on the historical and structural conditions in which human behaviour occurs (McDonald, 2001). Critical theories, including feminism, are also seen as "emerging voices in symbolic interactionism" (Sandstrom, Martin & Fine, 2000, p. 225) and are discussed later in this thesis.

Blurred Genres (1970—1986): Constructivist, Interpretivist and Critical Paradigms

Further along the continuum of 'historical moments' in qualitative research, the strengthening of the critical spirit that was postpositivism was followed by the *Blurred*

Genres, which spanned the third period from 1970 to 1986 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The quantitative/qualitative distinction became more pronounced during the *Modernist* and *Blurred Genres* phases of qualitative research development (Bryman, 2008). Various new interpretative perspectives also spanned these two eras, for example, “hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology, cultural studies and feminism” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). It was in this era that researchers became bricoleurs borrowing resources from various disciplines for critical interpretative theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This period was characterised by new and diverse theoretical orientations and paradigms and diverse ways of collecting and analysing data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The interpretivist paradigmatic developments significantly influenced the expansion of grounded theory, which eventually resulted in divergence from those methods propounded by the originators Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 2006).

The Crisis of Representation (1986—1990)

Following rapidly from the *Blurred Genres* were the *Crisis of Representation* (1986—1990), the experimental *Postmodern* period (1990—1995), *Postexperimental Inquiry* (1995—2000), the *Methodologically Contested Present* (2000—2004) and the current *Fractured Future* (2005—). During the period denoting the *Crisis of Representation*, theorists “called into question the issues of gender, class and race” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 16). However, while a number of paradigms and methods were now available to researchers during this time they “struggled with how to locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive texts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Researchers turned toward the humanities to learn “how to produce texts that refused to be read in simplistic, linear, and incontrovertible forms” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Yet others looked toward the social sciences for new social theories (Denzin & Lincoln,

2005). As a result, new thinking about knowledge construction and utility arose during this time and, as such, researchers challenged previous models of constructing meaning and truth, thus blurring the boundaries between text and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) insist that during this time "the erosion of classic norms in anthropology (objectivism, complicity with colonialism, social life structured by fixed rituals and customs, ethnographies as monuments to a culture) was complete" (p. 10). In particular, the separation of the researcher from the research and the researched, and questions regarding issues of validity, reliability and objectivity were foregrounded and led to theoretical perspectives such as feminism and poststructuralism.

Postmodern (1990—1995), Postexperimental Inquiry (1995—2000), the Methodologically Contested Present (2000—2004) and Fractured Future (2005—)

Superseding the *Crisis of Representation* were the *Postmodern and Postexperimental* periods that continued to move away from foundational research criteria, instead, seeking evaluative criteria that would potentially "prove evocative, moral, critical, and rooted in local understandings" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The *Postmodern* and *Postexperimental* eras reflected continuing tensions and diversity and a concern for narrative, story telling and new methods of composing ethnographies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The resulting reflexive experiential texts were "messy, subjective, open ended, conflictual and feminist influenced" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 559). Thus, the research project in these timeframes overtly implicated the researcher self (Coffey, 1999) and exhibited a "refusal to privilege any method of theory" (Denzin

& Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Denzin and Lincoln describe the contribution of poststructuralists and postmodernists to the qualitative project:

> Poststructuralists and postmodernists have contributed to the understanding that there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed. Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why. No single method can grasp all of the subtle variations in ongoing human experiences. (p. 19)

The Methodologically Contested Present spanned the first four years of the twenty-first century and blended into the following and current phase, the *Fractured Future*. *The Methodologically Contested Present* represented a period of methodological contestation most apparent in four specific areas. These areas are oriented toward sensibilities of morality and care, "the reconnection of social science to social purpose, the rise of indigenous social science(s) crafted for the local needs of indigenous peoples, the decolonization of the academy, and the return 'home' of Western social scientists as they work in their own settings" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1117).

At the time of writing their exposé of qualitative research development, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggested that the now current *Fractured Future* would "confront

the methodological backlash of evidence-based social movements, moral discourses and the development of sacred textualities" (p. 3). We currently live out the *Fractured Future* in the contemporary research project. However, as I attempted to find a middle ground from which to conduct and present this study, I cannot help but feel academia is not yet prepared to embrace this phase; difficulties are particularly apparent in the writing and presentation of theses in line with academic expectations and "the return 'home' of Western social scientists" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1117) .

The *Fractured Future* continues from *The Methodologically Contested Present* and faces the same areas of contestation as their predecessors. In this period, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further ask "that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community" (p. 3). The current research responded to calls for developing new 'critical conversations' by productively seeking to discover the process by which Aboriginal women perform agency in the everyday using a strengths-based research approach. Poststructuralist, critical and feminist approaches to research support challenges to grand narratives, and universalist claims to knowledge, by juxtaposing alternate knowledge and, thus, not only opening up new opportunities to expand traditional knowledge and ways of thinking about the world but to indeed transform the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Each 'historical moment' of qualitative research transcends boundaries and time, different research practices making "the world visible in a different way" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). Symbolic interactionism with its critical focus on process, human behaviour and relationships between the individual and their environment finds favour

in the current research as a basic framework from which to derive subsequent research questions and direct methods that can tap into the meanings held by the individual women. Different elements of the previously outlined 'historical moments' espoused by Denzin and Lincoln influenced the construction of knowledge and development of the present study. The rise of critical social science approaches saw the critique of positivism and the expansion of critical theory, including feminism, and the development of grounded theory influenced by symbolic interactionism. The constructivist paradigm emerged and was influential in the further development of grounded theory, autoethnography developed in response to the 'crisis of representation', and poststructuralist approaches developed as modernity came to a close. Indigenist research practices are located in the current *Fractured Future*s.

Glaser and Strauss, supporting the tradition of symbolic interactionism in the development of grounded theory, "held that theories should be 'grounded' in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people" (Creswell, 1998, p. 56). The current study explored how Aboriginal women actively engage and interact in society; how they negotiate cultural boundaries and discourses and, in doing so, achieve some authority over their environment. The research analysis needed to take stock of the women's behaviour in their interactions with social structures and significant others. What dynamics and properties were present in their interactions and actions? What discourses did they resist, which did they take on and which did they transform? How did they interpret and name those discourses? What were their motivations for doing so? What meanings were attached to their identifications? And so forth. The processual model developed out of symbolic interaction was grounded theory. In this study, it enabled the generation of a substantive

theory to explain the social processes of identification and action involved in the interactions between Aboriginal women and their environment in their everyday lives.

3.4 Research substructure

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) insist “[t]he qualitative research act can no longer be viewed from within a neutral or objective positivist perspective. Class, race, gender, and ethnicity shape the process of inquiry, making research a multicultural process” (p. 18). Thus conceived, the researcher is an integral part of the qualitative research process and viewed as the primary instrument through which conceptualisation of the research project is achieved and data generation and analysis is conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I recognise that ontological and epistemological and political concerns inform the way we conceptualise research problems and, eventually, frame the emerging texts. First and foremost, it must be noted that my Aboriginal identity cannot be set aside as I assume the role of researcher. Therefore, my identity as an Aboriginal woman imbricates my role as researcher and the experiences I bring to this research as my Aboriginal self influences the ways I view the world and, hence, the particular assumptions and interpretations made in regards to the research. I further wish to recognise the multi-dimensional nature of reality and truths, realising I am “not the essential woman and that the other realities and truths […] are just as valid and valuable” (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 115) as my own. I remain cognisant of the manner in which my personal biases and worldview have influenced the conduct of the current research; how I have elected to construct the research process, interpret and present the findings, as well as those pathways I did not follow.

The presentation of the research design in this chapter follows the scaffolding depicted by Crotty (1998, p. 4) (see Figure 3.1). The supporting framework details the four basic elements of research inquiry and, as elucidated by Crotty's model of social research, aims "to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they […] move towards understanding and expounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suit their particular research purposes" (p. 2).

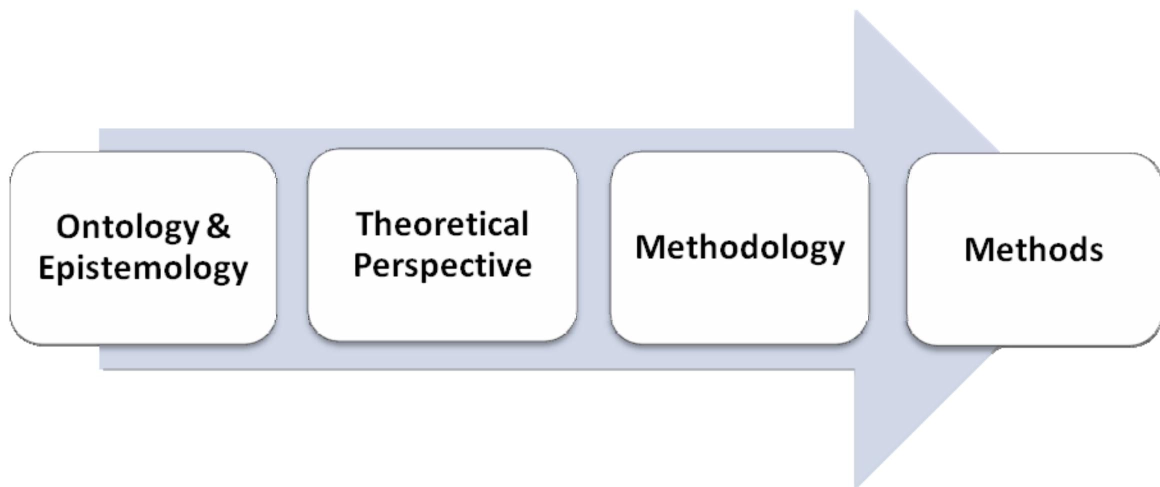

Figure 3.1 The scaffolding of the research design

Because qualitative researchers emphasise the subjective nature of the research process, they need to explicate the research paradigm in which their work evolved. Locating the paradigm enables audiences to understand their relationship to the research phenomenon and determine for themselves the integrity and authenticity of evidence for the results in the research. Qualification of the research paradigm, then, has the purpose of eliminating ambiguity by providing a discussion of the progression and context of the research outcome to demonstrate rigour over the course of conducting that research. It contributes to the enhancement of knowledge construction by enabling other researchers to contest or develop upon the original research.

3.4.1 Research framework

The research framework for the present study (illustrated in Figure 3.2) is representative of the theory building processes that contributed to the completion of this research. At the heart of the research (purple) is the research outcome; the aim of the research, which was to generate a substantive theory of Aboriginal women's performance of agency in contemporary society. The theoretical perspective (pink), which Crotty (1998) defines as "the philosophical stance informing the methodology" (p. 3), was a multifaceted approach encompassing critical theory, poststructuralism and feminism to deal with issues of power, ethnicity and gender that were a primary concern in the study. The critical stance served as the lens through which I conducted this inquiry and guided my methodological choices. It originated from my ontological and epistemological assumptions (orange), which are aligned with a constructivist view of the world and guided the study towards contributing to social change and raising the voice of Aboriginal women. My epistemology provided the foundations for knowledge construction and, therefore, pervaded the entire research process, thus informing the type of knowledge I could know and produce. The overarching research question (light blue) was: **What process underlies the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society?** The substantive theory constructed to respond to the research question was developed through the utility of a qualitative grounded theory methodology (yellow) as reconceptualised by Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006) and influenced by Glaser (1978, 2002) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). The methodology defined the boundaries for the methods of data generation (red) and data transformation (dark blue) used to explore how Aboriginal women experience agency. The primary method of data generation was life-history narrative interviews while the systematic 'constant comparative method' of grounded

theory assisted data transformation. These methods carry constructivist assumptions derived from symbolic interactionism. The rigorous method of data transformation implicated grounded theory as it is both a methodology and a method. The utility of grounded theory in the study contributed to the development of theory in lieu of rich description in the current research (Glaser, 2002), which explained how a specific cohort of Aboriginal women negotiated cultural boundaries, discourses and power to construct a coherent sense of self. The social constructivist paradigm in which the research was located is finally linked to issues of representation and legitimation (green) and ensured rigour was maintained in all stages of the research process. Delineation of these interrelated components of research demonstrates significant theoretical and methodological fit, which was crucial to achieving the objectives of the research and is integral to all good quality qualitative studies.

Figure 3.2 Research Framework

3.4.2 Philosophical assumptions

Gergen (2001) attests to the significance of engaging in discussion of our epistemological and political stance in the research. He states, "[t]hrough reflexive inquiry on our ways of constructing the world, and the practices which we sustain, we open doors to emancipation, enrichment and cultural transformation" (p. 113). Subsequently, I begin this section by, firstly, locating my position in this study by making explicit my epistemological position inherent in the underlying theoretical perspective of the research and, subsequently, in the methodology (Crotty, 1998).

Ontology and Epistemology

While not specifically including it in his scaffolding, Crotty (1998) makes it clear that ontology sits alongside epistemology. Ontology is "concerned with 'what is', with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality" (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Epistemology, according to Crotty (1998), is the "theory of knowledge" (p. 3) that saturates the entire research process and provides the foundation for knowledge construction; "a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower and what can be known [...] how knowledge is created" (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2006, p. 12). For instance, the original assumption underpinning this research was that there are cohorts of Aboriginal women who have been able to transcend survival and change the circumstances of their existence. Epistemologically, I presumed that knowledge of their realities could be best accessed from the privileged position of Aboriginal women themselves.

Epistemologies explain "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3) and, therefore, give rise to topics we choose to research, the questions we ask and the ways

we approach gaining knowledge, the selection and use of methods and providing explanations of the life worlds we seek to understand (Crotty, 1998). It ultimately determines the nature of the research produced. Desirably then, we should seek answers to our research questions through the enactment of our epistemological beliefs in a strategic process of knowledge construction. Consequently, there needs to be a logical fit and intimate interrelationship between the four basic elements in the research framework – epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and method to achieve the research objectives.

As human beings, we all observe, interpret, speak and act from particular historically situated ethnically-oriented, gendered, cultural, class and community standpoints. As carriers of these multiple standpoints in a research context, researchers approach inquiry with a pre-existing underlying philosophy of the social world (ontology) that becomes the premise upon which we gain knowledge of that social reality (epistemology). Epistemologies then, "make claims about which scientific procedures produce reliable social scientific knowledge" (Blaikie, 2007, p. 18) (methodology) and through which integrated ways we can best access this knowledge (method) (Blaikie, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The researcher's ontological and epistemological premises constitute the boundaries for how they "see the world and act in it" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19) and, thus, holds particular significance in the research endeavour. Together, the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodological premises combine and come to be regarded as an interpretative framework or paradigm; "a basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17; Neuman, 2007). The purpose of this section is to make my personal and political

approach to this research explicit so as to substantiate the validity of the research design and process from the outset.

3.5 Positioning the researcher: establishing trustworthiness and authenticity from the outset

> The qualitative researcher must describe and explain his or her social, philosophical, and physical location in the study […] honestly prob[ing] his or her own biases at the outset of the study, during the study, and at the end of the study by clearly describing the precise role of the researcher in the study. (Janesick, 2000, p. 389)

As an Aboriginal woman sharing a similar subject position to that of my participants, and indeed a participant in the study myself, I would, in all likelihood, bring certain biases to the study as I embarked on the research journey. Unearthing one's assumptions, in relation to the research, require that the researcher explore their ontological and epistemological perspectives in order to anticipate how these beliefs not only influence the methodological premise upon which the subsequent research is based, but also the implications for research outcomes.

Crotty (1998) communicates the ubiquitous nature and interrelatedness of the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions and the research enterprise. He states that:

> […] at every point in our research – in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers - we inject a host of assumptions. These are assumptions about human knowledge and assumptions about realities encountered in our human world. Such assumptions shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves!) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying. (p. 17)

Critically then, my ontological and epistemological assumptions must be explicated to understand the premise from which this research emerged and expose the nature of the knowledge produced by the resulting methodology utilised in this research. To clarify, I outline the assumptions I bring to this research. My assumptions are that:

- while I may share some experiences with my participants, we all, as individuals, attach different meaning and interpretations to our experiences in the world
- I enter this research as a knower and known and my positionality and epistemology influences every aspect of this study
- I am intimately part of the research endeavour, not an objective observer
- the perceptions presented in the study reflect a construction of reality created in collaboration with my participants at that particular historical moment
- the level of trust and cooperation achieved with my participants will reflect in the quality of the research results

- the generation of data was conducted intuitively within a culturally safe and culturally respectful environment and will reflect in the quality of the research results
- the conduct of the research (the generation of data, interpretation and analysis) by another researcher may have produced different results.

Having considered my assumptions, I place this research in context by locating it in a social constructivist epistemology.

3.5.1 A social constructivist epistemology

Epistemology encompasses the schools of thought with which we align ourselves in our particular view of the social world and further provides a justification for the knowledge constructed in the research project. Constructivism is based on:

> . . . the view that *all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social* context […] meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43)

It claims that people construct meanings as they "engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Hence, for human beings, there is no single reality 'out there' lest we engage with and give meaning to that reality. In this sense, meaning is not purely objective or purely subjective (Crotty, 1998) but a mutual construction. This understanding follows the phenomenological concept of 'intentionality';

intentionality here meaning “referentiality, related, directedness, aboutness” (Crotty, 1998, p. 44), a reaching out to the object. This relatedness engenders interdependence between the subject and the world in the creation of meaning (Crotty, 1998). Subjectivity in this sense cannot be fixed and social realities are the result of human intervention constituted by the meanings ascribed to them. However, Crotty (1998) notes this constructivist description of reality is inadequate if not set in a “genuinely historical and social perspective” (p. 54). Crotty’s observation brings to light the “mode of meaning generation” (p. 55) and, hence, the role of culture in the production of meaning, “our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token, leads us to ignore other things” (Crotty, 1998, p. 54).

The implications for this study, in an epistemological sense, are that, for me as the researcher, I enter into relationships of conversation and observation with the participants to construct knowledge. For participants, the implications are that, as individuals, they come from different life-worlds and, consequently, experience and interpret their personal development in accord with the definitions and meanings they hold regarding their perceptions of themselves, their strengths and weaknesses and actions.

Fundamental to a social constructivist understanding of meaning-making is that “the basic generation of meaning is always social, for the meanings with which we are endowed arise in and out of interactive community” (Crotty, 1998, p. 55). Critically, given the prominence of ethnicity in the research, I needed to regard the culture of the different actors who came to participate in the study. The significance placed on the cultural construction of meaning in social constructivism is consequently extremely

pertinent to this study. Relative to the methodology of this study, constructivist grounded theory enables a focus on processes of social development and interaction. The narratives of the female participants (being my partners in the construction of meaning) importantly depict the salience of ethnicity and, hence, culture in their performances of agency and, thus, show how culture shapes the way we experience things, our perceptions of ourselves and our re-actions to those experiences.

A social constructivist school of thought also holds that there is no essentialist category 'woman' or 'self'; instead, recognising the sway of culture in the development of gender and identity. The narratives also reveal the women's negotiation of cultural boundaries and relationships in the ways they work to construct personal knowledge. The women have learned to create their own knowledge through interaction with others in the world. Social constructivism invites an anti-essentialist argument in the construction of self (Burr, 1995).

Historical and cultural specificity in the development of knowledge is most congenial with social constructivism (Burr, 1995). An emphasis on the relational self is significant in social constructivism, as is "[t]he multiplicity and fragmentation of selfhood, its changeability, and its cultural and historical dependence" (Burr, 1995, pp. 30-31). These notions were touched on briefly in the previous chapter. The study further takes a critical stance in that it rejects an "objective, unbiased observation of the world" (Burr, 1995, p. 3); instead, privileging subjectivity but simultaneously emphasising uniqueness and difference.

It becomes clear then that social constructivists “emphasize the idea that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings” (Marshall, 1994, p. 484) and proffer a meaning of the social world as “interpretive nets woven by individuals and groups” (p. 484). All discussion on research structure is predicated upon fundamental underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions, which serve as a lens for conducting the research inquiry. Methodologically speaking, the social constructivist viewpoint is understood to “assume a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent cocreate understandings), and a naturalist (in a natural world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). As is the case in this study, findings are most commonly presented as theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

3.6 Theoretical bricolagé

The underlying theoretical framework described in the context of research is “a set of explanatory concepts […] that offer ways of looking at the world” (Silverman, 1993, p. 1). However, “it does not determine how we see the world, but helps us to devise questions and strategies for exploring it” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 306). Nevertheless, our theoretical assumptions regarding the research require explication, for not to do so potentially “limits the extent to which new insights can be discovered” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 15). Our theoretical perspective grounds the assumptions we have about the social world (Crotty, 1998) by providing the principles for the design of the study, for the development of methods, and to analyse, interpret and represent data (Carspecken, 1996).

In this study, I wanted to present an anti-essentialist portrait of Aboriginal women's performance of agency as well as the discursive constraints within which Aboriginal women, as agents, are constituted; how identity formation, social discourse and agency become mutually contouring in a contemporary context. Ultimately, the goal was "[m]aking the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the centre, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, [and] understanding women as subjects in their own right" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 248). Bringing Aboriginal women to the centre of the analysis "offers fresh insights on the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 221) of both androcentric and Eurocentric worldviews. The expanded experiences of change for Aboriginal women in a contemporary world engender a need for innovative research approaches to accommodate inquiry in this progressive domain.

It was also my aim that the outcomes of this research have utility in transforming conditions for Aboriginal women and, hence, Aboriginal people as a collective and society in general. Davidson et al. (2006), in discussing "the *epistemic concern* of critical theory" (p. 49), consider that "[t]o transform society we require theories to make sense of how society operates and how we might effectively change it" (p. 49). As Hartsock (1990) emphasises, to alter the dominating power relations that "structure society and define our subordination, we must understand how power works" (p. 157) in all its forms. In this sense, it was critical to raise issues of both the power involved in the relations of domination in the lives of Aboriginal women and the power of the women themselves. It is in this understanding of power relations that women have the opportunity to position and reposition themselves in and outside of particular discursive constructions to perform agentic acts (Francis, 2002).

African American feminist theorist Hill Collins (1990) states that "offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering, but revealing new ways of knowing that allow them to define their own reality has far greater implications" (p. 222). It was most certainly my intention to raise the consciousness of not only the participants in this study, but also myself, and to offer new knowledge and ways of thinking about our experiences. There was a critical need to understand the significant role "knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 221) and use this knowledge to gain fresh insights and add a new view of perceptions of the world. What was required was a rethinking of the social relations of domination and resistance "by embracing a paradigm of race, class and gender as interlocking systems of oppression" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 222).

I am acutely aware of the dominant discourses of systemic and institutional discrimination and, hence, the socio-economic and cultural oppressions under which many Aboriginal women live their lives. However, I wanted to understand how it was that particular individuals were not only able to disrupt these prejudicial practices but to also actively promote themselves and their concerns on an equal footing with the dominant society to achieve a position of privilege, albeit at varying levels. Thus the question, how do Aboriginal women experience, understand and operationalise agency in their personal narratives of development in a contemporary world? I, like many feminist scholars, was "troubled by the cultural expression, production, and perpetuation of patriarchy, ageism, and racism" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 150); however, more so, I am "intrigued by the resistance of these subgroups to these forces" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 150). Fundamentally, I wanted to understand how Aboriginal women have successfully sought to gain power and control in their lives to achieve a degree of

*author*ity and agency (Davies, 2000). Hence, an exploration of the nature of power relations was required.

The imperative was to find the best theoretical framework to fit with the substantive issue at hand and the goal of the research (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). I was motivated towards a critical poststructuralist feminist orientation; a move toward a critical social science (Fay, 1987) that incorporates "ways of knowing which interrupt relations of dominance and subordination" (Lather, 1991, p. xvii). A way of thinking about power relationships found support and direction from critical inquiry. I used poststructuralist analytic tools in the research "to think differently […] to open up what seems 'natural' to other possibilities" (Adams St Pierre, 2000, p. 479). The utility of a feminist perspective not only demonstrated epistemological congruency but also provided a way of constructing knowledge "that is both pragmatic and reflective of women's voices" (Wuest, 1995, p. 125). Further, feminist perspectives share epistemological congruency with symbolic interactionism inherent in grounded theory (Wuest, 1995). On these grounds, multiple theoretical perspectives were deemed necessary to adequately respond to, and illuminate, the intertwined questions of self, agency and discourse posed in the research.

Aligning my ontological and epistemological assumptions with these aims of the research, I came to embrace a multiperspectival approach; a critical poststructuralist feminist theoretical perspective. A multiperspectival approach is characteristic of the seventh moment in qualitative research, the *Methodologically Contested Present*, which has been notably influenced and shaped by postmodern perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Each particular theoretical perspective previously noted suggests

significant critiques of each other, thus contributing to a more holistic approach to the research. A case in point here is evidenced where poststructuralist theory, through its critique of 'grand narratives' can be used to attend some of the essentialising tendencies of feminist criticism, while a feminist critique can assist in establishing political emphasis in poststructuralist accounts (McNay, 1992). An androcentric consciousness gave rise to both critical and poststructuralist perspectives. A sense of equilibrium, I believe, was achieved through the inclusion of a feminist consciousness. The upshot of utilising a feminist lens was that it allowed a viewing from a distinctive cultural vantage point, which, in turn, produced evidence that potentially illuminated that which may have otherwise been overlooked. Further, a feminist perspective "raised issues that helped to redefine the notion of humanity" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 60).

3.6.1 Critical theory: utopian desires

The initial theoretical engagement lies with critical theory, using it as the theoretical lens through which to achieve the aim of the study. I found favour, also, in poststructuralist and feminist perspectives, which both come under the broad umbrella of critical theory and which all view that "power and conflicts of interest play a vital role in human development, emancipation, and well-being" (Davidson et al, 2006, p. 49). Criticalists were primarily concerned with the transformation of society by eliminating oppression and promoting justice. Feminism, poststructuralism and critical theory all share a leaning towards the epistemological premise of social constructivism (Davidson et al, 2006; Sarantakos, 2005). The production of knowledge in this thesis was directed from the confluence of three theoretical perspectives and, while I state the research is primarily grounded in critical theory, it should be noted that I hesitate to

privilege any perspective above the other as their union is critical to the overall conceptualisation of the study.

As the aspirations and struggles in the age of globalisation progress and transform, so, too, do the allegiances to one particular social theory. For that reason, critical theory now transcends its once much narrower definition and association with the Frankfurt School and the theorising of Horkheimer and Adorno to incorporate "any philosophical approach with similar practical aims […] including feminism, critical race theory, and some forms of post-colonial criticism" (Bohman, 2008, n.p.). Methodologically, in a contemporary sense, critical theory has diversified and now provides a multiperspectival approach to research (Bohman, 2008).

Contemporaneously then, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), in their treatise on a reconceptualised critical theory, understand a critical orientation to be a form of social and cultural criticism that is dynamic in the sense that it is progressively evolving with social circumstances. A critical orientation is concerned with "issues of power and justice, and the ways that the economy; matters of race, class and gender; ideologies; discourses; education; religion and other social institutions; and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 306), making critical theory germane to the purpose of the present study in a number of ways.

I passionately strive towards, perhaps what many may term, 'utopian desires' and visions for Aboriginal people. I advocate for positive social change and improved circumstances to better accommodate the futures of our children. Fay (1987) insists that critical theory works to:

> […] redress a situation in which a group is suffering as a result of the way their lives are arranged and to overturn these arrangements and to put into place another set in which people can relate and act in fuller more satisfying ways. (p. 29)

In this way, critical theory provides direction towards questioning the oppressive structures Aboriginal women confront in their everyday lives in anticipation of exposing and understanding power imbalances. By understanding the play of power inherent in the lives of Aboriginal women, change is possible. Most critical theorists, according to Davidson et al (2006), "espouse a dialectical view of change whereby people and social structures are reciprocally determined" (p. 49). The implications for this study require a search beyond the knowledge women have of the everyday realm to include the social and institutional relations in which they act (Smith, 2005). Implementing empowering research strategies to uncover both the power of the women and oppressive power structures provides the first steps towards redressing social disadvantages (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Critical theory, therefore, has the primary practical purpose of human emancipation; "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). Critical theory is deemed adequate to its purpose if it simultaneously meets three criteria; it needs to be practical, explanatory and normative (Bohman, 2008). Effectively, "it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation" (Bohman, 2008, n.p.). Further,

critical theory must have "as its object human beings as producers of their own historical form of life" (Horkheimer, 1993, p. 21).

Critical theory functions to guide the current research endeavour to understand the "nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3) as it relates to the lived realities of Aboriginal women. In tandem with a constructivist grounded theory methodology, critical theory takes an appreciation of how the Aboriginal female self is constituted within these parameters to bring about personal transformation and engender change in society and serves to transcend mere description in this research. A critical theoretical perspective is used as a way of critiquing power and oppression to construct a substantive theory that will act as an irritant to dominant forms of power and provide the conceptual stepping stones towards future political and social action for the benefit of Aboriginal women, in particular, and Aboriginal people in general (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) claim that a consensus among critical theorists is emerging in relation to the conceptualisation of power. They state, "power is a basic constituent of human existence that works to shape the oppressive and productive nature of the human tradition" (p. 309). This research focused primarily on the productive aspects of power articulated here, in "its ability to empower, to establish a critical democracy, to engage marginalised people in the rethinking of their socio-political role" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 309). However, to do so also required a concern with the oppressive aspects of power; the historical and socio-political domain in which the productive aspects were constituted and which also, subsequently, shaped the nature of

Aboriginal women's action (Neuman, 2007). Hence, a critical approach exposes the multilayered nature of social reality (Neuman, 2007).

Perspectives on both the oppressive and productive aspects of power were influenced by a number of works and used as an interpretive tool in this study. Freire's theorising of conscientisation, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital, African American feminist theorist Hill Collins' notion of the outsider/within, Butler's notions of performativity, Foucault's work on power, self, discourse and knowledge and Bhabha's interpretations of hybridity contributed critical insights and direction in the conceptualisation of the study.

3.6.2 Poststructuralism: stained glass windows on reality

The terms poststructuralism and postmodernism are often used interchangeably (Francis, 2002); however, poststructuralism is my preferred terminology. I use the term poststructuralism to refer to the conceptual influences of the French, which were developed from the precursor of structuralism during the 1950s and early 1960s, and which notably included the structuralist readings of Marx and Freud (Aylesworth, 2005; Crotty, 1998).

The humanist tenets enunciated in the Enlightenment are collapsed in a poststructuralist view of the world. In stating that, it does not mean that there is an outright rejection of humanism. Rather, because poststructuralism speaks back to humanism, an association of kind always remains (Adams St Pierre, 2000). Opposing humanist visions, the poststructuralist view understands knowledge as being

"relativistic, value laden, context specific, and theoretically or symbolically mediated" (Gergen, (1991, 2001) cited in Berzonsky, 2005, p. 127).

By its very nature, poststructuralism challenges succinct classification. Consequently, much ambivalence surrounds the politics of poststructuralist thought and practice and, hence, little consensus regarding what poststructuralism actually comprehends (Lather, 1991). Aylesworth (2005) assists, describing poststructuralism "as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning" (n.p).

Some, for example Habermas, view the position taken up by postmodernism and poststructuralism in relation to modernism as "a thoroughgoing rejection of what modernism stands for and an overturning of the foundations on which it rests" (Crotty, 1998, p. 185). Crotty further proclaims "[o]ne is quite simply the antithesis of the other" (p. 185). However, others perceive postmodernism, not as resistance to modernity *per se*, but as "a continuation of modern thinking in another mode" (Aylesworth, 2005, n.p). Postmodernism rises out of a modernity moving towards transformation (Aylesworth, 2005; Crotty, 1998). However, most certainly, poststructuralism has its root in postpositivism and places emphasis on "language in the production of the individual and the social, and […] claims that there has been a shift in the nature of society from modernist, homogenous and production-led to heterogeneous and knowledge-led" (Williams, 2006, pp. 231-232). The poststructuralist focuses on language and linguistic symbols in the construction and deconstruction of knowledge, while meaning is

understood to be “constituted within culturally based symbolic systems, metaphors, and practices” (Gergen, (1994, 2001) cited in Berzonsky, 2005, p. 127). Poststructuralism’s emphasis on language has led to sensitivity towards the multilayered nature of meanings inscribed in texts, while its focus on cultural and social heterogeneity has contributed to recognition of the complexities of difference that are key in the conceptualisation of this study (Williams, 2006).

The intention of this study was to explore Aboriginal women’s subjective experiences of agency. Poststructuralist theory invokes, in this purpose, the significance of social discourses engaged in the women’s definition and configuration of self constituted within and outside such discourses. The regulations of discourse, Adams St Pierre (2000) states, “allow certain people to be subjects of statements and others to be objects. Who gets to speak? Who is spoken?” (p. 485). To make something explicit is to open it up for discussion. Understanding discourse has significant implications for those of us who have previously been silenced. This research explores and identifies those discourses that have constrained Aboriginal women, as well as those that they challenged and those with which they complied. Explanations of these discourses are emancipatory for Aboriginal women as it enables them to reposition themselves in different discourses that are conducive to acts of agency. For, as Adams St Pierre (2000) insists, “[d]iscourse can never be just linguistic since it organizes a way of thinking into a way of acting into the world” (p. 485).

Moreover, the creation of new or alternate discourses is possible because discourses are not “closed systems” (Hekman, 1990, p. 187); indeed, they are unstable and open-ended, “[d]iscourses are often thin, unstable, and fragmented. There are

fissures, there are cracks, there are weak spots: windows of opportunity that lead to transformative pathways" (Bleiker, 2003, p. 29). Comprehending discourses in such fashion constructs them as powerful and weak, simultaneously tools of oppression and transformation. In a transformative reading, the remaking of discourses allows for agency in Aboriginal women's movement from object to subject. Hekman (1990) explains, "[t]he silences and ambiguities of discourse provide the possibilities of refashioning them, the discovery of other conceptualisations, the revision of accepted truths" (p. 187).

An understanding of the nature of power relations was also important to comprehend the women's enactment of agency. On the matter of agency, however, poststructuralists remain rather ambiguous. Poststructural theorists, such as Foucault, have largely neglected scope for human agency, although his later writings began to indicate otherwise (Flax, 1990). Indeed, Davidson et al. (2006) convey that while contemporary poststructuralists attribute less power to agents than do criticalists, "they do not renounce the agentic capacity of citizens" (p. 49). Broadly, what is required to best frame the question of agency is an understanding of the socio-cultural and historic conditions that facilitate its discursive production (Dissanayake, 1996).

The promise of a Foucauldian view of power holds much for those who seek libratory explanation for its theoretical complexities. Foucault sees power, not as a possession, but as something exercised and "constituted through multiple, and constantly shifting discourses" (Francis, 1999, p. 383). Demonstrating the agentic capacity of humans, Francis states:

> Power is embedded in discourses due to their ability to produce subjects and objects in certain ways: one might, for instance, be rendered powerless by gender discourse in one instance, while being positioned (or possibly positioning ourselves) as powerful via social class discourse in another. (Francis, 1999, p. 383)

Understanding the discursive constitution of the subject and power in this way opens up new ways of perceiving social change. To this end, this study considers how Aboriginal women have engaged and negotiated with discourses to construct a sense of agency.

In poststructuralist thinking, there is a complete break with the Enlightenment's humanist conception of self, which posits that all humans "have an essence […] which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she *is*" (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). Instead, a poststructuralist emphasis understands identities as "decentered, relational, contingent, illusory, and lacking any core or essence" (Gecas & Burke, 1995, p. 57). That is, the conception of self as "a unitary or essentially rational self is 'decentered'" (Flax, 1990, p. 228) and seen as historically and socially constituted. Foucault, for example, sees identity as being constructed in and through discourse, thus displacing the unitary subject and challenging the view that the subject possesses the "innate capacity to think and act with any significant degree of autonomy" (O'Donnell, 2003, p. 756). Thinking in terms of non-unitary identities (Bloom, 1998) or 'fragmented' subjectivities, as Flax (1990) would have it, makes available changes in subjectivity over time and highlights the role that language, social relationships and key life experiences play in the formation of subjectivities, thus identifying the multiple subject

positions people occupy (Bloom, 1998). Perceiving of subjectivity in this way grounds the analysis in Aboriginal women's experiences, enables a way of working through the discursive power plays in the women's lives, and theorises the processes development and transformation evident in their narratives. Further, this conceptual understanding of process is intrinsically attuned to my choice of a grounded theory methodology and life-history narrative interviews.

Many feminists view poststructuralism as antithetical to the emancipatory aims of the feminist project (Francis, 1999). However, Weedon (1987) clearly points to the distinct advantages of applying a poststructuralist framework for the purposes of emancipatory research:

> Feminist poststructuralism, then, is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. Through a concept of *discourse,* which is seen as a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it. (Weedon, 1987, p. 40)

Flax (1990) insists that the "self-analytic spirit" (p. 4) of postmodernism is a particularly significant aspect of its approach, along with its "refusal to avoid conflict and irresolvable differences or to synthesize these differences into a unitary, univocal whole" (p. 4). It was never my intention to reveal *a* truth of Aboriginal women's agency

based on universalising accounts achieved through some sort of consensus in the data. I worked from the premise whereby no one text is truer than another and no one text or texts are privileged above the other (Flax, 1990). On these grounds, and through reflexive action "[n]o speaker can claim special or unique authority" (Flax, 1990, p. 39).

Accordingly, postmodern moves to deconstruct texts seek out that which has been suppressed within texts or stories (Flax, 1990). As I am interested in unveiling mystifications in complex social and power relations, this approach works well with both the purpose of this study and the strategies of its grounded theory methodology. For poststructuralists then, knowledge is partial and local, with prominence given to social context, avoiding representations so as to escape privileging any one text above the other (Flax, 1990). The undertaking of social research becomes a deconstruction of texts to uncover values and interests, while simultaneously avoiding the production of "new hegemonies of knowledge" (Williams, 2006, p. 232).

Poststructuralist approaches have played a vital role in the ongoing development of qualitative research, particularly in problematic areas regarding the role of the researcher, the nature of interpretations, the nature of reality and the political infusion of interpretation (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Even so, many, including feminists, argue that poststructural perspectives cannot be used for emancipatory purposes in research. This key critique of poststructuralism is largely due to its inclination to deconstruct "current discursive practices, but suggests or builds nothing in their place" (Francis, 1999, pp. 388-389). However, Francis (1999) disputes this, suggesting that much feminist poststructuralist research has been "at the descriptive, analytical level" (p.

388). The utility of grounded theory methodology in this research assists in countering such criticisms by providing a substantive theory rather than descriptive research.

There is an emphasis on plurality expressed in poststructuralist thought and, thus, supports the thinking of feminists of colour and Aboriginal women who have long argued against conceptions of women as a homogenous group (Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981, 1989; Huggins, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). For this study, the inclusion of difference was critical because it gives 'voice' to Aboriginal women and validates their subjective experiences of agency. It must be highlighted that while the voices of the women represented in the study are of empowerment, agency and resilience, their narratives also serve to remind us that colonial power, patriarchy and racism remains dominant.

I do not claim a profound and deep knowledge or strong allegiance to all that constitutes poststructuralist thinking. What I wish to align myself with here is a softer characterisation of poststructuralism, one that recognises influences of poststructural lines of thought, such as those which advocate both a break with "totalizing, universalizing 'metanarratives' and the humanist view of the subject that undergirds them" (Lather, 1991, p. 5).

3.6.3 Feminist theory

Francis (1999) describes feminism as "a political project with emancipatory aims" (p. 385). As a theory of critical social science (Fay, 1987), feminist efforts have been instrumental in generating empowering, self-reflexive and relational research designs (Lather, 1991), thus paralleling in kind, the transformative nature and political

intent of critical theory. Indeed, the integration of both reflexive and relational strategies provides a criterion for rigour in the study by making explicit how data were constructed (Hall & Callery, 2001).

While Reinharz (1992) notes that "feminist research practices must be recognized as a plurality" (p. 4), Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) assert a beautifully contained description of feminist assumptions without diminishing the diversity that exists in "women's *ways* of knowing" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 4). They assert:

> Feminist scholarship is […] built on the premise of challenging hierarchical modes of creating and distributing knowledge. Feminists employ a variety of strategies for creating knowledge about women and their social worlds which often lies hidden from mainstream society. A feminist approach to knowledge building recognizes the essential importance of examining women's experience. It often takes a critical stance toward traditional knowledge-building claims that argue for "universal truths". Research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice. (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 3)

Feminist theories challenge dominant theories by foregrounding women's experience in the research endeavour and advocating a subjective, rather than objective stance in the research process (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004; Lather, 1991; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). Because multiple oppressions exist for Aboriginal women and, thus, differing socio-economic and political circumstances and subject

positions, it appeared desirable to adopt a feminist approach to the research. Feminist theory advocates that all knowledge is contingent upon experience interpreted from a particular subject position, thus exalting the recognition of difference in the research (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004).

Numerous feminisms exist (Reinharz, 1992) and definition, therefore, becomes contingent upon the specific interests of the individual researcher. However, Lather (1991) alleges, "all feminisms appeal to the powers of agency and subjectivity as necessary components of socially transformative struggle" (p. 28). Particular assumptions brought to the research very much concern questions of cultural difference associated with race and ethnicity and, subsequently, colonisation. The experiential diversity of the participants' subjectivity and agency required recognition in the analysis of their life-history narratives (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). Utilising this approach, I avoided the universal category of woman previously alluded to by second wave feminists (Oleson, 1994) and elected to utilise interpretations focussing on difference as espoused by African American feminists, such as Hill Collins (1990, 2000) and hooks (1981, 1989). A feminist approach incorporating a politics of difference will, in turn, positively influence the veracity and usefulness of the research. The assertions of Hill Collins and hooks provide a convincing standpoint for Aboriginal women for whom the realities of "intersecting oppressions" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 273) of sexism, racism and classism (Hill Collins, 2000) are as valid today as they were in the "dark ages of oppression when basic civil liberties were denied" (Bin-Sallik, 1989, p. 4).

Methodologically, feminist literature reveals that, in response to the diversity of women's experience, feminists across a variety of disciplines began "developing new ways of thinking about, writing about, and researching women and their lives" (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 101). Epistemological positions have introduced changes in research methodologies and methods, which are "shaped by the interests and positionality of the researchers who use them" (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 117). Subsequently, we find multiple feminisms and epistemologies (Reinharz, 1992; Wuest, 1995). In fact, Harding (1991) identifies three feminist epistemologies – feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and postmodern feminism. Wuest (1995) makes clear these feminist positions:

> Feminist empiricists seek […] a more objective truth by eliminating such biases as gender, race, and class from the research process. In feminist standpoint, knowledge is shaped by the social context of the knower; the perspective of groups marginalized by race, gender, or class is most complete because it reflects the experience of the disadvantaged within the dominant culture. Although postmodern feminism is also concerned with bias, this position argues that there is not one single truth. (p. 746)

This study is particularly concerned with the latter position, a postmodern feminist epistemology, which is also consistent with grounded theory in its "recognition of multiple explanations of reality" (Wuest, 1995, p. 747). In particular, as Wuest (1995) explains, because grounded theorists interrogate data by inquiring 'what is happening here?' as part of their core method, they are able to account for variation in behaviour. Wuest goes on to argue that while deconstruction is implicit in grounded

theory, the data is also examined at a micro and macro level for influences on the interactional processes, thus drawing a direct correlate between postmodern techniques of deconstruction and grounded theory. The usefulness of a postmodern feminist perspective in this study also provides attention to the "social processes that influence the generation of data and thus the social construction of knowledge" (Hall & Callery, 2001, p. 258). Implicit in these social processes are the ethics of care and responsibility that are also inherent in Indigenous research methodologies.

Indigenous academics (Irabinna Rigney, 1999; Martin, 2003, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) centre and articulate Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies to claim the right to use Indigenous realities and ways of knowing in the practice of research. Aboriginal academic Irabinna Rigney (1999) acknowledges a strong correlate between Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge and understanding and feminist methodologies, endorsing it as a suitable model for what he terms Indigenist research (Irabinna Rigney, 1999).

Feminist methodological orientations are characteristically dissimilar to more traditional qualitative methodologies in what could be described as an 'ethics of practice'. As an anti-colonial research strategy, a feminist perspective moves beyond traditional modes of practice to inform the ethics of practice and the practice of ethics in everyday action of researching through, what I would describe as, an 'ethics of care and responsibility'. Supporting this statement, Bloom (1998) insists that the feminist approach to research engages "with concerns about ethics, reflexivity, emotions, positionality, polyvocality, collaboration, identification with participants, intersubjectivity, and our own authority as interpreters" (p. 2). By extension, and in

relation to Bloom's conceptualisation of feminist research, a correlate can also be drawn between anti-colonial, postmodern feminist research and grounded theory. Additionally, it should be noted that grounded theorists support relational aspects of the research process by not only reporting the perspectives of the research population but also by "accept[ing] responsibility for their interpretive roles" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 274).

In practice, utilising a feminist approach afforded me the opportunity to attend the feminist principles, such as reflexivity and the co-production of the research, through directing attention towards the power relationships inherent in the research act of interviewing. The reflexive practices of feminist research direct and inform theoretical sensitivity required in a grounded theory methodology. It acknowledges how the intersecting dimensions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and so forth impinge on the differing circumstances in the lives of the women and, hence, in the conceptual levels raised in the analysis. This orientation makes the generated substantive theory even more relevant to the concerns and realities of Aboriginal women's lives.

I have invoked critical, poststructural and feminist theories of self, agency, power and discourse in an effort to reveal new knowledge and generate substantive theories through the utility of grounded theory. The perceived value of a critical, poststructuralist and feminist theoretical approach for this research not only stems from the ability of such discourses to elicit themes and issues of women's subjective experiences, but also from the flexibility, participatory and diverse nature of the availability of associated research methodologies. Fundamentally, this theoretical blend, ideally, closely considers an ethics of care and responsibility in reflexive research

practice and serves as a change agent by focusing toward initiating social change for Aboriginal women in a postmodern world.

3.7 The construction of knowledge

This chapter introduced grounded theory by briefly identifying some of its historical origins and locating it within the broad spectrum of 'historical moments' in qualitative research. The previous sections explained the underpinning philosophical views and theoretical framework pertaining to the study. This section provides a detailed description of the research approach; an account of the rationale behind the choice of methods used to achieve the desired outcomes and the specific ways in which these particular strategies were utilised. It examines the meaning attached to the use of methods which invariably align with the underlying epistemology of the methodological selection. Discussion is directed toward the relevance of grounded theory to the study, its defining features and a cogent discussion of its utility in terms of its strengths and limitations as employed in this research.

3.7.1 A holistic knowledge building process

Methodological issues are compounded by a number of unique historical, social and political complexities in Indigenous research studies, "a study of indigenous knowledges brings a complex array of theoretical and methodological issues to the table. There is the problem of defining 'indigenous knowledges' and establishing workable boundaries for studying them" (Dei, Hall & Rosenberg, 2000, p. 5). Similarly, the process of coming to a methodological decision in this study was difficult. Defining the intricacies at the heart of such difficulties, Aboriginal academic Moreton-Robinson (2000) acknowledges and illuminates the inseparable nature of ways of knowing and

being, “[m]y role as an academic analyst is inextricable from my embodiment as an Indigenous woman” (p. xvi). As an Aboriginal woman and a researcher, I share her sentiments. On the one hand, I was a novice Aboriginal female researcher with an anthropological background and Western-influenced notions about what constitutes a valid method of inquiry and what can be described as valid knowledge. Juxtaposed with this position were my cultural location and the knowledge and experience of negative research practices. Practical issues aside, for these reasons in particular, I was concerned about the selection of an appropriate research methodology. I sought a methodological framework, which could be used in a culturally safe and culturally respectful (Irabinna Rigney, 1999) manner, that would simultaneously remain harmonious with the institutional context in which this study was produced, my research objectives, my epistemological position and that of the participants, but which also maintained the intellectual and theoretical rigour expected of academic research.

I entered this research endeavour as both a ‘knower’ and the ‘known’, meaning I was what many would describe as an ‘insider/outsider’ researcher; in this particular instance, I was both a participant in the study and the researcher. Subsequently, I held concerns about imposing a prior frame of reference upon the participants’ realities. I required a methodology that avoided the imposition of theory on the data and evaded the separation of knowledge and ways of producing it. I required of this methodology a certain amount of flexibility and freedom from which to work to explicate details of a particular situation, understand the local context in which that phenomenon occurs and the practices and actors who interact in that context.

Based on my ontological and epistemological assumptions, I identified the features of a methodology that suited my inquiry and ways of working. From this point of departure, I allowed the research to emerge quite intuitively and organically. Although, in discussion with other researchers, I was alerted to the objectivist traditions and rigidity of grounded theory, I came to realise a grounded theory study – a *constructivist* grounded theory approach advocated by Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006). The study was never conceptualised as a grounded theory study from the outset nor did I have a predetermined hypotheses in regards to the phenomenon I was researching as there was a critical lack of literature on the research topic. Of course I did, however, have a personal sense of being an Aboriginal woman and the difficulties of coming to voice in a contemporary dominant society. Therefore, I entered the research with some broad sensitising questioning regarding the meaning of being an Aboriginal woman, about negotiating boundaries and discourses and how self-development emerged in the enactment of agency.

For some it may be useful, indeed critical, to have some methodological prototype in mind prior to embarking on the research journey; however, I was comfortable working in this manner and saw no urgency in naming my approach. Richards (2005) expresses this pragmatic approach to research, emphatically stating "[m]ethodologists may decry it, and experienced researchers may deny it, but researchers approaching qualitative research are highly likely to meet data before they meet method" (p. x).

In reality, my own formal and tacit knowledge, intuition, ethics, values and logic guided the study towards this methodological framework that came to be grounded

theory. It was my particular "way of thinking about and studying social reality" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 3), my methodology. This is not to say that I meandered through the research process without direction or that the research is chaotic or lacks rigour. To the contrary, I had previously undertaken very small-scale research projects so I worked quite formally, systematically and meticulously in the conduct of the project while simultaneously working towards practical completion. Methodological clarification progressed as the data began to build and engaged more intensely in the analysis.

Following the course of my doctorate research journey has been a personal learning curve for me, a process of coming to know better my preferred ways of working. At times, I have embraced the journey with great pleasure and, at other times, with extreme frustration. My intention is to provide insights to both so that one may develop an appreciation of the research journey as I experienced it. Schwandt (2000) most succinctly suggests that "to 'do' qualitative inquiry, what we face is not a choice of which label […] best suits us. Rather, we are confronted with choices about how each of us wants to live the life of a social inquirer" (p. 205).

Supporting my more pragmatic and intuitive approach to this research endeavour is Flyvberg's (2001) thesis, which gives new significance to praxis as part of the social sciences. Flyvberg revitalised three Aristotelian 'intellectual virtues', *Episteme* (scientific knowledge), *Techne* (craft/art) and *Phronesis* (practical wisdom - ethics and values), naming these virtues as the underlying philosophical framework required in successful social science research. He further states that a contemporary conception of *phronesis* cannot "be adequate […] unless it confronts an analysis of power" (p. 88). Flyvberg proposes the need for a critical interaction between *Episteme*,

Techne and *Phronesis* in the practice of social science research because it provides a holistic and contextual orientation towards gaining knowledge of the social world. Flyvberg's three Aristotelian 'intellectual virtues', *Episteme*, *Techne* and *Phronesis*, came to underscore the approach taken in this research. Others have supported Flyvberg's approach, for example, anthropologist Agar (1980) succinctly accentuates Flyvberg's attributes based on the intellectual virtues of Aristotle in the practice of ethnography. He states, "[w]ithout science we lose our credibility. Without humanity, we lose our ability to understand others." (p. 13)

I elected to privilege a grounded theory methodology for the study; a constructivist grounded theory methodological framework which supported construction of a substantive theory of how Aboriginal women experience agency. In grounded theory, comparative analysis has the capacity to generate two levels of theory—substantive theory and formal theory. Substantive theory concerns a very specific area of inquiry and is "a strategic link in the formulation and generation of grounded formal theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 79). "A good substantive theory has formal implications" (1999, p. 840) according to Glaser and further provides "the flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 40). A formal theory is best stimulated by a substantive theory and is analysed from data of many substantive areas, that is, across a range of situations or settings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Substantive and formal theories are constructed as the result of rigorous, systematic, methodical analytic techniques available for use in the application of a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Glaser and Strauss (1965) set out the nature and necessary descriptors of a substantive theory. A substantive theory:

> […] must closely *fit* the substantive area in which it will be used […] must be readily *understandable* by laymen concerned with this area […] must be sufficiently *general* to be applicable to a multitude of diverse, daily situations within the substantive area […] must allow the user partial *control* over the structure and process of the substantive area as it changes through time. (p. 259)

The substantive theory of the performance of Aboriginal women's agency was developed with these requirements in mind.

3.8 Classical grounded theory: the origins

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) locate the initial development of grounded theory in the second of their proposed eight 'historical moments' of qualitative research—the *Modernist Phase*. Glaser and Strauss (1967), the original founders of grounded theory methodology, responded to the hegemony of positivism current at that time with the development of a methodological amalgamation of both qualitative and quantitative research traditions (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The resulting practice sought to systematically develop theory derived directly from the data, rather than define a theory and preside over the task of verification of that theory.

The original intent of grounded theory was most thoroughly articulated in Glaser and Strauss' seminal text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Grounded theory, as espoused by Glaser and Strauss, has its roots primarily in symbolic interaction (Strauss),

but also in the "statistically oriented positivism" (Alvesson & Skőldberg, 2000, p. 12) that was Glaser's contribution. It is also located in the interpretivist paradigm and, hence, views the researcher as instrumental in the research process and in the interpretation of reality (Sarantakos, 2005). This is not to say that the researcher holds sway over the development of the research direction. To the contrary, the theory that emerges during the research guides the direction of the research (Sarantakos, 2005).

Glaser and Strauss worked the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research traditions. They developed a method that benefited researchers by bringing the inherent strengths from both traditions to the development of theory and, thus, offsetting the biases in each method (Benzies & Allen, 2001). In this way, a mixed method approach served to increase the depth and breadth of the knowledge produced (Benzies & Allen, 2001). However, tensions may arise in mixed method designs as competing epistemological assumptions come to the fore. Symbolic interactionism, nevertheless, finds favour with both qualitative and quantitative inquiry and can also be integrated with other theoretical perspectives in mixed method designs that are increasingly becoming evident in the literature (Benzies & Allen, 2001).

Grounded theory implies that, in very simple terms, theory should be systematically induced from, and grounded in, the data generated about the substantive area under investigation. A grounded theory is described as a qualitative research methodology:

> […] one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through

> systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23)

However, what actually constitutes data is an area of much debate. Glaser's notable exclamation "all is data" (1998, p. 8) does not sit well with many researchers. Nevertheless, Glaser indicates that this interpretation of 'data' is a grounded theory statement which is "NOT applicable to Qualitative Data Analysis" (2002, p. 1). The 'all is data' approach to data collection "expands constant comparison and theoretical sampling" (Glaser, 1998, p. 8) and avoids preconceptions of data usage. In turn, the range and depth of knowledge produced is not restricted and, consequently, neither is the resulting theory. Personally, I hold Glaser's opinion regarding the use and constitution of data. Glaser (1998) deems all "incidents that come the researcher's way […] from the briefest of comment to the lengthiest interview, written words in magazines, books and newspapers, documents, observations, biases of self and others, spurious variables […] is data for grounded theory" (p. 8).

Much can be said about the serendipitous nature of research. This research has been strengthened and expanded by use of data from many such sources and is one of the reasons for making explicit the utility of autoethnography as a method. The multiplicity of data sources coming to bear upon this research include observation at gatherings where Aboriginal women are present and, in fact, many observations occurred on a daily basis, comments and discussions with other Aboriginal women who were not necessarily participants, Aboriginal women's published autobiographical

narratives and speeches and lectures delivered by Aboriginal women and which I had the privilege to witness.

So many rich sources of data have been available for my use in the research and have enabled constant data comparison, generation and naming of concepts and the induction of patterns evidenced (Glaser, 1998). Yet, it must be said that more data was collected than used in the analysis (Glaser, 1998). Even so, unused data remained influential in the development of theory.

As demonstrated, I strongly concur with the view that 'all is data' and believe it not only contributes to the richness and depth of the resulting substantive theory but the explication of such data sources, as influencing my position and thinking and, hence, the research, is also synonymous with transparency in research enterprise. Such consideration of data and, in particular, observation in daily interactions, demonstrates a move away from the positivistic underpinnings of classical grounded theory to include a more naturalistic study of the research phenomenon.

3.8.1 Grounded theory

A grounded theory methodology aims to develop a theory of particular relevance to the area under study, most commonly a substantive theory. The methodology is designed to build theory inductively by remaining true to the objectives of the research and illuminating the particulars of the phenomenon under study, thus enabling the researcher to commence the project from the life experiences and understanding of the studied group (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this sense, the theory emerges from the research grounded in the voices of the studied group as opposed to originating in the

assumptions of the researcher. For me, the rendering of our experiences to theory and the subsequent grounding of the voices of the participants, and me, into that theory was critical to the aim of the research and resolves, to some degree, fears of imposing my own views on the data.

Central to the development of theory in grounded theory studies is the assignment of concepts in the analysis of data. A concept is directly grounded in the data and constitutes "an abstract representation of an event, object, or action/interaction that a research identifies as being significant" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 103). There are established evaluation criteria for grounded theory, which include fit, work, relevance and modifiability (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser, 1978, 1992).

In grounded theory, theoretical conceptual categories are assigned in the analysis of data. Critically, these categories must demonstrate a good 'fit' with the data they reflect. This practice avoids the imposition of preconceived concepts on the data. The conceptual rendering of data must explain the studied phenomenon. It must 'work' and be conceptually sound. Grounded theory is rendered relevant by offering analytic explanations of the basic processes evidenced in the studied phenomenon while modifiability is demonstrated in its capacity to move back and forth in the analysis as new data are collected and in its ability to account for variation (Charmaz, 2003).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) view grounded theory as a methodological approach which:

> […] fit[s] the situation being researched and work when put into use. By fit we mean categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by work we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant and be able to explain the behaviour under study. (p. 3)

In this research, conceptual categories were invoked from life-history narratives collected from Aboriginal women. Through constant comparative method, I was able to make explicit the implicit meaning and subsequently develop the substantive theory inherent in those narratives.

Grounded theory is designed to explore and understand the nature and occurrence of complex phenomenon and, in particular, phenomenon about which little is known and is centred on a number of methodological assumptions, all of which were relevant to the focus of the current study:

- A need to generate firsthand information from its original sources;
- The relationship between theory grounded in data and as a basis for social action and disciplinary development;
- The diversity of complexities of phenomenon and human action;
- A recognition that people assume an active role in response to problematic situations;
- That people act on the basis of meaning;
- That meaning is defined and redefined through interaction;
- A sensitivity to process;

- An understanding of the interrelationship between structure, processes and consequences. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 9-10)

3.8.2 Relevance of a grounded theory methodology

There are significant omissions in empirical research accounting for Aboriginal women in general but, more specifically, for the agency of Aboriginal women. For the purposes of capturing themes, categories and latent processes and patterns across subjective perceptions of agency, a grounded theory approach was considered most appropriate. Charmaz (2000) advocates "[t]he power of grounded theory lies in its tools for understanding empirical reality" (p. 510). Grounded theory enables the analysis of basic social processes through constant systematic comparisons because "[c]ategories emerge upon comparison and properties emerge upon more comparison" (Glaser, 1992, p. 43). In this way, grounded theory analysis ameliorates any lack of understanding regarding the lived experiences of Aboriginal women.

As a qualitative methodology, grounded theory was particularly suitable to gain increased knowledge in a study area that demonstrated a significant absence of current knowledge (Morse & Richards, 2002). As Flick (2006) infers, and Morse and Richards (2002) corroborate, a qualitative approach to research is particularly useful for its strategic ability to add rigour, expose experiential knowledge and probe deeply into a particular phenomenon, construct theory and add richness to complex inquiries in which the expectations of the research are unknown. Subsequently, as a qualitative methodology and method of analysis, grounded theory attends to the goals of the current study.

I was conscious of the fact that the quality of the data and my analytic abilities would later reflect in the research results. A grounded theory approach provided confidence in the conclusions I attained. It was my intention that, through a grounded theory approach, conceptual patterns of behaviour and relationships that characterised the research phenomenon would induce coherent meaning and, ultimately, articulate theory grounded in experiential knowledge, which was pertinent to the topic under investigation. Charmaz (2003) articulates theory as opposed to description as one of the strengths of grounded theory. She asserts that "the methods' inherent bent toward theory and the simultaneous turning away from acontextual description" (p. 271) is undoubtedly one of the strengths of grounded theory.

The value and strength of all grounded theoretical approaches is the strategic step-by-step guide through the process of sampling, data collection, research analysis and interpretation and, indeed, even in representation of findings (Charmaz, 2000, 2003). Such guidelines, and all proponents of grounded theory *do* stress these as *guidelines* and *not* prescriptions, were of particular significance to a neophyte researcher such as myself, who is beginning to learn the craft of research and analysis.

While I came to this research with particular urgency to understand how we, as Aboriginal women, intervene in reality to influence our environment to achieve emancipation and all that this freedom entails, I came with no predetermined hypotheses in regards to the research phenomenon. What I did realise was that, to understand how women came to achieve agency in their lives, I needed to document the process across time. This realisation led me to a purposive sample of women in the conduct of life-history narrative interviews with the intention to document our personal development.

Life-history narratives generate detailed stories of experience (Kohler Riessman, 2006) and can “be seen as opening a window on the mind, or, if we are analyzing narratives of a specific group of tellers, as opening a window on their culture” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 2). Grounded theory methodology facilitated the process of analysing our narratives.

A grounded theory approach was not part of the research design from the beginning. I did, however, have a broad research question statement. The future direction of the research was determined by the emerging data and came to be—how do Aboriginal women experience agency in the development of self-identity in contemporary Australian society? The natural progression of the study followed grounded theory practices of simultaneous sampling, data generation and coding directed towards the inductive building of meaning and theory as expressed in our narratives of agency and development.

A grounded theory approach enables an exploration of Aboriginal women’s agency about which little empirical research has been conducted. Grounded theory can, therefore, be considered suitable to attend to the focus of this study where there is a dearth of literature and empirical studies accounting for the personal development and authority of Aboriginal women. Further to this, because “the constant comparative method discovers the latent pattern in the multiple participants’ words” (Glaser, 2002, p. 2), the process of how authority is exercised and developed by these women, as well as the conditions under which that authority develops, can be explicated. Hence for this study, the most significant value and suitability of a grounded theory methodology lies in its capacity to identify the processes that underlie the experiences and enactment of

agency for Aboriginal women. The resulting theory of this substantive area provides the conceptual steps that inform self-development practices.

3.8.3 Methodological refinements of grounded theory

A number of methodological refinements have occurred in grounded theory since its initial inception by Glaser and Strauss, most notably that of Corbin's introduction into the fray and Charmaz's epistemological shift in her adaptation of grounded theory. Glaser has directed many scathing critiques towards Strauss and Corbin and Charmaz. Glaser uses "full conceptual description" (Glaser, 1992, p. 19) and not 'grounded theory' as a marker for Strauss and Corbin's adaptation of grounded theory, while he refers to Charmaz as "walking the talk of descriptive capture" (Glaser, 2002, p. 2). Glaser thus makes accusations towards Strauss and Corbin by insisting they have developed an entirely new methodology, while Charmaz has allegedly remodelled grounded theory to qualify as 'Qualitative Data Analysis' method (Glaser, 1992, 2002). Generally, Glaser argues that all have moved away from the centrality of data toward description and "contrived comparisons" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 255). Charmaz insists that whatever mutual critiques have passed between Glaser and Strauss and Corbin, they all "endorse a realist ontology and a positivist epistemology" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 255).

Despite Glaser's criticism, the methodological choice for this study is the reconceptualised constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006) with a sprinkling of fundamental understandings extracted from readings of Glaser, Strauss and Corbin. Knowledge gleaned from these readings especially honed in on the interplay between the researcher and the data, particularly the processual analytic tools

and techniques, the core practices of coding, memoing, constant comparative method of analysis, theoretical sampling and theoretical sensitivity.

Many similarities are evident in all three approaches with fundamental differences primarily emerging in the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings. In the view of Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) “variations of grounded theory exists on a methodological spiral and reflect their epistemological underpinnings” (p. 2). Significantly though, one can enter and exit at various points along this methodological spiral. Charmaz appears to concur, explaining that a constructivist account of grounded theory supplies “effective tools that can be adopted by researchers from diverse perspectives” (2003, p. 256).

Charmaz’s evolutionary grounded theory methodology is situated within the ongoing development of grounded theory and challenges the positivistic view of knowledge construction inherent in the classical grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Charmaz (2000), like Glaser, is visionary about the future of grounded theory and states her interpretation of its prospects:

> I add […] another vision for future qualitative research: constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory celebrates first hand knowledge of empirical worlds, takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research into the 21st century. Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings. (p. 510)

Expressed in the words of Charmaz is an epistemological consistency with the theoretical underpinnings of this study. By reclaiming the tools of grounded theory “from their positivist underpinnings” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250), a flexible, heuristic dimension is added. A constructivist grounded theory, then, legitimises the experience of Aboriginal women as a source of knowledge; it facilitates the development of theory directly interpreted from the words expressed by the women themselves; considers the influence of contextual social processes and structures; recognises the diversity of experience; and assumes a regard for the relational aspects of the research enterprise. Evidenced in this statement are concerns which are traditionally thought to be the domain of critical reflexive methodologies such as poststructuralist, Indigenist and feminist practice. Wuest (1995) cites parallels between feminist and grounded theories while Irabinna Rigney (1999) identifies that Indigenist and feminist practices intersect on a number of points.

3.8.4 A reconceptualised grounded theory

While the role of the neutral observer is paramount in classical grounded theory, as promoted by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Charmaz adamantly maintains, as did Wuest (1995) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), that “it is possible to use grounded theory without embracing earlier proponents’ positivist leanings” (Charmaz, 2000, p.374). Charmaz (2000) articulates an evolutionary interpretative constructivist approach to grounded theory, which:

> […] recognizes that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed. Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the “discovered” reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal,

> cultural, and structural contexts. Researcher and subjects frame that interaction and confer meaning upon it. The viewer then is part of what is viewed rather than separate from it. What a viewer sees shapes what he or she will define, measure and analyse. (pp. 523-524)

Epistemologically then, Charmaz demonstrates that constructivism stresses an intersubjective relationship between the knower and the known in the co-construction of meaning and the subjective position of the researcher and associated biases; this is an epistemological position that I share. Glaser, Strauss and Corbin all assume an objectivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003). I did not wish to distance myself from the participants and the data, so Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach was most compatible with my epistemological standpoint.

The value in a grounded theory approach is that it provides an outward direction in data generation and avoids replication of the same data. That is, as Charmaz (2003) explains, the simultaneous collection and analysis of data streamlines the research process and "avoids being overwhelmed by volumes of general, unfocussed data that do not lead to anything new" (p. 86). The streamlining of data collection has two notable implications for novice researchers such as me. Firstly, the novice researcher finds direction and confidence in the guidelines of the grounded theory process. Secondly, timely completions of the research endeavour that characterise a doctorate research journey are, to some degree, alleviated. It is the nature of the grounded theory process, simultaneous data collection and analysis that also contributes to timely completion. At a conceptual level, the strengths of grounded theory for this particular study are substantiated by its capacity to explain variation in complex human actions, thus

avoiding the essentialist categorisation of Aboriginal women (Miller & Fredericks, 1999). Grounded theory further allows for inductive theory construction.

3.9 Summary

In this chapter, the sources of persuasion and some of the key motivating elements for achieving the research aim were identified to establish and justify the methodological undertones for the study. Presented was a more general discussion of research conducted in Aboriginal contexts and introduced the notion of decolonising research methodologies; a rationale for electing to use a qualitative research approach; a concise positioning of grounded theory methodology and its epistemological foundations; an expression of the congruency between my own constructivist epistemology and the symbolic interactionist origins of grounded theory; and the identification of critical poststructuralist and feminist theories that colour the lens through which the contemporary position and performances of agency for Aboriginal women is understood in the study. The theories are implicit in the methodology and the methods of data generation, the analysis and the presentation of the findings and in the literature review. The rationale for the selection of methods as well as their utility in the research is examined in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

A Rationale for the Choice of Methods and Their Utility

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a rationale for the choice of methods, and the details of their application, used in this study to investigate Aboriginal women's performance of agency. The chapter commences with the secondary methods of practice; autoethnography, reflexivity, observation and fieldnotes and member checking. The rationale for the selection of participants, their recruitment and characteristics precedes a description of the primary data collection method—life-history narrative interviews. Ethical considerations are explored in the final section.

This grounded theory study, concerned with the subjective understandings of Aboriginal women relative to their experiences of agency, was conceptualised from a critical, poststructuralist feminist standpoint. Understandings of self are inherently implicated in the actions and behaviours of the women. Self-identity is concerned with who we are and a reflexive understanding of that self, and is most effectively accessed through self-report. To reveal the experiences of agency for the participants, I employed narrative life-history interviews as the core research method. However, "individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they offer are accounts, or stories about what they did and how. No single method can grasp all the

subtle variations in ongoing human experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). Reinharz (1992) concurs, stating that while "feminist research is driven by its subject matter, rather than by its methods [it] will use any method available and any cluster of methods needed to answer the questions it sets for itself" (p. 213).

Consequently, to provide the most comprehensive understanding and interpretation of Aboriginal women's experience, autoethnography, reflexivity and fieldnotes were considered as integrating secondary methods of practice to the narrative method adopted in this inquiry (see Figure 4.1). These methods not only complement and support each other but also correspond with the study's focus. The methods further harmonise with the underlying theoretical framework of the research and were considered to most effectively capture the interrelationships and meanings ascribed to the phenomenon under study in the voices of the women themselves. It should be acknowledged that electing to use multiple methods in the study does not guarantee complete representations of the realities I sought to uncover but multiple partial realities.

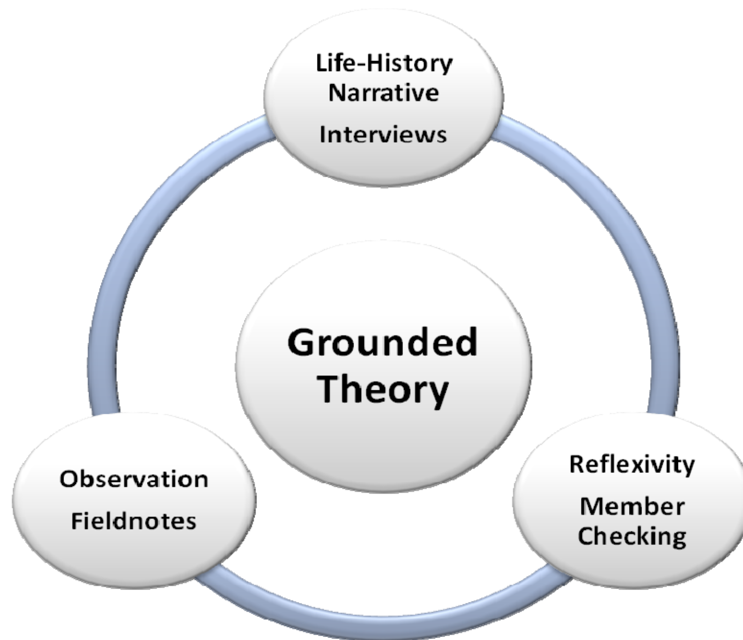

Figure 4.1 Methods of data generation and practice

4.2 Secondary methods of practice

Upon considering the performance of agency, I was not only confronted with the question of how best to capture the multiplicity of experiences which would identify the nature of, and contexts in which, this phenomenon developed but also how to capture the underlying process and its components. What methods could be used to best understand the women's journey of coming to *author*ity (Davies, 2000) according their individual experiences as told by the women themselves?

This study grew, quite organically, from personal experience. As the researcher, I began by contextualising the research topic in my own story; a personal perspective that provided both practical and personal benefits. As Reinharz (1992) recognises, the researcher's personal position has long been used in, and is "a distinguishing feature of feminist research" (p. 258). As the world entered the seventh moment in qualitative

research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) wrote, "[a]t the beginning of the 21st century, the narrative turn has been taken. Many have learned how to write differently, including how to locate themselves in their texts" (p. 3). It was at this point that I came to know and understand the advantages of using autoethnography as a method.

4.2.1 Engaging the I – a rationale for autoethnography as a method

In the past two decades, the social sciences have witnessed a strong upsurge of interest in narrative inquiry relevant to human experience and social relationships (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Maori scholar, Bishop (1996), draws attention to narrative inquiry as a valuable method for Indigenous research practices. Bishop suggests narrative methods are an apt means by which researchers may represent the "diversities of truth" (1996, p. 24), whereby the narrator, rather than the researcher, retains control. Narrative methods, "narratives referring to the stories people tell – [that is], the way they organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes" (Ellis, 2004, p. 195), have proliferated in many disciplines as part of the challenge to Western and androcentric perspectives and practice of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) indicate that this challenge has engendered the relatively new genre of autoethnography, which is concerned with the self-as-researcher and the researcher-as-self.

Hesse-Biber and Leavey (2008) advocate for the development of 'emergent methods' in research, such as autoethnography, to illuminate the complexities of rapidly changing social contexts and theoretical perspectives. They further support the development of new strategies to represent research findings. Autoethnography enables movement toward such flexible methods.

Autoethnography is "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). It is "the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one's relational and inward experiences" (Davis & Ellis, 2008, p. 284). Obvious correlations can be drawn from reading my introductory story in the Prelude section of this thesis and the research endeavour. Autoethnography developed as a method in response to the crisis of legitimation and representation; who and how one may speak for a particular culture (Davis & Ellis, 2008). For my research purposes, an Aboriginal woman's standpoint as a vantage point from which discoveries could be made was paramount. I wanted to permit readers to see and experience the worlds of my participants and I wanted to listen and represent the voices of the participants from this unique vantage point (Bainbridge, 2007). Autoethnography, then, may be defined not by its relationship to a prescribed theory-governed discourse but by its epistemological flexibility, which begins in people's experiences and understandings of the world rather than in theory. In this sense, autoethnography provides an unspecified space from which to conduct research (Bainbridge, 2007; Smith, 2005).

It has been established that the current study does not focus on "single-voiced narratives of the self" (Davis & Ellis, 2008, p. 284) as some autoethnographic studies do. Instead, autoethnography is used as method of legitimisation and as a means to resolve the inherent power hierarchy that exists in any relationship between the researched and the researcher. As such, the research incorporates the voices of the participants and me; only natural since the research originally grew from my own experiences.

Holding multiple subject positions, as both the researcher and participant in this study, did bring distinct disadvantages. To some degree, these complexities were stabilised by the increased practice of reflexivity, which has as its primary goal the reduction of "unintentional effects of power" (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2008, p. 4) by attending to how "biography, authorship and textual representations mediate the knowledge-building process" (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2008, p. 4). Ellis and Berger (2002) highlight four key features in autoethnographic approaches to research—a rejection of objectivity; a valuing of subjectivity and researcher-participant intersubjectivity; the utility of personal and accessible writing; and the explication of the researcher's experiences and a shared humanity with research participants—thus transcending the process of reflexivity and legitimising a way to use my own experiences as an Aboriginal woman to its full potential. While the utility of autoethnographic method at its full capacity was not captured in this study, it did attempt to surpass the method of reflexivity.

Reed-Danahay (1997) succinctly defines autoethnography as both a process and a product; "a method and a text" (p. 9). Ellis and Bochner (2000) interpret autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739) and, thus, the researcher to the researched. However, as noted by Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography can hold a dual perspective in research and may signal both "the ethnography of one's group" (p. 2) or "autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (p. 2). In this research, the focus primarily signals the former perspective. Either way, the distinguishing feature of autoethnography lies in the active presence, participation and acknowledgment of the self in the research and analysis. In this view,

autoethnography connects to heuristic, organic, feminist and Indigenous approaches to research and, hence, to the current research (Bainbridge, 2007).

As a research method, autoethnography allows the particularities of research production to be embedded in our inner ways of knowing and being; our subjectivities to saturate the research. In this view, it not only has the potential to accommodate inner group diversity amongst Aboriginal researchers but also to establish an Aboriginal standpoint in the research project (Bainbridge, 2007). Because the process avoids the assumption of epistemic unity, it potentially creates a space for positing Aboriginal ways of knowing as valid knowledge. That is, according to Nakata (2004), a space "that is recognisably Indigenous" (p. 9).

The purposeful use of self works to understand and interpret lived experience in the lives of others. Neumann (1996) describes the manner in which autoethnographers not only transcend their world through a critical outward gaze toward culture, but also "gaze inward for a story of self" (p. 173). For instance, in this research, my gaze was directed both inward toward my own performances of agency and outward toward the performances of other Aboriginal women. Simultaneously, I explored how my experiences connected with those of my participants. This unique position, Neumann claims, "ultimately retrieves a vantage point for interpreting culture" (1996, p. 173). In this sense, the union of *auto* and *ethno* explicated in autoethnography revealed a story between self and culture; a retelling of the culture in which the self is located. Simply, I occupied "dual interactive roles of researcher and research participant" (Ellis, 1998, p. 49) and used my own experiences in conjunction with those of my participants as primary data.

The use of autoethnography as a tool of legitimisation and positioning claims a natural fit with the aim of the research, its philosophical underpinnings and methodology. Indeed, grounded theorists Strauss and Corbin (1998) claim that the use of "[p]ersonal experience can increase sensitivity [to data] if used correctly" (p. 48). Further, grounded theory applications help to counteract the imposition of subjective frameworks upon data by "minimising preconceived ideas about the research problem and data" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 155).

Performing Autoethnography

Using an autoethnographic method in my research provides the option of drawing directly from an inner dialogue—my knowledge as an Aboriginal woman. Intuitive understandings of the research phenomenon were brought to the surface through writing 'my story', which stimulated critical reflective thinking. What was important for me was how writing my own personal experience illuminated and connected me to the phenomenon under study. This process liberated me in that my (our) story, not theoretical motivations, became the driving force behind my research; showing that I had developed a sensitivity towards understanding the development and expression of agency for Aboriginal women. There was no longer a sense of detachment from my research, allowing me to engage more deeply and dialogically with the research questions. A deeper empathy for how participants would feel in telling their stories was also developed. At an academic level, writing my personal narrative enabled me to better articulate and organise my own thinking. I presented my personal narrative as a traditional academic text and, using the creative license of autoethnography, as poetry (Bainbridge, 2007).

Just as I approached participants to elicit their autobiographies and personal opinions, I became part of the research story through a similar process. I devised a research space from which to elicit information and to participate. Autoethnographic method allowed me to explicitly attend the tensions between self and other and between the personal and the political (Reed-Danahay, 1997), thus allowing me to participate in the lifeworld of the participants and bring the participants into my theorising. I chose to explore my own subjective and cultural experiences to complement those of my participants and bring to the research insights that may have otherwise been silenced (Bainbridge, 2007).

4.2.2 Reflexivity

Because I use myself as a source of data, which has been criticised for being self-indulgent, introspective and individualised (Coffey, 1999), the use of reflexivity was considered an essential method in the research project to maintain the integrity of the project and myself as a researcher. Consistent with feminist epistemologies, I take position that the production of knowledge should encompass systematic examination and explication of our beliefs, biases and social location (Hertz, 1997). This aim is achieved through reflexivity and ensures that the underlying politics of our research methods and assumptions are analysed self-consciously, rather than remaining unacknowledged (Hertz, 1997). The autoethnographic approach to this research makes my assumptions and epistemological position explicit.

Critical theorists, and similarly poststructuralist and feminist theorists, support reflexive processes in qualitative research activities (Alvesson & Skőldberg, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wasserfall, 1997). By its very nature, research is primarily an

interpretative activity; an interpreter (the researcher) drives the research work through interaction with other interpreters (the study population) (Alvesson & Skőldberg, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Recognising the prominence of the researcher in the research enterprise, "reflexivity has become one of the most important tools for controlling the acquisition of knowledge, by providing a monitor over the problem of subjective influences of the researcher on her topic" (Wasserfall, 1997, p. 151). Given the deeply subjectively nature of this research, it was critical that reflexivity was introduced as a strategy to remain cognisant of the imposition of subjective interpretations. It appeared to me that, throughout the research, my personal reality was somewhat reflected through the stories of participants and that I needed to be mindful that I did not assimilate their voices into my own ontological and epistemological position; adopted prior to entering into this research journey and, hence, imposing a framework that would influence the analysis and interpretation of data. The inductive approach of a grounded theory methodology went some way to resolving this conflict.

Reflexivity, according to Alvesson and Skőldberg (2000), has a multiplicity of meanings, but meaning generally derives from the intricate association between the knowledge producer and the multi-level processes of knowledge production and its various contexts. Reflexive research has two fundamental distinguishing features—careful interpretation, where all references to empirical data are seen as the "*results of interpretation*" (Alvesson & Skőldberg, 2000, p. 5) and reflection, which turns the gaze inward towards the researcher herself:

> [...] the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the central importance, as well as the problematic nature,

of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context […] *an interpretation of interpretation*. (Alvesson & Skőldberg, 2000, p. 5)

For me, reflexivity involved epistemological awareness and continuously checking understanding and interpretation in an effort to achieve a more attuned reading of the realities encountered (Alvesson & Skőldberg, 2000). However, Wasserfall (1997) challenges this romantic vision that the use of reflexivity can overcome both exploitation and/or distortion in the research endeavour; a point on which I concur. However, we do not live in an ideal world.

4.2.3 Observation and fieldnotes

Observations, recorded as fieldnotes in a personal journal, were anecdotal and not analysed but, nevertheless, informed the analysis. As an Aboriginal woman, I had a privileged vantage point from which to understand the research phenomenon on a number of levels. For example, I engaged everyday with Aboriginal women, so I had any number of opportunities to observe behaviours and listen to other stories. However, I did not actively seek to observe; only using observation as a method of verification of my own interpretations when an opportunity arose. Keeping a fieldnote journal enabled reflection on the pattern of thinking that emerged as the research progressed.

4.2.4 Member checking

Member checking involves the feedback of data and interpretations to the participants. Classical grounded theory, as espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967), does not advocate the use of member checking and deems the practice as unnecessary. However, the epistemological premise of this research is based on a constructivist

approach to research and, as such, collaboration in the research relationship is important.

I was engaged in varying kinds of relationships with the participants of this study. Member checking occurred through both formal and informal lines of communication. The findings were presented publicly on several occasions in the presence of participants and, at other times, discussions with participants were taken at opportune times. The discussions were invariably around clarification and interpretation, asking questions of the participants such as, how do you think this happened, do you see it this way, or do you see it differently, do you think this is a good interpretation? Other discussions centred on terminology. Thus, the findings were considered in light of these conversations.

4.2.5 Triangulation

The use of multiple methods in this research endeavour "secure[s] an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.4) and is referenced as triangulation. Triangulation "adds rigor, breadth, and depth to any investigation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.4) by providing different perspectives from which to view the research phenomenon. By using life-history narrative interviews, autoethnography, fieldnotes and observation and member checking, a degree of trustworthiness, demonstrated in the rigorous design of the research, was established (Lather, 1991).

4.3 Research participants

4.3.1 Rationale for selection of participants

It was not the goal of this research to infer generalisations or express representativeness to all Aboriginal women regarding experiences of personal agency. Consistent with the logic of qualitative inquiry, this study sought to unearth in-depth understandings of the processes and meanings attached to the lived realities of a discrete population (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2006), in this case, adult Aboriginal women who experienced positive agency in their everyday lives. The aim of the research was to develop a substantive theory that explained how these women were able to bring about social transformation in their lives and that of others; their performance of agency.

I wanted to consider the strengths of Aboriginal women; how we create pathways for survival and beyond. I specifically chose women who were located in positions where they experienced direct social and political contact with society, and further, where their ways of knowing, being and doing contributed to social transformation. The intention of the research was to examine and understand how the women's actions were related to, and developed within, the social context in which they occurred. The processes of how Aboriginal women engage, negotiate and express power in a postcolonial world was the primary concern.

In qualitative research, sampling becomes the instrument by which the researcher estimates the characteristics of the larger population and attempts to account for, and remove, bias in the process of selecting research participants. Qualitative sampling attempts to achieve more validity and accurate data generation in the research

(Neuman 2006; Patton, 2002). Recognising that failure to utilise appropriate sampling techniques may, in all likelihood, produce flawed research, it was imperative that a systematic method of selection, congruent with the research objectives, was developed in the initial stages of the research design.

Mindful of the significance and implications of accurate sample selection, a demonstrative sample was sought. I perceived that a controlled sample group of women with specific characteristics and specialised knowledge was critical to achieving the research objectives. Precision in the sampling technique not only provided contextual depth and more nuanced responses in the generation of data, but was also more time efficient; data saturation was achieved more rapidly (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2006).

Without exception, the participants represented a purposive sample. As Neuman (1997) suggests, a researcher uses purposive sampling "to select unique cases that are especially informative […] to select members of a difficult to reach specialized population […] [and when] the purpose is less to generalize to a larger population than it is to gain a deeper understanding of types" (p. 206). I identified an essential base set of criteria that I believed relevant to the research phenomenon under study. Research participants were selected based on those specific attributes (Neuman, 2006). I cast as wide a net as possible to achieve selection within three basic themes—Aboriginal, women and agency—which I viewed as valid indicators of the abstract constructs to be considered in the research (Neuman, 2006). The homogeneity of the research sample worked to minimise sampling error (Neuman, 2006).

Consistent with the in-depth nature of the research, participants comprised twenty individual Aboriginal women, including myself; my story sits alongside those of the other women. The number of women interviewed was not predetermined; it completed at the point of data saturation and with a few more for good measure. Glaser (1978) suggests that grounded theorists need to collect less data than researchers using many other qualitative methodologies simply because data collection is focussed in a substantive area and "controlled and directed to relevance and workability by theoretically sampling for emerging theory" (p. 47).

Participants were inclusive of women from geographically diverse locations, different generations and backgrounds (see Appendix A Characteristics of Participants). Reinharz (1992) insists that diversity in the sample allows for a more precise conceptualisation of the research phenomenon. Although Aboriginal women share many experiences, from living in a society that denigrates both women and people of Aboriginal descent, the diversity of Aboriginal women's personal histories, in relation to the vast number of different language groups and experiences of colonisation, needs consideration. Therefore, different research sites were sought. I located women from a number of sites in Australian towns. These locations were seen as more viable propositions in terms of travel and offered a distribution of women from different urban contexts. While many participants resided, or were interviewed, in Cairns, it should be noted that the town has a transient population and most of the women came from a range of different locations across Australia. Further, some of the women were visitors to Cairns at the time of the interviews.

All women came from various urban contexts (a centre with a population cluster of 1,000 or more people) (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008b). It was never my original intention that the research should exclude those women residing outside this context. To the contrary, it was my intention to capture diversity among participants. However, funding and accessibility constraints restricted selection of participants. Even so, a diversity of language groups and residential regions were represented; totalling fifteen and nine respectively (see Figure 4.2).

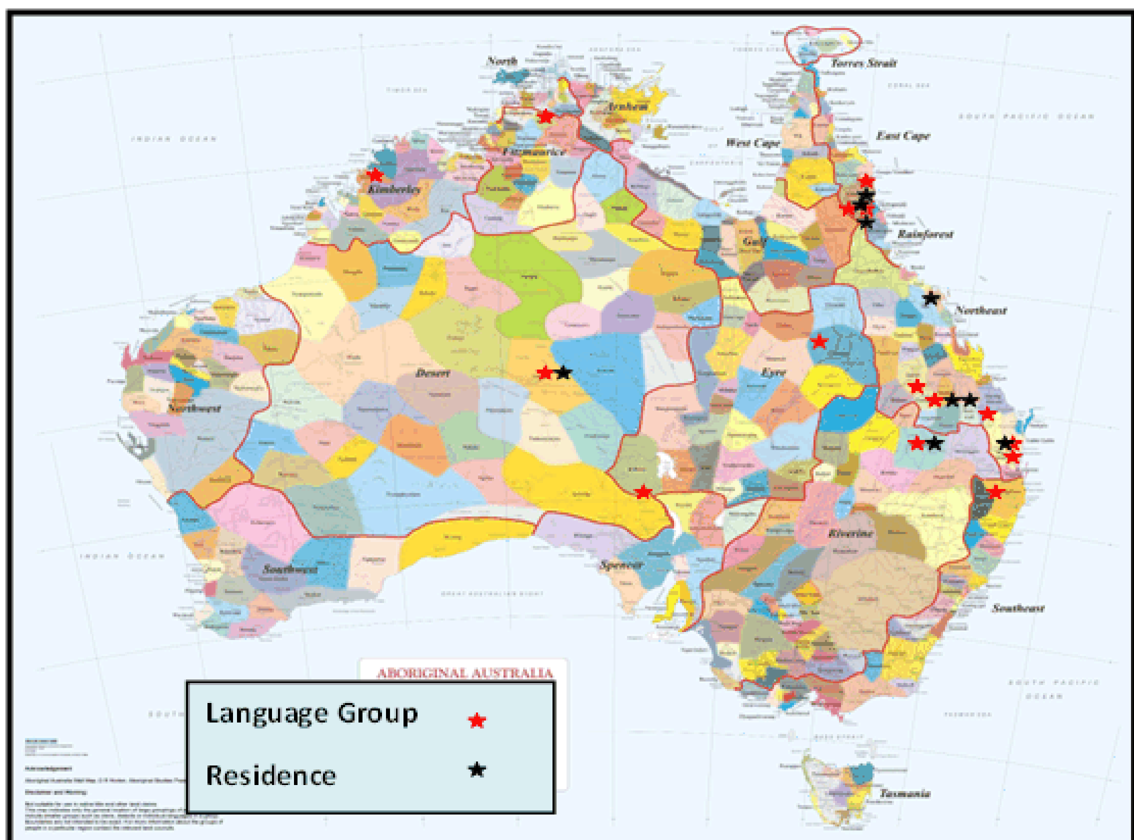

Figure 4.2 Map locating residence and language groups represented in the study (Horton, 2000).

I was guided predominantly by my insider knowledge of the women's activities in society. I considered only women with whom I shared a relationship, either directly or indirectly and who, in some instances, shared relations with each other. I

subsequently interviewed friends, colleagues, relatives and some women with whom I had a briefer acquaintance. All participants:

- were 18 years old and over
- self-identified as Aboriginal women
- were recognised in the community as Aboriginal women
- visibly/publicly demonstrated positive agency in their everyday life, as determined by the performative aspects of their lives; their role/s; activities and/or positions held in society and which were not necessarily paid or held formal positions.

Again, I outline briefly at this point the broad parameter used in the definition of agency as it pertains to the selection criteria. The emphasis on agency proposed here lies within the historical and socio-cultural conditions that facilitate its discursive production. In this sense, agency is dynamic, relative and demonstrated as active resistance or compliance with prevailing ideologies (Butler, 1999; Dissanayake, 1996). While this understanding implicates intentional effort and choice, actions are attenuated in comparison to the active role traditionally accorded to the subject (Applebaum, 2004; Butler, 1999). This understanding follows Butler's (1999) thinking, which suggests agency is not so much about choice, *per se*, as it is about the individual's capacity to differ from, rather than replicate, social discourses. In these terms, we are never located outside social structures (Applebaum, 2004). In this understanding, a mother who is able to run the household efficiently, under much duress, expresses agency. Alternately, the meaning of agency could extend to the actions of a woman who is actively influencing decisions at the United Nations. What I have attempted to stress here is the imperative to consider contextual constraints and/or opportunities in the assessment of

who does, and does not, demonstrate positive agency in their lives. I did not want to project a continuum of agency whereby the parameters would dismiss the realities of many, thus trivialising what a sense of agency might look like for some women. To simplify this judgement call, the purpose at this stage was not to elaborate a definition of agency but to provide a broad preliminary definition from which to work and build upon.

Theoretical purposive sampling came more into play as the study progressed. From the time of beginning initial data generation, I simultaneously collected, coded and analysed the transcribed women's oral histories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicate that this strategy directs the researcher towards "what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop […] theory as it emerges" (p. 45). For example, on one occasion, after realising the flow of events evident in the women's narratives, a search for women whom I knew had experienced particular difficulties and hardships in their lives was driven by the emerging category of resilience in the analysis. In this sense, sampling becomes more focussed as the study progresses and enriches the emergent categories and codes. Therefore, it was not only the women being sampled but also the incidence of life events. This practice is congruent with the method of grounded theory, which sees the sites of the research developed after a category is established and confirms whether the category is pertinent to other settings. It should be noted, however, that the primary identified sample criterion was strictly adhered to in the expanded selection.

4.3.2 Recruitment of participants

Individual participants were contacted through personal networks by phone or in person. Some problems were encountered by those offering to participate and their actual ability to participate. Five women, approached, were unable to participate; one did not present at the arranged meeting. This was most often due to constraints imposed on the lives of the women from family, work and/or community obligations during the specified timeframes of the study. The inability to participate was an expected occurrence as I am acutely aware of the hectic lifestyle and demands on the time of women, particularly given the characteristics of the target population. As one of the participants noted, “we’re just spread too thin on the ground” **(Anna, Elder: 258-259)** and time is of the essence. However, it should also be noted that two women declined the opportunity to share their story for reasons known only to them.

Among the twenty identified women who shared their stories for the research was my own story. This was not my original intention. Initially, I sought to use autoethnographic method and wrote my own autobiography. However, midway through the process of data collection I requested that one of the other participants interview me. My interview was transcribed and analysed according to the processes outlined in the transformation of other raw data.

4.3.3 Characteristics of the participants

Twenty urban-dwelling Aboriginal women were interviewed for this study. Their ages ranged from eighteen to sixty-six years; most were aged between thirty-five and fifty-five. They represented fifteen different language groups from across Australia; all had English as their first language and one woman spoke her tribal language.

Seventeen of the twenty women had children and eight were in a relationship at the time of the interview. Seventeen were currently working in a range of paid positions; the other three were in unpaid positions and were community active. Seven of the women served on various community boards at the time of the interview. Sixteen of the women completed school until Year 12 (the final year of secondary school); two did not complete Year 10 (two years prior to the end of formal schooling); eight had a TAFE (a publicly funded post-secondary organisation providing a range of technical and vocational education and training courses and other programs) certificate or diploma; twelve had completed a bachelor degree at university; three had completed postgraduate studies; and sixteen of the twenty women continued to study at the time of the interview.

The women were located in a range of positions such as community volunteers, health workers, project officers, management, academics, students, public servants, researchers, executives, workers in community organisations, teachers and Elders. Further, understanding was enhanced through a multiplicity of perspectives.

4.4 Data collection

The primary data collection method was face-to-face life-history narrative interviews conducted with Aboriginal women. They were invited to participate in one- to two-hour narrative life-history interviews, with the possibility of a follow-up interview of a similar duration; four follow-up interviews eventuated.

4.4.1 Life-history narrative interviews

There exists a multitude of ways of being an Aboriginal woman in today's society. The challenge of this research was to explore Aboriginal women's agency without essentialising or creating specific or universalising notions of realities/identities for Aboriginal women. It was never my aim in this research to surreptitiously empower myself through the writing of this thesis nor do I proclaim myself as an expert or assume a position of authority. Rather, I try to convey the individual realities of participants as expressed in their narratives from a position of *author*ity. I explicitly claim at this point that, while I am the fundamental conduit through which this research speaks, it is the stories of participants I wish to project.

Data was generated through the collection of life-history narratives. In a cultural sense, life-history narratives are a method that is congruent with Aboriginal oral traditions and, therefore, relevant to the nature of the research experience, both for me, as the researcher and participant, and the participants. It seemed fitting that storytelling was the obvious method choice. It is an important feature of Aboriginal culture, practiced for millennia. Life-history narratives were also a way of preserving our voices and introducing open-endedness into the manner in which the interviews transpired.

Narrative method is ideal for exploring the development and expression of social interaction. Life-history narrative interviews evoke the texture of experience by enhancing the opportunity to gather rich descriptive data that is characteristic of qualitative research, so, was considered to be the most appropriate approach to elicit understandings about how Aboriginal women conducted themselves in contemporary Australian society. Cortazzi (1993) explains that "[b]y studying oral accounts of

personal experience we can examine the tellers' representations and explanations of experience" (pp. 1-2). Seeking personal accounts of such representations is a significant issue in research with Aboriginal women, as demonstrated in the Sensitising Narrative section of this thesis. The issue of voice is particularly critical, as one of the goals of this research is to create a safe and respectful space where the women's voices are placed at the centre of the analysis and authenticity is privileged in an effort to avoid essentialised and homogenised representations of women's realities. Interviewing gives rise, in this sense, to multiple authentic voices and contributes to the "diversity, richness and power" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. xii) expressed in the stories of participants.

Interviewing, according to Reinharz (1992), "offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). By utilising life-history interviews, I have allowed individual women to become narrators of their experiences. In turn, the words of participants enabled insights of differences and similarities, as well as the meaning ascribed to their experiences by each of these women, to emerge. However, it is crucial that the narratives presented in this study are viewed as fleeting snapshots of the participants' life journeys as they recount their developmental narratives of agency.

I further bring to this research the conviction that Aboriginal knowledge is the domain of Aboriginal people. Narrative life-history interviews align well with this belief. Flick (2006) asserted that participants in narrative interviews "are taken as experts and theoreticians of themselves" (p.173). Narrative interviews invite participants to recount their experiences relating to the research topic. The role of the researcher is to encourage the participant to relate all relevant events of the story (Flick,

2006). This technique elicits data that cannot be reproduced through other forms of interviewing for three major reasons—narratives take on independence during recounting; people ‘know’ more of their lives than they are able to articulate theoretically; and narratives are reported as experienced by the narrator as the doer (Flick, 2006). Hence, the structure and content of narrative provides an understanding of both a person’s inner experience and the meaning held regarding that experience (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992), making narrative interviews well suited to the research inquiry.

Timeframe and Location of Interviews

All stories were gathered between August 2005 and December 2007. My office, my home, interview rooms at the post-graduate centre, workplaces, motel rooms, co-researcher homes, government offices, conference rooms and educational institutional offices were used to conduct the interviews, providing a safe space of trust and privacy negotiated on each participant’s terms. I was very flexible on the time and site of the interviews, as I was mindful that all women involved had family commitments and a heavy workload. Various geographical locations included Alice Springs, Cairns, Sunshine Coast, The Whitsundays and Yarrabah.

Prior to the Meeting

Prior to the day of the interview, an information package was sent to the participants. The package comprised an Informed Consent Form for their perusal, an Information Sheet outlining the study and an Interview Schedule detailing questions they may wish to consider in preparation for the meeting (see Appendix B Participant Information Package). Immediately preceding the interviews, participants were invited

to negotiate intended meanings of any information in the research package or discussed in dialogue with me personally. This interaction enabled participants to negotiate meaning in terms of individual life experience, thus constructing consensual knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004).

The interviewing technique took into account Aboriginal cultural norms and protocols as well as ethical considerations. At the beginning of the interview session, participants received a verbal explanation of the research inquiry, which also considered the boundaries and necessity of informed consent. I obtained signed copies of the ethical consent forms in alignment with university ethical requirements, which incorporate the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans June 1999 and Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research 2003. Subject to the participant's approval, I recorded interviews.

Interview Process and Questions

Silverman (1993), commenting on the aim and nature of qualitative interview questions, states that "[a]uthenticity rather than reliability is often the issue in qualitative research" (p. 10) and that the best means by which to generate data to gain an 'authentic' understanding of people's experiences is through open-ended questions. An open-ended statement invariably launched most interviews. Simply, I began by explaining that I was interested in understanding how they became the person they are today, and then asked 'can you tell me your story?' This statement opened a world of interpretations from participants; at one stage, I found myself engaged in a discussion of

UFOs and prehistoric sea creatures. One could be forgiven for considering that any discussion of this nature was not pertinent to the research presented here. Not so.

To maintain confidentiality of participants, I transcribed and de-identified the interviews; coded firstly by numbers and later changed to pseudonyms. All interviews were personally transcribed verbatim which served a number of purposes. The iterative process of transcription increased the familiarity with the interview contents and further enabled nuances of meaning to be recalled. The flavour of the language was captured and not edited out until I was certain it held no meaning in the context of the conversation. For example, the 'ums' and 'you knows' were at times edited out of the transcripts, while at other times the accompanying silences spoke volumes. Colloquialisms were maintained in the transcripts. The particular expressions were significant; firstly, to the method of grounded theory analysis and, secondly, to include, at times distinctive, Aboriginal English ways of expression so as not to silence Aboriginal voices and capture intricate nuances of language and meaning. To me, the use of Aboriginal English by some of the women indicated a level of trust and intimacy in the research relationship. Significantly, the inclusion of Aboriginal language as markers of Aboriginal identification, from an Aboriginal position, also speaks back to discourses of assimilation and, so, language constitutes an important part of the analysis.

Having stated the significance of transcription for this study it should be noted that Glaser (1998) actually contests the taping of interviews, contending that it "neutralizes and undermines the power of grounded theory methodology to delimit the research as quickly as possible" (p. 108). That is, for him, note-taking privileges the

selection of content and limits description, allowing the researcher to concentrate on theory generation. On more than one occasion while conducting interviews, technology failed me and I thought the interview was lost. However, the occasions of technical failure occurred in the latter stages of data collection when I was quite familiar with the already well-developed categories. The occurrence of the event enabled me to be selective in the choice of data and avoid the "descriptive capture" (2002, p. 2) to which Glaser refers. Indeed, I found the experience of writing purely from recall was quite powerful. Even so, I strongly oppose this method. While transcription is undoubtedly a time consuming process and produces large volumes of data, I view note-taking as contributing, once again, to 'silencing' the voices of participants and is far from conducive to the conduct of research in interactive and naturalistic settings. It is on these points of subjectivity and collaboration in the research relationship that the Glaserian 'objectivist' grounded theory epistemologically departs from the constructivist approach. As Charmaz (2000) suggests, "[a] constructivist approach necessitates a relationship with respondents in which they can cast their stories in their own terms. It means listening to their stories with openness to feeling and experience." (p. 525)

While I believe, at times, naïve overemphasis is placed on the potential for contributing to the empowerment of individuals in the interviewing process, I saw a change of tone in the women during some interviews. At the commencement of interviews, some women were not always in the highest of spirits and, at times, their minds were elsewhere. However, on several occasions, these women were re-energised from becoming involved in the positive content of the interview; to be observed to become alive, realise their potential and achievements and refocus on the future.

During the long conversations with participants, a number of women expressed their gratitude for listening and, more often, for providing the opportunity for them to validate their experiences and focus on their positive attributes. For instance, one woman verbalised her appreciation for allowing her to 'discover' personal attributes of which she was unaware, providing a new confidence in how she viewed herself and how she perceived others viewed her. African American feminist theorist bell hooks (1995) verifies the power of narrative. She states, "writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means to self-growth and change in a practical way" (p. 86).

After the Meeting

I recorded fieldnotes as soon as possible following the interviews. Fieldnotes assisted in capturing the essence and meaning of personal observation and acted as a personal aid in interpretation and analysis of interview data. The fieldnotes were in the form of a personal journal and were not analysed.

I transcribed all interviews personally with affective comments noted on each. I returned a copy of the transcripts to each of the participants, who were encouraged to review their individual transcripts and make any necessary alterations. The significance of this action allowed the women to add and/or eliminate the content of their transcripts so that they were comfortable with the content of the information they divulged during the interviews. Only one participant made alterations to her transcript; primarily making grammatical corrections. I made no copies of the original recording and erased recordings of interviews to make space for new dialogue. Transcripts are safely stored in lockable storage at James Cook University (Cairns Campus).

4.5 Ethical considerations

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) cautions, “insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis forever more, and so do their families and their communities” (p. 137). To add to Tuhiwai Smith’s considerations, I wish to highlight that many insider researchers may need to first deal with the consequences of past processes. I was an insider, an Aboriginal woman and a participant in this research activity. I had connections with participants and shared a similar subject position to them. Truly an insider, also, in an academic sense, armed with a historical understanding of the consequences of unethical research, equipped with all the knowledge of conducting research in Aboriginal contexts. Nothing prepared me, however, for the actual performance expected of the researcher. Coming to terms with conducting research with Aboriginal women caused me much angst. I realised that I was no longer an insider; undeniably I was an outsider in the role of researcher—an insider/outsider researcher. The reality of acknowledging myself as an outsider was unquestionably devastating for me and placed me in a desperate position regarding how to continue the research. At one point, I seriously contemplated turning to a study of literature. I felt incapable and immobilised to continue the task of interviewing. Recollections of times long past initiated these emotions. These were times in my life when the personal and the political converged; when I personally experienced the negative impact of exploitive research. After much deliberation, I worked through these issues.

In the past, accurate representation and interpretation of Aboriginal voices proved to be problematic and influenced social policy in ways that have been harmful to Australia’s Aboriginal population (Irabinna Rigney, 1999; Martin 2003, 2008).

Accordingly, collaboration with participants remained a priority to ensure a high standard of ethical conduct prior to, during and following negotiations with research participants.

4.5.1 Informed consent and confidentiality

The results of my research will be publicly communicated. Therefore, the protection of the participants' individual and collective intellectual property is a major ethical consideration. The research methodology reflects the need to ensure information provided by participants will not be appropriated for academic and/or commercial purposes without their prior knowledge, understanding and informed consent. Prior to gaining entry into the field, ethical clearance from the JCU Human Ethics Sub-Committee was established. The sensitive and personal nature of the research topic and the line of inquiry require that ethical dimensions be addressed through the research design and methods (see Appendix C – Ethics Approval).

4.6 Summary

This chapter detailed the rationale for the utility of life-history narrative interviews, the primary method of data generation and secondary methods of practice including autoethnography, reflexivity, observation and fieldnotes and member checking. It further documented the manner in which these methods were used. The selection of participants, their recruitment and characteristics was also documented. These methods were considered the best avenues available to gain access into the world of the participants to provide an informed response to the research questions identified at the beginning of the study through the generation of quality empirical data and its

subsequent analysis. The following chapter explains the methods of data analysis and expands upon their practical application.

Chapter 5

Transformation of Data

5.1 Introduction

Grounded theory was designed as a complete methodological "package" (Glaser, 1998, p. 9). In whatever variation of grounded theory chosen, in practice, the omission of the strategies will reflect in the resulting theory. It is critical to be mindful of the strategies used and reflect on, and integrate, each step into its application. Chapter 4 featured the methods used in the generation of data for this study. Chapter 5 discusses the transformation of data in the study; the practical application of grounded theory as a method of analysis. Glaser (1998) indicates that to learn grounded theory you must have faith, and "just do it" (p. 254) and learn from the experience because it will work. This section follows my path of learning and understanding grounded theory as advanced by Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006) but also strongly influenced by the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1998, 2001) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). I provide a fundamental understanding of the application of grounded theory in this study and outline the steps from the simultaneous sampling, collecting, coding and categorising of the women's life-history narratives to the emergent theory.

5.2 Conceptual processes implicated in grounded theory

To understand how grounded theory is applied in practice, it helps to understand the conceptual processes implicated in its application. It was this knowledge that allowed me to have faith and "just do it" (Glaser, 1998, p. 254). Prior to understanding

these processes, I felt very tentative in proceeding with the analysis and uncertain whether I was 'jumping' to conclusions instead of staying close to the data. Grounded theory involves both inductive and deductive methods of theory generation (Ezzy, 2002). Grounded theory, placing emphasis on the inductive nature of theory construction, was developed mainly in reaction to the logico-deductive method. It is the verification of theories to which grounded theorists are opposed; the way in which deductive theory is derived and the way it enters into relationship with the data as a pre-existing theory (Ezzy, 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1990) insist that the use of pre-existing theory "hinder[s] progress and stifle[s] creativity" (p. 53) in the research project. Purely deductive methodologies, then, restrict interpretations and constrain the development of new theoretical explanations and understandings of phenomenon (Ezzy, 2002).

Grounded theorists do, however, recognise the importance of both induction and deduction in the practice of grounded theory. It is true that, in grounded theory, the generation of concepts and categories (induction) and consideration of their relationships move from the specific to the general, "that is, constructing abstract concepts from a study of specific data" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 351) and emerge from the data. Inductive reasoning is essential to enable the identification of concepts in order to generate theory (Morse & Field, 1996). However, interpretation also occurs in the conceptualisation of data, categorical relationships and the development of hypotheses (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Any process of interpretation, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), is a form of deductive reasoning; "anytime that a researcher derives hypotheses from data, because it involves interpretation, we consider that to be a deductive process" (p. 22). That is, we deduce what is happening in the data.

Simultaneously, our reading of that data, our ontological and epistemological assumptions and influences of literature synthesise to all play a part in the creation of meaning (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Glaser (1998) insists that deduction, as observed in grounded theory studies is "not logical, conjectured deduction" (p. 43) but "is carefully deduced probabilities on where to go next for what data one might find to induce further a growing theory" (p. 43). Grounded theorists attempt to validate their interpretations through constant comparisons between data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), that is, tentative explanations emerge from the identification of concepts, provisional causes and relationships (Morse & Field, 1996). In practical terms, the researcher moves "between cause and definition, and, as understanding increases the definitions, hypotheses and developing theory are modified" (Morse & Field, 1996, p. 7).

A grounded theory approach is "inductively driven" (Morse & Field, 1996, p. 7) but also uses deduction to develop theory (Morse & Field, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphatically state the interaction of induction and deduction in their treatise on grounded theory:

> At the heart of theorizing lies the **interplay** of making inductions (deriving concepts, their properties and dimensions from data) and deductions (hypothesizing about the relationships between concepts, the relationships are also derived from data, but data that have been abstracted by the analyst from the raw data). (p. 22)

Ezzy (2002), drawing on the work of Peirce (1965), claims that "the theory of abduction provides the philosophical background to the processes that are involved in

grounded theory" (pp. 13-14). According to Peirce (cited in Ezzy, 2002), abduction and not deduction or induction engenders new understandings and contributes to the observed data. Abduction is the preliminary step in scientific thinking, while induction is the final step (Fyhr, 2002). Abductive reasoning suggests that the researcher "analyses the conditions or criteria for the hypothesis that best explains the facts at hand and that can be experimentally tested" (Fyhr, 2002, n.p.). In inductive reasoning, the researcher "seeks facts and corrects and modifies the proposed hypothesis" (Fyhr, 2002, n.p.). Ezzy (2002) explains that "[a]bduction makes imaginative leaps to new theories to explain observations […] without having empirically demonstrated all the required steps" (p. 14). Abduction therefore assists in forming new propositions or hypotheses during the research process by drawing inferences about observable data (Fyhr, 2002). The testing of hypotheses predicated upon inductive and deductive probing for confirmation (Ezzy, 2002). Movement back and forth between general propositions and empirical data is integral to the process of discovery. Preconceived theories and knowledge do, therefore, have a place in grounded theory studies by sensitising "the researcher to the particular issues and aspects of the phenomenon being studied" (Ezzy, 2002, pp. 11-12) but must be used as part of the cycle of theory building and data collection (constant comparative method).

5.3 Strategies of grounded theory analysis

Grounded theory is a flexible, strategic, iterative, non-linear process. Some, for example Ezzy (2002), would argue that grounded theory and thematic analysis are extremely similar methods and share many common strategies. Ezzy (2002) cites the absence of theoretical sampling in thematic analysis as the major difference. Still, as utilised in this study, a grounded theory approach is a discrete form of analysis because

it constitutes more than a method of analysis. It is a complete "package" (Glaser, 1998, p. 9) that integrates strategies of concurrent sampling, data collection and analysis. Glaser (2001) insists that grounded theory presents a "set of fundamental processes that need to be followed if the study is to be recognized as a product of the grounded theory methodology" (p. 225). Grounded theory research methods are predicated upon seven distinguishing characteristics detailed by Glaser (1992) and Glaser and Strauss (1967), to which I adhered, although not always at a conscious level. These characteristics are:

(i) Concurrent sampling, data collection and analysis
(ii) Constructing mid-range theory to explain behaviour and processes
(iii) Inductive development of codes and categories
(iv) Memo writing
(v) Comparisons between data and data, data and concept, concept and concept
(vi) Theoretical sampling
(vii) Forming analysis prior to the literature review.

5.4 Analytic tools in grounded theory

Documented here is the application of the analytic tools of grounded theory as it occurred in this study, and which gave rise to the conceptual categories, their properties and dimensions and allowed the identification of the relationships between the categories leading to the identification of a core category, its process and the construction of theory. Meaning was constructed from the comparative analysis of theoretical categories which, in turn, were raised to higher levels of abstraction. However, ultimately, the interplay between me, the data and the analytic process would guide the generation of theory.

In grounded theory, moving toward theory involves a concurrent cyclic act of a number of integrated strategies; theoretical sampling, data collection, coding, categorising, writing memos, constant comparative method, theoretical sensitivity and diagramming (Charmaz, 2003, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory approach to research advocates that the sampling, data collection and analysis and interpretation are not enacted in a linear fashion and should not be considered independently. Nevertheless, for the purposes of clarity in communicating grounded theory strategies and, in particular, an understanding of the analysis and interpretation processes in this study, I approached each strategy as an individual entity (see Figure 5.1).

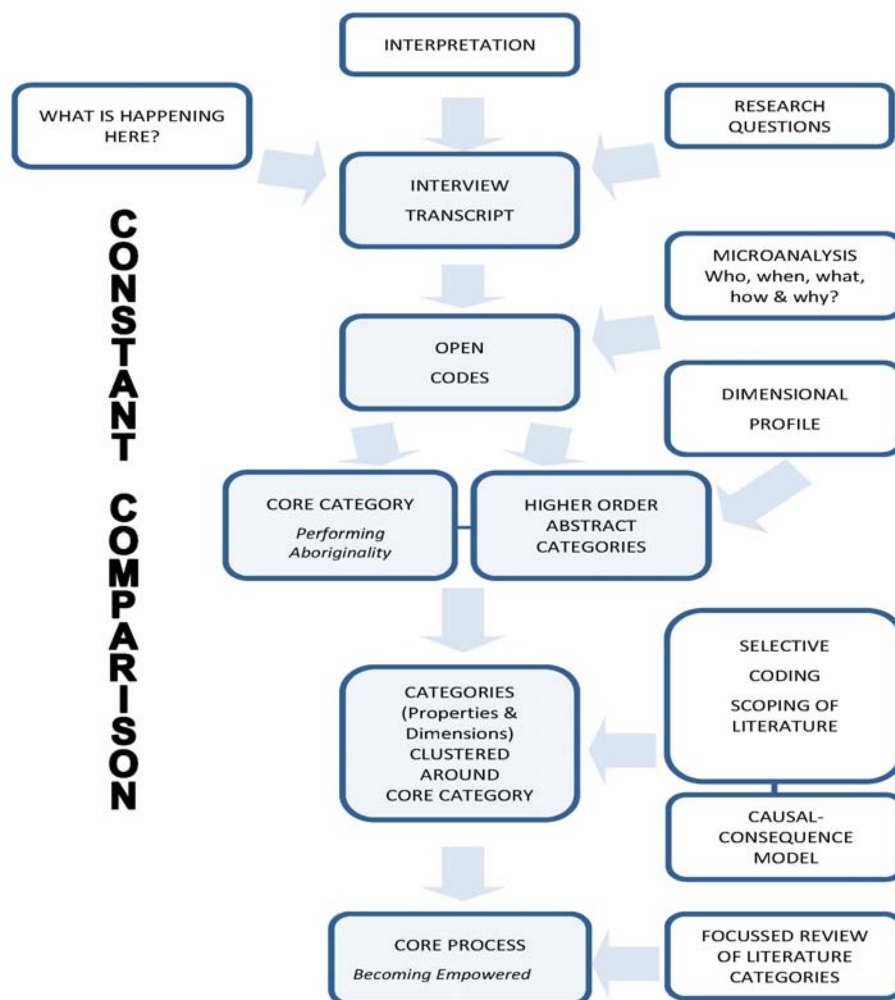

Figure 5.1 Grounded theory in practice

5.4.1 Coding

Draucker, Martsolf, Ross and Rusk (2007) provide a succinct overview of the coding practices of grounded theory:

> Open coding is the initial close, line-by-line or word-by-word examination of the data for the purpose of developing provisional concepts. Through the process of constant comparison, these concepts are collapsed into categories. In axial coding, the analysis is specifically focused on an emerging category. Selective coding is the examination of the data for the purpose of unearthing the core category and achieving the integration of the theoretical framework. (p. 1138)

It is here, in the strategic coding practices, that fundamental differences within grounded theory arise. Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate microanalysis, which combines open and axial coding. Their articulation of microanalysis correlated with my ways of thinking and best suited my ways of working with the data and, therefore, this approach to coding was adopted.

Microanalysis: Open and Axial Coding

The initial fracturing of the data occurred from the time the first interview was transcribed. I did not use specific qualitative data analysis computer software in the data organisation, preferring instead to complete the process manually with the use of Microsoft Office. Prior to open coding, I printed a hardcopy of the transcripts and each transcript was closely scrutinised; I not only read and re-read the data transcripts but also listened to the recorded interviews many times over. In the transcription of the interviews, each line was numbered and double-spaced so as to have room to write and

code. I coded each transcript line by line, for the data were so richly textured that I did not wish to overlook any part of it. At each line I wrote the allocated code name. In the open coding procedure I asked a prime question of the data—what is happening here for the participant? (Glaser, 1978), all the while keeping the terms of reference, established in the origin of this research, in mind.

I moved rapidly through the data in open coding (Charmaz, 2006). The resulting codes upon first engagement with the data emerged as being more descriptive than interpretative and I worked at trying to balance the process. I endeavoured to maintain the language of the participants in the process of deciding upon codes for the data, but most often the codes reflected short titles beginning with active verbs, for example *making choices*. Some of the codes related to the demographics and personal history of the individual women, some to events in their lives, life choices, actions and strategies and some to the feelings, thoughts, needs, desires and visions of the women. Interestingly, from the outset of coding the data, recurrent codes were identified and patterns of relations between them began to become apparent, both across and within individual transcripts. An example of some of the initial line by line coding is presented in Table 5.1.

Following the identification of initial codes, the line numbers of the coded transcripts and the corresponding codes of each line of the interview were placed into new documents for each individual interview. A folder was made for each interview to keep the information contained in each of the documents together. The folders also held a brief biography of the individual women, diagrams of processes and some memos of individual themes.

Table 5.1 Example of initial line by line coding

118	I think you sort of get a network right…if I'm talking about myself specifically, I started
	connecting with others/ being independent
119	off on my own, it was my choice to go and get another degree at uni…um, but well you
	making positive life choices (education)
120	know yourself, I've worked up this network at uni itself, I'm not a mentor but I know
	connecting with and mentoring others
121	I've been told over the last couple of years by other students that they've been really
	assuming responsibility and care/acting as a mentor
122	glad that I'm there, because they are feeling like they're participating, that they are not
	assuming responsibility and care/acting as a mentor
123	alone…and so I've got that network, you know caring for each other and making sure
	caring for and connecting with others
124	we're getting through, you know giving each other you know the incentive to keep on.
	supporting self and others

In uncovering initial codes, relationships between them were already becoming apparent. The intentional use of constant comparative analysis, the hallmark of grounded theory, enhanced identification of the relationships. Constant comparative method involves comparing data with data, and data to concepts, to search for similarities and differences. For example, you might take a comparison of incidents with the same incidents in the same data and across data at different times and locations, or compare developed codes to new data. Practicing this method of comparison in this study sometimes meant a return to earlier transcripts to search for processes and events identified in later transcripts but which may have presented differently or been

identified differently in earlier transcripts. I endeavoured to avoid judgement calls in this constant comparative method; instead, I strove to understand the reasoning behind the women's experiences (Charmaz, 2006). The idea behind the constant comparative method in grounded theory is that it aims to explicate the properties and dimensions of categories with a view to saturating the categories (seeking new information on categories until such information no longer produces new insights) and reducing the data to a more manageable level, which is, at that point, constituted by a set of themes or categories that represent the research phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Conceptual mapping assisted in charting the processes inherent in the categories most times.

It must be said that this part of the process of analysis was extremely time consuming, sometimes very tedious, but exciting and rewarding, particularly upon emerging the core process. I had not only misjudged the timeframe of analysis in this study but also underestimated the level of personal involvement with the data and the difficulties inherent in defining categories. At times, I questioned whether I was indeed reducing the amount of data or increasing it with all the memos and categories. It should also be noted that constant comparison was practiced in conjunction with, and with the guidance of, strategies of microanalysis.

The early discovery of relationships was the turning point at which I elected to follow Strauss and Corbin's practice of microanalysis as opposed to practising open coding and axial coding as separate activities. Themes reflecting the relationships between initial codes were developed as categories and allowed further fracturing of the data by identifying higher order abstract categories and clustering the initial codes within those categories. I placed all relevant line coding under their individual

categories by cutting and pasting into a new document for each transcript. Some of the codes were categorised under more than one category. Some of the early higher order categories are shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Higher order abstract categories

Higher order abstract categories	
Biographical Information	Claiming
Spirituality	Defining Moments
Belong	Making Choices/Changing
Witnessing	Standing in Relatedness to Others
Being Aware	Doing it the Hard Way/ Resilience
Envisioning a Future	Mentoring/Leadership
Naming	Exercising Responsibility & Care

The documented analysis of each interview was still maintained in its individual folder. At this early stage of data analysis, the coding provided insights into the future direction of data collection. In subsequent interviews, I began to pick up on themes and processes identified in the initial coding. This allowed for more in-depth exploration and clarification of those areas. The comparison across and within data sets enabled the pursuit of data that could elucidate the identified processes, if not previously identified in earlier cases. It further enabled saturation of categories more rapidly. An informal scoping of literature, relevant to the identified categories, was undertaken with this purpose in mind. Because I was becoming more familiar with the process and was now attuned to picking up on cues as they were related to me in the interview process,

coding began to quicken. As new data came in, line by line coding made it easier to compare data and, in particular, to find similarities and differences in the data sets. Open coding ceases upon the emergence of a core category; however, as a novice researcher, I did not have the confidence to cease open coding until the latter part of collection.

The role of microanalysis is to facilitate the discovery properties, dimensions, conditions and consequences of the individual categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As categories and their properties were identified, they were further filled out through theoretical sampling. To achieve more in-depth insights into the categories, I asked more focussed theoretically probing questions, such as those suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998); "who, when, what, how and why" (p. 66). For example, in the category *making choices*, I asked theoretical questions of the data such as, when did personal choice become important in this woman's life? What facilitated the ability of this woman to assert *author*ity? How did she enact choice in her life? What were the consequences of enacting personal choice in this woman's life? And so on. To ensure complete explication of categories and their relationships, these theoretical questions were written inside the hard copy folders of each interview and attached to the memo board in front of my computer, as a reminder of the questioning process, until this became a routine line of questioning for me. This line of questioning built up the properties, dimensions, conditions and consequences of categories across data sets, which, in turn, served to facilitate the conceptual mapping of individual categories. Thus, a "dimensional profile" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 70) was built around each of the categories elucidating the conditions in which it was developed, the context in which it was embedded, the strategies by which it was handled and the consequences of

those strategies—the sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This 'dimensional profile' is similar to Glaser's causal-consequence model around which the core process of *Becoming Empowered* was constructed. These coding methods enabled an examination of the interface between Aboriginal women and the worlds in which they lived (Corbin, 1991) and, subsequently, provided critical insights into their negotiation of power; the conditions that give rise to agency, the contexts in which it is performed, the strategies that enabled agency and the consequences of those strategies.

Attention to language in the data was also important in the microanalysis. Codes of specific terms used by participants can serve as "symbolic markers of participants' speech and meanings" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Some of the terms utilised by the women, such as 'doing it the hard way', were explored further, according to the previously discussed line of questioning in microanalysis and through comparative analysis with other data. Terms such as these, known as *in vivo* codes (Charmaz, 2006), make use of the exact words of the participants to form the categories.

Establishing the Core Category

While constructing 'dimensional profiles' for the categories and continuing with the cyclic process of grounded theory method, I consistently asked 'what is the common influencing background in this data?' This line of inquiry was intended to establish the category that was central in the data and broad enough in its scope to link all, or most, of the other categories—the core category. As data accumulated and after a couple of incorrect identifications of the core category, I came to the realisation that the women were not necessarily articulating their central concern explicitly; that it could be identified in their address of that concern. Thus conceived, I asked what drives the

women to engage in these actions and behaviours not as individual categories in constructing the ‘dimensional profiles’ but as engagement in a process. I therefore commenced a process of hypothesising. I had already identified the relationships of the individual categories to each other but what did these categories, in the aggregate, mean in the broader scheme of the women’s lives? Eventually the core category of *Performing Aboriginality* was established. The core category was considered the shared core concern evidenced in the women’s narratives and conceptually reflected their desire to achieve a better quality of life consistent with their identification as Aboriginal women and all which that identification entailed. The task, then, was to identify, through ongoing analysis, the relationship of the core category to the other categories. Thus, *Performing Aboriginality*, as the core concept in the data, was the common theme linking all actions and behaviours of the women together.

Selective Coding and Theoretical Saturation

All further data collection and analysis, from the point of emerging the core category, restricted the coding to only those variables that linked to the core category. This is referred to as selective coding and is the final stage of data analysis. It builds on the foundations of microanalysis by examining the interrelationships of categories and validating the categorical relationships. It confirms “the integration of concepts around a core category” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 236) and refines and develops categories left wanting (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As such, this process moves toward theoretical saturation.

The focus of the analysis moved once the core category of *Performing Aboriginality* was identified through theoretical sampling. At this stage of the analysis, I

found myself involved in an interesting paradox. While I had become very close to the data, I simultaneously found myself speaking and writing in theoretical concepts and was somewhat uncomfortable that I felt removed from my constructivist epistemology. However, I began validating the theoretical categories with the women through further interviews and member checking. Indeed, the latter group began speaking in conceptual terms. It appeared that naming their shared concern, in terms that resonated with them, was an exhilarating experience.

I continued to sample for the focussed categories and, when I began to hear stories that no longer contributed to identifying new dimensions for the categories, or any new categories, I suspected I was very near theoretical saturation. However, I did continue to collect data beyond that point. This was primarily motivated by my inexperience and lack of confidence in grounded theory research.

5.4.2 The significance of memo writing

Memoing is an essential component of grounded theory methodology. Glaser (1978) defines memo writing as "*the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding*" (p. 83). Memos are essentially a "record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110). Thus conceived, the practice of writing memos, also part of reflexive practice, helped to illuminate preconceptions and biases. Glaser (1998) explains that "[i]t is a fantasy for the researcher to think he/she is not a part of the data" (p. 49). Continuing, he implores the need to keep track of how one is part of the data. Memos facilitated recording of preconceptions and reminded me "not

to force the data with particularism" (Glaser, 1998, p. 49). As both researcher and participant in this research endeavour, reflexivity was a critical strategy.

Particularly pertinent for me, because the study was borne of my subjective experiences, was a critical need to be mindful of 'forcing the data' to fit my preconceived ideas. The grounded theory process made this much easier because of the forced notation of preconceptions and biases in memoing. In the application of grounded theory, conceptual levels become independent of personal experience and knowledge (Glaser, 1998). It is pertinent to note here that "pet theories" (Glaser, 1998, p. 49) with which I entered into this research were partially dispelled in conduct of the research and, as Glaser (1998) predicted, new discoveries increased my motivation and my own learning experiences.

Memoing comprised an ongoing process that started in the initial open coding. For example, memo writing helped me to begin to conceptualise the process of *building resilience* through the identification of patterns between and within data sets. I considered, for instance, what *building resilience* look likes for this participant and how the experience is similar or different to others. I began to understand the circumstances in which resilience developed, how it was drawn upon at different times, its ebbs and flows, the strategies the women employed in coping with everyday realities and its relationship to other identified categories—the categorical dimensions. For example, it was evidenced that, for some participants, strategies for *building resilience* emerged from both negative and positive life experiences and timeframes for development varied and were dependent upon urgency of the situation in which they were involved. I began to realise similarities and differences in these circumstances and to refine my ideas and

develop higher order categories. It should be noted also that, as these categories were developed, a scoping review of literature took place. For instance, as resilience was identified as a category, a reading of literature around resilience was undertaken to increase understanding and theoretical sensitivity toward the identified concepts.

Initial memos began as fundamental and purely descriptive notes. However, the more I wrote, the more creative and proficient I became. Indeed, it was fascinating to relive my earlier thoughts in re-reading these notes, which were, most times, written in the style of a research journal providing a chronological journey of my thinking about the categories and codes. Making these notes, particularly given that one of the data sets was my own, was, for me, quite a cathartic experience; at other times it proved quite emotionally draining, as my mind wandered back in time to consider the *author*ity once enjoyed by our Spirit Sisters and then to the resilience they demonstrated in the face of cultural genocide enacted through colonisation. And yet, other times provided a steep learning curve and life-transforming experiences, in that life-transforming activities were explicated in the process and I, too, was able to see other ways of being.

These notes constituted an integral part of, and a transitional stage between, data collection and writing. In this sense, memo writing proved to be a valuable constructive and time-efficient method which "not only grounded the abstract analysis, but also laid the foundations for making claims about it" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 103). It was memoing that enabled a preliminary analysis to be written towards the end of data collection; a task my supervisors requested of me and also informed the conference and seminar papers delivered during my candidature.

It must be said, however, that I am very much a neophyte grounded theory researcher, who, upon reading a multitude of related texts, had higher expectations of the practice of memoing. This became apparent as I attempted to begin writing the findings chapters for this thesis. I had envisaged, following the advice of some grounded theorists, that, once the memos were sorted into a coherent story, I would be able to write the findings directly from the notes. Not so. I found in writing up the findings that those memos could not be directly transcribed and built upon to constitute the findings chapter as alluded to by a number of authors. Instead I was able to draw from the memos while simultaneously weaving the storyline in a more coherent fashion. What was also found to be problematic was unravelling the interrelatedness and overlap among categories to explicate the findings.

5.4.3 Playing cards: reconstructing theory to emerge the core process

Morse (1994) suggests that theorising is "the sorting phase of the analysis […] the process of constructing alternative explanations and of holding these against the data until a best fit explains the data most simply is obtained" (p. 33). In the reconstruction of theory, I matched the research significance and objectives to the analytic objectives which relate to categories developed in the analysis. The questions developed at that stage of the research were then asked of the data; the response with the best fit to the data was used to weave the story. The process of hypothesising was conducted in conjunction with Glaser's (1978) coding families in mind; in this case, the causal-consequence model. In doing so, I was able to emerge the core process, conceptually identified as *Becoming Empowered* by weaving a story consistent with the causes, conditions, strategies and consequences of the women's actions and behaviours in which they engaged to facilitate the core concern of *Performing Aboriginality*.

Memo cards were invaluable as a tool with which to reconstruct the theory. I made new cards with the categories only inscribed on the front. The cards were spread across the table and I proceeded to group them into high order categories according to the components of the causal-consequence model. I again made new cards with the newly named higher order categories, listing under each the categories that constituted it. The flexibility of being able to see what the theory would look like in different combinations, as laid out on the table, made the reconstruction of theory a much easier process for me.

Higher order categories and their supporting sub-categories constituted the basic social psychological process of *Becoming Empowered*. These higher order categories represented the milestone experiences of the women as reflected in their developmental narratives. These were called 'signifying facets' in an attempt to move away from the perception of viewing the process as being comprised of discrete phases and toward the conceptualisation of a dynamic, experiential, fluid, open process of *becoming*. Conceiving the process in this way suggested constant movement between and within facets; never really dwelling in the one facet.

5.5 Introducing the findings

Data analysis identified the process of *Becoming Empowered* as the basic social psychological process through which the women engaged with their shared core concern of *Performing Aboriginality*. The core process was constituted by four signifying facets which acted in synergy; *'Defining Moments'*, *'Seeking Authenticity'*, '*Authoring Narratives of Self*' and *'Capturing Autonomy'*. A full explication of these terms is provided in Chapters 6 and 7.

5.5.1 Construction of terms

In the construction of conceptual terms used for the categories identified in the study, my intention was to select descriptors that most closely summarised what was reflected in the data. As a multidisciplinary study, my intention was to make it available to a wide range of audiences, so basic dictionary definitions of conceptual terms were used to accommodate more generalised accessibility. For example, 'Aboriginality', as a term of reference used in the definition of the core category, is understood by the MSN Encarta Online Dictionary as "the condition of being Aboriginal, or the distinctive qualities inherent in Aboriginal people or their heritage and culture" (MSN Encarta, 2007). 'Perform', by the same measure, means "to carry out an action or accomplish a task, especially one requiring care or skill" (MSN Encarta, 2007). Hence, *Performing Aboriginality* can be interpreted literally and contextually as 'accomplishing and enacting the task of being an Aboriginal woman in contemporary Australian society'.

Multiple meanings exist for the term 'empower'. However, from the available definitions, the closest fit for meaning, as exemplified in the data, was found in the online Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (2008). This definition described 'empower' as "to give authority to and/or to give moral or physical power, faculties, or abilities to" (n.p.). By the same token, the term 'become' had just as large a scope for meaning. Meaning gleaned from the online Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (2008) defined 'become' as "to pass from one state to another; to enter into some state or condition, by a change from another state, or by assuming or receiving new properties or qualities, additional matter, or a new character". These meanings held a significant degree of relevance for capturing the essential connotations expressed in the data. Hence, in this study, *Becoming Empowered* could best be understood as 'entering

into a different state of being with the sensibilities of, and capacity to, enhance personal authority and moral power'.

All of the conceptual categories that crystallised during analysis were grounded directly in the women's narratives and integrated to illuminate the core category *Performing Aboriginality*. In this respect, the findings show how Aboriginal women accomplish and enact the task of being an Aboriginal woman in contemporary Australian society by entering into a different state of being with the sensibilities of, and capacity to, enhance personal *author*ity and moral power. In this view, *Performing Aboriginality* explained the original research phenomenon of how Aboriginal women perform agency as ethnic and gendered subjects in a contemporary world.

5.5.2 Defining the processual terms

'Defining Moments', as a conceptual term, is relatively self-explanatory. Defined by the Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (2008), 'moment' represents "a minute portion of time; a point of time; an instant", while 'define' means "to determine with precision; to mark out with distinctness; to ascertain or exhibit clearly". *'Defining Moments'*, therefore, quite literally translated means 'to ascertain with precision particular points in time'.

Dictionary definitions yielded a workable understanding of *'Seeking Authenticity'* as it was reflected in the data. On this basis and in the context of the study, *'Seeking Authenticity'* translates to 'endeavouring to find and claim a verifiable origin and authoritative measure of self' as an Aboriginal woman and in relation to others and the world. *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* prompts a dictionary translation that means 'to

re-create specifically designed messages from available information, which tell the particulars of self as the agent of activities and as the possessor of capacities and character'. *'Capturing Autonomy',* the final signifying facet, contextually and literally translates to the consequence of Aboriginal women securing the desire of self-determination through their own agency relative to that which holds value for the individual women. 'Capture' alludes to "the securing of an object of strife or desire; the act of seizing by force, or getting possession of by superior power or by stratagem" (Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1998); 'autonomy', in similar regard, relates "independence or freedom, as of the will or one's actions" (Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1), 2006).

5.6 Theoretical sensitivity and literature

Theoretical sensitivity is predicated upon the ability of the researcher "to conceptualize and formulate a theory by constant comparison of data" (Giske & Artinian, 2007, p. 70). The researcher increasingly attains this ability by probing the research phenomenon "from multiple vantage points, mak[ing] comparisons, follow[ing] leads, and build[ing] on ideas" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 135) according to what you find in the data. Grounded theory strategies are structured so as to facilitate the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher in the analysis of the data and include the use of literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006).

5.6.1 The utility of literature in grounded theory

Methodologically, the framework of grounded theory is emergent and, as such, little forward planning can be arranged (Glaser, 2001). This grounded theory study grew quite naturally from my own ways of working. I had no preconceived answer to the

research question and, thus, at varying points in the research, I articulated what it was that I was studying differently. I simply could not, until the core category and process was identified, provide a label for the research other than the general topic area of ‘Aboriginal women’s agency’. In addition, I must flag that the position in which I found myself was awkward at times to say the least; the academic world in general, I have discovered, is far more attached to certainties than open to possibilities. Glaser (2001) has the following to say about the uncertain nature of a grounded theory study:

> In a grounded theory study our questions are constantly changing, our sample is unpredictable, and out analysis is constant throughout. We do not know what we are looking for when we start. Everything emerges. We do not preconceive anything. The research problem emerges, our sample emerges, concepts emerge, the relevant literature emerges, and finally the theory emerges. We simply cannot say prior to the collection and analysis of data what our study will look like (Glaser, 2001, p. 176).

The unpredictable nature of grounded theory research also reflects in the use of literature. When and how it should be consulted is a problem that continues to be debated as part of the ongoing evolution of grounded theory method. Both Glaser and Strauss, the originators of grounded theory, differ in their individual views on the consultation of literature, particularly at the onset of the study. Glaser (1998) has erred on the side of caution and continues to highlight the emergent nature of grounded theory and the need for researchers to remain ‘uncontaminated’. Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend that some knowledge of literature “can enhance sensitivity to subtle nuances in data” (p. 49). Glaser, however, in engaging the concept of theoretical sensitivity,

explains that “[t]he researcher does not go blank or give up his knowledge. He goes sensitive with his learning which makes him alert to possibility of emergence and how to formulate it conceptually” (p. 123). Glaser further insists that the encounter of literature should remain in an area unrelated to the field under investigation. However, not all advocates of grounded theory share the views of its original proponents. A constructivist approach to grounded theory supports the use of literature in the traditional sense—at the onset of the study (Charmaz, 2006). Others, for example Charmaz (2006), suggest taking a critical stance toward theory, a notion attuned to Glaser’s (1978) position in which extant concepts are considered as problematic. This requires that “extant concepts earn their way into your narrative” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166) by looking for the degree these concepts are understood and lived in your data. Confusing, yes; especially for the novice researcher who struggles with thoughts of taking either a purist approach in the use of literature or embarking on what one perceives as a compromised research journey through contamination that would build barriers to the natural ‘emergence’ of theory as a result of reviewing the literature.

Morse, Swanson and Kuzel (2001) feel that Glaser already had vast banks of knowledge from which to draw, as do many experienced researchers. No-one enters into the research endeavour as a ‘*tabula rasa*’ and, as such, brings a diverse range of experiences and knowledge to the research. Drawing on a number of other researchers who have entered the literature debate in grounded theory (Heath, 2006; McCallin, 2003; McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006), it is apparent that, while some found advantages in reviewing the literature prior to the emergence of the core category, others continue to argue against the conduct of an initial literature review.

Proponents tending toward a Glaserian approach to literature see that “[t]here is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study” (Glaser, 1992, p. 31). This approach aims to protect the researcher from becoming stifled in the generation of categories. It is suggested that once the researcher becomes ‘contaminated’ by a reading of the literature, they will then be led by the literature and import concepts rather than remaining close to the data (Glaser, 1992, 1998; Heath, 2006; McCallin, 2003; McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007). Others believe the concern over ‘contamination’ can be offset by reflexivity in the research, while still others consider that the constant comparison method stems bias (McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007). There are advantages, too, for conducting an initial literature review. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that the need to satisfy institutional requirements, such as ethics committees and funding bodies, is a primary purpose for conducting a literature review, as is the need for the researcher to have an awareness of the existing knowledge base and to identify gaps.

Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) deepen the argument for and against the early use of literature in grounded theory, hinging it on the researcher’s ontological premise. This study, however, is oriented toward a constructivist grounded theory approach and, as such, involves the co-construction of meaning. Therefore, in reality, there was constant interplay between me, the participants and data (including literature as data) from the outset.

Grounded theory is perhaps not as prescriptive as some would have it and does not provide a particular point from which to work in regard to the utility of literature. The researcher’s ontological perspective, background and knowledge in the

investigative area, research experience and institutional requirements all influence their application and practice of grounded theory (McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007). McCallin (2003) argues, "[t]here is a fine line between doing a literature review and being informed so that a study is focussed" (p. 61) and Dey (1993) adds that "[t]he issue is not whether to use existing literature but how" (p. 63).

5.6.2 The role of literature and its application in the current study

This research was never originally conceptualised as a grounded theory study. For this reason, initial engagement with the literature was not influenced by its disputed use in grounded theory. Upon embarking on this research journey, I worked in a way in which I felt comfortable and from the assumption that, because I did not know the answer to the research question, I did not really know what literature to review. From previous understanding and experience, I was aware that I was working in an area where there was little extant knowledge. As such, I decided upon interrogating the macro-context of the research prior to engaging in any other research activity. This literature review was subsequently refined, updated and presented in Chapter 2. As an Aboriginal woman, I was already relatively well-versed with the evidence base of much of the literature reviewed. Reviews of literature were undertaken around the concepts of agency and identity to familiarise myself with, and gain a critical understanding of, the central concepts in the research based upon the early interpretation of the research question. Further literature was sourced from a historical perspective relating to Aboriginal women's lived experience and cultural adaption and social change. Historical texts of colonisation, anthropological texts of culture and Aboriginal women's autobiography were prominent in these reviews. The texts of Aboriginal writers (Huggins and Moreton-Robinson) and African American theorists (hooks and

Hill Collins) were highly influential upon the conceptualisation of the research project at this point. I also delved into the methodological literature to consider what options were available and the best approach to take to elicit the information I required to respond adequately and ethically to the research question. Specifically, I searched for information around new and innovative methodologies, beginning with feminist and Indigenous methodologies; both obvious points of departure in a study about Aboriginal women. The engagement with this literature enabled development in my ways of thinking and did not cease throughout the study. As a point of significance, I consistently reviewed the literature on grounded theory and explored how others had used the method. I found most of this literature in nursing journals. Nurses, it appears, have extremely competent levels of reflective practice and well-developed skills in documenting that practice. I believe these skills assisted greatly in their articulation of their own application of grounded theory and, thus, my interpretation.

The substantive undertaking of an initial review of the literature at this level fulfilled a number of requirements deemed essential in commissioning any research activity. The reviews of literature engendered sensitivity to the research field and enabled the expansion of personal knowledge, the identification of a need for research to be conducted in this area and that the findings would most probably make a unique contribution to existing knowledge about Aboriginal women. The perusing of literature enabled the opportunity for informed choices to be made in compliance with institutional demands, such as the development of a research proposal and ethical requirements.

5.6.3 Data analysis and the influence of literature

The review of literature became more streamlined after the analysis was well underway. By that time, I had decided to pursue a grounded theory approach, embarked upon as the result of a critical reading of available and suitable methodologies some way into the study. The choice of grounded theory was driven, in the most part, by the need to settle on a method of analysis that would avoid the 'contamination' of data by me, an Aboriginal woman, researcher and, ultimately, a participant. I did not wish to impose my existing conceptual understandings on the data.

At the point of emerging categories, I required further direction. I had identified a number of categories and developed their relationship to each other along with their properties and dimensions. However, I was uncertain what all this meant in the broader scheme of things. In my endeavour to begin weaving the story back together, I began an informal scoping of the literature focussed around the identified categories; initially to glean some information about how the findings were located in the bigger picture. In doing so, I drew on previous knowledge and intuitive responses to the identified categories. For instance, for the category *assuming responsibility and care* and *coming to voice*, I had prior knowledge that the feminist readings of Belenky and Gilligan had investigated similar concepts in their research on women's development. Thus, what I found was that many of the categories had corresponding terms or were synonyms for concepts in the broader literature. In reviewing the literature, I came to understand that agency was often used interchangeably with other concepts, such as empowerment, and that other theorists, for example Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002), viewed it as the "essence of women's empowerment" (p. 9). Specific to the categories in the present study, informal literature reviews were undertaken in the areas of women's

development, ethnicity, consciousness-raising, intergenerational trauma, resilience, self-identity, hybridity, gender performance and bi-culturalism. These fields were explored with imaginings of how the data enhanced the existing literature—what did it add, where were the points of divergence. This method was significant in that the saturation of categories occurred more rapidly because, having explored the literature related to the identified categories, I was then able to sample more effectively and ensure specifics were not being overlooked. The greatest value was my greatly enhanced ability to switch to an interpretative mode and weave a coherent story to present in the findings of the study. A further point of significance was that, through viewing how these concepts were applied and situated by others in their related fields, I began to envision the location of the research. Although this was not what would be described as a formal literature review, it did enable me to begin to position the study; the field of public health and, more specifically, in the areas of health promotion, social and emotional wellbeing and community development.

For me, a reading of literature relating to the substantive area under investigation was undertaken as the categories were identified from the data; the more formal and substantial reading being conducted after the core category was identified. This may be considered by some as influential in its potential to impose bias in the study by reducing my receptiveness to themes yet to emerge from the data. However, I took the view, like Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006), that the analytical lens would be stimulated by a reading of relevant literature at this stage of the research. Interestingly, I found that the data and emergent theory remained foremost in my mind and I had a greater sensitivity toward the literature rather than the reverse being true. Thus, as it should be in grounded theory, the literature was filtered through the women's

experiences, as opposed to the narratives being shaped by, and forced through, a theoretical lens.

5.6.4 Integrating the various streams of literature with the emergent theory

I accessed literature as it became relevant but the formal, more comprehensive, reviewing, in the most part, followed the identification of the core category and process when I made use of the extant literature in two ways. Firstly, it was a tool to streamline the emergent process of *Becoming Empowered* to facilitate *Performing Aboriginality*; a guide in the development of a framework for the discussion of the study's findings. Secondly, I used it to situate the study in its broader context, that is, a comparison of the emergent theory and the literature as a necessary requirement to identify the study's contribution to knowledge in the relevant fields, not to verify the findings of the study. However, it should be noted that the data was always positioned in a place of prominence, the benchmark from which the literature was accessed and assessed, thus maintaining the embedment of the comparative theories in the data.

A conceptual synthesis of key categories identified in the analysis were subsequently organised into a causal-consequence model, inspired by Glaser, which led to the emergence of the core process of *Becoming Empowered*. Literature was critical in the developmental phases of this model. I drew on my in-depth understandings of the categories and much of the literature on women's development and consciousness-raising, previously illuminated, to facilitate the development of the model. Integrating these categories into a logical process facilitated the emergence of the core process, identified as *Becoming Empowered.*

Becoming Empowered responds to the overarching research question as the basic social psychological process that underlies Aboriginal women's performance of agency. Based on the nature of the core process, a number of related constructs were identified in theories of empowerment, while other literature correlated with the specific categories identified in the analysis. At this point, following the writing of the findings chapters for this study, an extensive formal review of literature was conducted in the substantive area of the study's findings. It was conducted with the view to use it as a point of reference from which to identify key points of convergence and divergence in the extant literature, identify the study's contribution to new knowledge and position the study within its broader context.

The conceptual terms used for the naming of categories in the study attempted to, as much as practically possible, reflect what was happening in the women's narratives. This occurred, by and large, instinctively and was embedded in intuitive understandings. I also initially supported the conceptualisation of terms with general dictionary definitions. Therefore, as an obvious point of departure, I began to search the literature on empowerment.

Quite expectedly, I initially engaged with feminist literature on empowerment. In the first instance, I searched the Internet for a bibliography on women's empowerment. I was indeed fortunate that the search terms 'women's empowerment' revealed an extremely comprehensive annotated bibliography relating the foundational texts, current debates and approaches to women's empowerment, interdisciplinary perspectives on women's empowerment and evaluating empowerment and social change, spanning the period 1985 –2005. The significant limitation to this literature was

that it specifically focussed predominantly on non-Indigenous women, so, a more general search was made using the references from the retrieved texts. Once again, many of the texts located in the literature were commissioned by the World Bank and the World Health Organization, which confirmed a relationship between the study phenomenon and health (in its broader conceptualisation) and community development. It was not until that point that a concise literature review, relevant to the substantive area identified in the current study, was undertaken.

5.7 Summary

Chapter 5 presented the transformation of data. It sought to detail the procedures followed in the application of grounded theory method. In doing so, the chapter explored the processes involved in constructing theory to explain the behaviours of the women who participated in the study. It investigated the inductive development of codes and categories and how, through constant comparison and theoretical sampling, these developed to emerge the core category and process. It then explained the utility of literature during and following the analysis. Chapters 6 and 7 will present the significant findings of the research.

Chapter 6

Aboriginal Women's Voices: The Lived Experience Part 1

6.1 A prelude to the findings

The present study was designed to generate a substantive theory that explains the personal and social processes of agency in the everyday lives of Aboriginal women. The storyline, interpreted by the women themselves in life-history narratives, was theoretically coded as *Becoming Empowered* to facilitate *Performing Aboriginality. Performing Aboriginality,* or accomplishing the task of being an Aboriginal woman, was identified as the constant influencing background in the women's narratives—the core concern for the participants. *Becoming Empowered* was the process that chronicled how the women assumed responsibility for the identity work and actions in which they engaged to construct a meaningful and fulfilling life as Aboriginal women in a contemporary world. The four dimensional dynamic developmental process which implicated both social and psychological components was analysed and interpreted within a personal, historic and structural framework.

A bricolagé of four signifying facets, conceptually termed '*Defining Moments'*, '*Seeking Authenticity', 'Authoring Narratives of Self*' and '*Capturing Autonomy'* were identified in the analysis as being constitutive of the core social psychological process of *Becoming Empowered*. Prior to explaining the individual components, their

interrelationships and illuminating the meaning given to each by the women, a note regarding use of ordered and discrete signifying facets in the presentation of the findings is warranted.

While the process of *Becoming Empowered* is fundamental to the patterned thinking, behaviours and social organisation of the women as they go about their central task of *Performing Aboriginality*, the ensuing findings illuminate the variations of what was happening for the individual women. In this sense, the process remains the same, but fully variable, through the activation of the differential conditions, contexts, strategies and consequences demonstrated in the women's narratives (Glaser, 1978). For this study, the relevance of the variable nature of the basic process meant that it accommodated changes over the life spans of the women and captured differences between women's experiences.

The processual model was adapted from Glaser's (1978) causal-consequence model as a means to emerge the core process. While the model in Figure 6.1 depicts the individual signifying facets of the women's developmental journey as linear and discrete, in reality, the women did not move seamlessly from one facet to the next. Rather, the process was non-linear, signifying facets overlapped and were replicated throughout the life course at various intensities. At different times and in different contexts of the life journey, some facets and/or their components were omitted. The emergent process itself is best conceived and illustrated as a dynamic, experiential, fluid, open process of *becoming*; a reiterative spiral from which entry and exit may be made at differing points and in which transgression, progression and regression occur according to the interactions between the women and their environment.

An attempt to demonstrate the developmental change process of *Becoming Empowered* as dynamic and reiterative was made by using the image of a whirly-whirly (see Figure 6.1). *Becoming Empowered* is portrayed by the developmental and growth phases of the environmental atmospheric phenomenon known as a whirly-whirly. By nature, the whirly-whirly has the ability to lie dormant, stabilise and regenerate and strengthen through its interaction with the environment. A whirly-whirly is typically characterised by a whirling spiralling column of air that moves across the landscape gathering constituent parts, which give the spinning vertical winds form and visibility. The updraft of this funnel-shaped phenomenon not only entrains particles, but also transforms and disperses them. The whirly-whirly transforms and is transformed through environmental interaction. The action of the whirly-whirly is reminiscent of the ways the women came to mediate power in their lives to become self-determining subjects. Thus conceived, the metaphorical whirly-whirly encapsulates the manner in which the women moved from positions of relative powerlessness to exercise agency, traverse boundaries, come to understand new social landscapes, negotiate new pathways in life, acquire, select and discard knowledge, cultural values and traditions and adapt them to suit their own purpose; all the while increasing their capacity to grasp opportunities along their life journey, determine their direction in life, assist others and lead fulfilling and active lives. Imagining the metaphorical whirly-whirly encapsulates a notion of mutual interchange between the women and their environment; the women's capacity to change their environment and the manner in which they are changed by their environment. It further implicates the transitional nature of experience; a space which is never stable and always temporary. It is a space where the energies for life are generated and regenerated and new perspectives on life are developed and revised.

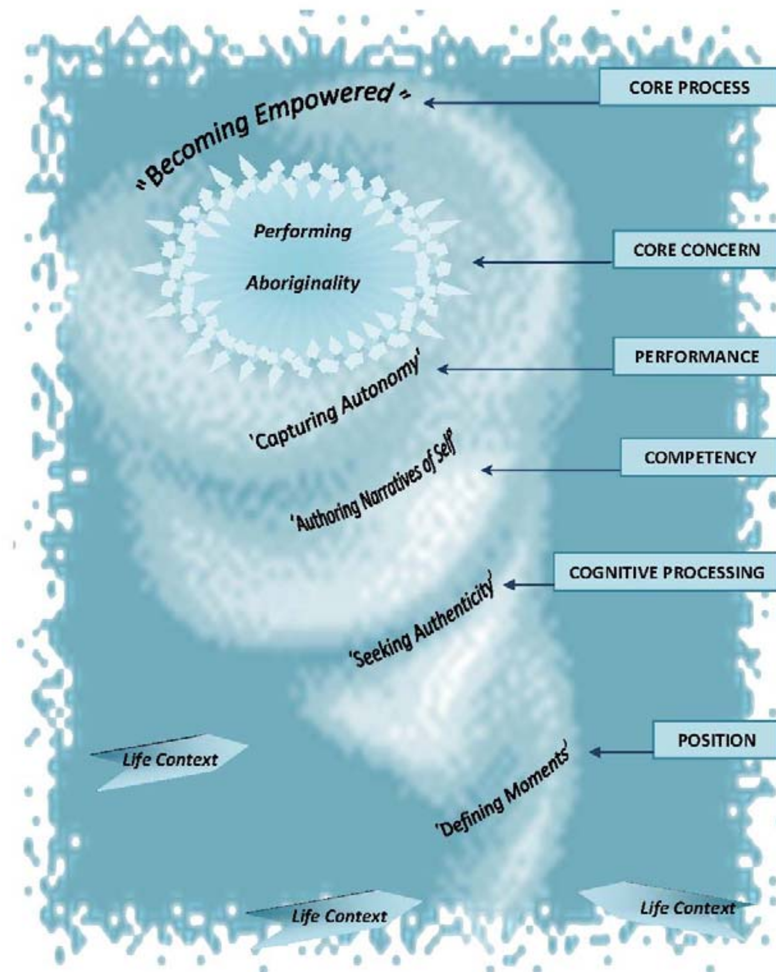

Figure 6.1 Becoming Empowered: a processual model of agency

6.2 Reading the findings

In the presentation of the findings, the conceptual terms used in the process of *Becoming Empowered* are visually indicated according to their levels of abstraction. The higher order levels of abstraction, the core social psychological concern and the basic social psychological process are designated by capitalisation and italics, for example, *Performing Aboriginality*. To illustrate the signifying facets of the process, single quotation marks, capitalisation and italics are used, for example, *'Seeking Authenticity'*. To evidence conceptual terms within signifying facets, single quotations marks, lower case and italics are used, for example, *'orienting morality'*. All concepts below those levels of abstraction stand alone in italics, for example, *naming self*.

To provide substantiative evidence for the theoretical model, verbatim quotations were taken directly from the transcripts. Each transcript extract is referenced using the participant's pseudonym followed by their age and the line number of the transcript in parenthesis, for example, **Andie (55: 125-136).** If the extract has been taken from a second interview, it will be indicated by the numeral '2' after the participant's pseudonym. Twenty Aboriginal women participated in the study. See Appendix D Introducing the Participants for respectful insights into the unique character of the individual women.

The significant findings of this study are presented in two sequential chapters. The first, Chapter 6, details the contextual and conditional signifying facets '*Defining Moments'* and *'Seeking Authenticity'*. The second, Chapter 7, delineates the strategic and consequential facets *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* and *'Capturing Autonomy'* (see Figure 6.2). Experiences of *Becoming Empowered* emanated from critical junctures in the lives of the individual women, the recurrence of which continued throughout the women's life journeys with varying degrees of influence on their construction of self and reality. *'Defining Moments'* initiated the core concern of *Performing Aboriginality* by challenging the women's sense of self and ways of being in the world, thus engendering the desire and/or need for change, for example, challenges to their worldviews, ethnicity, gender roles, self-identity, self-confidence and self-esteem, sense of belonging, personal goals and visions and independence. They felt that life, as they desired or understood it, was threatened and social and psychological change on their part was pursued to redefine their realities and reconcile self and environment according to their interests, aspirations and their ways of being in the world. *'Defining Moments'*, then, referred to pivotal life moments which stimulated social and psychological change

for the women (Position). For example, following the death of her mother, with whom she had an extremely close and, in some respects, dependent relationship, Shae needed "to change everything around" **Shae (46: 222)** and find alternate supports, ways of knowing, doing and being in her world.

'Defining Moments' was the critical antecedent to the second signifying facet of *'Seeking Authenticity',* a process of self-reflection and knowledge acquisition that enabled the negotiation of a way forward in life (Cognitive Processing). The subsequent facet of *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* referred to enunciable strategies identified in the diverse ways the women took up their perceived roles and responsibilities as Aboriginal women to engage in the world by assuming an ethnic, social and political consciousness. These strategies were those which the women embraced in mediating power in their lives to expand possibilities, become empowered members of humanity, agents of change and advocates of human rights and social justice (Competency). The final and consequential signifying facet of *'Capturing Autonomy'* illuminated the women's exercise of individual and relational agency (Performance).

Figure 6.2 Signifying facets as sub-processes of Becoming Empowered

6.3 'Defining Moments'

'Defining Moments' initiated the acquisition of self-knowledge and assisted the women to learn their limitations as well as their capacity for achievement; what was possible for them as individuals. *'Defining Moments'* were experienced by the women as individual processes and contingent upon a variety of factors; however, many commonalities were evident. Accounting for variation were differences in social, cultural, historical, spiritual and political configurations in the lives of the women and, therefore, understandings of identity and agency were considerably broadened to incorporate the authority of major structural influences.

A number of different contexts appeared as *'Defining Moments'* in the women's narratives. Among those contexts were situations of crisis which were characterised by stressful life circumstances and appeared as *'trauma'*; '*being aware',* present in the narratives of the women as relatively benign life circumstances; and *'valued*

experiences', which were regarded as optimal life experiences. All of these sub-categories were viewed in light of the women's perceptions and experiences of the events.

6.3.1 'being aware'

'Being aware' as delineated by '*Defining Moments'* incorporated notions of self-awareness, self in relation to others, the environment and history. Whilst '*trauma'* and *'valued experiences'* were indeed imposed upon the lives of the women by external forces or as unintentional or unpredictable action, *'being aware'* signified conscious thought leading to associated action on the part of women. This dimension of agency experienced by some of the women was substantiated in Debra's narrative. Debra was extremely young when she made the very mature decision to leave her friends to attend a private high school. Debra demonstrated a heightened sense of awareness and understanding of her needs and environment; in this instance she indicated *'being aware'* of her need of *wanting a better life*:

> Just the fact that I did want something for my future…like, because I'd seen…our next door neighbours were older, and they had finished high school and they had their life but it was just plain. Like, one of them got out and she became a child-care minder, and there's nothing wrong with that but it's just normal…and then there was the other one who became a lawyer's secretary and I thought 'oh'. **Debra (18: 283-288)**

Similarly, Andie also recalled *'being aware'* as young girl:

> I think I had my mind set early on that, like, we were fairly poor but so were a lot of people. Just the depression and the war and, you know, and that's how people lived and there was only a small number of people where we lived with the big flashy houses and the car and all the rest of it. So I think I had my mind set early on that I was actually going to do something; I didn't want to live like that. Like, there was nothing wrong with how we lived, but I realised if you want to have things, it was pretty, bad is not the right word, but it was like sometimes we ran out of food, and we would all go down and fish and have fish for tea it would be like 'careful with the bread guys, two days til pay day' and, you know. So you would need to watch what you're eating…not ever being hungry or anything, but having to live like that. You don't need to live like that.
> **Andie (55: 125-136)**

The acute sense of awareness *('being aware')* exemplified at such a young age only presented in a select few. Why only very few of the women experienced *'being aware'* as an early developmental process was not clear. It was possible these women, by their very nature, secured ways of monitoring their needs at an early age. One could conceive of this situation as ideal and being distinctly advantageous. That is, earlier developmental patterns of *'being aware'* could well have impact on timing and intensity of movement toward *Becoming Empowered.*

Alternately, what was perhaps required was the synchronised event of other life-altering experiences to ensure further development. Gracie, for example, was participating in a community employment program and mowing lawns when she recalled encountering a turning point in her life; an epiphany which set upon her

consciousness as a direct result of the monotony experienced by acting out mundane tasks. By *'being aware'* of her situation and raising her conscious understanding of her experience to a level of *spiritual calling,* a level at which she could reflect on social position, Gracie began to redefine her reality in a psychological sense long before she engaged in taking active ownership of concrete changes in her life:

> One day I kinda woke up to myself. I was getting sick and tired of doing the same thing, I wanted to change, I wanted to become somebody in my life. I guess, from that point on it was the turning point in my life. I decided myself, as an individual, that I wanted to become somebody and I wanted to do something not only for myself, for my community, but for the rest of the Aboriginal people in Australia…It was just like; I think I was holding a rake in my hand…I think I was like daydreaming that day just looking up at the trees, lookin' at the birds. I said okay birds, if you got a message for me or something let me know. 'Cause I tend to look at the animals a lot because the animals around the environment always have the answers for me and I've always believed in that whatever you see that is natural, it will be happening in the spiritual as well. And that day I woke up to myself and I said there's something better in life than this here.
> **Gracie (42: 21-33)**

Gracie's words showed that she assigned meaning by organising her construction of reality around a particular and familiar standard of truth. Hence, Gracie understood her desire for change in terms of her immediate social reality; as an Aboriginal woman wanting a better life for herself and 'for the rest of the Aboriginal people in Australia'. The desire to achieve personal and social change should be

clarified as the core concern of all the women noted previously as *Performing Aboriginality*. While Gracie's redefinition of reality was borne from dissatisfaction with her life circumstances, her creative ability to transcend thought was initiated by other *'Defining Moments'* in her life and participating in the subsequent self-reflective dimension of the core process of *Becoming Empowered* in *'Seeking Authenticity'*.

Evidenced here, was the significance of examining patterns of behaviour as essential to understanding self development and not the avenues or *'Defining Moments'* through which that experience is derived. Using the nature of the initiating experience as a yardstick of evaluation of development *vis-à-vis* the overall patterns of behaviour is problematic, as the scope of concern lies in the generated responses and behaviour of the women; the overall patterns of behaviour.

6.3.2 'trauma'

All women remembered experiencing *'Defining Moments'* under traumatic circumstances. Dolly recalled that one critical turning point in her life came in reaction to the '*trauma'* endured as the result of a miserable relationship with her husband. "My husband used to drink like a fish…every day…I just got sick of it…I just, got out…you know, like started schooling and stuff like that" **Dolly (58: 201-204).** As evidenced in Dolly's experience, *'trauma'* provoked no less of a positive reaction than did *'being aware'* or *'valued experiences'*. Dolly, and similarly the other women, moved toward making changes in their lives irrespective of the motivation. Most significantly, however, regardless of the motivation behind the events, the resulting changes stimulated self-growth and development. It is the overall meaning of the process that is concerned here.

A vast array of other traumatic circumstances was reflected on by the women as '*Defining Moments'* in their lives, such as illness, family breakdowns, violence, intergenerational/historical trauma, loss and grief. However, most interestingly, of those women reflecting on *'trauma'*, all referenced the events with an extraordinary degree of acceptance. In such instances, their focus detailed those events stimulated by the *'trauma'* rather than the trauma itself. Events following in the wake of *'trauma'* were commonly characterised by personal transformation and growth regardless of the devastation experienced. For example, after an extremely violent outburst with her partner, one woman stated, "I had to make a conscious choice that I don't want to live like that and I don't want my children brought up like that" **Carrie (45: 105-107).**

It was interesting to note that for those women who reflected upon *'trauma'* in their lives, there was no indication of victim mentality. Indeed, the women, in fact, gained a sense of strength by not only surviving these traumatic *'Defining Moments'* that oftentimes plagued their lives but also by turning their lives around and empowering themselves to the degree that they enjoyed fulfilling and purposeful lives. A definite sense of achievement and success in overcoming *'trauma'* was characteristic of the attitudes of many of the women. In this sense, less than optimal *'Defining Moments'* such as *'trauma'* can be characterised as bittersweet events in the women's lives. Bree succinctly described the effects of her experience of racist *'trauma'* by turning the bitter taste of racism into the sweetness of strength and hope. "So therefore, I use that [her sense of self as an Aboriginal woman], I draw from that, and I draw strength from that…I think I am a critical optimist." **Bree (38: 97-98)**

Violence

Violence was revealed as a pervasive undercurrent in the lives of some women. Carrie evocatively described violence in her early life, "the violence was pretty spectacular; guns, knives, spears; one year blood on the Christmas presents, blood on the Christmas tree, can't beat it, hey?…bloody absolute fear associated with the violence, pretty scary" **Carrie (45: 35-38)**. Carrie, however, focused her later life on a more harmonious existence and critically demonstrated the stimulation of positive agency as a result of her experience of violence:

> Well, my husband and I haven't had our first argument yet. Well, we were both brought up in a violent household, and when we got together we both kept our word and we agreed never to argue…so in the process we sit down and talk about it, if we can't, if we're too hot tempered, wait, always kiss each other goodnight, and then talk about it. **Carrie (45: 200-205)**

The event of related experiences in the lives of different women did not always provoke similar responses. While Carrie drew a positive response to her experience of violence, another woman, who also experienced severe violence in her early life, responded in a very different way:

> I used to get beat up and I couldn't take it any longer, so I had to learn and I used to fight different boys and girls in the community. Me and my husband had a razorblade fight, I smashed a large coke bottle on his head and we started off boxing and I socked him one in the eye. Then we had a good fight and off came the gloves and we went inside and picked whatever came to mind and there was

> blood and stuff and we got in trouble and learned not to hit people and stuff, you could kill them, you could also bleed to death yourself. **Gracie (42: 214-220)**

Early in Gracie's life she acted out what was required to survive—she learned to fight. As she grew older and married, the harsh realities of life again confronted her but did not arouse a constructive response until she was alerted to the harmful impact of violence. Critically however, while the pathways and timeframes between individuals differed, the outcome of learning from *'Defining Moments'* in their lives still eventuated.

Illness

Illness was also apparent as a defining factor in the very existence and life direction of some women. "I could say when I was getting anxiety attacks; that changed the way I was." **Simone 1 (31, 153)** However, of the few who referenced illness, none dwelled on it, or lived as if it were an ongoing or particularly overwhelming force in their lives. There was considerable acceptance demonstrated; a coming to terms with their illness. This is not to say illness did not influence life outcomes and ways of thinking. Jane made substantial adjustments to her life course after she became ill and, in doing so, redefined her reality to accommodate her new capabilities. Jane indicated how illness influenced her life choices and, in particular, her career direction:

> I started off in early childhood teaching but I was too ill to be able cope, 'cause I did a couple of placements in schools through that course and I just couldn't cope, it was just too exhausting for me. So then I found I could get some credits for the education subjects in psychology, so I switched over. **Jane (39: 336-339)**

Jane clearly learned to adapt to the limitations of her illness and, in doing so, discovered new realities and ways of being.

Another woman, Shae, contended with the effects of polio throughout her life. However, she did not relate her experience of illness as a deficit in terms of the overall impact on her life. Of her fourteen siblings, Shae was the only one who contracted polio, as did her mother whom Shae held in very high regard. Shae perceived that if her mother coped and 'done it the hard way', then she could follow suit. However, Shae did recount her feelings of shame as a child:

> I used to be shame because I had polio, and I've still got polio in one leg, one leg's smaller than the other...and I had a harness…and the harness came up around my leg to about here…but I was the only one out of all the whole fifteen of us that came down like my Mum…but I only had it on the leg instead of thing. **Shae (46: 200-204)**

In the most part, illness was accommodated with great acceptance by those who experienced it, but it did alter their perceptions of reality and constrain their choices in life.

Historical Trauma

Several of the women overtly raised a description of contemporary *'trauma'* embedded in their historical narratives. They described *'trauma'* in terms of memory of past events; events that were not necessarily part of their subjective experience *per se*, but legitimate and valid experiences nevertheless. This contemporary *'trauma'* was

characterised by a deep sense of concern, fear, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, loss, sorrow, remorse and even guilt for past injustices endured by Aboriginal people in general and, more specifically, by their own families. Such multi-layered experiences incorporated feelings associated with loss and grief and defined by some as intergenerational or historical *'trauma'* (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt & Chen, 2004). Bree readily imparted with knowledge about how this occurred for her:

> …so I guess I grew up in a house permeated by a critical view of a racialised world, um, my parents, as did my grandparents, encountered many acts of explicit racism, so they therefore imparted to me and my sister the importance of knowing the historical and social context of race, not only in this country, but they gave me knowledge of where I grew up and what was happening at the time in terms of some of the injustices. **Bree (38, 152-158)**

Bree further expressed her anger, loss and fears relative to the past injustices experienced by her grandmother and her identification with Ancestral anguish:

> I feel quite sad about that, when you think about the impact history has had on us; it saddens me that I can't speak those things [language]… what I am afraid of Roxanne, is that my grandmother may pass away believing that she was a neglectful mother, when in fact it wasn't her fault…it was a government policy that was enforced upon Aboriginal people. **Bree (38: 381-382, 413-415)**

Simone's notation was brief but reiterated the guilt and sorrow mentioned by Bree. Simone inferred, also, that her feelings of responsibility extended to those in global community who endured the devastating experiences of genocide and violence and who now live with that legacy. "Sometimes I feel so sorry for what happened to our Ancestors and subsequently many families now, it should never have happened to anyone, in any country ever" **Simone (31: 113-115).**

For Bree, the intergenerational/historical *'trauma'* she experienced initiated the strength to heal self and foster a commitment to the future of forthcoming generations. "I am over my anger; I am so over my anger. And I choose to see myself as a reconciliator" **Bree (38: 401-402)**. Ultimately, her commitment toward reconciliation and to be an 'overcomer' gave rise to her direction in life and shaped the person she is today. "I am interested and driven by the desire for social change. I'm also optimistic to find some inroads and find some answers to what the current policy of reconciliation offers, for the present messy state of race relations in this country" **Bree (38: 98-101).** As a reconciliator, Bree has made some attempt to resolve the past as part of her perceived responsibility as an Aboriginal woman. She also effected a degree of healing for herself:

> Yeh...don't dwell on the past, but you can use the past as a key to unlock the future, in that coming to know about the past and understanding why people feel the way they do today in regards to race relations in this country, it is a way of opening up dialogue, breaking down misconceptions and stereotypes, and from that, hopefully through the communication that healing can take place and that we as a nation can go forward. **Bree (38: 423-428)**

Not all of the women were so optimistic but, nevertheless, continued to work passionately towards cultural recovery. Meghan, one of the Elders interviewed, not only rued the loss of cultural traditions and held very strong views about the erosion of tradition but also expressed her sense of hopelessness in regaining those losses:

> I am actually very strong minded about my Aboriginality…I also have a very strong view about contemporary life and I don't think much of it…so I'm one those horrible persons who would like to see a lot those traditional things still being carried on in society…I have no control over contemporary society, and so, there a bit of cynicism has crept in…but I hope, I guess and I've tried to do this, is to keep a lot of cultural things alive, I mean you know, Aboriginal cultural things alive…but let me tell you, there's all the contemporary advertising and stuff like that, it's a losing battle. **Meghan (66: 26-32)**

Other women rued the loss of kinship ties, "like I'm one of her family, like I'm a cousin to her, cousin/sister like thing…but you know but we lost all that" **Shae (46: 319-320).** Others mourned the loss of skin colour. "The only time in the past I felt like I didn't have to explain myself was when I was with my Dad [dark skinned] because he 'looks' like an Aboriginal person. However I knew then and even more so now know that I don't need to" **Debra 2 (18: 14-16)**; and yet others felt hollow as a result of their disassociation with culture as a result of assimilation policies, "for me as an Aboriginal woman there's a loss there, there's a big *gap* there" **Isla (46: 434-435).**

Experiences of loss and grief were included in the women's expressions of cognitive and behavioural responses to their experiences of historical or

intergenerational *'trauma'*. All women shared their feelings about cultural losses. Most commonly, the women regretted the loss of language. For some women their language was irretrievably lost, others sought to learn language, while some were currently involved in the revival and retrieval of language and histories, "we got another linguist and we employed a graphic artist to make some CDs and videos and between the two of them and us and many interviews later we have a CD ROM with all the language words on it and stories" **Andie (55: 27-29)**.

Fear of disconnection was a theme underlying some of the women's narratives. Debra experienced an innate fear of losing connection to culture when her White mother tried to break the connection between Debra and her Aboriginal father, **"**she [mother] took me away from my Dad so I would lose that connection" **Debra (18: 49)**. Debra has strongly desired and required cultural information and continues to seek that knowledge through more recent re-connections with her father.

All women provided emotionally charged accounts that strongly resonated with intergenerational trauma and historical losses. What was significant in the women's narratives was that these, oftentimes vicariously, lived experiences not only continued to saturate the contemporary realities of the women, but also assisted the women to construct understanding of particular aspects of their world and self and redefine their identities and realities accordingly.

Loss and Grief

For many women, experiences of loss and grief were associated with *'trauma'* and accounted for a significant proportion of *'Defining Moments'*. For example,

significant for Shae as a *'Defining Moment'* in her life was the passing of her parents and, in particular, the *loss* of her mother. From this time forward, Shae was forced to make rapid changes to her life to accommodate the loss and reconstruct new ways of knowing, being and doing:

> I just decided to go on a different angle because I lost my parents…You see, after my Mum died, I said I'll have to do something, because my Mum was there, like she was my mentor…like, I could go to her anytime… I had to change everything around, how I am goin' to cope with it, what am I going to do, who am I goin' to come up against. **Shae (46: 8, 222-223, 263-264)**

Shae experienced significant personal transformation through incidents of loss and grief that profoundly shaped her self-concept and identity, her perception of life, her choices and ultimately her life journey. However, what is worth flagging here is that *'Defining Moments'* did not always prescribe an immediate or positive change, response or outcome for the individual women. The timeframe around personal change for Shae was exemplified further into her narrative. Returning again to Shae's experience, one can see that her initial stages of *grief* reflected a very different story:

> After my Mum died, I said, 'boys do you know where I feel as though I want to go to? I want to go down there look, with Nana'…you know because I said *I lost everything*…I have to do it the hard way…or I might as well be the same way as Nana…so really you know, like a big loss there, but I built myself up there, it took a long time, it come together, but I got there. **Shae (46: 275-284)**

Shae indicated that it took her ‘a long time’ to move on with life after her mother’s passing. However, in Sissy’s narrative, the response to her father’s illness occurred more rapidly; perhaps because of the urgency of her situation. Thus, for Sissy, self-knowledge was quickly acquired as she was forced to confront new realities:

> My Father’s illness was the most devastating experience of my life. I had to muster every bit of strength I had to get through that, it wasn’t a very good time for me. It was a moment in my life I had always feared. I was always worried about how I would ever cope with losing my father…we were very close. But as it turned out it taught me a lot about myself and other people…I was caring for Dad, I had no other choice. **Sissy 2 (47: 173-178)**

Like Sissy, Anna was forced to respond to her husband’s passing, “I mean, my first husband died when my boys were 9 and 11 and I had to face that reality” **Anna (Elder: 144-145).** Anna clearly articulated the need to rapidly redefine her reality and reconstruct new identities to resume her role as the widowed mother of two young boys; as one of the other women continuously reiterated throughout her narrative “you just do what you have to do” **Ava (54: 94)**. Likewise, Carrie’s comment resonated with Ava’s reflection on coping, “no-one else is going to do it so you got to do it yourself, hey” **Carrie (45: 90)**.

Some women experienced loss and grief during childhood and resisted authority:

> And then my Dad died when I was 11. He had cancer and up to that point I had a perfect childhood, played lots of sport, played hockey and basketball. Then after my Dad died, we went and lived with my grandmother, 'cause Mum didn't cope real well. My mother, she still hasn't grieved properly for my father…she's a drinker, she lives by herself, she still works thankfully… So by the time I got to high school, I went to three high schools… I was a bit of a run-a-muck child by then. Everything was fine until my father died. **Tina (30: 110-114, 125-126)**

Another woman, Isla, also acknowledged how, as a child, she experienced similar resistance following the death of both her father and brother within a twelve-month period. Moreover, she described how she took advantage of her mother's grieving period to engage in activities that were, ordinarily, unavailable:

> …at the same time I was turning into a little teenage rebeller…so I was taking advantage of all those liberties, so I started having all these weekends away and telling her I was going here, and I'd be going different places and so I started establishing, you know, this little individual thing for myself. **Isla (46: 76, 82-84)**

On the other hand, one woman, who experienced significant loss and grief in childhood, described how she initially changed from an 'opinionated child' to an 'introverted child'. "When Mum died, I went down to Bullamooloo, it was a violent school and I think Mum dying, I was a pretty introverted child. I was usually pretty opinionated child" **Carrie (45: 234-235).** Carrie also went on to indicate that the

‘unfairness’ experienced in her life following her mother’s death was also the source of her strong contemporaneous sense of social justice:

> I’ve always been strong in social justice and I’ve always been smart enough to know how to run…probably the unfairness…like I suppose *surviving* the violence, experiencing sheer terror…and I suppose surviving that and thinking that that’s not the way it should be, and being able to see that other people don’t live like that. **Carrie (45: 62-63, 65, 68, 71-73)**

Still, other women coped better with loss and grief in their lives as children and maintained self-*author*ity by caring for others. Andie, for example, described family deaths as traumatic but also indicated compassion toward others, “deaths of people, because you see how upsetting that was” **Andie (55: 145)**.

6.3.3 ‘valued experiences’

Despite the myriad traumatic accounts featured in the women’s narratives, an equally extraordinary number of *‘valued experiences’* were recorded. *‘Valued experiences’* were revealed as optimal life experiences, such as childbirth, marriage and relationships, friendship, education, being mentored, opportunities, praise, achievements and change. *‘Valued experiences’* were enriching stabilising events. Thus, by nature, these *‘Defining Moments’* were catalysts for action and played a significant role in shaping life values and direction and the manner in which responses and approaches were enacted to manage the less than optimal moments in their lives. Tina, for instance, succinctly demonstrated this point. “When I went back to work after I was pregnant, I realised I didn’t want to be an admin officer for the rest of my life” **Tina (30: 197-199)**.

Differentially, previously highlighted was Shae's disturbing response to her mother's passing. However, looking further, what assisted Shae to overcome the devastation of her loss was responsibility to her boys. Shae described how she coped with the ordeal of her mother's passing, "I said no, there's only one person I can take it up against and that was my children…I got a thing there where I can fall back on, my kids" **Shae (46: 265, 269)**. Shae's motivator was her love and responsibility for her children and this enabled her to pass through a most tenuous space. While the passing of Shae's mother was an overwhelming experience, self-reflecting on her role as a mother forced a continuation of self and reminded her of the value of self. Specifically then, the occurrence of valued life events (for example, being a mother) were particularly powerful in their influence over the women's life courses and enabled them to regain some sense of stability and balance to counter the constraining effects of the other social conditions such as *'trauma'*.

'Valued experiences' were often motivators for change, awareness of values, wants and needs, reflection, future thinking and the pursuit of knowledge, which redefined the women's approach to life and initiated awareness of other ways of being. Having children was significant as a motivator for positive change and future-oriented thinking in the lives of all women with children. For example, Bree averred, "I do have two beautiful children and you really do have to look at the future" **Bree (38: 439-440).** Shae concurred with Bree. "The happiest thing in my life really was having my children, yeh, and bringing them up in front." **Shae (46: 207-208)**

'Valued experiences', generally, were viewed as affective influences that played an integral role in shaping, reinforcing and enhancing positive behaviours. Bree's

satisfaction with her work is testament to the correlation that may be drawn from optimal life moments and positive affirmations of self and subsequent behaviours:

> One of my greatest joys, in terms of my position in working in Western academia, is that I encounter people from different countries everyday, so therefore my teaching activities give me an opportunity not only to shatter misconceptions and unveil hidden stories, um, but to also empower people and act as a mentor to those who will come after me in terms of our own people. **Bree (38: 692-697)**

One of the younger women, Amanda, showed how a positive school experience provided motivation and determined her career direction:

> It was in year 8 and we'd just finished making a newspaper for our group assignment, a few days later we were in a house meeting and she saw me from across the room so came over and said that she'd marked our assignment and thought I was a good writer and that I would make a good journalist, so I decided then and there that I would be a journalist. **Amanda (20: 244-248)**

Today, Amanda has just completed a degree in journalism and is seeking employment in that field.

Similarly, Gracie told of a proud moment in her life; one that has highlighted new possibilities for other members of her family and set a precedent for her children:

> …that was the most proudest day in my life being the first in my family to get a degree and I am still the only one my family who attempted it the futures ahead of me…and I need to remember that there are really positive things for me in my life, what do you call it one of the effects on my life. **Gracie (42: 102-103, 108-109)**

As the three cases in point indicated, and while it was certainly the experience of Bree, Amanda and Gracie that an optimal life experience predicated a positive outcome, it was not necessarily the case that only positive events could attract positive outcomes. All women referenced both positive and negative *'Defining Moments'* in their narratives. However, it appeared that the nature of the event did not necessarily predetermine the nature of outcome in terms of subsequent thought, action, personal growth and/or change.

All twenty women who participated in this study illuminated multiple turning points in their lives; particular moments in their lifetime that raised their consciousness to the degree that action and personal and social change followed. These experiences opened up new ways of being and a world of new possibilities and changes, and often streamlined a response towards a specific goal. The cognitive processes enabling transformation is now examined in *'Seeking Authenticity'*, which is the second signifying facet of the core process of *Becoming Empowered.*

6.4 'Seeking Authenticity'

The conditions underlying the metanoia inspired in the women as a result of experiencing '*Defining Moments'* in their lives is the concern of this section—*'Seeking Authenticity'*. *'Seeking Authenticity'* represented the spiritual infrastructure upon which the women constructed themselves as agential, gendered and ethnic subjects to uphold a purposeful and fulfilling life; the cognitive mechanisms that sustained their identity-making processes, assisted in the resolution of problems and lay the foundational pathways toward *Becoming Empowered*. Significantly, *'Seeking Authenticity'* is an omnipresent facet which ran parallel to, and undergirded, all subsequent signifying facets, thus identifying the mediating role of developing a critical, moral and ethnic consciousness and identity formation and agency in the process of *Becoming Empowered*.

The multidimensional sub-process of *'Seeking Authenticity'* (see Figure 6.3) revealed observation of modelled realities named *'witnessing'*, shown as the gaining of meaningful and relevant knowledge that incorporated an orientation toward deep reflection and a process through which the women evaluated and re-evaluated themselves and their environment; *'orienting morality'*, encompassed the women's aspirations and expressions to embody moral *author*ity; and *'claiming ethnicity'*, observed as the means by which the women explored their ethnicity and which was simultaneously the decisive concept towards which the women were oriented—their Aboriginality.

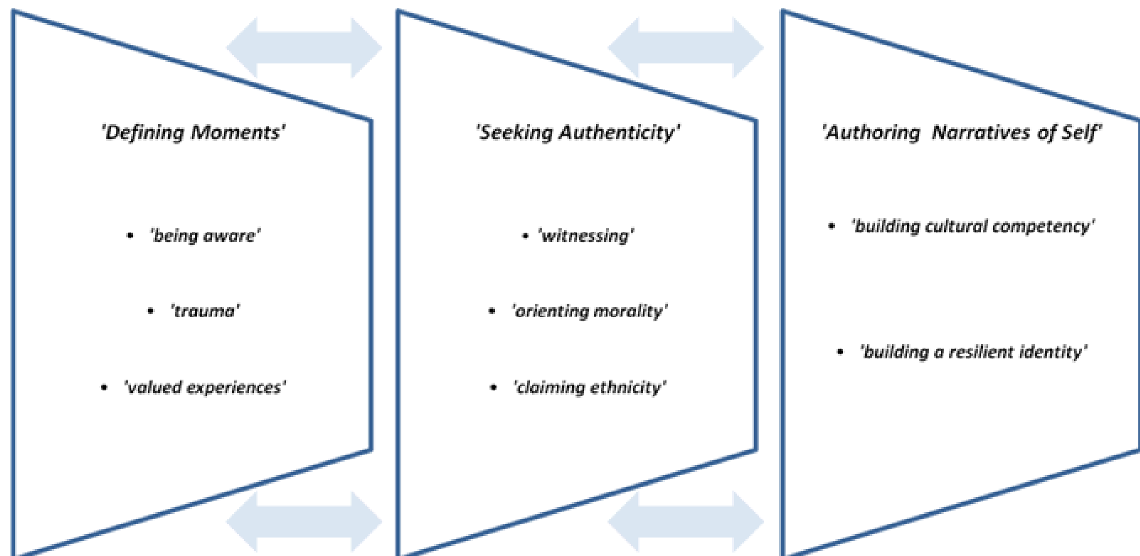

Figure 6.3 Signifying facets of 'Seeking Authenticity'

For all women, this spiritual signifying facet was one of constant engagement, between self and others and the world, to discover new ways of knowing, doing and being. Sustaining a concordant correlate between outer realities and their inner self required that the women raise their thinking to higher levels of consciousness and develop actions that resonated with their newly acquired sense of self, purpose and connectedness, consciousness and worldviews. In short, the women reoriented themselves and their actions in relation to new identifications made by seeking to author new selves.

The women participated in philosophical questioning of self and the world. A spiritual dimension was observed, but should not be confused with 'spirituality' as viewed in the context of religion; that is, in this thesis, the terms spirituality and religion are not viewed as synonymous constructs. Spirituality, as utilised here, is a multifaceted fluid construct; an existential orientation that describes the fundamental nature of being and experiencing the world for the women. It is intimately tied to the women's

ontological and epistemological realities, characterised by their reflection on the existential meaning of being, their origins, and who they were and who they wanted to become. Spirituality represented the various philosophical belief structures that underscored the lifeworld of the women; the fundamental ontological, epistemological, ethical principles and energies that constitute the nature and character of the women and were accordingly connected to, and influential upon, the everyday lives of these women.

Nevertheless, the spiritual dimension referenced was no less a sacred journey and viewed as the cornerstone of self-development and growth; a journey of discovering innovative ways of understanding self; coming to interpret and know self, others and the world differently; and ultimately engaging meaning, purpose, connections, direction and fulfilment in life. It is a journey that moves toward a more 'authentic' self; understanding, acceptance and completeness as an individual; a spiritual awakening that grows and changes in meaning along life's continuum. "I thought the past was important in terms of coming to terms with my own identity… you really do have to look at the future" **Bree (38: 438, 440)**. Another woman commented on transcendence of spiritual meaning through her journey of self-discovery, "there was always a certain amount of learning…but spirituality went for me from being part of everyday life, it had more substance, you know, not just a thought, but an object [doing]" **Carrie (45: 142-144)**.

'*Seeking Authenticity*' appeared as a parallel condition that spanned the lives of all the women to varying degrees at different life stages. This signifying facet holds profound significance as a critical first step towards ameliorating some of the tensions experienced by Aboriginal women in a contemporary world, as they "walk this

tightrope between two worlds" **Bree (38: 357-358)** as one woman expressed it. To perform this activity, the women reconciled the past with the present and future and negotiated tensions that exist between their authentic self and the environment as they walk the interface of cultural boundaries in contemporary society. Put simply, *'Seeking Authenticity'* enabled the construction and reconstruction of identities through the negotiation of difference. Narratives of the women indicated this spiritual journey is an ongoing, reiterative, self-motivated process, experienced in fundamentally similar ways but often with differing antecedents or '*Defining Moments'.* Similarly, variations of experience and personal constructions of meaning relevant to these experiences were evidenced between the individual narratives of the women.

The women's narratives revealed how the nature of *'Defining Moments'* often played a significant role in the focus and direction of their identifications and agency in their redefined realities. This is an important insight for understanding the construction of self and power for Aboriginal women and the subjective nature of arousal and outcomes of empowerment. For example, Bree elected to see herself as a 'reconciliator' and became an educator in Aboriginal culture and histories as a result of her own experiences and out of her perceived responsibility for the experiences of her grandmother. Bree's narrative also highlighted her involvement in "an interracial relationship" **Bree (38: 443-444)** which further substantiated her reconciliatory spirit.

Bree's identification as a reconciliator afforded a solution to inherent tensions in her interracial relationship and those contained in her "rich tapestry of ethnicities" **Bree (38: 45-46).** Bree avoided the dichotomous thinking that had the potential to alienate her and, instead, embraced a new subject position—that of reconciliator. Significantly,

assuming such a position did not diminish Bree's declared status as an Aboriginal woman, "first and foremost I will always be Aboriginal" **Bree (38: 85)**. Thus, the women were observed to adhere to, and creatively draw on, very specific historical and social contexts in the ways they went about making new identifications, repositioning themselves in relation to their environment and redefining new realities. From such a perspective, the women envisioned themselves as being a part of, and playing a role in, various social contexts according to the specific historical, social and cultural discourses to which they have been predisposed.

'Seeking Authenticity' reflected the soul-searching questions of 'Where did I come from?', 'Who am I?', 'Who do I want to be?', 'How do others see me?' and 'Where do I belong?' The women's responses to these questions revealed the structure of the sub-process of *'Seeking Authenticity'*; the accumulation of such knowledge, resulted in *'Authoring Narratives of Self' and 'Capturing Autonomy'* and responded to 'How do I assume and maintain my role as an Aboriginal woman operating at the interface of contemporary Australian society?'

Coming to know and understand self in relation to their external realities, often under significantly compromised circumstances, was concerned with significant deliberation; an inner dialogue that firstly drew on existing meaningful knowledge, then connecting with self and later connecting self to others and broader social realities. Simultaneously, through the personal translation of relevant knowledge, the women developed new knowledge to bring into play in their transformed consciousness. At a fundamental level, enabling such knowledge to emerge required that very specific conditions be present to nurture the women's potential for coming to a critical

consciousness, namely opportunities for the accumulation of relevant knowledge and a significant degree of reflexivity and awareness on the part of the women. While the experience can be quite confronting, it may also be a significant learning experience and, thus, empowering. One of the women expressed the empowering learning experience that occurred as a result of her participation in a similar exercise, deliberately and formally constructed for its reflexive purpose:

> …in this life journey exercise we put down birth to where we are now, and what has happened in between and what significant things have happened in our life, where we have had to make choices and where changes have occurred…and we looked at that and tried to work out why we, why we didn't go down another path…and it wasn't until then that I understood some of my choices and some I still don't understand, except that they have all been learning experiences and I have learnt an awful lot and I appreciate where I am now. **Isla (46: 235-241)**

6.4.1 Bree's Story

Bree's narrative provided an explicit, contextual and powerful exemplar of the sub-process of *'Seeking Authenticity'* and, specifically, showed how she reconciled previously held perceptions of herself with those of others:

> And othering, you know as I said, I had to reassess who I was, and it was looking at yourself through the perceptions of others' eyes, and that was quite, not an easy thing to do, was not an easy thing for me to do. So, um, yeh, and it's really funny though, because you know what, that's given me my grounding now, yeh, first and foremost I will always be Aboriginal. **Bree (38: 82-86)**

Bree's background and quoted narrative extract provided a prime case in point of her coming to realise a critical and ethnic consciousness or *'Seeking Authenticity'*. The *'Defining Moment',* 'othering', can be identified as the impetus behind initiating the process of *'Seeking Authenticity'*. Bree's background narrative provided more specific clues. Bree grew up in a discrete Aboriginal community where she went to school. She had a strong work ethic and was employed on surrounding properties performing domestic duties and also worked in a shop for White employers. Bree's parents were also employed and well respected in the community. Bree's mother and grandmother were positive role models in her life and her father played a key role in supporting her education by teaching her much about history. After completing secondary school, Bree went to university where she encountered 'othering' for the first time.

While this was Bree's first encounter with 'othering', elsewhere in her narrative she described being present when similar circumstances were experienced by relatives. When Bree was prompted to look at herself 'through the perceptions of others' eyes' she had previously experienced the situation through *'witnessing'* the experiences of significant others in her life. Bree articulated her thoughts in that instance. "I'm thinking, well here they are, they're labelled, so what do they think of me…and what do you, me, think of all this" **Bree (38: 341-342)**. Elucidated here was that Bree had historically relevant knowledge. *'Witnessing'* and *recalling the past* engaged *being aware* enough for her to critically reflect, reinterpret and develop new knowledge, often morally orientated knowledge, rooted in a sense of social justice. This process culminated with her *'claiming ethnicity'* or developing an ethnic consciousness.

Bree experienced adequate exposure to specific and meaningful knowledge through *'witnessing'* and *recalling the past.* This background knowledge allowed her to reflect on, and engage in understanding her current position within its broader context and begin to transform that knowledge for specific use in resolving her core concern of *Performing Aboriginality*. While Bree stated that 'it was not an easy thing to do', she coped with the situation by first drawing on existing knowledge of herself and others, reflecting on self in relation to others in the broader community and becoming aware of her current position.

Bree further oriented moral *author*ity in the hope of reconciling humanity as part of the means by which to resolve the issue, "because one would think that through inter-racialism and through coming together and breaking down of barriers they will become a bit more accepting as opposed to tolerant…I need to cleave to something or otherwise I would have no faith in man" **Bree (38: 448-454)**.

Bree, then, elected *'claiming ethnicity'* as a strategy of grounding herself; a way of claiming a verifiable origin, a life purpose and as a means of maintaining relatedness and belonging. Aboriginality, then, was the subjective position in which she located herself and to think and act accordingly. In brief, Bree was not only working toward a critical consciousness but also moving toward the development of an ethnic and moral consciousness.

In Bree's narrative, and consistently reflected in all other narratives, it appeared the women were intuitively critically aware of themselves and their environment and reflected upon their 'selves', life purposes, their positions in society and relations to

others and the world. However, upon closer analysis, *'witnessing'*, *'orienting morality'* and *'claiming ethnicity'* appeared as the significant conditions constituting the sub-process of *'Seeking Authenticity'* and provoking the women's seemingly innate abilities to think and act in such a critically reflexive manner.

6.4.2 'witnessing'

'Witnessing' was particularly influential upon the cognitive processes demonstrated and consistent descriptions were exemplified in all narratives. Formal and informal mentoring relationships, opportunistic observations of behaviours, role-modelling and past memories were incorporated into the category termed *'witnessing'*. Accordingly, *'witnessing'* enabled the women, through personal presence and perception of special knowledge, to create a new knowledge base through which to understand their inner and outer reality and base future decisions and choices; reconstructed ways of knowing, being and doing.

Contextual opportunities for *'witnessing'* were diverse. Bree was very clear about her opportunistic observations of behaviours, "the women in my family have influenced me greatly, my grandmother and my mother, so has my father. And it was my father who has give me a passion for learning" **Bree (38: 228-230)**. When asked what enabled her to become aware of other realities, Andie succinctly responded with, "see what other people do" **Andie (55: 138)**. Likewise, Carrie replied with expanded detail. "Observation, the care I got and the information other people gave, the values" **Carrie (45: 75-76)**. Carrie continued supporting the significance of opportunities for, and role of, knowledge sharing; she stated, "without that influence…when I had my first

child, my neighbour was an invaluable source of learning and education and information" **Carrie (45: 78-79)**.

However, opportunities for knowledge sharing were not always available for all women at critical developmental phases in their lives but available at other times. As Sissy approached puberty, her two older sisters married and her family moved away from her extended family and friends. She expressed feelings of alienation and noted the absence of such opportunities. "I never really had a female mentor, role model, whatever you would like to call it, because my sisters had left home by the time I reached my teenage years and quite honestly my mother and I have never really been close" **Sissy (47: 42-45).** Even so, Sissy communicated her current situation. "I have a fantastic supervisor at work…I admire her greatly, she…has the most beautiful way about her and I continue to learn so much from her" **Sissy (47: 38-40)**. Likewise, Isla commented, "I work with a fantastic bunch of people who I am learning so much from" **Isla (46: 285)**. She also remarked on the influence of her husband, whom she met later in her life. "I just look at him and he's just a picture of what I want to be" **Isla (46: 322)**. While yet another woman was inspired by her father's work ethic and learned from the example. "Dad, he was one of those ones, you know like *work* too much" **Shae (46: 160-161)**. Other women learned from observation and moral judgement of others. For example, Tina declared, "I think my Nana played a role in making me strong and you know, making me, I think the dedicated kind of person I am, or that sort of thing, whereas my Mum played a role for me about what not to be" **Tina (30: 232-234).**

Gaining knowledge through personal involvement and observation was a theme that resonated with the development and transformation of women to a more

emancipatory position. In some instances, the process of learning was subtle. "I guess we were also taught how to keep a clean and tidy home and cook for your family as an unconscious teaching strategy, just by example" **Simone 2 (31: 290-292).** However, this was not always the case from the outset. One woman described how her violent upbringing negatively impacted her relationships later in life, "one sense of strength I suppose was when I realised I could kill a person, and that's when I broke completely from this other guy, I threw a knife at him actually and I was shit shocked" **Carrie (45: 103-105)**. Even so, as Carrie indicated, it was a 'sense of strength' which later initiated critical reflection and became the stimulus for a liberating decision. "I had to make a conscious choice that I don't want to live like that, and I don't want my children brought up like that" **Carrie (45: 105-107)**.

'*Witnessing*' was a critical condition in that it facilitated the transfer of knowledge required by the women to stimulate critical reflection upon themselves and the situation at hand. Critical reflection, then, accommodated the transposition of the personal into the broader social context. For example, Meghan, now a respected Elder, was raised in a very politically-orientated environment. Her mother was extremely active in early Aboriginal political movements and Meghan and her siblings all assumed a similar role. Meghan related that it was a natural option for her to choose to create a political identity for herself:

> …'cause she [mother] was one of the founders for the Advancement League for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and then she was instrumental in forming FCAATSI, which was the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders…my mother was a, if you like a pioneer…'cause

with that sort of thing around you can't help it, being who you are today type of thing. **Meghan (66: 314-317, 357-358)**

Meghan went on to identify herself as being involved in a number of 'pioneering' achievements throughout her life and directly related the construction of her identity to that of *'witnessing'* her environment. She demonstrated how *'witnessing'* the activities of her mother accommodated the transfer of meaningful knowledge. Developing a repertoire of knowledge through *'witnessing'* also became the source from which Meghan interpreted and committed to subsequent identifications, decisions and actions in life.

Many women identified mentors and role models as holding a place of prominence in their lives. The women gravitated toward people who were male or female, Aboriginal or White, but always those significant others for whom they had a high regard. For some women, opportunities of *'witnessing'* through political involvement were not part of their realties. Andie related that "Mum and Dad weren't involved in many things" **Andie (55: 402)**. However, she also stated "Mum and Dad were my big mentors" **Andie (55: 344)**. What Andie's parents did model was significant life values. Embodying such values promoted them as well respected community members, "Mum and Dad were very well respected in the town" **Andie (55: 139-140).**

Debra had no family members with whom her ways of being resonated in her early years of life. However, in her narrative she communicated that her young White female teacher became a role-model for her when she was only seven years old:

…when I was in year 2 I had the best teacher and I thought she was the greatest thing, and I guess that she was sort of a role model…like, she was really nice and she was really pretty and she was grown up and she just sort of set something out there for me. **Debra (18: 301-305)**

Later in life, in her early teenage years, Debra was reunited with her father and he assumed a similar role. With the absence of a female role model, Debra says that “by year 10 there was just me, trying to make my way” **Debra (18: 322-323)**. Debra eventually found resonance with the, then aspiring, young Aboriginal actress Debra Mailman and in many ways began to emulate Debra as a model for success:

…the thing that made me want to uni and do drama was a play that I read called The Seven Stages of Grieving and it had Debra Mailman in it, and ever since I read that I've been absolutely in love with Debra Mailman, and if she does something, I pretty much know about it, so...yeh, and what her story was, cause she went to QUT as well so, I felt privileged that I was going to the same place Debra Mailman went to. **Debra (18: 375-380)**

The role of *‘witnessing’* in the transmission of knowledge was not always recognised by the women. A case in point was Tina's inability to recognise the significance of bearing witness to the activities of both her mother and grandmother and other members of her extended family. At only 30 years old, Tina is married, the mother of two young children and fulfils a number of leadership roles at a high level; she has represented the interests of Aboriginal people on occasions in international forums. When asked how she achieved such positions at such a young age, Tina was at first

perplexed. Interestingly, Tina acknowledged, in sharing her story, that she was taken to all the community meetings attended by her grandmother and mother. Tina's "grandparents were part of the founding members of [Aboriginal health service] and my Mum was the first nurse and still works there and my family played such a big role in the setting up and the sustaining of the service" **Tina (30: 215-217)**. By pointing out to Tina the powerful female and male role models in her family life, she came to understand better the privileged space in which she was raised.

For Tina, and many of the other women, there was the acknowledgment of learning and being mentored and encouraged from a multiplicity of individuals who came in and out of their lives. "I think it's different people who come into your life, isn't it" **Tina (30: 199)**. Tina goes on to explain how different people were influential in her life:

> I think being influenced by Bronte was good, we shared a house together, she used to party, but she wasn't a big, big partier and she was in that mode at the time, setting up her career and where she was going and stuff. And then I moved in with Emily which has been another influence I think…she was like, she kept on sort of dropping hints, like do you really want to do this, like looking further than drinking every night and doing admin stuff…Charlotte must of seen something in me better than what I was on the front desk and so she got me to do some higher duties and stuff and put me in an office as an executive officer…Yolande was always like, 'Tina what are you doing, you going to study, are you going to study?' So she got me on to doing the Health Promotion

> Course at university, the Graduate Diploma of Indigenous Health Promotions. **Tina (30: 194-197, 201-203, 205-207, 209-211)**

In addition to the politically-oriented environment in which Tina was raised and that promoted opportunities of observation, she also had generous mentors in her life. Clearly this, in large part, contributed to her current social standing and competency.

For other women, parents and family members created empowering narratives for them within their home. While the reinforcement of these narratives was not sufficient in itself to accommodate immediate change, these ways of being were stored in the women's memories until either required or understood fully. Many of the women noted that, in the absence of available knowledge, they drew on memories of Ancestors:

> I always thought back to my mother and my grandmother and, um, the difficulties that they had to deal with in their lives, and um, how that had, sort of, I guess made them stronger…and I always sort of thought back to those things when I was, sort of, faced with a challenge. **Anna (Elder: 134-138)**

'Witnessing' is used in a very specific way by Anna in the above reflection. Anna vicariously drew on strategies and behaviours successfully utilised by her mother and grandmother under difficult life circumstances. As a consequence, she drew strength from, and was secure in, her own expectations of success.

All women drew on knowledge sought through various avenues of formal and informal education. These women were acutely aware of their desires for knowledge

and its potential to unlock the doors to new realities and identities. Shae indicated why she required further formal education to transform her current reality:

> So I give all my work experience away and I said to my children, well, I'm going back to do a bit of education. And so I've done all my work experience, and I said, I can't go any further, I can't do this, and I can't do that, I better go back and do some education…and ever since I done education everything's coming out in front that I never had before. **Shae (46: 25-29)**

Simultaneously, Shae acknowledged the significance of understanding self in history through movement toward her Ancestral origins and a more authentic self. Generally, the imperative for the women was to strike balance between formal and informal education. Shae paralleled her quest for accomplishments in the formal education system with deliberate efforts to enhance her cultural education. In doing so, Shae sought cultural knowledge to balance self and better understand her existence and purpose as an Aboriginal woman, "well I pulled out of church, I just do my own religion now through sister Sarah and family…we just do our own little bits and pieces, we go thing way now [cultural way]" **Shae (46: 119-121)**.

Similarly Isla, who considered that her cultural education was severely lacking as a result of the negative impact of past government policies, also sought to further her cultural knowledge. "So along the way that culture was not reinforced and as part of my Indigeniety, I see that as something that I need to explore more, because a lot of it wasn't handed down from him [father]" **Isla (46: 428-430)**.

Being Reflective and Being Aware

The women's stories of *'witnessing'* were confirmation of the significance of knowledge acquisition in the current and subsequent signifying facets of *Becoming Empowered*. *'Witnessing'* led to a heightened sense of awareness of self in environment and self in history and which, in turn, prompted a cycle of critical reflection and action. As a sub-category of *'witnessing'*, *being reflective*, like *being aware*, is associated with *'witnessing'* in the sense of self-witnessing; all components fundamentally provoked the generation of knowledge. *Being aware* and *being reflective* are examined in tandem as critical and interpretative cognitive processes that flowed quite naturally in response to the women's endeavour to understand dimensions of self, others, their environment and nature of the power dynamics involved in their everyday lives so that they could not only change their personal circumstances but also sustain efforts to alter their social milieu. In this sense, the women had available privileged vantage points from which to view their realities. The women examined their specific situations from a multitude of subject positions and through the lens of others.

Assuming multiple standpoints not only enabled them to critically examine their position but also enabled an acute awareness on numerous other levels. For example, Bree first began to question difference when confronted by questions of identity. "Interestingly enough, I thought nothing about the different hues of my skin or other family members until I went to university and was constantly asked by your peers at that time, 'What part Aboriginal are you?'" **Bree (38: 31-34)**. For example, the women demonstrated an enhanced sense of purpose in life through identifying strengths, assets and skills.

The coalition of the two components, *being aware* and *being reflective*, therefore enabled the women to process accumulated wisdom gained through both formal and informal knowledge acquisition, such as *'witnessing'* and situate self in environment in a manner that is self-determining/directing and congruent with their 'authentic' self, beliefs, desires and aspirations. Hence, *being reflective* and *being aware* potentially enabled the women to avoid and resolve contradictions at the macro, meso and micro levels of reality and proactively realise a way forward in life.

Being aware and *being reflective* allowed the women to engage in discourses of self. The women were also critically aware of the past, present and future, their own shortcomings, strengths, desires and needs, challenges, opportunities, social restraints, racism and the need for social change. Thus, awareness and reflexivity manifested in numerous ways. For instance, one woman reflected on how she perceived the 'problems of Aboriginal women trying to achieve social change'. "I think one of the problems for Aboriginal women trying to achieve social change, is that there is just so much to achieve, and so few of us, and so little time" **Anna (Elder: 242-244).** Anna's awareness of, and reflection on, the challenge faced by Aboriginal women enabled solutions to be constructed and, thus, new identifications and realities to be shaped in the remedial process.

Andie, on the other hand, demonstrated reflection upon self and environment and expressed the need to remain cognisant of the same. To ensure she captured opportunities life had to offer, Andie maintained that one required an expression of gratitude and acceptance for 'what you've got'. She further acknowledged that these qualities, along with awareness were critical to the capacity to take advantage of what

life had to offer. “You know be thankful for what you’ve got and be happy with what you’ve got, and make do with what you’ve got…but on the other hand, life’s full of opportunities, so take advantage of it” **Andie (55: 157-159).** By accepting reality, the women had a more positive outlook toward life and were thus afforded the opportunity to envisage new realities and attach new meaning to life, thereby taking a self-directed approach to life *vis-à-vis* life circumstances controlling their actions. For the women, multiple advantages and possibilities for exercising agency, both present and future, emanated from fundamental cognitive processes.

Being reflective and *being aware* proved invaluable tools used by the women to actively initiate change processes and engage identity work. Despite having children of her own, Dolly also raised five other children. Throughout her narrative, consistent references were made to her adolescent dreams of raising Aboriginal children in need. Through her growing consciousness and awareness of needs of others, Dolly was enabled to occupy new subject positions and fulfil those aspirations through an ability to choose, and then action that choice. “I always dreamt about when I get married and have kids and that I was going to bring up Aboriginal kids…and that’s what I done hey” **Dolly (58: 263-265).**

Because the women demonstrated a sensitive awareness of self and environment, they were also instinctively aware of their own individual strengths and misgivings and those of others. They were further enabled to consider consequences prior to actioning their thought processes. Amanda demonstrated the significance of *being reflective* and *being aware* of others, prior to acting, when she considered a request from someone whom she held in high regard. “At first I didn’t want to, but then

decided I didn’t want to disappoint her, so I worked all through the school holidays to produce an essay discussing the history of Native Title Agreements” **Amanda (20: 201-204).** Cognitive processing led to a degree of enlightenment and was an essential precondition to *Becoming Empowered*. The following two components of *‘Seeking Authenticity’*, *‘orienting morality’* and *‘claiming ethnicity’*, show how the embodiment of action began for the women on their pathway toward *Becoming Empowered*.

6.4.3 ‘orienting morality’

‘Orienting morality’ primarily concerned the women’s response to ‘Who do I want to be?’ As a result of *‘witnessing’* other realities, *being aware* of their own realities and *being reflective* upon their situation, the women began to question what was good and bad and right and wrong for them. They began to think about and develop particular standards of morality and expressions of moral *author*ity, “learning different things and I guess I just formed my own idea about what was good and what was bad” **Debra (18: 313-315).** Indeed the women aspired to embody such values by choosing to think and later conduct themselves in accord with such values. Shae explained:

> Um, in a way I had a few [friends], but I parted from them because, you know they the ones…you see I don’t drink or smoke and don’t go out, and that’s why I just, I pulled away and I just do my own things…and they would say to me how come you didn’t come or what’s wrong with you? you know…but I used to go everywhere, I had friends all over…but I just give all that away. **Shae (46: 193-198)**

In short, the women began making their own identifications, defining their own needs and deciding how they wanted to live, which included who they wanted in their lives and the kind of environment in which they lived. Understanding individual needs assisted the women to reconcile themselves and their outer reality. Isla made clear her feelings on her choice not to have more children; she reflected on her decision:

> I feel that I sort of let him down in a way by making him an only child, you know I could have made other choices, but you know I thought at the time that I didn't want to bring another child into the world when I wasn't prepared financially, or emotionally or physically. **Isla (46: 247-250)**

Isla not only elected to live her life based on her value-laden choice but also reflected on the impact of that decision, the moral obligations she felt for her son and passed moral judgment on self. To engage in such reflection, Isla had a set of values which defined what was important to her and that were open to change over time.

Values were viewed as critical to the ways the women elected to live their lives and the choices they made to do so. Myriad situations eventuated throughout the lives of the women where they were required to seek moral responses, and revealed how a range of ethical values were embodied and embedded in their daily lives. Andie, an Elder, noted a change in values over the years:

> I think the values have changed over the years, I think the values then were that you were honest, in our family, you were honest, made sure that you respected yourself and other people respected you, and you treated people how you would

> like to be treated, those old values…Just those things like do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay basically; be independent financially; yeh, look after other people. **Andie (55: 164-167, 346-347)**

What was significant was that the women who participated in the study still upheld the integrity of 'those old values' such as work ethic, acceptance, responsibility and care, honesty and respect with each woman applying these in her own unique way. For example, in the absence of parental contribution of values, Debra recalled her private school attendance as influential, "every week we had liturgy…they were trying to get a message across…trying to push the human morals across to be a good human and stuff like that" **Debra (18: 270-273)**.

Simone corroborated the importance of instilling values in children. When asked what values were emphasised in her as a child, she responded with "I suppose the same things that I deem important now in my adult life. Moral issues - there are some things you just don't do; family is rather high up there; acceptance" **Simone (31: 53-55)**. As a child Beccie also had a number of values impressed upon her. "Do what is right…don't lie…You can agree to disagree, be kind, it never hurts to say hello, and there are plenty of people in the world to fight, so don't fight with your family, get a job and work hard" **Beccie (42: 54-62)**. Interestingly, for the majority of the women, the uptake of values derived from male and female sources. Numerous qualities were impressed upon the women as children:

He [father] always says, be proud of who you are and where you came from**…**and education is the most important thing that you can ever have. **Debra (18: 240-241, 354-355)**

He [father] just liked being out bush, I guess that's the value I got from him...all sorts of values because Dad was a very generous man. Hardworking…Dad never hit us ever, never raised his authority. **Jane (39: 85-87)**

Honest…responsibility. **Jessie (27: 39)**

Honesty, hard work, work ethic, respect. **Amanda (20: 56)**

While in large measure values were founded in childhood lessons, one woman commented that, in her family, it became primarily an individual responsibility of trial and error:

Yeh, we just grew up the hard way and we just had take our values to the limit ourselves then…Yeh, yeh they [parents] just put us through everything…he [father] just let us, in a way he just said you don't really need to speak language and whats-a-name if you don't want to, don't really worry, as long as you know your family history and family whats-a-name. **Shae (46: 152-153, 166-169)**

However, upon closer reflection, it is evident that Shae was indeed given the opportunity for experiential learning, shown the importance of family and culture and allowed to learn and develop a resilient attitude in life. Similarly, Tina, whose father

died when she was young, learned to become an independent child under extremely difficult circumstances. **"**Every night she'd [mother] be out at the pub and come home drunk. Yeh, my sister and I basically lived on our own we just did our own thing, we cooked our own meals every night, washed our own clothes, took ourselves to school, yeh it wasn't a nice year actually" **Tina (30: 167-170)**. The skills gained through experiential learning would later provide the sound basis for *'building a resilient identity'*.

Work ethic was powerfully present as a considerable influence upon the moral consciousness of the women and was exhibited by all. Anna provided some insight into the advantages of a strong work ethic among Aboriginal women. Anna regarded it as a tool for achieving a degree of agency. She explained the moral benefit of work:

> …if you look at the workplace, you know, how do we change the social relationships that underpin those workplace relationships, a part of the problem is just literally that, there's so many fronts on which we have to operate, so many areas in which we have to try and gain, so kind of influence. **Anna (Elder: 247-251)**

There were certain expectations that benefits emerged from assuming work ethic as a virtue. One woman not only demonstrated the benefits of hard work but also the moral virtues involved in being a diligent worker:

> …people go and have morning tea and long lunches and flexi-time; actually I didn't like it, I couldn't believe how these people could take a salary and do

> that…but our little team worked really hard and built it right up and yeh, lots of legislation was accepted. **Andie (55: 293-296)**

Bree was more explicit regarding her expectations. “I felt like I was never completely accepted by White society, unless you were a good worker” **Bree (38: 358-360)**. Bree’s expression of *reaching higher* to participate as a full member of society was also instilled in her as a child by parents who were raised on a mission, “my parents always used to say, ‘you are just as good as anybody else, you just have to work twice as hard’. That was Grandfather’s philosophy in life…so we come from a family of workers” **Bree (38: 318-320)**. Likewise, Jessie elaborated upon the benefits of work ethic and considered that to “work hard, ask questions, build rapport, network, take on acting positions and ask for the job” **Jessie (27: 187-188)** would guarantee a career promotion.

Generally, women adopted a work ethic as a moral trait to enhance personal and collective social mobility and moral fibre. For some, work ethic intimately resonated with self. Ava defined herself as having “a strong work ethic, practical and kind-hearted” **Ava (55: 89-90).** Some women recognised the financial gain and the opportunities hard work could bring. By *reaching higher* Bree was able to leave her mission home and attend university:

> You know by the time I got to year 9 I was working at three different shops during the week, and every second weekend I would go out on the properties and house clean – on a Friday afternoon and come back on a Sunday afternoon, and do two different properties, you know, one on the Saturday and one on the

> Sunday, and working 12 hour shifts too, I worked *hard*. But as I said, so when I went to university, I had $5000 in my bank account. **Bree (38: 323-328)**

Although not explicitly expressed, Leila (46) commented on experiencing similar opportunities when she joined the Navy as a young girl. Similarly, Anna described how her strong work ethic, early in life, provided her a degree of independence and freedom after her husband's passing. "I had an established career, I didn't have to worry in terms of being able to support them or whatever" **Anna (Elder: 147-149).** Debra, the youngest of the women, clearly related her capabilities of *passing moral judgement* and *reaching higher* at the tender age of thirteen when choosing a high school to attend:

> I just saw the kids come out of there and they just looked real brogan, and they didn't care, and they were smoking, and swearing, and they'd fight…and I didn't want to be like that. And I just looked at the other school, and they just looked all prim and proper, like they all had nice uniforms. And that's another thing, at that school there was a uniform to be worn, but they didn't have to wear it. **Debra (18: 288-293)**

Gracie articulated her initial engagement with discourses of her moral self at a different point in her life course; following the birth of her daughter:

> …it was just after my first child, I didn't wanna be on the pension, I wanted to be independent. I always wanted to be an independent person. I wanted to do something, I didn't want my daughter to grow up like me, I wanted to do

> something better in life than just hang around and not doing anything and collecting money you don't even work for. **Gracie (42: 46-49)**

Gracie drew a direct relationship between the value of cultivating a strong work ethic and enhanced character as a person. Her expressions reflect the development of a moral consciousness and motivation with a strong connection to independence, moral responsibility and care and relatedness to others and, thus, personal agency and the construction of identity. However, the significant point here is that the discourses appropriated by Gracie to reconstruct a new identity and reality are socially and culturally shaped. Further indicated here is that Gracie is, to a certain extent, inscribed by discourses of the dominant culture. What is pertinent is not the degree to which Gracie subscribes to, rejects, or adapts such discourses, but that she comes to understand herself in relation to these discursive influences and practices.

Gracie was raised by parents who demonstrated a strong regard for the teachings of the mission and military. Her work ethic was not originally a natural orientation; it was forcefully instilled in her as a child. "I used to get picked on to do different jobs…we had to get up and clean the yard, we weren't allowed to have one leaf on the ground or we'd get belted, but we picked up the work ethic value and the strength to survive" **Gracie (42: 192, 231-233)**. Strong correlates were drawn between work ethic and strength and pride. Gracie continued in her narrative with thanks to her parents for instilling work ethic as a value and regards it as a measure of personal strength. "I became stronger doing my chores and work I'm so thankful. Me doing these chores, it makes me know I'm not a lazy person, I'm able to do the work guys can do like chopping trees for fire wood" **Gracie (42: 196-198)**.

In a general sense, a strong relationship existed between the orientation and application of values demonstrated by the women and achievement, choice, respect, strength and independence. The orientation of moral virtues appeared as a critical prerequisite to achieving agency, autonomy, competence and self-esteem and played a key role in the process of *Becoming Empowered* and more immanently expressed in subsequent signifying facets.

6.4.4 'claiming ethnicity'

Identity-making processes were fundamental to the rationale behind assuming a critical, ethnic and moral consciousness and engaging actions for the women in the study. Integral to the ways the women constructed their subjective conceptions of self in the category of *'claiming ethnicity'* was the creation of meaningful identifications. The most salient aspect of these identifications was ethnic affiliations. It was apparent from the women's narratives that ethnicity, specifically Aboriginality, was quite naturally adopted as a significant influence upon their construction of identity and also in the ways agency was developed and directed. The women's ways of *'claiming ethnicity'* varied according to their innate personal qualities and life circumstances, including their social, historical and political contexts. Nevertheless, all women, even though they all had other ethnicities to choose from, elected to attach their constructions of self to their Aboriginal heritage. This, in itself, indicated a connection between the construction of identity and personal agency.

Significantly, every woman who participated in the study reported a complex weave of ancestry and interactions and relationships with a cross-section of people from an array of different cultural backgrounds. This meant that alternate ethnic affiliations

were available to all the women. However, without exception, the women chose to identify themselves by claiming their Aboriginal heritage as a salient feature of their identity. None of the women made any strong identification with other ethnicities and all elected to be identified as 'Aboriginal' women. The reasons for this were not clear, although some women gave insight into possible explanations, "we have a rich tapestry of ethnicity; I don't know anything about the other side. All I know about is my Aboriginal side, the other side to who I am, that White ancestry, has always been a taboo topic within my family" **Bree (38: 44-47)**; "My Dad is Aboriginal and Mum is a White woman of Scottish heritage…Mum's family live in Sydney and I don't know much about her side of the family" **Sissy (47: 3-4, 7-8); "**because we lived up here away from my Dad's family we connected with my Mum's family" **Tina (30: 103-104)**. Conversations evidenced in all three narratives were common and it appeared that contextual constraints may well have limited their options of ethnic identification.

Many of the women proudly and overtly claimed Aboriginality in their narratives, "you know my Aboriginality has been my guiding force right from the beginning" **Meghan (66: 524-525)**; "first and foremost I will always be Aboriginal" **Bree (38: 85)**. However, while *'claiming ethnicity'* was not always as explicitly displayed in the women's narratives, it was intrinsically evidenced in their very being; in their ways of thinking and what they did. For example, one of the younger women, Jessie, a teacher in a large state school, demonstrated an ethos of care and responsibility for Aboriginal children in the school. Sprinkled throughout Jessie's narrative were multiple references to her role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the school and developing connections between the Aboriginal community and the school. Neither role was part of Jesse's job description. Rather, they were self-created

roles to fulfil her perceived responsibility and role as an Aboriginal woman and of identifications of Aboriginality. For Jessie, these activities functioned as an important formal connection to ethnic affiliations, networks, support for inner group concerns and a means by which to ensure cultural continuity:

> Like I have had leadership roles since I started teaching. First I took on the leadership of girls and Aboriginal and Islander students at school. We organised a lot of stuff for the students, camps and NAIDOC celebrations, special activities for the girls like hairdressing, make-up and hygiene and stuff. At the moment I am working with an Aboriginal performer and looking at employing him to teach our Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to dance. **Jessie (27: 156-162)**

For almost all the women, paid employment fulfilled the role of maintaining ethnic affiliations, whether or not it was a formal aspect of their position responsibilities. Some women, for instance, worked in educational institutions and were educators of, and advocates for, Aboriginal concerns and issues; others were researchers and explored matters of priority for Aboriginal people; others had caring roles in Aboriginal health; while still others held positions of significant influence and power and championed Aboriginal causes and concerns as part of that role. Of the three women who were not in paid employment, community service activities served this function. "We just go out and talk to the old ladies and that, you know…in the homes" **Dolly (58: 241)**. Furthermore, Dolly was the mother of two children of her own and also raised five adopted Aboriginal children from birth. She explained:

> …five of them, the same mum, she sniffed petrol every single time through pregnancy and that and her Mum and father was alcoholics and they couldn't look after the grandkids, and the great grandparents was too old to look after, so the great grandparents asked me to look after…then she had 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. **Dolly (58: 268-272)**

This self-directed behaviour was embedded in an ethics of responsibility and care for self and the Aboriginal collective. Also implicated in this process was the purposeful monitoring of self, which enabled the construction of new identifications and an understanding of self as an agent of change and *author*ity.

The women spoke with much pride about Ancestors and significant others. Dolly, for instance, when speaking of her husband, commented, "He's Aboriginal…his grandfather is Pastor Doug Nichols…You know Pastor Doug…The first Aboriginal in Parliament you know" **Dolly (58: 124, 127, 129)**. Evoking such memories enabled the women to satisfy their need for belonging and give positive meaning to the construction of their ethnic affiliations.

For some women, for example Beccie, who was born and raised in a country town, "Being Aboriginal became a problem around about year 6, 7 – I began listening to stories about being paid to go to school and being Black meant being drunk, dirty, not owning a home, could fight, being intimidating and scary, those sorts of things" **Beccie (42: 125-128)**. Reports of this nature wove a common thread throughout the narratives of many of the women. Nevertheless, Beccie, like the others, drew strength and pride from her sense of belonging and Ancestral ties and, today, is employed in an Indigenous

education unit as a community partnerships officer and plays an active role in bridging the gap between mainstream educators and Aboriginal children.

Some women did, however, make acknowledgement of, and show more interest in, other affiliations. “I’m a bit of a mixture, but my Dad’s side of the family is Aboriginal…and German…and my Mum’s side of the family there’s ah, Pacific Islanders came down to work the cane fields, the Kanakas and Aboriginal people” **Andie (55: 6-10).** Even so, when asked to describe herself, Andie, as did most of the other women, began with “I’m an Aboriginal woman” **Andie (55: 413)**. Aboriginality held powerful sway in the way the women elected to identify and, more critically, a clear correlation between positive ethnic identifications and *Becoming Empowered* was observed. Viewing the primacy of Aboriginal identifications in this way gave rise to the existence of a vital relationship between identity and agency.

Some women had particularly creative ways of understanding and negotiating their mixed ethnicity to construct their sense of self. One woman drew a correlate between her Irish ancestry and her Aboriginal ancestry. “I was brought up by an Aboriginal mother and an Irish father, who was also Aboriginal, his country was also colonised by the British, fighting parents on each side of the spectrum, one White and one Black but still Aboriginal” **Meghan (66: 519-521)**. Meghan, nevertheless, still chose to resolve her identifications in a single ethnic affiliation—Aboriginal.

Other women made no reference at all to ethnic backgrounds other than their Aboriginal ancestry. Even those who acknowledged other ethnicities did not express dual ethnic affiliations or lose their cultural distinctiveness and always maintained

Aboriginal identifications. It is pertinent to note that, while the language used in reference to ethnicity by the women in their extracts were depicted by the terms 'Aboriginal' or 'Aboriginality', all women, excepting one, sought to identify themselves elsewhere in their narratives by naming their individual language groups and Country. The woman who did not identify her language group was unclear about her Ancestral ties because of historical circumstances. However, another woman who identified her Ancestral ties was a little ambivalent in her response, torn between her own Country and the place she now lived. "I would say I'm from [name of own Country], but I don't know, something in this Country's [current residence] calling *me* here all the time" **Dolly (58: 164-165)**.

In the most part, narratives indicated that the women took charge of defining their identities, ethnicity and, thus, their outer realities. All women revealed close ties with Aboriginal families and communities and strongly supported the advancement and care of Aboriginal people. Those women employed in mainstream positions continued their care and responsibility for Aboriginal people by creating space within their employment roles and/or through extra-curricular activities. Almost every woman who participated in this study sat on Aboriginal community boards and on mainstream boards in the capacity of Aboriginal representative, "so you know I was on every, like you know the research committees, the academic board, all of those things but I was there as an Aboriginal representative" **Anna (Elder: 558-560)**. Consequently, *'claiming ethnicity'* or establishing an ethnic identity also required commitment to, and involvement in, the group in addition to identifications with the group.

Primarily, the women sought to make ethnic identifications and reposition themselves such that their ethnicity, Aboriginality, was at the centre of their own experiences. Indeed, *'claiming ethnicity'* was an all pervasive category, which gave meaning to, and underpinned, the women's ways of understanding themselves and being in the world. For example, Meghan related an evocative story of identification and finding direction in life, concomitantly centring her experience as an Aboriginal woman, her ethnic identifications, at the heart of her existence:

> The fact that I'm doing a degree, I'm doing that for myself right, but then I need that, I needed something to give me direction and to quote an old Aboriginal woman that I knew, she's now passed on, 'Once you're an Aboriginal person, you never stop doing things for your people'. You know, in her seventies she still used to go into town every day. I said 'You gettin' tired and old now, you better stop home some days?' and she said 'My girl, you never stop doing things for your people, no matter how old you are'. And she used to go in there each day and talk to other pensioners and fight for the rights for the old pensioner Aboriginal women, on pensions and stuff like that. And that's where I'm at I guess, even though I'm doing the degree for myself, what I will do with that degree is not for myself, it's for my people. **Meghan (66: 106-115)**

Meghan's narrative gave insight into how she constructed and understood her identity and, in particular, how she negotiated her ethnic identity; then, how she situated herself as the subject of her experience. Through the words of the 'old Aboriginal woman', Meghan indicated she possessed the same intimate Aboriginal affiliations through naming her perceived obligations to support Aboriginal causes and people. Her

actions showed how a synthesis of self-knowledge and new knowledge can be used in a broader social context. Meghan's narrative demonstrated a degree of agency motivated largely by her ethnic identifications and by relating how her subsequent actions, 'doing a degree', were embedded in her own ethnic identifications.

The process of *'claiming ethnicity'* was fluid and construed differently over time. For some women, open commitment and claim to common Ancestral origins intensified as they matured and became more aware of self in environment and self in history. Some women observed gaps in their Aboriginal affiliations:

> …we were brought up, not as Indigenous children, not as Aboriginal children, I think we were brought up in more of a non-Indigenous society…it was a journey for me to get back to my own identity, it's never going to stop I'll keep learning, and every time I go home I'm getting closer and closer, and learning more and more about who I am and that's never going to stop, there's still a big void there and I'm at the stage in my life now that I want to explore, open that up more.
> **Isla (46: 435-437, 440-444)**

'Claiming ethnicity' in such instances induced powerful cathartic experiences. Evidenced, as in Isla's experience, was that identity work was fluid, fragmented and ongoing and nurtured through learning processes.

For other women, the desire for a sense of belonging, and particularly ethnic belonging, was powerful and much sought after. Jessie explained how, after taking on

employment in a new location, she felt alienated by the all-White staff with whom she worked and how those feelings were alleviated:

> But when I first moved down here, I didn't have a very good time. I was the only Aboriginal teacher at the school and the rest of the staff weren't very helpful or friendly, not really my kind of people. It's much better now. So I decided to go to the Indigenous Education Unit at the local university one day to develop some networks. When I walked in there and sat down, it was just like being home, it was just so comfortable, I didn't have to worry. So I maintain those connections. **Jessie (27: 105-110)**

Debra clearly articulated strong spiritual connections to Country and the capacity of those connections to heal and nurture individual spirituality:

I love it down there…it's gorgeous, like there's this one place that I'm absolutely attracted to it, every time I go down there I've got to go it, just really beautiful…and it just makes me feel so calm and peaceful, and like nothing else matters. **Debra (18: 539-542)**

In this way, the women not only expressed powerful ties to people, but also related an intuitive awareness of environment. *'Claiming ethnicity'* therefore engendered important and potent ways of *nurturing self* by developing the spirit within. Even when the women considered that their commitment was incomplete, they longed for that sense of belonging and connectedness and remained acutely aware of their

responsibilities. In short, the women demonstrated an awareness of their own spirituality.

What Aboriginality actually meant for the individual women differed considerably:

> I'll say I'm Aboriginal…and people say like are you like a half, a quarter? And I say 'no, I'm Aboriginal'. It doesn't matter; it's what's in your heart…but being proud and being able to one day help people who need it. **Debra (18: 523-526)**

> That I am just me, I like me and that [Aboriginality] is part of me. **Simone (31: 169)**

> I guess what makes me Aboriginal is the racism I encountered along the way. **Bree (38: 305-306)**

However, when asked to identify themselves, most women introduced themselves with 'I am an Aboriginal woman'; others began with their name. These responses also integrated a gendered aspect into their identity. The way gender was accomplished as an identity task is elaborated in the third signifying facet, *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*.

Key to the women's identity-building processes was *'claiming ethnicity'*, which once again allowed movement between the past, present and future. All of the women demonstrated positive identification with their Aboriginal ethnicity; they viewed

themselves as Aboriginal women and sought to have those affiliations recognised and identified as such by others. While not representing the totality of their identity work, ethnicity, in this case Aboriginality, gave positive meaning to the women's construction of self-identity and their sense of agency. Narratives showed how feelings of belonging and attachment to Aboriginal people and traditions are bound up with their self-identity. That is, the women's self-identity was intrinsically bound up with their ethnic identity. What remains to be answered is how the women reconcile their ethnic identity with other threads of their identity.

Paradoxically, the underlying source of their identity dilemmas, being an 'Aboriginal' woman in a contemporary colonial world, became the panacea to transcend the concern at hand. As the women encountered tensions between their own experiential knowledge and other realities, it was only natural that forms of resistance to other ways of being featured in the interaction. Even so, it should be duly noted that mutations also occur at the interface of social relations. Therefore, while in large measure disassociation from the unfamiliar occurs, parts of the same remain, however miniscule. Such encounters inevitably saw retreat to the familiar and provoked the question 'How do I define myself as an Aboriginal woman and how do I go about fulfilling that role?' Hence, the point of concern, Aboriginality, is simultaneously the point of strength exhibited by the women. By *'claiming ethnicity'* the women largely shaped expressions of spirituality within the contours of the social and cultural contexts within which they function. Simply, ethnicity becomes the focal point, the instrument through which the women question self, but also the grounds upon which their future is nurtured and mediated. Movement toward, grounding in, and gaining strength drawn from, their Ancestral origins were fundamental to all of the women's understanding of their

existence and purpose in life. However, because the self is largely defined by the complete environment and not only one part, the process of *'claiming ethnicity'*, ethnic identification and appreciation, was complicated by the women's location in a bicultural environment; that of Aboriginal culture and the dominant culture.

'Seeking Authenticity' represented interpretive, identity-building and transformative processes achieved by coming to develop a critical, moral and ethnic consciousness and claiming authorship of those processes. It reflected the processual conditions experienced by the women as they enquired into their current understandings of self as Aboriginal women, the world and self in relationship to others and the world. Critically, they developed the resources through which they could perform their roles as Aboriginal women.

6.5 Summary

All of the women provided accounts of how both positive and negative *'Defining Moments'*, pivotal life experiences whether cast as good or bad, had lasting impact on their lives and played key roles in their personal development and construction of identities and reality. Critical here, was the stimulation to gain knowledge, reflect and adjust through everyday events; reflection on life and self, which in turn enabled the women to make the necessary adaptations and decisions towards personal and social transformation over their life course. *'Defining Moments'* were seen as the critical premise from which the women constructed new ways of knowing, being and doing in the world; in this study, represented as retrospective interpretations of past life stories of 'becoming' self (Giddens, 1991).

'Seeking Authenticity' elucidated the significance of engaging a holistic approach in theorising the empowerment process, that is, understanding the women's development in environment; the social, psychological, historical and political contexts of their development. The process of coming to know and understand self within the context of one's environment was possibly the most significant facet of the women's movement toward *Becoming Empowered*; not that the mutual interdependence of the individual signifying facets should be overlooked. However, without developing introspective mechanisms to seek out an authentic self, one is unable to transcend mere survival and develop critical self-knowledge in relation to others and the world, thus positioning self as 'subject'. From this point of departure, the women created their own realities; realities that hold personal meaning. The capacity and motivation to move forward in life and operate confidently and competently in society emerges from this point onward, through constant reflective dialogue between self and the environment. *'Seeking Authenticity'* facilitated agentic capabilities, the nature of which is explored, in the following chapter, as the signifying facet of the core process of *Becoming Empowered* called *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*.

Chapter 7

Aboriginal Women's Voices: The Lived Experience Part 2

7.1 The strategic signifying facet 'Authoring Narratives of Self'

The previous two signifying facets documented the complexities of life for the women in *'Defining Moments'* and showed how they integrated knowledge developed through the reflexive cognitive processes illuminated in *'Seeking Authenticity'*. This chapter reveals the dimensions of the third and fourth signifying facets of the core process of *Becoming Empowered* called *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* and *'Capturing Autonomy'*. As a sub-process of *Becoming Empowered*, *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* rests on the premise of the knowledge gained in the previous signifying facet and comprises two strategic categories identified as *'building cultural competence'* and *'building a resilient identity'* (see Figure 7.1). The observable interrelationships between the signifying facets are made more apparent in coming to understand the current facet. That is, a certain equilibrium exists between the previous signifying facet of *'Seeking Authenticity'* (knowing), the current facet of *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* (doing) and the ensuing facet *'Capturing Autonomy'* (being).

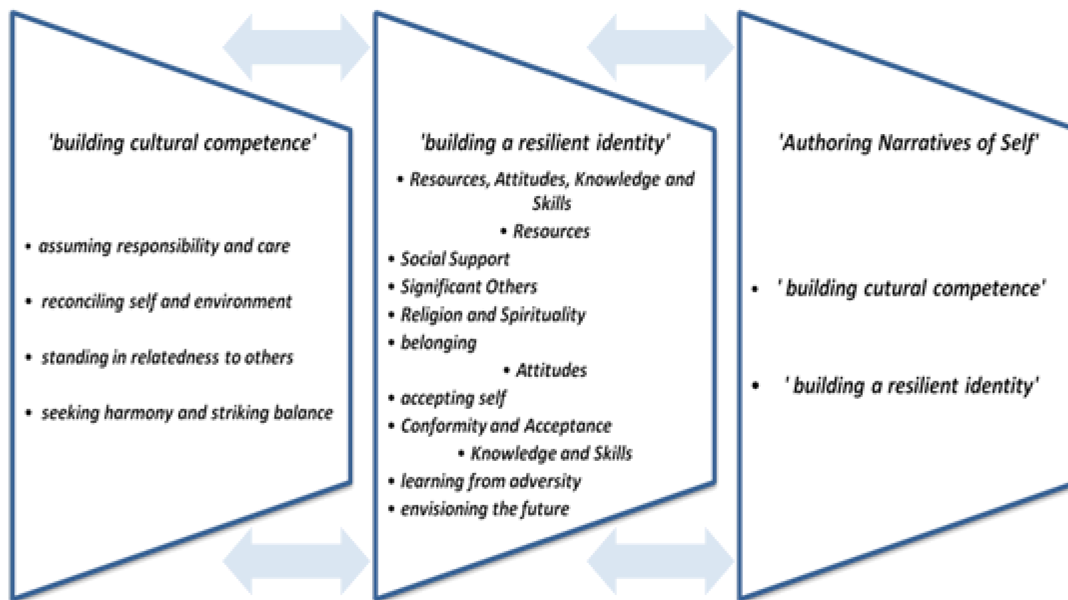

Figure 7.1 Signifying facets of 'Authoring Narratives of Self'

The facet at hand denotes the enunciable strategies identified by the diverse ways in which the women took up their perceived roles and responsibilities as Aboriginal women to engage in the world—the manner in which they built cultural competence. These were strategies embraced by the women in mediating power in their lives to expand possibilities, become empowered members of humanity, agents of change and advocates of human rights and social justice. *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*, therefore, is primarily concerned with the women's strategies of translation and adaptation of acquired knowledge and the application of that knowledge to claim new realities and assume their perceived goals, roles and responsibilities in a sustainable manner. Essentially, this facet was marked by creating new patterns of relations in ways that hold individual and relevant meaning; by actioning new ways of being in the world by *seeking harmonious relationships* within self and between self and others and self and environment; and by forging new identities that account for life's ebbs and flows. *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*, therefore accounted for negotiating ways of

accomplishing the task of being an Aboriginal woman in a contemporary world—working toward integration of consciousness and practice.

Of vital importance in *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* was the women's ability to adapt to "living in two worlds" **Gracie (42: 243)** and to operate at the interface of contemporary Australian society. Learning to 'live in two worlds' required an ability to adapt to environmental conditions and simultaneously influence that environment in congruence with their individual virtuosity, values and interests with the express aim of *'building cultural competence'*. From this location the women had a vantage point from which to better understand their social position relative to their complete environment and to mediate social relations. In turn, they were enabled to reconstruct and configure new narratives of self and reality in accord with that environment. The women drew on knowledge gained in *'Seeking Authenticity'*, which provided the infrastructure to support consideration and re-consideration of their role, purpose and power within their environment. From that point, they developed and adopted new social practices that enabled them to engage in broader activities and action. This process led to the re-creation of self and realities. The women developed strategies through which they substantiated meaning and purpose in life by *seeking harmony*; they enacted morality, made value judgements, confronted challenges, expressed commitments to self, the Aboriginal collective and the greater good of humanity, cultivated belonging, developed and maintained relationships and ensured cultural continuity.

7.2 Anna's story

Anna, one of the Elders who shared her story in this study, recounted a narrative that was the absolute embodiment of the current facet; indeed a striking illustration of

the strategies the women employed in the process of *Becoming Empowered.* Anna's exemplary account related a particular occupational experience and the social practices through which she to elected work. That is, those strategies through which Anna and the other women sought to find a way forward in life by '*building a resilient identity and cultural competence'*. These strategies provided the foundations for developing the relational aspects of their lives to achieve social change for self and others. The nature of, and the role, these social practices played in the core process was clearly evident in Anna's commentary:

> The challenges you face as part of an organisation, there are really some different schools of thought. And people like Mary will tell you, you know, you've got to be an activist and you've got to get up there and thump the table and bla bla bla. And that's fine, and I say we always have to have activists because they're the people who really put the stuff in the public arena. But there's also another approach in terms of activism; that if it becomes the only strategy that you have, then it's often likely to put off people that you actually need to help you to achieve your goals, 'cause you can't achieve those goals in education if you haven't got the whole institution with you. So you have actually got to be able to operate as a part of, and to win some sort of recognition for the value of your contribution, rather than your contribution always only being over there for your own mob. 'Cause it's for me, education, Indigenous education needs to be not only for Indigenous students, and it's not only about educating Indigenous students, it's also about providing Indigenous education for non-Indigenous peoples and educating them into the value of Indigenous cultures or Indigenous rights, you know it's a two-way process and you can't achieve that if

> you're excluded or marginalised. And you know I don't, I certainly don't beat about the bush, I'll go out and say what needs to be said, but I'll also acknowledge that we need teachers and we need principals and these are the issues and how can we do this together. And there are times when we need to take a step back, and say well okay, let's negotiate how we can do this. And I think that, you know, if you can sometimes be soft, there's actually strength in that, because people think, 'oh yeh okay, I never thought about it like that'. I think it's far more powerful to say to people you need, you know, to be able to understand these kids or these patients or whatever, you actually need to try and stand in their shoes and imagine what it's like to come from, and then paint a scenario, than to just start you know, start jumping up and down and saying, you know, you don't understand us da da da. You actually need to work with people so that they can understand and I think that it's a very fine line that you walk bringing those two things together, but never backing off a principle. And you can do that. **Anna (Elder: 502-532)**

Anna grew up in a 'little bush town' and her "Mum always had this real thing about you had to be educated and her thing was always that education was the way you escaped racism" **Anna (Elder: 310-312)**. Anna followed the trajectory envisioned by her mother and, at the time of the interview, she functioned in a leadership role at the helm of a centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education located within a larger institution. Her commitment to the care and wellbeing of self, family and ethnic group provided the energies to achieve and gave meaning and purpose to her position in Indigenous education. Anna recognised that 'you can't achieve…if you're excluded or marginalised' and sought to centre herself by *standing in relatedness to others*. In

occupying such a position, neither Anna nor the educational centre she headed was marginal to the larger institution. She worked the boundary to create dialogue and negotiate with others, seek support, develop and maintain relationships and gain respect. From this position, Anna demonstrated leadership qualities. She liberated self and confronted the challenges she faced by *working with and for others* and *assuming responsibility and care* for others while simultaneously maintaining and *speaking out* for the interests of her ethnic group and steering ordinarily external processes in which she would have no input. Thus, in initiating a process of change, Anna conveyed responsibility and care through enacting moral dimensions such as respect, integrity and reciprocity from a relational position of strength.

In the aforementioned transcript excerpt, Anna described the strategies she employed to restructure the failing educational centre at base level. She commenced her story with an account of *accepting difference*; she acknowledged and accepted that there were multiple ways of knowing, doing and being in the world. When relating Mary's extreme proactive approach to *making changes* and *confronting and resolving problems*, Anna took much care not to denigrate those alternate modes of doing by enacting an ethic of responsibility and care and, thus, overcoming the possibility of alienating self or Mary. This strategy adequately presumes to take into account strategies of *building and maintaining relationships* and *seeking harmony*.

However, Anna continued to relate her preferred method of working. She commented that she considered alternate strategies, *standing in relatedness to others* and *cultivating belonging* to be far more powerful in *fulfilling purpose;* that is, *seeking harmony, seeking justice, making changes, working with and to empower others* and

ensuring cultural continuity. *Reconciling self and environment* by s*eeking harmony* and *developing and maintaining relationships*, she explained, is critical to achieving desired outcomes. Further, Anna had access to such resources. In this sense, Anna's choice to work from her own epistemological position provided certain strength and demonstrated personal agency. Working in this way created a space where her *author*ity could be heard and become included in decision-making processes, retain some influence in the use of resources, hold some *author*ity in the situation and operate from a position of power. The orchestration of power in this way maximised potential benefits and, hence, influenced the outcome for Anna.

Alternate constructions of self and agency offered opportunities for newly co-constructed realities and built relationships afresh. Undertones relating a discourse of reconciliation between Aboriginal and White people held a strong presence in Anna's attitude and ways of working. Reconciliation referred to the acceptance and gaining knowledge of cultural differences and acknowledging commonalities. By *seeking harmony* and *striking balance* in life and relationships*,* Anna asserted, one can wield powerful statements. Moreover, Anna expanded possibilities and grasped serendipitous opportunities in the process. For example, Anna was not only 'educating Indigenous students' but also viewed it as an opportunity for 'providing Indigenous education for non-Indigenous peoples and educating them in the value of Indigenous cultures or Indigenous rights'. Anna achieved and fulfilled both her professional expectations and aspirations and undertook her role as an Aboriginal woman by *'building cultural competence'*.

Anna captured a far more subtle approach to mediating the power in *Becoming Empowered.* She continued to advocate that the utility of these 'soft' strategic approaches facilitated and assisted in *'building cultural competence'*. Anna did not come from a position of powerlessness; rather, her personal agency was strengthened by working within her capabilities and energised by the desire to achieve social change for herself and Aboriginal people with the support of both Aboriginal and White people. In this sense, *'building cultural competence'* connoted both a socio-cultural and political statement. Through these interactions, Anna *'Authored Narratives of Self'*. While new dimensions were added to her identity, Anna retained the salience of her ethnic identity, her visions and aspirations and sense of morality. The performance of agency in this instance emanated from both an individual and collective base and was underscored by an ideal of relationships in the world.

'Building a resilient identity' grounded Anna and enabled her to build cultural competence. *'Capturing Autonomy',* the final signifying facet of *Becoming Empowered* was the consequence of Anna's ability to understand other ways of being, make judgements, make changes and choices and define, map and direct a meaningful existence for herself and, by implication, the ethnic group she represented. To mediate power relations, Anna engaged an ethics of responsibility and care to foster relationships. More specifically, Anna altered her subject position so that all players inhabited a similar position. Simply put, by activating reciprocal interplay between stakeholders in the situation, by *standing in relatedness to others*, Anna privileged her inner world and, consequently, the unit she headed. Anna further explained the value of such an approach, "we'll have far more power if we're in the middle of this, where we

can influence people, you can't influence people if you're shut out" **Anna (Elder: 481-482)**.

Noteworthy is that the incarnation of relational strategies is deliberate and qualified by mutual respect and reciprocity and should not be mistaken for relinquishing power or subservience. Rather, it should be understood as *striking balance* and *liberating self* and others; the active involvement in a process of transformation and change and a sharing of power. Agency, for Anna and the rest of the women who described variables and similar ways of working, involved a degree of both individual and social change and management.

For Anna, *Performing Aboriginality* was facilitated by constructing and reconstructing new identities and realities congruent with her own ways of knowing, doing and being. She brought the private into the public by making formal the informal practices inherent in her ethnic self. More so, she expressed and acted upon a relational discourse of reciprocal interchange, a discourse of reconciliation and a genuine moral concern for others. Essentially, Anna became a defender of moral values and social justice and, ultimately, an agent of change. The manoeuvring of power in this way naturally embodied individual, collective, relational and reciprocal aspects and was actively created by Anna. Power was derived from, and experienced in, a personal sense through *assuming responsibility and care*, albeit, at times, on behalf of others. Thus, Anna not only constructed meaning and created and re-created realities through her own experiences, knowledge and understandings but also with others. She came to define herself and new realities through a connectedness to others and developed the energies for action with and for others; in this way, power was shared and negotiated. An ethics

of care and responsibility emerged through synchronisation of knowledge and action from a premise of commitment and social justice; '*building a resilient identity'* was the foundation upon which this was built.

7.3 'Building a resilient identity'

The women's agency and construction of identity was influenced by their individual psyche and a number of environment considerations—cultural, social and historical constructs. As such, the women had the option of drawing on internal and external resources to function within society. *'Building a resilient identity'* reveals how strengthening factors in the women's lives were utilised to develop a spirit that not only confirmed their ability to recover and adjust to the changing circumstances of their lives but also showed how they became more resistant to negative influences and learned to reach out to available opportunities. Essentially, *'building a resilient identity'* was more concerned with the application of the women's re-evaluations of self in environment and self in history achieved through various learning environments, which led to growth and change in self-perceptions and also their perceptions of others and the world.

The initial signifying facet, *'Defining Moments'* evidenced a number of less than optimal moments in the lives of the women; without exception, this is true of every woman who participated in the study. While differences presented in the nature and degree to which these risk factors were manifest in the individual lives of the women, each demonstrated great personal fortitude in the ways they managed these risk factors. They not only had the capacity to offset the effects of adversity in their lives to become survivors but also developed the self-mastery to initiate change, become achievers and construct positive outcomes in their lives. This meant that somewhere in the women's

lives, a balance between risk and conditions of adversity and protective factors was struck, and further, the women had the capacity to transfer that knowledge and develop the resources to achieve successful outcomes.

7.3.1 Resources, attitudes, knowledge and skills

As components of resilience, resources (including knowledge), attitudes and skills upon which the women were able to draw to overcome conditions of adversity were vitally important to identify. Identifying these elements permitted a more intimate understanding of the process and outcomes of resilience for the women and, more specifically, the exercise of personal agency in constructing a resilient identity. The extent to which all women managed adversity in their lives, and how they actually interpreted adversity in their lives, said much about their current attitudes and sense of agency and how this was mirrored in their concepts of self. Isla was particularly forthright and concise in acknowledging her resilience:

> I think from what I said, and that reinforces how I feel about myself as well, is that I do have this resilience. **Isla (46: 471-472)**

The women drew from an array of social assets and resources developed incrementally over their life journey to construct a resilient identity. Included here was the self-directing capacity and attitudes that enabled them to utilise these resources and skills. Previous excerpts from the women's narratives in the initiating facet *'Defining Moments'* and those highlighted in the previous facet were particularly illustrative of this point.

Protective factors, those influences which enabled the women to cope with risk, were present in the women's narratives of resilience. Critical to understand were the knowledge, resources, attitudes and skills that reflect the key characteristics of resilience for the women and which provided them with a degree of mastery over their lives and, thus, indicators of *Becoming Empowered*. The most important aspects of resilience identified were social support and *belonging*; attitudes, which included acceptance, appreciation and conformity, commitment and responsibility, competence, optimism, adaptation, creativity and determination; and skills such as *recognising opportunities*, *making decisions*, *seeking solutions*, *reaching out* and *envisioning the future*. These elements were, in actuality, intricately interlaced throughout all categories of *Becoming Empowered*. It was impossible to unravel the individual elements. For that reason, and to avoid reiteration, only those elements not previously explored will be dealt with in this section.

Resources: Social Support

As members of an ethnic group, the women made frequent references to their roles and responsibilities as Aboriginal women, "looking after the community wellness" **Meghan (66: 161)**, as one woman put it. They were also alert to their resilience. Some women demonstrated a sense of pride in their capacity to overcome adversity and continued to draw strength from achieving successful outcomes. For example, one woman consistently but confidently reiterated "we did it the hard way" **Shae (46)** throughout her narrative. All of the women attributed their sense of resilience to an amalgamation of social support, *belonging* and inherent strengths.

Identified as the most fertile ground for '*building a resilient identity'* was social support and *belonging*. One of the Elders captured the significance of *belonging* and articulated it beautifully. "It [Aboriginal identity] really underpins everything I do, I'm very aware, very comfortable with who I am, with my identity" **Andie (55: 448-449)**. Another woman supported Andie's sentiments, "I've always been comfortable in my identity. And I've always been grounded in my Blackness" **Bree (38: 300-301).**

Resources: Significant Others

All women drew from, and found strength in, social supports with significant others identified as a particularly influential source. Most often, the enabling role of parents was acknowledged as the means by which the women learned to confront adversity and gained a positive sense of being. Bree's words were particularly expressive of this point, not only in naming the enabling role of her parents but also in the way she explicitly tied identity to agency:

> And our parents also raised us to believe in equality, and social justice, and they instilled within us the ethic of never giving up…You know, we were never to give up, you know there was no problem that could not be solved, no task that was too difficult and all that was required was paradigm shift, you know. You just had to reassess who you were and think of other ways in which to do it.
> **Bree (38: 180-181, 183-186)**

Similarly, other women commented on parental support. Jessie remarked, "it is important to have a relationship with my family as long as the relationships are healthy. They provide love and support" **Jesse (27: 117-118).** Beccie also referenced parental

support; “She’s [mother] always been there whenever I need her” **Beccie (42: 46-47).** Isla, though, reflected on her decision to reject family support, “I made that conscious choice to move away from the family and that made it harder. I saw that support as meddling, as interfering” **Isla (46: 257-259).** However, Isla also acknowledged that same family support as the resource from which she drew to be independent:

> You know coping with the big family, you know when you are in a big family, at dinner time it’s everyone for themselves and my mother was the matriarch in the family and if you didn’t eat all your dinner you didn’t get your dessert, there was none of this menu planning, it was whatever she felt like cooking and what was cheap as well and that taught me a lot about getting on together, a lot about every person for themselves, getting in first, speaking up for yourself, all of that kind of stuff, so when I was at work I didn’t have any problems. **Isla (46: 213-219)**

Family was viewed as a resource and central support for all women; “I think family is always at the centre” **Anna (Elder: 582-583).** Gracie supported the notion of finding strength through knowing family and highlighted the ongoing flow of responsibility for others and the reciprocity of that support:

> I guess we find out who our families are and I guess the last relation you find and connects you to the last person in your family, it’s an accomplishment and makes you feel good as an Aboriginal person and a strong woman and makes me strong in my work…I wanna see my children have a good education and good jobs and not to judge people and give them a chance, and I’ve given them a

> chance in life and I've also been given a chance in life. I guess that's the way life should be if everyone gives someone a chance in life. **Gracie (42: 329-335)**

While most women found support within their families, one woman also sought to surround herself with friends describing herself, indeed, as 'a social butterfly'. She found support in her friends when family support waned, "my friends support me, they understand…So I guess my friends become my family, what I classify family to feel like…and if I get friends they become close friends" **Debra (18: 144, 337-339)**. Debra not only found support in her relationships with friends but she actively sought those relationships which she used to ameliorate risk factors in her life.

All women who commented on the nature of friendships acknowledged they had a broad network of friends from an array of cultural backgrounds. In addition, some insisted that friendships with Aboriginal people were no more important than friendships with others. These responses were educed from the women when asked about their friendships:

> I have always had a wide array of friends with various backgrounds…Yes, I've got a lot of Anglo-Australian friends, but interestingly enough though, when I reflect back on my life, even going through university a lot of my very dearest friends, well my dearest friend was from Sarawak; yet a lot of the role models and women who encouraged me were white Anglo-Saxon women who were a lot more mature, a lot older. **Bree (38: 557-564)**

Mostly non-Indigenous Australians…I have very few relationships with Aboriginal people by comparison. **Jessie (27: 95-96)**

A mixture, but mostly Aboriginal. **Dolly (58: 106)**

I'd say the predominant one is Anglo-Saxon but Australia is predominantly Anglo-Saxon so that's to be expected. **Debra (18: 229-230)**

Non-Indigenous, long family ties to the area. **Beccie (42: 159)**

Most of them would have been born here [Australia]…No more important than with non-Aboriginal people. **Simone 2 (31: 442, 445-446)**

Amanda provided more detail:

Black and White. I have many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander friends and I have many friends who I only know to be White Australians. I have a few friends with different backgrounds - a Greek, a Cypriot, a Filipino, a Malaysian, Yugoslavian and Spanish. It's no more important to me to become friends with Aboriginal people than it is for me to become friends with people of any other ethnicity. Friends are essential for us to survive and if I come across a good friend who happens to be Aboriginal then so be it, if they happen to be Russian or Bolivian or whatever, then that's fine too. Obviously, I would like to maintain the friendships that I already have with Indigenous people and of course I'm

always up for making new friends, but again whether they are Aboriginal or not makes no difference. **Amanda (20: 131-143)**

Evidenced in the comments was the diversity of friendships and an openness and acceptance of others in the development of those friendships. Subsequently, the women were exposed to a multiplicity of discourses, connected to broader social contexts and received support in varying forms; all of which informed identity formation and opportunities for change.

Eight of the twenty women were involved in personal relationships at the time of the interviews, so, for these women, partners played an integral role in the type of social support available. Interestingly, of those women involved in relationships, all but one were partnered by a White man. Ava married an Aboriginal man and emotively described her husband, "he is my rock…we are like chalk and cheese, but that works well" **Ava (54: 60-61)**; while Carrie described the depth of connection to her husband, "Yeh [he is White] a bit older than me, but he's cute, I'd marry him all over again; a real soul mate" **Carrie (45: 96-97)**. These women enjoyed a range of different benefits and support from their partners. Bree was more explicit about the type of support:

> I do have a very strong relationship with my partner and in fact, and whilst I adore my mother and my grandmother and give them credit for where I am today, the reason why I am still here is because of my partner and he's the one that encourages me, he's the one that deals with a lot of the house and looking after the children because when studying and working you're sacrificing quite a

> lot. And he's there to pick up the pieces and he's there to pick me up when I'm crying. I am, I'm blessed. **Bree (38: 592-600)**

As Bree pointed out, her mother and grandmother provided critical support, but that role was now taken up by her husband. Nevertheless, Bree also credited the teaching of 'the hard core stuff', the deep-rooted connections and stabilising elements to her mother. Moreover, Bree's words illustrate the advantages of being mentored and the significance of *striking balance* in life; in particular, the balance between formal and informal knowledge:

> The greatest teacher is my mother. I mean you know, no it's my mother, she taught me a lot. And if anything, it's the hard stuff, the hard core stuff, coming to terms with who you are and building me up to become an overcomer. You go to university and you make a lot of friends and acquire a lot of knowledge, but I guess it's my Mum that I turn to, yeh, she's my inspiration. **Bree (38: 604-608)**

On the other hand, some women sent clear messages that previous relationships were detrimental to the development of a resilient oriented self. However, they still recognised the learning process in that journey and eventually sought to make changes in their life. Gracie reflected on a relationship in which she felt trapped and controlled. She stated that she persisted with the relationship because she felt it provided the fundamental human needs of belonging and love and further, at that time, provided her with a position in society. Gracie then became aware of an alternate understanding of self in healthy relationships with others:

> I guess I was afraid, I guess it was a sense of belonging and a position with a person who you thought loved you and I thought that's a normal thing [violent relationship] and I found out its not a normal thing and it was bad. I found out that a relationship is supposed to be successful, happy and communication and sharing and trust and respect. It makes you shine. **Gracie (42: 357-361)**

Two other women, Millie and Leila, also related similar experiences in which they persisted in violent relationships because of the fundamental human need and desire to be loved.

While in large measure not explicitly noted, the women also relied upon the support of other Aboriginal women; not only in times of need but also in the everyday. Anna clearly expressed the nature of the support shared**, "**Aboriginal women are extremely supportive of one another and try and sort of shift the load to somebody else while that person has a bit of a, bit of lie down, and then pick themselves up and come back in" **Anna (Elder: 253-255)**.

The availability of mutual female support did not function to the preclusion of males. Meghan explained:

> I've got that network, you know caring for each other and making sure we're getting through, you know, giving each other, you know, the incentive to keep on going…I do it for the girls and boys…and so it doesn't matter who it is, even though traditionally, there's men's jobs, there's women's jobs, there's whole communities' job you know, and it's the caring and sharing of the whole

community. I don't leave out just because they're male. **Meghan (66: 123-125, 130-132)**

For these women, the notion of support from significant others in life was underpinned by a sense of obligation, responsibility and reciprocity and held strong correlation with the category *'building cultural competence'*.

Resources: Religion and Spirituality

For some women, religion and spirituality were intimately tied to their identity. Thus, Christianity and differential spiritual beliefs were documented as a compelling force in the lives of those women. What actually constituted spirituality was not always articulated as a tangible entity. Consequently, the role spirituality played in the women's lives was not always apparent; instead spirituality often appeared as tacit knowledge that materialised in recounts of the women's actions. On the other hand, Christianity was more explicitly acknowledged. One woman clearly identified Christianity as a social support and source of personal strength:

…that Christian ethic that taught me, 'cause I've been through all that self-pity, wallowing, I've been through you know, drinking yourself until you're so numb you can't think, I went through all that and I'm not proud to admit that now, but I was lost, I felt like I *was* in the wilderness, you know, whereas now, I just feel like my feet have been firmly planted on the ground and I've got this renewal of life because I've come back to my Christian background. **Bree (38: 681-687)**

Bree found great comfort in Christianity and it became a source of strength in her time of need. She reported that she returned to Christianity as a particular way of knowing, being and doing in the world. Bree felt grounded by coming back to, and investing in, the tenets of Christianity. However, she also invested in Aboriginal spirituality, “Country’s where you get your identity” **Bree (38: 144)**. Bree managed to reconcile Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality and embedded both in her very being and viewed as a mode of existence. In this sense, Christianity and spirituality represented a way of knowing and experiencing self and the world and which guides action; a specific ontological and epistemological view of existence that enables attachment to meaning and purpose in life. Therefore, while religion and spirituality appear as distinct from the material world, often encompassing the metaphysical, it is quite discernible through an examination of beliefs and behaviour. Thus considered, the strategies detected in the current facet hold particular significance in understanding the construction of identity and the women’s creative capacity for agency.

Only one other woman commented on her Christian beliefs. Gracie’s remark, however brief, referenced how the church offered a form of social support that provided a safe environment within which she could build confidence, “I used to sing in the church. This was good support for me. It gave me confidence” **Gracie (42: 275-276)**. Two other women made cursory remarks about attending church at different times in their lives. None of the remaining women divulged information about stringently following a specific Christian faith or any other faith; however, some noted a spiritual connectedness to Buddhist beliefs, “at this time in my life I am veering towards Buddhism but, yeh, I’m not a Buddhist” **Jane (39: 12)**; “I’m much more contemporary, I have some Buddhist philosophies as well. I put Catholic down if I have to answer the

question, but I'm not practising. I have a very open mind when it comes to religion and spirituality" **Isla (46: 280-282)**.

Several women noted their connections to Aboriginal spirituality, "I have a strong sense of connection to Aboriginal spirituality" **Jane (39: 14)**; "my father always described me as the spiritual one of the family, but I'm not into Christianity. Bits of this and that and an underlying set of beliefs of my own and a connection to Aboriginal spirituality. I guess I live a lot by my dreams" **Sissy 2 (47: 68-71).**

Others renounced Christianity in favour of Aboriginal spirituality, "no well I pulled out of church, I just do my own religion now through Sister Sarah, and family, we just do our own little bits and pieces, we go thing way now [Aboriginal spirituality/culture]" **Shae (46: 119-121)**. Two women condemned Christianity. "Aboriginal people had very strong spiritual beliefs before Christianity and we don't have to accept your beliefs" **Meghan (66: 516-517)**. The other woman commented, "I don't have any religious beliefs. I think there are too many hypocrisies involved with what the Bible says and how some Christians interpret it" **Amanda (20: 18-19)**.

Another one of the women was very matter-of-fact and recalled that while her parents were not involved in the church, they were sent to Sunday School as children because some of the townsfolk offered to take them. "It was a waste of time and then we had to wait around for the 'do-gooders' who took us to Sunday School to finish at church before we could go home" **Ava (54: 23-25)**. One woman expressed utter contempt for Christianity and the role it has played throughout history while simultaneously sourcing self as a source of strength and support. "I *hate*

Christianity…on a whole no one else at a higher level is gonna help me, just myself…I actually get quite angry over that religion and how people have allowed it to cause so many problems" **Simone (31: 148, 150-152)**. However, it was Amanda who encapsulated the significance of beliefs whatever their source:

> Either way, it doesn't matter what you believe about religion or spirituality, it is faith that is the most important. Ultimately, if you have faith in what you believe in, then nothing else should matter. **Amanda (20: 33-35)**

On the whole, all women identified some kind of belief system; the greater proportion did not reference Christianity, while all alluded to Aboriginal spirituality. Most women were unable to articulate what spirituality meant for them; those who did were vague and ambiguous in their response. What was clear was that spirituality signified the existential self. With much clarity, one of the younger women articulated precisely what spirituality meant to her:

> Spirituality is far more personal and unique to each individual and to an extent can be anything you want it to be. I like to think that I have spirits to watch over me - not to sit on my shoulder and watch my every move, but to look down occasionally and make sure I'm doing okay. I choose to believe that these spirits are people who I've known and have since passed, or people that I would have known if they hadn't died, like grandparents, aunties, uncles. These are also the people that help develop the inner spirit of each individual - their values, attitudes and beliefs often shape the person we become. I don't believe that such spirits are limited to the human world either and would like to think that the

> plant and animal world have some kind of equivalent - even though admittedly I'm not always as mindful about such things. I also believe in auras - everybody has one, some are easier to pick up on than others, but I can usually pick up fairly quickly what sort of person they are and I very rarely turn out to be wrong. Some might actually call this judgemental, but I don't. **Amanda (20: 20-32)**

Amanda's citation emphasises the individuality of spiritual expression, the connection between past, present and future, ontological and epistemological systems, the significance of knowledge transmission, the integral link between spirituality and identity, the need to incorporate a holistic view of the world, the relational nature of being, '*orienting morality*' and intuitivism. Amanda's illustration of spirituality is itself striking in its similitude to the research phenomenon under investigation—the process of *Becoming Empowered.*

Resources: Belonging and Cultural Connectedness

Almost all of the women spoke unequivocally of finding strength within their Aboriginality and culture. Through communications (verbally or otherwise) from parents, grandparents, other extended family members and significant others, all women gained varying degrees of cultural knowledge. What is interesting is that not all cultural acknowledgements were transmitted by positive projections of Aboriginal culture and being. For example, when asked about retaining Aboriginal traditions in her family, one woman responded with, "not really, the Aboriginality was suppressed so to speak" **Simone (31: 306).** Another woman elaborated in her response, alluding to the reasons for this. "Dad would speak language and Mum would rouse at him…you know there was always that thing about authority and you know being taken away and all those

things” **Andie (55: 349-351)**. Another woman noted the ambivalent messages received from her parents. “People acted out of fear…We were told stories as kids but then we were told not to tell anyone” **Ava (54: 44, 46-47).**

Other women had very different experiences, which enabled them to take advantage of affirming projections of Aboriginality and culture from an earlier age. For example, Tina grew up in a very large politically oriented extended family, whom she describes as her ‘direct family’ and from whom she also received affirming messages of Aboriginality and culture. Likewise, Isla was blessed with a cultural upbringing:

> We as children used to go out, she had like a camp where we could go and on Saturday morning we would go out to her camp and I’d bush stuff, like she showed us how to build a gunyah, things like stripping a tree, and my brother…she showed him how to paint, use bark for artwork and so he started making bark paintings, bark artwork as well. **Isla (46: 457-461)**

Amanda, however, was somewhat mystified as to why few Aboriginal traditions were practised or transmitted:

> Very few. I know that my grandparents have a few stories from their areas and I know that they have been working to recover their traditional languages, but in terms of handing on knowledge to us younger ones, they haven’t said much. I’m not sure if this is because they don’t really know or just because they feel that we don’t seem to be interested. **Amanda (20: 58-62)**

Curiously, those women who did not receive positive messages as children still demonstrated a similar intensity and commitment, as adults, as did those who received more positive affirmations of Aboriginality and culture. Even so, the implications of negative feedback manifested as problematic in their early lives. As a new generation emerged and the socio-historical and political environment changed, the women were able to embrace ethnicity in ways previous generations were denied. On these grounds, the women demonstrated a sense of agency in making strong ethnic identifications and *'building a resilient identity'* for themselves. This process, of defining social categories of self, accounts for meaning making and social and cultural change. Identity then becomes a choice and, as such, co-exists with the exercise of agency. Thus conceived, expressing the prioritisation of Aboriginality as a salient signifier of self satisfied belongingness became the impetus for *assuming responsibility and care* for their ethnic group, which led to assuming a socio-cultural and political consciousness. Elaborating, reinterpretation and reconstruction of both identity and culture occur and further enhance the implication of agency in the construction of identity and the transformation of culture. A historical reading of Aboriginality therefore lays open the complexities and contradictions inherent in cultural development and change. Bree's words were particularly illustrative of the case in point:

> But even amongst your own, I mean come on, if we were to go to Central Australia they'd called me a 'yella fella', do you know what I mean? And so even amongst our own, I'm forever going to be a 'yella fella' or a half-caste. Therefore, I guess I'm going to turn that around, and I'm not going to feel ashamed of it, cause that's how we were made to feel in the past. **Bree (38: 85-91)**

Carrie had a similar sentiment:

> I suppose if someone has the need to tag me, they will tag, regardless about the way I feel…I am an Aboriginal Australian, or Indigenous Australian and that's it. I'm connected spiritually, there's a spiritual connection and that connection to Country and despite all the practices of the past that were to isolate all the people from that connection, and it's certainly caused difficulty in people's lives. But I suppose now I just refuse to give them credibility. **Carrie (45: 172-179)**

Many of the women registered resistance to categorisations and stereotyping of self that was unjustified, did not reflect their being, or in any way limited their agency. They resisted social persuasion from rhetorical feedback and made manifest identifications that defined and redefined their self-identity and culture in harmony with critical self-knowledge. This process entailed ways through which the women participated in social interactions and grappled with structural systems and power relations in their life context. Bree conveyed the fluidity, contradictions and ambivalence of constructing identity regardless of context:

> With Blackfellas there seems to be this unwritten code, that oh to be truly Black you have to adhere to this, this and this, you know what I mean. And I don't want to be, I refuse to be placed in box, I refuse to be categorised…that's why I proudly admit that I am a Mission Christian, you know, or I'm a half-caste bastard. I'm proud of it, it's something I can embrace, and something I can draw strength from. So I'm not a conformist and it's like I have this little saying and

> it's – 'do not conform to the customs and conventionalities that are a part of the great mass. To be a power in this world be yourself – Ralph Waldo Chimes'. **Bree (38: 661-666, 672-675)**.

Interestingly, elsewhere in Bree's narrative she recognised and named herself by openly admitting "I'm a bit of a walking contradiction" **Bree (38: 510)**. Bree clearly communicated the inconsistencies and ambivalence in the available discourses at her disposal and how she elected to reconstruct and configure new narratives of self in the extract related above. She further related significant creativity in accomplishing the task. While Bree shared a collective identity in many respects and drew a sense of belonging, distinctiveness and pride in doing so, she refused to conform to the rhetoric of 'Blackfellas'. In far more subtle ways, this sentiment reverberated throughout the women's narratives and supported the function of individual identity. Collective identity, then, did not necessarily impose conformity or attract a prescribed behaviour. Even so, the limits of action and service on behalf of the group were not impeded; neither was commitment to the group.

On the other hand, noteworthy here is that Bree experienced the repercussions of non-conformity to her ethnic group. She noted similar experiences:

> I have also felt that I've had to walk this tightrope between two worlds…when I went home during the holidays, I would actually even have my own people say 'oh who do you think you are, you know, what do you think you're better than us?' Because you have chosen to go to university and educate yourself, they immediately set up barriers, you know, between me and them. And that hurt me.

> And in fact that hurt more when I experienced comments like that from my own people than it did the White side. **Bree (38: 357-365)**

Bree commented that, whether the attacks on self came from her 'own people' or 'the White side', it "was like another hurdle that I had to overcome…I had to negotiate my way through it all and it sometimes wasn't easy" **Bree (38: 353-356)**. Bree's identification with formal education was seen as a rejection, rather than an enhancement, of her ethnicity. Hence, she was consistently constituted as 'other' by both her inner and outer social groups and acknowledged the difficulties she experienced in her efforts to maintain inner group identifications while simultaneously negotiating contemporary realities. Bree could have allowed the relationship to become mutually destructive; but instead, she refused to negate the shared purpose of the group and worked toward *fulfilling purpose* in her role as an Aboriginal woman as viewed from her own perceptions. Simply, Bree made ethnicity salient in the relationship. Bree built a resilient identity by not only employing certain skills and behaviours at the confluence of inter-cultural discourses, but also by negotiating intra-cultural differences.

Bree showed how her ethnic identity underwent change; she challenged various Aboriginal social and cultural norms and adapted to changing social environments. Illustrated here is the significance of ongoing change in the development of culture and identities over time and the fluid nature of identities. Noteworthy was, firstly, the significance of negotiating difference and, secondly, that despite challenges to what was considered by others to be 'authentic' ethnic identifications, some core components of ethnic affiliations remained intact, while some discarded, some adapted and some constructed anew. Retained as core elements of ethnic affiliation was the women's

connection to Country, spirituality and commitment to the collective. For the women, the maintenance of these practices supported a positive sense of ethnic identity and, certainly, there was no implication that their ethnic identity was at risk.

The women's narratives demonstrated the struggle to claim Aboriginal identification through innovative subjective re-positionings and re-inscriptions of identity accomplished through a fusion of past knowledge and future thinking; cultural continuity and renewal of identities re-negotiated in the present. Essentially, the women developed new ethnicities and identities by *renewing being*. Negotiating a contemporary framing of self through their responsiveness to ethnic identifications was at the centre of the women's identity work; "It [Aboriginal identity] really underpins everything I do" **Andie (55: 448)**. From the standpoint of this research, individual identity and collective identity are mutually dependent, at odds with each other and, at the same time, congruent with each other. In large measure, successful functioning and wellbeing is dependent upon the ability to reconcile individual and collective identity.

Social support, however expressed, was not only confirmed as a protective factor, those influences which enabled the women to cope with risk, but also a portable resource upon which the women could draw. The significant point here is not only the protection or social buffering and the accumulated learning that occurred as a result of *confronting challenge,* but also the role of social support systems in creating a balance of optimal life experiences. Social networks promoted, restrained and expanded identity work for the women as they functioned in varying social contexts. Drawing from individual narratives, significant variation in the representation of ethnic identity was observed. '*Building a resilient identity*', however, was also contingent upon the capacity

of the women to reflect, integrate knowledge and build competence and, hence to a large extent, on their own sense of agency.

7.3.2 Attitudes

Attitudes, such as *being themselves,* acceptance and conformity, optimism, adaptation commitment and responsibility and care, reflected the foundational mindset of the women and, generally, the women demonstrated all or most of these qualities. These attitudes underpinned their ability to reframe life during the occurrence of less than favourable life circumstances. Andie conveyed a general attitude of acceptance and appreciation, "I mean things were obviously hard, but I think if you take that approach...You know, be thankful for what you've got and be happy with what you've got, and make do with what you've got. But on the other hand, life's full of opportunities, so take advantage of it" **Andie (55: 209-210, 156-159).** This approach to life coincided with the ability to make choices and changes and led to envisioning future possibilities. For the women, therefore, a degree of personal power was implicated in their actions.

Accepting Self

While the women were open to developing new dimensions of self, those who overtly indicated their self-perceptions responded positively and demonstrated a large degree of acceptance of self and reassurance in *being themselves*:

> I see myself as an individual; it's a quality I admire in others as well. **Ava (54: 89-90)**

I use the name my mother gave me, I just am. **Carrie (45: 170)**

I am my own person…I was always told to be comfortable with myself and I am. **Amanda (20: 305-306)**

Doesn't really worry me that much what they think because I like me…I am happy with my interior. I don't think I would change any of that. **Simone (31: 576-577, 582-583)**

Yes I feel really strong in that [identity]. **Shae (45: 302)**

I like to think of myself as raging river, that does not conform, that changes courses throughout life, but still strong. So that's me. **Bree (38: 688-689)**

While to a large extent the women were relatively happy with themselves, some also acknowledged aspects of self that required improvement:

I do have lots of positive qualities that do accept, but I have a lot of things I'm working on. **Isla (46: 400-401)**

I am reasonably happy with who I am, but I guess you always continue to strive to improve yourself. Certainly though there are aspects I would like to improve; maybe not necessarily change, but there are things about myself I would like to add. It's important to be yourself and work from that and in that sense I am a work in progress. Guess I'll always be a work in progress. **Sissy 2 (47: 252-256)**

The women generally used positive language when referring to themselves—social, leader, competent, confident, organised, patient, strong-minded, strong-willed, good, relaxed, happy, capable, reliable, outspoken, bossy, matriarchal, controlling, optimistic, proud, overcomer, successful, compassionate, passionate, reflective, logical, practical, kind-hearted, independent, bubbly, easy-going, fun-loving, lively, homely, friendly, nurturer and a good-listener were included in their descriptions of self. The women painted a rich portrait of personal traits that characterised their resilience. Accordingly, this talk indicated that the women generally displayed a strong positive sense of self and acceptance of self.

Conformity and Acceptance

Positive attitudes pertaining to self also flowed into the context of the women's lives and, thus, a high degree of acceptance was registered. Conversely, there was an equal balance of comments that indicated a lack of conformity. Simone explored the contradiction and suggested that moral judgement directed the degree to which she was willing to conform. In other words, Simone learned to reconcile her ideals within acknowledged boundaries of power, thus maintaining her *author*ity:

> I've never succumbed to peer pressure…Sometimes I conform only if it doesn't compromise what I feel is right, most of the time I do what I like to do and how I like to do it. There is always a certain amount of conformity within society anyway. **Simone (31: 176, 189-191)**

Jessie rejected conformity outright, "I despise conforming. I am my own person" **Jessie (27: 170)**. Amanda asserted, "I am my own person. I don't feel that I should

conform to other people's expectations of me at all, I was always told to be comfortable with myself and I am, so if I don't meet the expectations of other people, then that's their problem" **Amanda (20: 305-307)**.

The precise nature of contested social expectations was not always made apparent in the women's narratives. What was significant was the expressed right to reject particular discourses of self and the choice to take on alternate possibilities. Further, what was perhaps more important to take into account was not the extent to which the women conformed, but how they performed in practising non-conformity. Narratives indicated similar trends and related avoidance of conflict:

> I tend not to say much even if I disagree, probably because I think too much about the implications now, and I never used to. **Amanda (20: 301-303)**

> Avoidance and blocking, I don't really have any particular tactic. **Jessie (27: 150-151)**

> [I said] how can I handle this...I said I can't do it anymore, I've got to do it my way now, I've got to get away from it all. **Shae (46: 212, 214-215)**

A degree of acceptance of life's adversities, confidence in their own competencies and assuming ownership of their life circumstances inspired the women to direct their life pathways. When responding to comments on her considerable achievements despite significant adversity in her life, Tina simply responded with a downward comparison, "see I don't really reflect on it, I'm pretty proud of where I am

considering what I've been through, but some people have been through far worse" **Tina (30: 282-283)**. On the other hand, another woman implied it was inherent behaviour, "You have just got to do it because no one else will do it for you. I do not feel sorry for people who think life is oh so hard when they have got it easy. I guess I imitate my parents" **Jessie (27: 132-134).** Yet another woman responded with a strong sense of independence, **"**So no one else is going to do it so you got to do it yourself hey" **Carrie (46: 90-91).**

7.3.3 Knowledge and skills: learning from adversity

Many learning opportunities, made available through confronting adversity, were apparent in previous sections of the analysis and will not be restated here. Experiences of adversity increased awareness and stimulated the desire for change. Many women commented that they discovered benefits through lessons learned and the positive transformations that occurred as a result of surviving less than optimal life experiences. One of the women commented that experiencing adversity was critical to the development of strength of character, "I have a theory that you actually need a bit of hardship in your life to form your character and I think the problem with some people, if it is a problem, is, yeh, that life's too easy sometimes" **Jane (39: 285-288)**. The absence of adversity in life, according to Jane's experience, helped to create individual incompetence:

> Yeh, I've had people doing things for me all my life because I was sick and when I first moved out of home, I didn't know how to turn a washing machine on, didn't know how to cook and certainly didn't know how to shop for cooking, for food, had no idea about any of this stuff. **Jane (39: 288-291)**

For Jane, reflection on self prompted her to monitor her behaviour; that is, Jane recognised that she did not have the necessary competencies to function at the required level and, thus, adjusted her knowledge and behaviour to accommodate changes in her lifestyle. A certain openness to confronting adversity and an attitude of acceptance was demonstrated in Jane's narrative. Jane's 'theory' constituted a common theme apparent in most of the women's narratives; that is, there was a general consensus that adversity enabled self-development and transformation; 'character' building as Jane put it. Emanating from that experience was a degree of self-monitoring and competence—opportunities for expanded learning and growth and thus, new selves.

The unfolding of these adverse events did not always convey immediate benefits or deficits in self. Generally however, the women approached adversity with great determination and later interpreted the events as pivotal learning moments or moments that stimulated change and growth and which were carried into the future, allowing them to cope with contemporaneous trauma. For example, Jessie, reflecting on her childhood, stated that "not having money probably hindered the opportunities that were available to us but in saying that, going without has made me tough and a good person" **Jessie (27: 81-82)**. Another woman spoke about the trauma of discovering her father was terminally ill, but simultaneously realising a sense of strength and competence, of which she and others were previously unaware:

> I remember my mother sending my brother over to check on me when they first told me Dad was sick; yeh they thought I wouldn't be able to cope. And the thing was, I was the one who coped while the rest of them, yeh, they didn't do so well. **Sissy 2 (47: 179-182)**

For Sissy, becoming aware of her coping skills not only allowed her to deal with her father's illness but also provided her with new attitudes and skills the next time she was confronted with trauma. Further, she would take this new found knowledge as a resource of improved competence and confidence into other areas of her life. In short, experiencing adversity had expanded her social capacity to act and, thus, contributed to the process of *Becoming Empowered*.

Knowledge and Skills: Envisioning the Future

All but three of the women had children and so a commonly derived source of strength and motivation was developed through their relationships with their children. "I love them [children] more than anything…as long as they have what they need first the rest is just a bonus" **Simone (31: 487-488)**. "As mothers and nurturers, your children are your everything" **Bree (38: 431).** Perhaps, in part because the majority had children, the women were unanimous in speaking and *envisioning the future*. The women, in the most part, demonstrated that they had competing demands in their life. Hence, most women incorporated their personal visions for the future with an element that concentrated on care for family and community and cultural continuity. Through exercising agency, the stage was set for self-determination and commitment to the collective.

Some women spoke of career options. One woman integrated personal interests with a career option and a way to help her people. "I just chose mental health I guess, I was just passionate about helping people, talking to them helping them to talk through things with issues within their lives and I guess I'm just passionate about people, especially my own people" **Gracie (42: 12-14)**. A few women indicated they intended

to start their own businesses, all of which entailed cultural components, “I want to begin my own consultancy business for cross-cultural training” **Ava (54: 106-107)**. Ava, by her own admission, was motivated by a desire to improve her social milieu, “to keep me in the way I am accustomed…if I can help out along the way I do” **Ava (54: 92-93)**. Yet other women talked about buying an old house like Aunty used to have; a place of *belonging*. Still another woman spoke of fostering Aboriginal children and providing respite care for foster parents:

> At the moment I’m thinking Indigenous children and that’s probably because there is just not enough foster carers, and there’s so many children being removed. If I can just make children happy for a day or two with what I can offer, in their lives which might be in turmoil, or I can give some respite to a foster carer, then that would make me happy too. **Isla (46: 295-298)**

Others still, related career and travel aspirations:

> Helping Aboriginal communities, but when I’m older, I don’t want to sell myself out too young, and I know that’s selfish. I don’t want to have to finish my degree, and go out into a community, and basically stay there my whole life and get sucked in…I don’t want to do that, and that sounds selfish but like there’s so many things *I* have to do. Like I want to travel, I want to see other cultures, I want to see different places. Like I would like to help, but not right now. **Debra (18: 549-555)**

Another woman was inspired to maintain Aboriginal culture, “I think it’s still Dad’s culture, to keep that going” **Dolly (58: 234)**. Whatever their desires, all of the women creatively reconciled their, often competing, social, political and economic demands with cultural obligations, were forward looking and continuously involved in *envisioning the future*. This is not to say, however, that they neglected the present or disregarded the past.

7.4 ‘Building cultural competence’

Anna’s story pronounced many detailed insights into the two strategies of *assuming responsibility and care* and *reconciling self and environment*. Such insights were also etched into the narratives of the other women. On this basis, *assuming responsibility and care* and *reconciling self and environment*, as sub-categories of *‘building cultural competence’*, will not be pursued in the detail featured in other facets. Furthermore, previously proposed was the complex interrelatedness, mutual dependence and overlapping elements of the signifying facets that constitute the process of *Becoming Empowered*. The strategies of *assuming responsibility and care* and *reconciling self and environment* are so intimately intertwined that it is almost impossible to speak of one without implicating the other. The difficulties of teasing out discrete categories in this signifying facet posed a substantial problem in their representation. For this reason, and to overcome the difficulties of disentangling the two facets, they will be explored concurrently. Moreover, certain elements extend beyond *‘building cultural competence’* to overlie the previous category *‘building a resilient identity’*; overlapping elements will not be restated.

'Orienting morality', *'claiming ethnicity'* and understanding, living and maintaining a connectedness to significant others, or in conceptual terms of the current facet of analysis, *standing in relatedness to others,* played a critical role in the development of the women's spirituality. A*ssuming responsibility and care* was the primary means by which the women related to others, and the world, in the co-creation of new realities. There was indeed an imperative expressed in building the capacity for responsibility and care for self and others. Even at a young age, Debra expressed this imperative, she pronounced, "I always found myself arguing and defending myself and my people" **Debra 2 (18: 10**). *Reconciling self and environment*, as a strategy for '*building cultural competence'*, originated from a spiritual awareness of self in environment and self in history. For the women, the awareness of spirit or knowing self, enabled belief in an authentic presence in the world and, thus, what constituted their mission in life. Herein lays the importance of the cognitive facet of *'Seeking Authenticity'*; that is, knowing self provided the foundation for further developing measures of engaging in the world to achieve the competence to assume responsibility and care for self and others. Further to be stated here is the import of the previous category, *'building a resilient identity'*.

7.4.1 Assuming responsibility and care and reconciling self and environment

Assuming responsibility and care originated as an integral category in descriptions of the women's narratives of work and ways of engaging with others and their environment. Jane viewed *assuming responsibility and care* as a natural part of the individual's development:

> It's a developmental thing, you know, you go through stages of your life, you know, the teen years they're all about having fun, that's what they're all about and then you start settling down and start thinking, 'actually what am I doing with my life' and then eventually you start thinking 'what do I give back' too. **Jane (39: 220-223)**

Gracie, however, indicated that responsibility and care for others is an expression of 'the Aboriginal way' and, therefore, aligned with sets of values and beliefs, moral obligations and responsibilities. "From where I come from everyone helps each other and that's the Aboriginal way, you help other people, you don't look down on other people, you don't judge you just; everyone's equal" **Gracie (42: 14-16).** Gracie, in this instance, presented Aboriginal values as an egalitarian belief system that was concerned with relational strategies of care, reciprocity and maintaining balance and which had the creation of a mutually caring relationship as its express intention.

Like Gracie, Bree supported her actions with a cultural belief system underpinned by integrity. "First and foremost, then we have to reassess culture and what that means and what we have adopted as culture. And by that I mean a lot of people think that culture is sitting under the tree sharing their alcohol when that's not what culture's about at all" **Bree (38: 500-503).** Bree further painted a picture of how she assumed a position of *standing in relatedness to others* in the hope of creating social change:

> You see that's where I see my role as being quite important, within the education system because they say that well, people forever espouse that

> education is the key to tomorrow and I guess, my task is to talk to people and unveiling the hidden stories and creating a space for open dialogue between different cultures. And if I can do that and create a safe environment, where people can come together, and discuss their hopes and fears, their upbringing and worldviews, and hopefully at the end it, see that difference is not necessarily a deficit. And maybe I'm still dreaming when I use the words 'something we can embrace', but if I can create a space where that dialogue, can take place, I feel that I'm contributing to social change in some small way, hopefully in some big way. **Bree (38: 456-467)**

Bree understood *assuming responsibility and care* as part of her role and obligations as an Aboriginal woman and raised a number of key issues significant in the implementation of strategies in that role. Bree expressed that her role as an educator came with certain responsibilities and care for others; all others. She articulated that what was required was *reaching out* and building a place of cultural safety where people engaged in dialogue and realties could be re-created and co-constructed. These measures, in themselves, emphasise the significance of *building relationships* while such strategies reconstructed Bree's roles and responsibilities. Such strategies further contributed to *assuming responsibility and care*, *reconciling self and environment* and *standing in relatedness to others* thereby engendering social change and, thus, reflected Bree's agency and identity work.

Assuming responsibility and care made available to the women powerful avenues of self-growth and promotion of collective alliances. It stemmed from an epistemological base; certain ways of knowing the world harmonised with particular

ways of doing and being in the world. In this way, action resonated with the women's worldviews, values and culture. Furthermore, working from within their own epistemological framework, *being themselves* enabled the women to act from a position of strength. The strategy of *assuming responsibility and care*, enacted in both public and private spaces, was expressed differentially and was dependent on, and influenced by, micro, meso and macro level contexts. Consequently, this strategy existed as an underlying influence on actions and interactions. These actions and interactions, in turn, spoke back to, and informed, identity work.

7.4.2 Seeking harmony and striking balance

Bree's 'rich tapestry of ethnicity' and her experience of others destabilising her view of reality by questioning her ethnic affiliations prompted her to harmonise her ways of knowing, doing and being. Bree demonstrated how she reconciled self and action to create new realities and ways of being in the world. She also exercised an ethics of responsibility and care in her actions at the micro, meso and macro levels of her realities:

> Jimmy Chi actually made a comment once in describing himself, he said, 'Me half-caste bastard, bridge to both worlds' and that's how I choose to see myself. I guess I see myself like that, I have to because, I think I am a critical optimist, in that I am interested and driven by the desire for social change. I'm also optimistic to find some inroads and find some answers to what the current policy of reconciliation offers, for the present messy state of race relations in this country. **Bree (38: 94-100)**

Here, Bree elected to take on what she considered to be an authentic measure of self and, in doing so, shed the masks of vulnerability by avoiding dichotomous thinking and coordinated her actions in concurrence with her reconstructed narratives of self; a synchronisation of her ways of knowing, doing and being. Authentic knowing of self, or understanding self, demands that the task is achieved through creating specific lived experiences. Conversely, these experiences initiate learning.

Noteworthy in Bree's narrative is the concept and difficulties of *reconciling self and environment*. Bree avered her choice to see herself as a 'bridge to both worlds' to resolve the contradiction. The acknowledgement of incongruity between self and environment, and at times within self, was raised in a multitude of contexts within many of the women's narratives:

> I'm living in two worlds; one in my culture one the white culture. I guess I'm living in two worlds…it's the shaded area I'm discovering. **Gracie (42: 243-245)**

> Living in two worlds explains exactly how I have felt almost my whole life. **Debra 2 (18: 12)**

> I am an Aboriginal woman, who looks white. **Jessie (27: 154)**

> I know they don't believe you're Aboriginal. I have to get my Aboriginal identity [proof of identity]…I think it's wrong. **Dolly (58: 191-192, 195)**

> Many people don't think I'm Aboriginal. What part Aboriginal are you? You know they do tend to think I'm not true Aboriginal. Because you know, you don't know your culture, you're not living in Central Australia and you're not waving a boomerang around. **Bree (38: 309-312)**

> These days you have to live like the White man's side of it now you know, like you have to get that education and get this and get this you know. **Shae (46: 326-328)**

Significantly, the women, in the most part, found a resolution to the contradiction through an amalgamation of strategies. Like Bree and Anna, all of the women resolved to become a 'bridge to both worlds' in their everyday ways of working. Expressed in Bree and Anna's reconstruction of events were positive attitudes and purposeful strategies of passive resistance, which were characterised by a shift toward harmonious relations and strategies and underpinned by an ethics of responsibility and care. These strategies appear in striking opposition to the strong proactive resistance espoused by many social activists working in inter-cultural settings, but consistent with Aboriginal ways of working.

Having stated this, one of the women described a time when she held a dissenting opinion and challenged the *status quo* by establishing more proactive strategies in her quest for social change. Carrie challenged a government department over racism in schools and won, but, as she stated:

> I had that big win but at great personal cost, so I had to learn to act smarter then. I got through that simply by my sheer bloody-mindedness and my refusal to let go and my ability to argue, a good arguer, but it took its toll on me physically and the stress level was amazing, I'm a fighter. **Carrie (45: 190-191, 195-198)**

In the present day however, Carrie insists on taking a different approach. She takes more care of herself and has developed new strategies to tackle injustices and achieve change, "my husband's good, he mellows me a bit, especially when there's been an injustice…I suppose I look for recognition of what I do know and also easier ways of going about it" **Carrie (45: 189-190, 194-195)**. Carrie's strategies became more attuned to those demonstrated by the other women and suggest considerable adaptation and change. She reconstructed and configured narratives of self through the performance of these innovative strategies; her sense of self however, remains grounded in her self-defined expectations of self, her relational self and her ability to assume responsibility and care for others. In this sense, it was critical that Carrie functioned in both personal and collective spaces.

7.5 'Capturing Autonomy': exercising agency

Explicated thus far were life-changing experiences categorised as *'Defining Moments'*; cognitive processing named *'Seeking Authenticity'*; and the strategic facet termed *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*. The final and consequential signifying facet, identified as *'Capturing Autonomy'*, was focused on the women's exercise of agency in mediating both individual and common ends—the pursuit of personal, social and political change by performing agency and translating perceptions and competency into being.

Preceding signifying facets culminated in *'Capturing Autonomy'*, enunciating various aspects of self-determination, choice and leadership for the women. As previously foregrounded, a critical association and interdependence between guiding philosophies espoused by the women and their transformational knowledge and social practices exists. Thus, the exercise of agency was dependent upon, and aligned with, the nature of the former and, therefore, a predictor for the developmental outcomes and, in particular, of the nature of the process of *Becoming Empowered*. The women demonstrated how they exercised competence, worked to empower self and others and extended their application of agency to manage, organise and embrace opportunities to lead others and effect change at the micro, meso and macro levels. Accordingly, in this facet, the women created and accessed spaces which allowed the development of their personal, social and political judgement in regards to significant aspects of life; a space in which the women exhibited advanced personal, social and political action. Agency was acted out by individual women in accord with contextual determinations and was evident in the women's capacities to be self-directed, shape their own lives and take action to achieve their desires and fulfil responsibilities as Aboriginal women; in other words, *Performing Aboriginality*.

'Capturing Autonomy' translated to the consequence of Aboriginal women securing the desire of self-determination through *exercising agency* relative to that which held value for the individual women. In stating this and as a cautionary notation, 'autonomy', as it is referenced here, should not assume connotations of existing as an independent part of the whole. To the contrary, the women viewed themselves as part of the broader environment, just as it was part of them. Autonomy in this sense is not

limited to suggestions of independence; rather it expounds fusion and an interdependence between self and the environment, thus connoting a relational term.

Autonomy also encapsulates notions of self-determination and, hence, choice and decisive actions in life. As Andie described with much clarity, the women held significant roles as agents in such activities. She further contended that having such privilege also entailed reciprocal obligations of sharing that power with others. This action, in itself, sustained connectedness and belonging, thus building shared power within that relationship:

> I think I'm pretty strong, I think I'm pretty motivated and one of my things is like, if you have the opportunities and privilege to, you have good outcomes in life. I think you have an obligation to pass it on to other people, so I am very much into mentoring other people and assisting those people how to see how they can take advantage of opportunities. I don't think they even realise that they can take advantage of those opportunities. **Andie (55: 413-419)**

Also revealed was how different ontological and epistemological standpoints disclose different interpretations of subjective experiences and, perhaps more critically, the dissolution of the individual/collective dichotomy and a foregrounding of relational empowerment.

'Capturing Autonomy', having emerged from a positive appraisal of personal efficacy, brought the women's capacity to act to the fore. It articulated more than management of self. Rather, *'Capturing Autonomy'* was directed toward the creative,

self-determining and influential role the women play and have on their life contexts. Thus, *'Capturing Autonomy'* showcases the kinds of agency expressed in different socio-political and cultural contexts and which is grounded in a transformational learning and a moral order of their own determinations. It explicates intricate understandings of how the women understood and enacted social, cultural and political participation; the courses of action primarily related to processes of empowerment and the women's identity work.

The nature of *'Capturing Autonomy'* was differentiated in a number of ways, for instance, through various life contexts such as age, socio-economic position and interests. Generally however, the women's focal point was oriented toward *Performing Aboriginality* and was manifested through activities that captured inherent competencies and potential of selves. They enacted agency on their own terms; intentionality and orientation reflecting the pulse of both the personal and the collective. Therefore, in the current context, agency was comprised of personal and relational components. Identified under the personal component, *'coming to author*ity*'*, were the conceptual categories of *breaking cycles, embracing opportunities and knowledge* and *referencing*. The relational component *'leading'* contained the categories, *working to empower others* and *committing to the group* (see Figure 7.2).

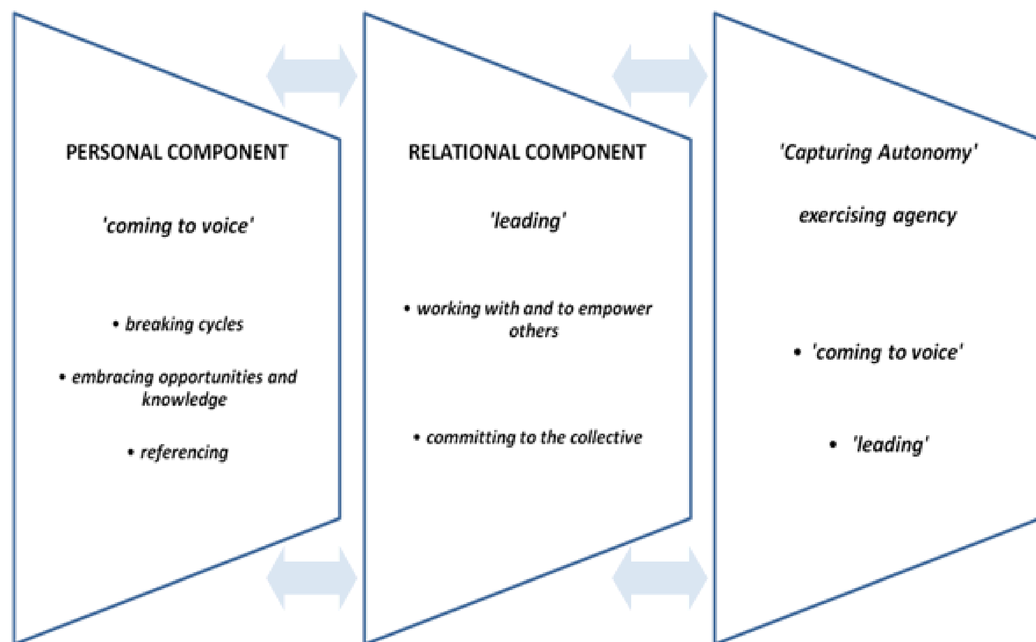

Figure 7.2 Individual and relational Components of 'Capturing Autonomy'

7.6 'Capturing autonomy': exercising individual and relational forms of agency to effect personal, social and political change

All of the women, to some degree, perceived themselves as agents of change at macro and meso levels by inhabiting professional and social roles and positions and influencing broader social and political projects and actions of others; and at a micro level in which they practiced choice and self-determination in a personal capacity. In this way, the women not only became active participants in regulating their own lives but also worked to advocate on the behalf of others, and influence and contribute to the lives of others, as well as social and political structures that oftentimes dictated to their detriment. Thus conceived, their behaviour emerged as the result of the consistent and dynamic interplay between structure and agency. The women's capacity for agency engaged choice, self-determination, self-regulation/efficacy and action-in-relationship, in what was determined as '*coming to author*ity' and *'leading'*. The enabling strategies

elucidated in the previous facet of *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* and the knowledge resources identified in *'Seeking Authenticity'* were mobilised and supported the women in the current process that led to *Becoming Empowered.* Required to fully understand the core process and, in particular, the sub-process of *'Capturing Autonomy'* is a comprehensive understanding of the women's exercise of agency at all levels of action. Performance in the everyday was constructed and determined by meanings attached to their identified realities. It was also constrained and simultaneously enabled by the social, cultural and political systems in which they dwelled.

7.7 Andie's story

All women in the study alluded to times in which they desired more from life. Some women had great foresight and acknowledged these revelations early in life while others were more mature when they realised their desire of *wanting a better life*. For instance, Andie knew her parent's life was difficult:

> It was hard. We had to go cut firewood and cart it from goodness knows where, cart the water and you know the house we lived in was fairly grotty, and so Dad was fairly handy so we'd go the dump, and we had a great time at the dump and find things, not like now. Dad got all our bikes from there. And Dad got lots of wood from there and built tables and chairs and made the household furniture as well basically, the walls and the floor was rotten as well and half the stairs were missing and he fixed that. **Andie (55: 147-150)**

However, Andie expressed her intentions to resolve this matter very early in life; tension in this regard leading to change. Indeed, Andie made clear her choice to break

the cycle of deficiency and improve her quality of life. The capacity for Andie to define her own realities (called *'referencing'* in this facet) and begin *making choices* was succinctly expressed in her statement:

> I think I had my mind set early on that I was actually going to do something, I didn't want to live like that…I always knew I wanted to be self-sufficient and have a good job and be able to earn good money. **Andie (55: 128-130, 435-436)**

Andie demonstrated there was catalytic value in her thinking, whereby it provided the stimulus for strategic, intentional action and thus, personal, social and political change. Andie not only determined a goal of excellence for herself but also the actions through which she could go about attaining that goal. She also indicated elsewhere in her narrative that education (*embracing opportunities and knowledge*) played a huge role in how she achieved her goal of *wanting a better life.* She further stated that she was forever mindful of *embracing opportunities*, "I don't think I had any set things like I wanted to be an [occupation] or anything like that, but I had set aspirations about taking advantage of opportunities that arose" **Andie (55: 276-278).**

As Andie progressed through life and became more competent within herself, she started to implement various aspects of leadership. "I am very much into mentoring other people and assisting those people" **Andie (55: 416-417)**. She described a specific occasion when she mentored and encouraged others:

> I asked if she was interested in doing any further study and she said she was just happy doing this. And after about a year, I said to her would you like to do this

> Graduate Diploma in Health Promotion, so she did that and passed it and then there was opportunity for the NHMRC training scholarship and she finished her Masters and then she became a lecturer. **Andie (55: 425-430)**

Andie continued to relate how she worked to empower others, "I'm really, social justice-wise I really take issue with things that mean that people aren't being looked after or their rights aren't being recognised and I think the program is very much a part of that and other areas I work in" **Andie (55: 452-454)**. She committed to her ethnic group, enlisted support and had a shared vision of a better future:

> I came down to the meeting and it really promoted cohesion and then we started up the companies…got the funding for the language project and…two history projects. And then we started negotiating with government departments… And through that we have quite a few of our mob get jobs… And then if none of our mob want to do it we hand it to our neighbours and we have a working relationship there. And we have two major projects…on our Traditional lands and work together to look at all the issues and find solutions. **Andie (55: 361-391)**

Contained within Andie's storyline were accounts of how she demonstrated her leadership capabilities and possessed the capacity to name her own realities and act on constructing those realities through everyday behaviours. For Andie, watching the life struggles of her parents stimulated the desire for change. Her capacity to engage reflective cognitive processes and acquire relevant knowledge led to increased self-efficacy and provided the skills for *making changes and choices* that she desired to

enhance her life circumstances. Indeed Andie was *'coming to autho*rity*'*, a term borrowed from Belenky. (1986) which indicates a journey of coming to know, accept and articulate one's own capacity for power.

7.8 'Coming to authority': breaking cycles

All of the women shared a desire for better quality of life. They recognised that *breaking cycles* played a critical part in achieving that desire. Some women, for example Bree, were inspired by others to break cycles. Bree had lived in a discrete Aboriginal community with her parents where there was little opportunity to improve quality of life. She revealed:

> She [mother] was always telling me 'you're leaving Brewarrina, you're not staying here', and I used to think; 'oh my mother doesn't love me'. But in reality, she loved me enough to want me to leave, to become educated, to get an occupation, and to do something with my life. **Bree (38: 219-223)**

This urging inspired Bree to break cycles through higher education. Another woman, Amanda, acknowledged her privilege as beneficiary of her Ancestors' struggle to break cycles:

> I'm the first generation in my family that can say, at 20 years of age, that I have complete control over my life. It is this freedom that my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents always wished that I could have, because it's something that they never did at my age. **Amanda (20: 314-317)**

What was significant here was that Amanda continued to work not only in maintaining but improving upon the struggle of her Ancestors.

Some women recognised the adversity faced by their parents, family or community and knew it was not sufficient to sustain their desired quality of life. Shae explained, "like my parents, were just, they Aboriginal whats-a-name, and, but they just worked around in the community too. We grew up the hard way" **Shae (46: 10-12).** No disrespect was intended toward her parent's lot in life, but Shae was not prepared to accept that her destiny would be defined by others or the environment in which she lived and was determined to break the hardship cycle. Other women, too, expressed similar sentiments in accord with the aspects of their lives that required attention. For instance, Gracie and Carrie were compelled to break the cycle of intergenerational violence; while Dolly and Shae, for example, simply desired relief from the drudgery of others. For some, such as Gracie, an attempt to break cycles was initiated through her '*witnessing'* the reality of others. She explained that:

> …one day I was walking down the street and I talked to a lot of people in town and they all wanna change, but they don't know what to do about it. I thought, I don't wanna be like that - the people who sit on the benches and stuff who can't really handle life and stuff. **Gracie (42: 40-43)**

In conjunction with the notion of *referencing,* Gracie named her objection to the observed reality. Committed to breaking the cycle of perceived deficiency, not for her but for others, Gracie embodied that resistance and committed to assisting Aboriginal people in the process of healing and change; *referencing*, *working with and to empower*

others and *committing to the collective*. Gracie commented that she took up a course in mental health because, as she stated, "I was really interested in using therapy as a way of healing my people" **Gracie (42: 87)**. Hence, Gracie's narrative is intertwined with relational connotations.

7.8.1 Embracing opportunities and knowledge

Identifications that surfaced in *'Seeking Authenticity'* assisted the women to traverse new boundaries and claim relative self-determination. That is, they made constructive changes to enhance their quality of life attained through the pursuit of agency on their own terms and through their own beliefs, patterns of relations in life and innovative social practices. The prime enabler and sustainer of this process was education; formal and informal. Critically, all of the women held multiple formal educational attainments which were achieved as a result of their desire for a better life. The mindset of the women, developed in *'Seeking Authenticity'* and strategically deployed in *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*, allowed for elements of choice and change to come into their lives, even under compromising conditions. Thus, they were able to embrace opportunities that arose in their lives and, perhaps more importantly, create opportunities; whether or not opportunities emanated from a position of despair or elation did not always influence the women's available options. A woman's story that piqued interest as an example was Jessie's. She related, "leaving my daughter's father when she was six weeks old and thinking I have to do something with my life. He was not going to provide for us. I thought the only way I am going to be on 'easy street' is to get a better education, so I did a degree in education" **Jessie (27: 136-138)**. Despite the dire circumstances of her life at that time, Jessie was still able to reach out and grasp opportunities. Significantly, she was orientated toward further education. Indeed, all of

the women were inspired to seek a formal education to open up new spaces in which they would flourish.

In other instances, the women found it necessary to find a balance and embraced informal knowledge. Informal knowledge was invariably in the form of cultural knowledge. Isla reminded us of this in her narrative, “culture was not reinforced and as part of my Indigeniety, I see that as something that I need to explore more” **Isla (46: 429-430)**. For other women, it meant a stronger focus on cultural traditions and values.

At other times in their lives, the women learned to recognise and take advantage of opportunities that came their way. Gracie elaborated on how she embraced a critical educational opportunity in her life. She said:

> My friend asked me how would you like to enrol in a course and I said what’s that course…she asked me to come along and she took me upstairs to the lecturers from Western Aussie who came to interview students. And I thought to myself ‘aw okay, I’m in this room now, I might as well stay in this room’ and I walked in and I was shocked there was so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. **Gracie (42: 53-59)**

The ability to take up opportunities created more opportunities and opened up new possibilities. Gracie was able to gain meaningful employment for herself. Currently, she is doing her second degree course. Amanda supported this statement, insisting that “trying new things when the opportunity arises and always pursuing new

adventures" **Amanda (20: 327-328)** was the way in which she attempted to achieve her goals in life.

7.8.2 Referencing

Referencing, a powerful and consistent component of '*coming to author*ity', represented the women's ability to define their own realities *vis-à-vis* allowing others to name the terms of their realities. The women convincingly laid claim to defining how they lived their lives at all levels; in their personal, family, community, political and professional lives. Indeed the women named the past, present and future to ensure their *author*ity was heard. The self-determination of the women shifted from the subjective centre out toward the broadest levels of society. However, this is not to say the women always had claim to *author*ity. Some women expressed frustrating times in their lives when they felt they had no *author*ity. "I try to push for this place, but government won't, they got no funding they reckon…but they just don't listen to ya, they're closing all the Aboriginal schools down here" **Dolly (58: 179-181)**.

Definition of self was implicated in the process of *referencing*. Herein lays the salience of subjective experience as the medium for how the women referenced realities; all the while connecting back to their sense of purpose in life. Bree *author*itatively alerted to being a non-conformist, "I'm not a conformist…I choose to see myself as a reconciliator" **Bree (38: 274, 402)**. She further defined her professional boundaries in terms of active engagement, "so therefore, my teaching activities give me an opportunity not only shatter misconceptions and unveil hidden stories, but to also empower people" **Bree (38: 693-695).** Additionally, Bree saw herself in a position of leadership, sensing that her work had the potential to 'empower people'. Similarly, the

key features of embodiment and action were evident in Carrie's comment, in which she recognises herself as an activist. "I guess I had the skills there and I kept on pushing boundaries and my journey through taking the Education Department on, I've always been active" **Carrie (45: 261-262)**. The women's actions then, reflect the authenticity of self and they themselves define their own realities in accord with the spiritual forces in their lives.

The ability to define self and reality was a powerful achievement for the women. It entailed identity-building processes through their own creative interpretation of the world and how they were located within it. This achievement feeds back to the conditional facet of *'Seeking Authenticity'* in which the women sought out an *author*ative measure of self. In this light, *referencing* went beyond cognitive processes and simple naming of self and environment. It was the actual embodiment of naming that facilitated '*coming to* author*ity*' and, indeed, implied a certain amount of resistance and encapsulated a deepening of spirit. Further to this, *referencing* enabled the repositioning of the women through speaking back to the discourses which constituted them. Thus conceived, referencing implicated personal, social and political transformation and, therefore, the women were able to move from positions of social exclusion to social inclusion. The women's self-determining spirit contributed to this action and rendered visible the identities of self and culture; a liberation of sorts.

7.9 Leading: working with and to empower others

Working with and to empower others included the women's practice of *mentoring others*, which in turn promoted *committing to the collective*. Whether it was formal or informal, all of the women had the opportunity to be mentored at different

times throughout their lives. As part of their own perceived responsibilities, they felt it was incumbent upon them as Aboriginal women to mentor 'Others'. Bree revealed that one of the ways in which she defined herself was through her capacity to mentor 'Others', and specifically, Aboriginal 'Others'. She insisted that it was important that she "act as a mentor to those who will come after me in terms of our own people. So that's, that's also another way that I see myself, hopefully as a mentor" **Bree (38: 696-697).**

Shae played a crucial role in mentoring young Aboriginal girls, in nurturing and caring for their babies, albeit in a professional capacity. "I used to be one of their home carers making sure that babies are having proper feeds, they're doing the right thing with that baby, you know instead of going out getting drunk and leaving the baby laying around" **Shae (46: 45-48).** With the exception of the younger women, all of the women at one time or other assumed responsibility for the care of siblings, extended family and community children and acted in a mentoring role that more often became a parenting role for these children. Despite Shae raising her own five boys alone, she assumed the additional responsibility of her nieces and nephews, "it was a bit *hard*, but I done it the hard way too you see, because I had my own five boys, and in between I had my sister's kids, my brother's kids**" Shae (46: 181-182).**

Some women mentored Aboriginal 'Others' into new board positions while those people entering into new employment and educational institutions were also mentored by the women. Meghan commented on her role in mentoring other Aboriginal students as they entered the university system and acknowledged that she assumed this role in an unofficial capacity, "I've worked up this network at uni itself, I'm not a

mentor but I know I've been told over the last couple of years by other students that they've been really glad that I'm there" **Meghan (66: 120-122)**. One of the younger women voluntarily sought these mentoring roles in a more official capacity. Jessie, for instance, applied in a professional capacity to take on a leadership position for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children at the school where she was a teacher.

Cultural mentoring was key in the lives of some women; viewed as part of their responsibility for nurturing and maintaining Aboriginal culture. The perceived responsibility for *mentoring others* was taken up in different ways and was not always constrained to Aboriginal 'Others'. A large part of the women's mentoring roles was consumed by White 'Others'. Often, the women became cultural mentors and, in some instances, acted as cultural brokers, particularly within the confines of their professional domains. Jessie said, "At the moment I am working with an Aboriginal performer and looking at employing him to teach our Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to dance" **Jessie (27: 160-162)**. This role was assumed, not as part of her job description, but as part of her perceived responsibilities as an Aboriginal woman. However the women's mentoring role was taken up, the important point to note was that they perceived it as part of their role and responsibilities for the collective.

Further to the notion of *working with and to empower others* was that the women enlisted support to achieve their desired outcomes. Oftentimes, as was revealed in Andie's narrative, they worked within the Aboriginal collective. However, Andie also made it known that support for the projects in which she was engaged also involved other groups. She recalled that they received funding for their projects and also negotiated with government departments to ensure the best outcomes for her people.

This is a critical point. The women's ability to build bridging and linking social capital was a common thread identified throughout all of the women's narratives and a significant enabler of accomplishments. This is not to say that power was renounced. Rather, it enhanced the women's own capacity for action. For instance, Meghan, in her dedication toward the development of a health promotion project for the Elders, approached and enlisted the support of Quentin Bryce. "I even met Quentin Bryce, who's the Queensland Attorney General…and I was telling her what I wanted to do, and she told me, when you're ready I can help you, call me" **Meghan (66: 69-71)**. Hence, Meghan not only reached out to others but also made vertical connections to people in power in her efforts to enlist support for her project. Thus conceived, Meghan was enabled to secure and share in that power to meet her own ends. In other words, she created an environment that facilitated her *'coming* to author*ity'* through her commitment of *working with and to empower others*.

7.9.1 Committing to the collective

While ever the safety of Aboriginal people was threatened, the women themselves were threatened. Therefore, as has been previously highlighted on several occasions, the struggle for quality of life is intimately intertwined with the Aboriginal collective. The oldest participant, Meghan, at 66 years of age still honoured her commitment to the Aboriginal collective. In relating her latest project, health promotion activities for elderly Aboriginal men and women, Meghan said:

> So it's like looking after the community wellness as well. When I think about it, doing something that makes them feel good has got to be good for them, you

know they will sort of like, become ten foot tall and bulletproof even when they're getting old and frail. **Meghan (66: 161-163)**

In this sense Meghan was not only *committing to the collective* but also *working with and to empower others*. Therefore, her agency and perceptions of self were contingent upon, and enhanced through, her ability to empathise with, and foster connections with, others. Acting out of concern for others is linked through the strategies of *assuming responsibility and care*, *standing in relatedness to others* and the development of an ethnic and moral consciousness in the signifying facet *'Seeking Authenticity'*. Amanda's words supported this notion, she insisted "people motivate and inspire me, sometimes it's because they have faith in me, sometimes it's because I can see they need someone to be their strength and sometimes it's because they annoy me" **Amanda (20: 240-242)**.

On the other hand, Debra, the youngest participant, indicated a commitment to the collective in terms of future intentions. Acknowledging an awareness of her responsibilities, she emphasised "like I would like to help, but not right now" **Debra (18: 554)**. In saying this, Debra referred to a full-time commitment to the collective for, as mentioned earlier, Debra indeed currently partakes in community activities with her father. Similarly, Amanda, a twenty year old participant, while hailing the strength she drew from the collective, attempted to maintain distance from, and simultaneously preserve, her connection and support for the Aboriginal collective. Debra and Amanda were acutely aware what *committing to the collective* entailed, "I don't want to go out into a community, and basically stay there my whole life and get sucked into…I don't want to do that" **Debra (18, 550-552)**. For Debra and Amanda, maintaining a degree of

autonomy was important. Therefore, while they were certainly primed to commit to the good of the collective, they were not prepared to do so at personal cost, as some of the older woman have done. Anna called to mind the total commitment of women who sacrificed self for the collective good. She confirmed, “there’s so many fronts on which we have to operate, so many areas in which we have to try and gain so kind of influence. And it becomes at times really overwhelming; and people burn out” **Anna (Elder: 250-253).**

7.10 Summary

This chapter initially presented a repertoire of competencies which enabled the women to attain a positive sense of subjective wellbeing. The nature of the women’s ways of functioning in a contemporary world highlighted critical insights into how they worked within relational discourses of morality, respect, care, responsibility and reconciliation. Indeed, the women worked toward constructing a model of *author*ity and leadership. *‘Building cultural competence’* suggested the women reconstructed and configured narratives of self within and between similar and alternative discourses; thus implicating a degree of personal agency. This process of identity construction implicated a complex weave of individual and collective identity, was concerned with psychological and social processes and was dependent upon self-interpretation and context. Additionally, referenced here was behaviour that exhibited and facilitated personal change toward self-determination and a demonstration of personal agency in the construction of self-identity. Simultaneously, standing in opposition to this notion was the relational and collaborative contexts in which the personal was developed. It can thus be concluded, then, that a dialectic relationship exists between individual and collective identity.

The culmination of the process of *Becoming Empowered* was represented in the consequential and performative facet *'Capturing Autonomy'*. This element of the process of *Becoming Empowered* reflected the women's performance of agency. Critical to the women's exercise of agency was the interconnectedness of, and mutually contouring relationship between, the personal and the collective. Education, both formal and informal, was raised as the sustainer of this process, while the ability to choose and become self-determining agents highlighted the women's competency in self by '*coming to* author*ity'*. In this sense, the women recognised the position of *author*ity they now held and used this knowledge for the collective good by *working with and empowering others*. Underpinning the sub-process of *'Capturing Autonomy'* was the development of an intricately balanced web of relationships.

Chapter 8

Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Incredible wellsprings of strength and resilience are found among Aboriginal women in Australia. The narratives of some of these women were presented in the findings of this study and provided the empirical evidence that found this particular cohort of women were enabled to make strategic life choices, explore new possibilities and selves, access and mobilise resources in their own interests, create and take up new opportunities, address challenges in life and engage in social and political action through participation in the process of *Becoming Empowered.* This chapter now honours the spirit in which these women shared their stories for this research by highlighting the unique and significant contributions of the study and by presenting a discussion of how the meaning drawn from their narratives of agency can be used in transforming the conditions of life for other Aboriginal people.

A grounded theory analysis of Aboriginal women's life-history narrative interviews identified a number of significant findings about the empowerment processes in which they engaged to move beyond social exclusion in a contemporary world and flourish in life. The findings confirmed extant literature in theories of empowerment on several fronts. Equally importantly, the study also extended empowerment theories with the identification of three additional dimensions evidenced in the process of *Becoming Empowered* – a spiritual sensibility, an ethics of morality and the notion of cultural

competence. To set the tone for the discussion of these findings, this concluding chapter of the thesis begins by revisiting the intentions and significance of the study followed by its limitations and strengths. An appraisal of the quality of this grounded theory research is then presented—how well did the study respond to the original commitments outlined in the aim and objectives of the study according to the intentions of grounded theory. It then discusses the unique contributions of the study. An overview of the emergent theory of *Becoming Empowered* precedes a discussion of the substantive findings, viewed in light of the significance of the study and explored within the context of the extant literature to inform the conclusive findings. This is followed by implications of the findings of the study in providing evidence for the original intentions of the research. The chapter then focuses on recommendations for future research directions to expand the findings. The culminating statement references researcher reflections.

8.2 Revisiting the intentions and significance of the study

The overarching research question in this study inquired: **What process underlies the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society?** Three subsidiary objectives were considered to illuminate a response:

- identify the dimensions of the process underlying Aboriginal women's performance of agency
- develop a substantive theory of the process underlying Aboriginal women's performance of agency

- identify how understanding this process might assist Aboriginal women to facilitate positive change in their lives.

From the outset, it was my aspiration and the core proposition that this research would contribute to personal, social and political change for Aboriginal people. A number of points of significance were considered as priorities in pursuing the study objectives. The first point lay in disrupting essentialist accounts of Aboriginal women by theorising them as agents in a contemporary world. The second aimed to contribute to new knowledge by addressing the significant gap in knowledge of Aboriginal women's experiences of agency so that the role of women in Aboriginal communities and the broader society could be reconsidered in a new light. The third intention was to inform and improve outcomes of social policy and programs in Aboriginal communities. The final and most salient point of significance aspired to provide the important foundations from which to work to enhance possibilities for personal, social and political change for Aboriginal people. Simply put, this study focussed on providing the conceptual stepping stones from which practical applications and possibilities for transformation on the ground could be drawn as a response to the social exclusion experienced by many Aboriginal Australians; and which aligns with, and holds meaning for, them as Aboriginal people and in their aspirations of becoming self-determining subjects in a contemporary world. Social exclusion is referred to as:

> … living in conditions of deprivation and vulnerability, such as poverty; inadequate access to education, health and other services; lack of political influence, civil liberties, and human rights; geographic isolation; environmental exposures; racism or historical trauma; disruption of social capital and social

isolation; exposure to wars and conflicts; alienation or powerlessness. (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 17)

8.3 Major contributions of the study

This study was significant in its unique contributions. Theoretically, while the study confirmed much of the literature in the field of empowerment theory, it contributed considerably to extend theories of the process of empowerment by identifying three additional dimensions—an underlying spiritual sensibility, an ethics of morality and cultural competency. These dimensions captured the unique ways in which Aboriginal women function. Each of these dimensions is discussed in more detail in the followings sections but the major contributions of the study are now considered.

Methodologically, most research concerning Aboriginal issues overwhelmingly emanates from a deficit model of research which identifies the 'Aboriginal problem' and imposes a White cultural framework of meaning and interpretation to the findings. As a result, this type of research not only views the issue in problematic terms, but also fails to adequately capture the perspective of the Aboriginal research population. In contrast, this study was a strengths-based model of research which let *Umbi* speak, listened carefully and analysed and interpreted the findings through the eyes of an Aboriginal woman. The research focussed on Aboriginal women's own resolves to flourish in life in ways congruent with their authentic selves, while grounded theory method assisted to keep the analysis immersed in the lived experiences represented in the narratives of the women.

This research indicated that an intricate multifaceted integrated process of empowerment underscored the performance of agency for Aboriginal women. Significantly, it showed that, given favourable circumstances and appropriate resources and opportunities, Aboriginal women are themselves able to transform the conditions of their lives in their own best interests. This knowledge itself disrupts essentialising portraits of Aboriginal people in general and, more specifically, of Aboriginal women. Thus, perhaps most importantly, this research makes a unique contribution to Aboriginal people as a 'gift' of hope and freedom by beginning to undermine and change the prevailing ideologies about Aboriginal people that form the basis of contemporary power relations in Australia.

The findings of the study developed a model of *Becoming Empowered* for Aboriginal women, which reflected the realities of their existence. This can now be confidently used to assist other Aboriginal women to move from a position of social exclusion to social inclusion. There are no studies to my knowledge that have documented this process and, as such, this research makes a unique contribution to a number of fields, most specifically, Aboriginal health and wellbeing and education.

8.4 Limitations and strengths of the study

Methodological choices inherently impose limitations on any study. Embedded within this study are several important limitations that require consideration when assessing the research. Significant methodological limitations pertaining to the nature of the research are apparent from the outset. The research was conducted within the qualitative tradition with specific attention focussed on the individual perspectives of Aboriginal women and the meanings they gave to their realities and behaviours. Thus,

because of the very nature of the research, generalisation to other populations was never the intention. The research engaged only with those women who were urban-dwelling and demonstrated agency in their lives as defined by a particular set of criteria and, therefore, maximum variation was not achieved in the sample. Although it is quite possible that women living in other locations participated in, and experienced, similar processes in their performances of agency, it is difficult to generalise from urban-dwelling women to other groups of Aboriginal women and, therefore, may not be reflective of the circumstances of others. It does, however, offer insight into a broader historical, social and political narrative of Aboriginal people.

I shared a relationship with all of the participants in the research and this could be construed as creating biased feedback in the interview data. I felt that biased data was unlikely to be produced because the interviews were not about perceptions of abstract concepts, but rather recounting their individual life-histories. However, because I had personal knowledge of the research participants, this limitation was offset by having the advantage of being able to select participants who I knew had the specific characteristics and specialised knowledge that would prove invaluable in generating quality data and the quest to saturate categories. Further, the development of rapport was already established. Even so, the researcher/participant relationship must be considered as a potential limitation in the study.

Although the sample may appear small, data saturation was achieved. The small sample size was offset by the richly textured data generated from the life-history narrative interviews as well as the fact that there were multiple cycles of agency contained within the narratives of the individual women.

Being located as both an insider and outsider in this research endeavour brought with it some strengths, but also imparted limitations. Firstly, because of my position as an insider, I was able to empathise with the participants in the research. I felt a responsibility toward the participants to ensure the research translated into practice that would benefit them.

Funding constraints and family commitments existing at the onset of this study posed particular limitations in the conceptualisation and implementation of this research. For these reasons, urban-dwelling women were chosen to participate in the study as opposed to travelling to rural and/or remote areas. Costs and time absent from home were, in large measure, the drivers behind this choice.

Despite the imposition of limitations in the study, there were also strengths acknowledged. Many of the participants were able to attend presentations of the research and confirmed the findings. Further responses also came from outside the participant group. Presentations of the research findings were also attended by a number of researchers, colleagues and practitioners in the field of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing who related to and recognised the value of the study. Other women, of Indigenous Australian, Indigenous and White origin, mentioned that different aspects of the process of *Becoming Empowered* reflected in their own lives.

A salient methodological point which was seen as both a strength and a limitation in the study was the use of grounded theory. Grounded theory method is valued for keeping the analysis grounded in the data. However, as a novice researcher

and first time grounded theorist, the possibility of misinterpretation or error in the application of the grounded theory process must be acknowledged.

The utility of narrative method in this research proved to be an invaluable tool for capturing the nuances of meaning and behaviour of the participant women across time and different levels of existence—personal, community and institutional. Further, the co-creation of meaning with the participants through expression of their own narratives was not only found to be congruent with the nature of the research but also contributed significantly to circumventing some of the problems of inherent power imbalances in the research relationship.

Midway through the process of conducting this research, I had supervisory changes. Had I not been so driven and committed to the project and had I not been blessed by being located within the supportive environment of an empowerment research team, I would have considered this experience a limitation.

8.5 Appraisal of the study

The intentions of the study were to identify the underlying process inherent in Aboriginal women's performance of agency in the everyday and develop a substantive theory that explains the patterns of behaviour and meanings attached to these behaviours. The core concern for the women in the study, conceptualised as *Performing Aboriginality,* was to carve a life for themselves that held personal relevance and meaning for them as Aboriginal women. The process through which the women actualised their concern for creating a better life was identified as *Becoming Empowered.*

Elliott and Lazenbatt (2005) insist that "research should be evaluated by the very constructs that were used to generate it" (p. 49). Thus, I must return to the constructs advocated in the application of grounded theory. Grounded theory "generates conceptualisations that fit, work and have relevance" (Glaser, 2003, p. 131). These interrelated criteria, with the inclusion of 'modifiability', were used to evaluate this grounded theory research.

'Fit' relates an understanding that the identified categories must fit the data without forcing or being selected to fit preconceived categories. Modifiability is key to achieving fit. As categories emerge and more data is coded, it is critical that the researcher modify the categories to fit the data, as opposed to forcing the data to fit the pre-existing categories (Glaser, 1978). Thus, fit is validated by checking for adherence to the methods of grounded theory application. The attention to detail outlined in Chapter 5 provided sufficient evidence in this respect.

'Relevance' to the substantive area under investigation is ensured by 'fit'. When procedures of emerging categories are adhered to, relevance naturally follows because "the emergent concepts will relate to the true issues of the participants" (Glaser, 1998, p. 236). While in grounded theory it is proposed that there is no need for member checking because the concepts will fit and have relevance, as some categories emerged I did cross-check with many of the participants as to relevance. This was more confirmation to self-questioning; was what I was seeing really happening for the participants. Many of the participants also had the opportunity to attend presentations on the research and confirmed the relevance of the categories to their individual experiences. Other Aboriginal women made similar confirmations of relevance.

The emergent theory 'works' when its categories have fit and relevance to the substantive area of investigation; it "starts to explain how the main concern of the participants is continually resolved" (Glaser, 1998, p. 237). I made a few attempts at identifying the core category before I realised that these were indeed sub-categories of a much larger picture. Those categories that I thought had potential as the core category did not feed back or account for what was happening for all participants. The eventual identification of *Performing Aboriginality* accounted for all other categories that explained the behaviours of the women in the substantive area. The dense rich theory emerging from the intense interrelatedness of the categories and their properties was evidenced in the difficulties I experienced in trying to tease out those networks of relatedness to write the findings.

The application of the grounded theory method of constant comparison requires creativity and flexibility in the mind of the researcher. Grounded theory "is constantly modified by the constant verification of fit, relevance – and workability using the constant comparison method of generating categories and their properties" (Glaser, 2001, p. 57). Modification is continuous in grounded theory and is necessitated by conceptual saturation, theoretical sampling and conceptual integration, as previously alluded to in the explanation of 'fit' (Glaser, 2001). I must say, however, that initially, I did not have the flexibility of mind to engage with modifying previously identified categories. Nevertheless, following the method of constant comparison forced 'modifiability' to occur. New data was being forced into categories that did not have a comfortable 'fit' and to continue in this vein was impossible. Thus, the researcher must be as flexible as the methods used to accommodate the continual flow of data being generated. Despite participating in a steep learning curve in the application of grounded

theory methods, in my estimation, the substantive theory presented here has fit, relevance, may be modified by future research and works for those for whom it was developed.

8.6 An overview of the process of Becoming Empowered

The significant findings of this research identified that a specific process of empowerment, *Becoming Empowered,* underscored the performance of agency for a particular cohort of Aboriginal women. The process demonstrated how the women, as significant actors in processes of change across their individual life spans, moved from one state of being to another to facilitate their primary concern of *Performing Aboriginality*. Four critical components acted in synergy in the process of *Becoming Empowered* and were conceptually represented as *'Defining Moments'*, *'Seeking Authenticity'*, *'Authoring Narratives of Self'* and *'Capturing Autonomy'*. The four facets integrated as experiential milestones and not discrete phases.

Recapitulating the findings of the study, the women played out a cyclic process stimulated by their desire of living a better life as Aboriginal women. The desire for change was often stimulated by significant life events that resulted in epiphanies and which held particular relevance for the individual. As a result, a process of self-reflection and action, knowledge acquisition and the development of an ethnic, moral, social and political consciousness occurred. A number of strategies reflected the diverse ways the women took up their perceived roles and responsibilities as Aboriginal women to engage in the world by assuming an ethnic, moral and political consciousness. These strategies included building a complex web of relations, skills, knowledge and resources that supported their capacity to achieve a better life. The culmination of the process of

Becoming Empowered was realised through the women's exercise of agency and was characterised by increased self-determination, social and political action and quality of life that reflected fulfilment of their perceived roles as Aboriginal women—*Performing Aboriginality*. At this point, the women viewed themselves as agents of change embodying an emancipatory ethic. The intricate balancing of two lifeworlds was significant.

Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane, one of the earliest anthropological texts about Aboriginal women in Australia, portrayed the Aboriginal woman as "a complex social personality, having her own prerogatives, duties, problems, beliefs, rituals and point of view [...] exercising a certain freedom in matters reflecting her own interests and desires" (Kaberry, 1939, p. ix) and contributing to the maintenance of society as the equal of Aboriginal man. Conducted some seven decades later, this study supports the findings propounded by Kaberry. The women's narratives of agency, which today are constituted amid very different social spheres as a result of the processes of colonisation, reflected profoundly complex stories of adaptation, change and reconciliation of those two lifeworlds. These intricacies made it extremely difficult to unravel the threads of existence for the women and, thus, did not submit to a reductionist explanation by which their lives could be reduced to a catalogue of themes. Rather, the emergent theory was developed as a multifaceted social psychological process, a narrative whole embedded in historical life contexts. The process, as such, lends itself to a number of interrelated multidisciplinary theoretical processes; a complex interweave of making choices, developing a critical, moral and ethnic consciousness fortified by a spiritual sensibility, engaging knowledge and skill-building processes, identity-building processes, the building of intricate, supportive social

networks and alliances and the exercise of agency through the power of decision-making and social and political action that integrated to construct an ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment.

8.7 Positioning the findings within the extant literature

A somewhat informed, but largely subjective and intuitive knowledge of the concept of empowerment, was drawn on in the initial identification and naming of the core process of *Becoming Empowered.* In coming to this discussion, I reflected on the experiences of the women identified in the process of *Becoming Empowered* and the literature on women's empowerment; then on the broader empowerment literature. I returned to examine the interrelated processes constituted within the process of *Becoming Empowered* and evaluated each to determine what areas were addressed within the existing literature, what areas were not and whether the emergent theory extended existing theories of empowerment; all the while seeking to discover what meaning the findings held in terms of the original intentions of this study. While the emergent theory of *Becoming Empowered* did not reflect precisely in the empowerment literature, it did, however, establish relevance to literature in that area on several important fronts and expanded upon the literature by theorising the particular nuances inherent in Aboriginal women's experiences of *Becoming Empowered*. The importance and position of these additional dimensions of the empowerment process are illuminated by contrasting the findings of this study with the extant literature.

To facilitate the ensuing discussion, I pondered what this research meant in terms of facilitating change for Aboriginal people. In what ways could this knowledge be of value as a response to the social exclusion experienced by many Aboriginal

people in Australia today? Yes, the women were participating in a specific process of empowerment but how were their performances of agency situated in the broader social context and how did that reflect in the literature? I came to reason that personal and social interactions were at the heart of the women's narratives and, thus, at a very fundamental level their stories were about relationships; how the women experienced change, growth and emancipation through their connections and interactions with others and society. This was the most powerful and forthright message. From an ecological perspective, the findings suggested the women participated in three parallel processes: (i) self in relationship with self; (ii) self in relationship with others; and (iii) self in relationship with environment; each level influencing, and being influenced by, the other. Reflecting on this information, I then inquired what explained the importance of using social connections and social relations in achieving goals in life and how best these interactions could be captured and demonstrated. In response, I was drawn to literature on social capital for its explanatory power about how relationships are important for human behaviour; a line of thought in developmental literature and in explanations for persistent socio-economic disparities across ethnic groups (Quillian & Redd, 2008). In saying this, social capital not only elucidates relationships between people but also provides an explanation for the interactions between people and social structures and the facilitating role it plays in accommodating the actions of people within those structures (Coleman, 1988). Accounted for in this conceptualisation is the individual as a social actor and the influence of the environment upon that individual (Coleman, 1988). Human capital, on the other hand, was viewed as an inherent resource from which the women drew to achieve their goals in life.

The findings of this study established an explicit association between the women participating in the process of *Becoming Empowered*, individual wellbeing and active participation in their social and political arenas. Thus conceived, *Becoming Empowered* may well be considered one way of overcoming social exclusion. Linking the process of empowerment to social inclusion is, however, not a new concept. The World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO) have long focussed on this connection. Wallerstein (2006), in a paper commissioned by WHO, stated "empowerment of marginalized people [is] an important outcome in its own right, and also an intermediate outcome in the pathway to reducing health disparities and social exclusion" (p. 18). Bennett (2002), in a paper for the World Bank, explored empowerment and social inclusion as complementary concepts and key elements of a framework for bringing about social change.

In accord with the findings of this study, a comparative review of literature is now undertaken to position the process of *Becoming Empowered* within existing and relevant theories of empowerment, human and social capital and its relationship to social inclusion.

8.8 What is empowerment?

Contemporaneously, and to varying degrees across the globe, empowerment is hailed as a prominent paradigm in the quest to improve the health, political and economic status and social and emotional wellbeing of people who experience disadvantaged conditions in their lives (Fisher, 2008; Parpart, Rai & Staudt, 2003; Ratna & Rifkin, 2007; Tsey et al., 2007; Wallerstein, 2006; World Bank, 2008). Theories of empowerment have, over time, assumed different forms in different

contexts and across disciplinary fields. They are related to, and have been framed within, a number of concepts such as agency, gender equality, female autonomy, individual and psychological empowerment, wellbeing, leadership, self-efficacy and self-actualisation. Malhotra et al. (2002) insist that for purposes of clarity, women's empowerment may be distinguished by two defining characteristics; process, in the sense that it involves personal transformation; and agency, which positions women as actors in the process of change being observed. Empowerment theorist Williams (2005) supports Malhotra's et al. inference and asserts, "[a]gency, or women's exercise of power, is the one consistent element of the various definitions of women's empowerment" (p. 7). Clearly then, the findings of this study presented in the previous two chapters demonstrated that *Becoming Empowered* may well be conceptualised as a particular process of women's empowerment.

Empowerment is perceived by any number of theorists as a complex multi-level participatory process of changing power relations (Boehm & Staples, 2004; Darlington & Mulvaney, 2003; Freire, 1970, 1973; Gutierrez, 1990; Kaminski, Kaufman, Graubarth & Robins, 2000; Keiffer, 1984; Malhotra, Schuler & Boenda, 2002; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005; Parpart et al., 2003; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Tsey & Every, 2000; Wallerstein 1992, 2006;Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; World Bank, 2008; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998). Minkler and Wallerstein, (2005) view empowerment as "a social action process by which individuals, communities, and organizations gain mastery over their lives in the context of changing their social and political environment to improve equity and quality of life" (p. 34). Further, and more specifically, the process of empowerment "integrates perceptions of control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the socio-political

environment" (Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998, p. 4). Reflecting on women's empowerment, Kabeer (1999) indicated that it "entails a *process of change* […] by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (p. 437). Significantly however, it is important to take into consideration that, within these perspectives, "empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change […] [that] embodies a broad process that encompasses prevention as well as other goals of community connectedness, self-development, improved quality of life, and social justice" (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988, p. 380).

There were very specific ways in which empowerment theories were played out in the women's narratives of agency. Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) suggestions of empowerment as a process; as encompassing personal, social and political change; of being constituted within an imperative of self-determination and social justice; and of holding the specific aim of achieving a better quality of life is resoundingly apparent in the categorisations of the concepts which materialised through the grounded theory analysis of the women's narratives in this study. Indeed, the aggregate of the concepts identified by Minkler and Wallerstein submits to a well measured interpretation of *Becoming Empowered* to facilitate *Performing Aboriginality*. Notions of change, self-determination and social justice also found grounding in the broader Aboriginal political aspirations. Several important dimensions of the empowerment process may be gleaned from the interpretations prescribed above including the notion of empowerment as a process; attitudes and beliefs; personal, social and political change; mastery, control and choice; a critical understanding of the socio-political environment; conscientisation; and power and agency. Further to the already identified elements of the empowerment

process, this research discerned additional dimensions of empowerment. Supplementary were dimensions of spirituality and morality. These elements were included as salient influences upon how the women gave meaning to, viewed and acted in the world. The identification of these additional dimensions is acknowledged as significant in light of their contributions to the literature on empowerment.

8.8.1 The nature of power in empowerment

Wallerstein & Bernstein (1988) introduce an important insight regarding the nature of power in empowerment. To restate, they stress that "empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change" (p. 380). Wallerstein & Bernstein's proposition correlates with gendered perspectives on empowerment. For instance, Andrews (1996) distinguishes women's empowerment from that of more traditional androcentric notions of empowerment. She asserts:

> Their [women's] empowerment will take on a very different face from that of the dominating, exploiting, oppressive, authoritative power of the present day brokers of power […] Women are finding their power – becoming empowered – through co-operating, compassion, community, and competence. (pp. 2-3)

The latter notions of empowerment, referred to as co-operation, competence, compassion and community, finds much resonance with this study in the specific ways the women took to a very soft subtle pathway toward *Becoming Empowered* and was evidenced with much clarity in the signifying facet *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*. In that facet, the women demonstrated their repertoire of competencies and capacity to act

in accord with ethics and moral principles and by *assuming care and responsibility* for self and others, *standing in relatedness to others* and *reconciling self with environment*. In doing so they worked within relational discourses of morality, respect, care, responsibility and reconciliation. Thus, one might understand the power in empowerment as '*author*ity' rather than 'authority' as espoused by traditional conceptualisations of power. An emphasis on '*author*ship' *vis-à-vis* notions of traditional power *over*, as in 'authority', captures the significant need for the process to be self-determining and hold personal significance for the individual women by finding resonance with their ways of knowing, being and doing.

Darlington and Mulvaney (2003) developed their model of women's 'reciprocal empowerment' believing empowerment's root concept of power held little relevance to women. In their exposition of 'reciprocal empowerment', Darlington and Mulvaney challenge androcentric and Eurocentric conceptualisations of power and endeavour to eliminate notions of individual mastery and control. In doing so, their analysis emulates the thinking of Parpart et al. (2003) who refute the concept of traditional power (*power over*), instead arguing that "power is individual consciousness/understanding (*power within*), and its importance for collective action (*power with*) that can organize and exert *power to* challenge gender hierarchies and improve women's lives" (pp. 7-8). The significant message in Wallerstein & Bernstein, Darlington and Mulvaney and Parpart's et al. description of the nature of empowerment is not only that they refute the notion of attaining domination and *power over* others and things, but also that they insist that the power in empowerment is characterised by acquiring the power to engage 'with others'—relational power—to effect change. The notion of 'relational' power suggests

the building of relationships to achieve change, a point of some significance in this study given the centrality of relationships as a source of agency.

8.9 A framework of women's empowerment: resources, agency and achievements

Kabeer (1999) interprets women's empowerment as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices" (p. 437). Many attempts have been made to deconstruct the process to reveal its key constituent elements. To this end, in her conceptualisations of women's empowerment as the ability to exercise choice, Kabeer focuses on three interrelated and interdependent dimensions, "resources (pre-conditions); agency (process); and achievements (outcomes)" (p. 437). Resources refer not to only material resources, but also human and social resources; perhaps better conceived as enabling factors (Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2002). Agency, according to Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002), relates to the ability of women to participate in the change process as significant actors in that process. However, Kabeer asserts that agency is more than just observable action and stresses it also relates to "the meaning, motivation and purpose" (p. 438) individuals attach to their exercise of agency. The notion of agency, in terms of Kabeer's formulation, is concerned with the ability to make 'strategic' choices and is central to this thesis and to most conceptualisations of empowerment. Achievements, Kabeer suggests, are the results constituted by resources and human agency, a consequence of the empowerment process. Kabeer does not, however, explicate the causal relations between the three concepts but does consider them in relationship. This is just one way to conceive of the empowerment process; however, Kabeer's framework is influential upon the organisational principles in this discussion given its resonance with the process of *Becoming Empowered* by way of the

causal-consequence model developed in the grounded theory analysis of the women's narratives.

The deconstruction of the constituent parts of the process of *Becoming Empowered* (illustrated in Figure 8.1) is an ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment that is intrinsically regarded as a process of change. The figure shows the interconnectedness of resources, agency and achievements as it occurred for the participant women to achieve their core concern of *Performing Aboriginality.* The process itself is framed by the notion of 'choice'. The energies or power *to* make decisions and act emanate from *within* and *with* others (agency) and are derived from human and social capital identified as contributing to resources. Achievements indicate the outcomes of change in the process, which in turn feed back as resources. Each cycle serves to increase the women's resources, capabilities and effectiveness to act by expanding the availability and possibility of choice. In turn, opportunities to move from social exclusion to social inclusion are enhanced.

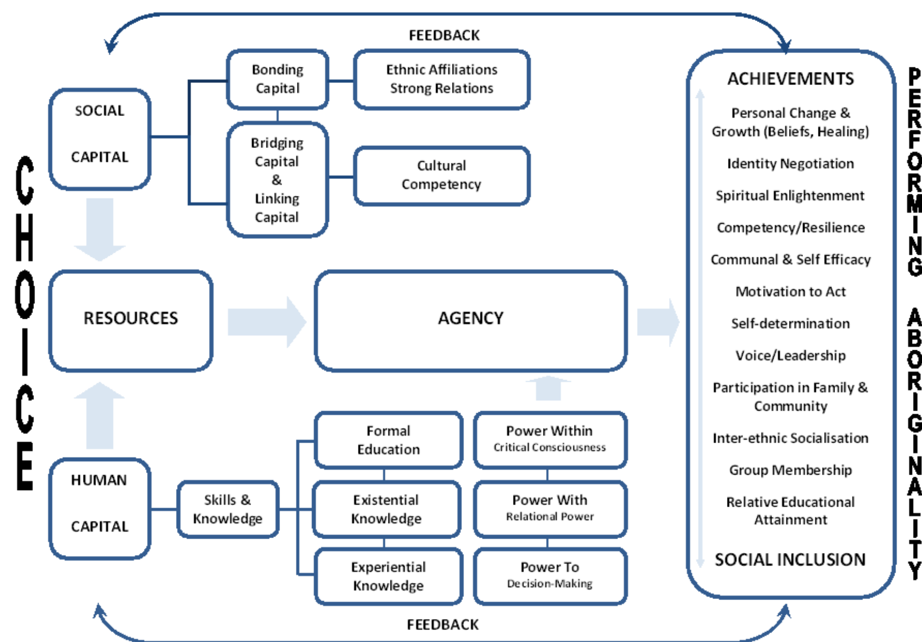

Figure 8.1 An ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment

8.9.1 Resources

The women participating in this study drew from a range of resources to facilitate agency in the process of *Becoming Empowered*. One way to conceptualise this reality can be found in notions of capital—human and social capital. Essentially, what the women were doing in *Becoming Empowered* was drawing on a base of knowledge and skills developed throughout life identified as experiential knowledge, formal knowledge and existential knowledge, and reaping the benefits (albeit at times not at a conscious level) of developing relations and networks; a mutually reinforcing interplay of building social and human capital and agency. Bourdieu's perspective on social capital, an analysis of power and structure, theorises the way in which people's access to resources shapes their position in life; a position that links to a contemporary focus on the social determinants of the health and wellbeing of individuals. Social capital, while it in no way submits to a simple definition, has been linked as a contributor to healthy societies and, in a general sense, may be understood as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Thus, building social capital and human capital is a way of interpreting the processes in which the women engaged in determining social resources for agency in *Becoming Empowered.* As such, a critical relationship should be recognised between having banks of human and social capital and its significance as a contributing factor of agency and thus *Becoming Empowered.* The sequences of building human and social capital and agency are illuminated in Figure 8.1 and the interplay between and nature of human and social capital can be seen in Figure 8.2.

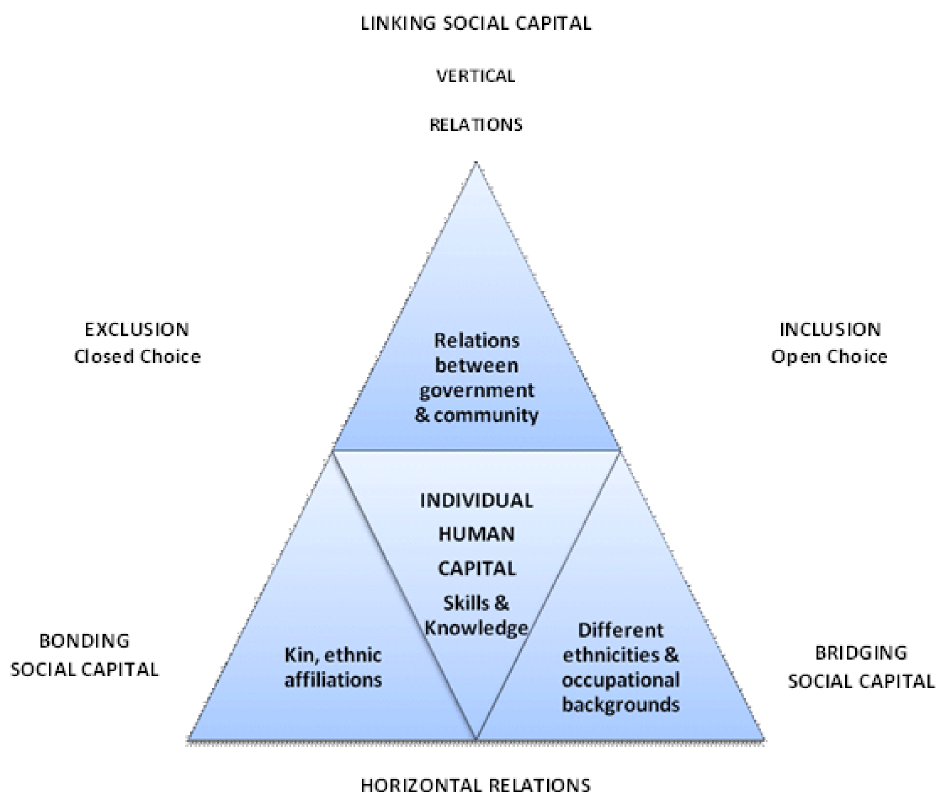

Figure 8.2 The interplay between and nature of human and social capital[3]

8.10 Exploring the interactive causal sequence of resources, agency and achievements

The expansion of the women's life choices emanated from resources that were identified as human and social capital. The salient elements of human capital were existential knowledge, education and experiential knowledge, while the components of social capital were viewed as ethnic affiliations, personal and social relationships and cultural competency. Strong linkages were evidenced between bonding capital and bridging and linking capital. In *'Seeking Authenticity'* the women came to know themselves and began building a knowledge base from which they could develop

[3] Adapted from Cullen and Whiteford, 2001

strategies to achieve their purpose in life. The third signifying facet, identified as *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*, revealed the behaviours and strategies the women used to go about accessing resources required to achieve their individual goals. These strategies were conceptually identified as *'building cultural competence'* and *'building a resilient identity'*. Primarily, the two sub-categories concerned the women's strategies of translation and adaptation of knowledge and the application of that knowledge to claim new realities and author new selves. It further documented the resources, skills and knowledge that supported their actions. *'Building a resilient identity'* revealed how strengthening factors in the women's lives were utilised to develop a spirit that not only confirmed their ability to recover and adjust to the changing circumstances of their lives but also showed how they became more resistant to negative influences and learned to reach out to others and available opportunities.

The women simultaneously built cultural competence and a resilient identity in the facet *'Authoring Narratives of Self'*. They sought the resources they required to achieve their individual purpose. They moved within and beyond their own boundaries accessing social supports and developing formal and informal relationships, knowledge, attitudes and skills and simultaneously expressed an imperative for building the capacity for assuming responsibility and care for self and others. For instance, the ability of the women to develop and use various kinds of social networks and the associated resources was documented in their narratives, as were the skills and knowledge upon which they were able to draw for this purpose. Illuminated was social cohesion as a coping/support mechanism. However, the women were aware that, in addition to their individual skills and knowledge, in order to gain any type of *author*ity and influence they would require alliances and support as resources to engage social action and achieve change. Hence,

while levels of group identification and affiliation provided important supports and protection for the women, these alone did not significantly predict movement toward empowering action. The women also invested in social networks that stretched beyond their immediate relations and, as a result, accessed other opportunities and effected change. This is not to say those relationships were built purely for the purpose of increased opportunities. To the contrary, the women noted the nature of their social relationships in their narratives and all women expressed formal and informal relations outside their ethnic group. Therefore, it is important to separate the development of these relationships and the benefits which the women derived from engaging in such relationships. What this means is that relationships of all kinds are important and healthy relationships are the foundations of a well-functioning society and, thus, at the heart of individual wellbeing.

8.10.1 Social capital

Social capital is useful in its interpretative power to understand the nature of the women's social networks and how those networks influenced the women's capacity to act and open up new opportunities. Investment in the concept of social capital, for its explanatory power, is also significant because it "can be measured and quantified so we can distribute its benefits and avoid its losses" (Cox, 1995, n.p.). A social capital interpretation also engaged an understanding of the significance of values evidenced in the process of *Becoming Empowering*, a concept that receives little attention in empowerment theories. Thus, social resources are viewed as social capital, which is broadly conceived as "*resources embedded in one's social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the networks*" (Lin & Harris, 2008, p. 51). Coleman (1990), and similarly Bourdieu (1986), attest that access to social relationships

provides a critical resource; otherwise unavailable through human and economic resources but influential upon those areas. This notion finds support in Batliwala's (1997) thinking whereby she urges the address of disadvantage to be considered holistically through a coalition of material, human and intellectual resources. An aggregate of indicators can be identified in the notion of social capital, including "'generalized social trust', membership in organizations, and norms such as reciprocity, cooperation and tolerance" (Foley & Edwards, 1999, p. 145) and values. It was through accessing social relationships and networks that the women were able to enhance their own position by capturing the resources available through forming those relations, for example, belonging, support, knowledge, power and values (Lin & Harris, 2008). These relations were built, nurtured and accessed within and across borders and, therefore, impacted the women's agency at different levels—the personal, social and political. For these reasons, implicated in the nature of the resources are three types of social capital—bonding, bridging and linking. The accumulated social trust that develops from building social capital allows individuals, "groups and organisations, and even nations, to develop the tolerance sometimes needed to deal with conflicts and differing interests" (Cox, 1995, n.p.). Thus, the relevance of building social capital, in all its forms, is of considerable interest for Aboriginal people living within the bounds of a colonial project. Further, in accord with existing literature and the findings of this research, higher stocks of social capital are known to improve quality of life and wellbeing (Cullen & Whiteford, 2001).

Bonding Capital

All of the women demonstrated strong bonding and bridging ties in their narratives and there was evidence of their utility. Bonding capital, in a general sense,

references those strong interpersonal relations that bring individuals and groups together. Bonding ties are characterised by high levels of trust, maintain solidarity in groups and are a primary source of support. Bonding ties were expressed throughout the women's narratives but held a specific focus in the sub-category of *'building a resilient identity'*. The women referred to a number of sources of social support that sustained them in life and included powerful ethnic ties, significant others including family, partners and friends and the church. These close bonding ties were confirmed as protective factors that enabled the women to cope with risk and to draw on in times of crisis. The corollary is that it promotes quality of life through mutual understanding and support (Healey, Hampshire & Ayres, 2003).

Ethnic Affiliations

Bourdieu (1986) understands social capital as:

> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (pp. 248-249)

He considers that access to capital, not human action, is central to shaping the social world. The findings of this study indicate that bonding ties in the form of 'group membership', that is, ethnic identification and affiliations, give meaning and purpose to the lives of the women and, further, within those same boundaries provide support, a

sense of belonging and the conditions in which to establish a strong sense of self as Aboriginal women. In turn, the women realised agency through ethnic affiliations. Bonding capital was also an important resource which the women drew on to build resilience. In this way, their sense of agency was derived from the 'power to' define and pursue their goals in accord with their ethnic affiliations—as *Aboriginal* women. In her study of ethnicity and empowerment, Gutierrez (1990) found significant evidence supporting the importance of ethnic identification and consciousness to engaging the process of empowerment for her Latino study population. In this context, she suggests that three key processes integrate to affect beliefs about the self in the process of empowerment. They include: (i) group identification, defined by the identification of common experiences, the preference for one's group and feelings of a shared fate; (ii) a group consciousness, shaped by the understanding of the differential status and power of social groups; and, (iii) self and collective efficacy, belief in the capacity of the self to affect changes in one's life and that of others. Gutierrez further impresses that group identification and group consciousness are insufficient as individual constructs to inform the development of self/collective efficacy, which in turn leads to agency, and, as such, are mutually reinforcing.

In the signifying facet *'Seeking Authenticity'* the women came to a deeper understanding of self, self in environment and self in history. Gutierrez (1990) refers to this process as part of realising a group consciousness. Group consciousness was difficult for many of the women to achieve early in their lives; there were, however, a few for which this task was much easier. For instance, for various reasons, some women did not achieve the balance of making ethnic identifications and affiliations until later life while others were afforded opportunities for acquiring an ethnic consciousness and

making ethnic identifications by being raised in highly political environments. This is an important point because, while the former group of women were able to make ethnic identifications, they lacked the opportunity to gain an understanding of the prevailing power relations in society and/or were disconnected from the group. In these instances, the integration of the two occurred later in life. Because opportunities were lacking for these women, a delay was evidenced in their capacity to fully engage in the process of *Becoming Empowered*. Even the temporary disconnection from the group, at times, broke the sequence of experiences connecting group affiliation and agency. For example, Jessie recalled her lack of direction and support when beginning employment in an area where she had no support from her ethnic group. She then noted that it was not until she contacted the Indigenous support unit at the university that she was able to become focussed again and found new expressions of agency. Conversely, the women who were familiar with their socio-political environment and whose integration of a group consciousness and identifications progressed with relative ease and was sustained; self-efficacy was experienced far more rapidly.

Nonetheless, it is important to be reminded that not all people have access to the same resources and that social structure and institutions also play a role in the possibilities and nature of identifications and affiliations. This notion is clearly evidenced in the women's narratives and, in part, accounts for why some of the women were availed to opportunity while others were not. Hence, attention needs to be paid to institutional power and practice; the relationship between structure and agency. Giddens (1991) highlighted the inadequacies in theories of structure and agency and proposed a dual perspective. He highlighted the interdependent and cyclic nature of the relationship between agency and structure; a cycle where agency determines structure, which, in

turn, determines the possibilities for the expression of agency, and so forth; a process of structuration. This notion resonates with the experiences of the women in this study in that structure imposed constraints but also provided resources and opportunities for the women's development. That is, while individuals shape structure, structure also determines what they can do. Therefore, those 'knowledgeable' individuals are provided the capacity to act in more creative ways. In this view, structure may be both enabling and constraining and people can act either in compliance with, or in resistance to, existing structures to influence the social world (Giddens, 1991). Human agency then, is commonly described as the capacity of individuals to act and impose those choices to influence the social world and has as its attributes knowledge, choice, self-determination, action and independence.

As supported by the women's developmental narratives, it is imperative that opportunities for acquisition of such knowledge are made available. Having opportunities to develop a group consciousness, maintain group affiliations and identify with one's ethnic group played a crucial role in *Becoming Empowered* and is attuned with Freire's (1970, 1973) proposition that the conscientisation of power relations that restrains freedom is a critical precursor to emancipatory change. The women highlighted the significance of their Aboriginality, in a way their sense of belonging, that underpinned all that they did.

Having highlighted how bonding ties within ethnic groups are sustaining and, indeed, generate agency, it should also be pointed out that these ties can also be constraining if allowed. Bree (participant) reminded us how groups can constrain:

> I would actually even have my own people say 'oh who do you think you are, you know, what, do you think you're better than us?', because you have chosen to go to university and educate yourself, they immediately set up barriers, you know, between me and them. **Bree (38: 361-364)**

Bree made ethnicity salient in the relationship but built a resilient identity by not only employing certain skills and behaviours at the confluence of inter-cultural discourses but also by negotiating intra-cultural differences by discerning the quality of different relationships and adopting altruistic behaviours. Bree's ability to choose to stand against cultural norms and expectations is itself a powerful illustration of agency. For this reason, it is also important to build a separate identity and have the security of drawing on a strong sense of self. In this sense, the constraints of the group can also be overcome through developing bridging and linking ties that allow for the development of new skills, knowledge, networks and ways of knowing, being and connecting to the world. This approach is supported by Kabeer (2001) who claims "[e]mpowerment entails a change in the terms on which resources are acquired as much as an increase in access to resources" (p. 20). The change to which Kabeer refers involves the 'power to', which represents the capacity of individuals to "define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others" (p. 438). Despite constraints, the space to make ethnic affiliations was an essential resource for all of the women and the provision of such spaces should be a prime consideration in any project involving Aboriginal people and, indeed, as a necessary resource for living.

Bridging and Linking Capital

Bridging capital are the ties formed with groups who share more or less common interests but with whom the same levels of closeness and trust that characterise bonding ties are absent. Similarly, linking capital is understood in terms of the building of alliances to formal institutions and those in positions of power (Healy et al., 2003)—vertical relations. For example, these ties may facilitate access to government and business sectors and require a certain level of trust in these systems (Healy et al., 2003). These alliances are formed across borders, linking the individual to outside networks. They are important in terms of the benefits they provide "to get ahead" (Healy et al., 2003, p. 3) in life in the sense that they can provide access to opportunities such as education, employment and training. For example, Andie reflected on how her employment opportunities were expanded through membership in processes and structures:

> … there was the department of community services [job], then from there I went to training co-ordinator, an A8 position in children's services and then I applied for and got an A9 job, and that was the training co-ordinator for the chief minister's department. **Andie (55: 305-308)**

For Andie, establishing bridging ties became an enabling factor in the empowerment process. She realised agency through this connection, which, in turn, led to certain achievements, for example, leadership. Significantly, this process also fed back to Andie's bank of human resources in the form of knowledge and skills. Likewise, these relationships also built the foundations upon which Andie was able to

develop vertical relations. This brings to mind Andie's work with government and industry partners in promoting and advocating on behalf of her own group.

At another level, Bree, in her narrative, talked about being mentored at university by White women; "a lot of the role models and women who encouraged me, were White Anglo-Saxon women, who were a lot more mature, a lot older" **Bree (38: 563-564)**. However, she still cited the critical role of bonding ties; "first and foremost, I had my family who supported and encouraged me, from behind the scenes with telephone calls each week" **Bree (38: 567-568)**. Bree relied on both groups for support to manage university life. Gracie, on the other hand, availed herself to new opportunities by forming alliances with others. She was drawn into attempting tertiary study by way of an existing, but not 'close', friendship.

As well as providing support and opportunities, outside networks were also recognised as protective factors. For instance, Jane reaped the benefits of her sister's relationships. She stated, "I was fortunate that my sister ran the schools, because she was a bit of an organiser of people; this is my younger sister; so nobody ever picked on me" **Jane (39: 39-41)**. This is an important insight into the relational nature of social capital and also indicates its unpredictable nature. Evidenced here is that, while Jane's sister built social capital to meet her own agenda, it also fulfilled another purpose for Jane. In determining the value of social capital, one must carefully consider its purpose and its costs and benefits.

Nonetheless, the women were able to leverage agency for their own benefit and their narratives showed how those benefits existing beyond their close bonding ties

were accessed. Thinking in terms of social capital has certain advantages unavailable when considering bonding capital or processes of empowerment. Close bonding relationships are dependent upon the capacity of the individual to nurture those relations and empowerment cannot be conferred upon another. However, clearly, reflecting on Jane's experience, bridging and linking social capital can be brokered on behalf of others if strong bonding ties exist between the broker and the group. The advantage here is that an entire group can begin to benefit from the horizontal ties of bridging capital and the vertical ties of linking capital, even if only a few in that group have that capacity to foster those relationships. Power in this sense is shared, never possessed and provides a window of understanding of ways that those people with less influence in society can open up possibilities and opportunities for change.

Vitally important for *Aboriginal* women in forming bridging and linking ties was their ability to adapt to "living in two worlds" **Bree (38:357-358)**. The women were able to manage the innate tensions of balancing two lifeworlds while simultaneously exhibiting a strong Aboriginal identity. It was a belief in their 'authentic' self and self-efficacy, along with unique knowledge of self in environment and self in history, that allowed this resolution to come to fruition. Therefore, alliances across borders were not only about gaining access to opportunities. They were also invaluable sources of knowledge and information to which the women had no previous access. Hill Collins (1990) accounts for this transference of outsider knowledge and defines it as the "outsider-within" (p. 11) perspective. She suggests that the outside location of women of colour in the labour market, together with an insider view on their own culture, provided a unique standpoint on self and society for those women. It is true that all of the women in this study participated in the labour market and had a high regard for

work ethic; this contributed to the process of *Becoming Empowered* in the form of experiential knowledge and which could also be identified as economic capital. Even so, by developing bridging and linking ties, Aboriginal women were enabled to occupy that unique standpoint through which they could learn to understand the dominant group's actions and ideologies. Zimmerman and Warschausky (1998) also talk about coming to "a critical understanding of the socio-political environment" (p. 4) as fundamental to enabling change in life. Using this position as a point of reference, the women in this study were also able to develop new knowledge and strategies by which to manage their own position in society for their own benefit and that of their inner group.

'Authoring Narratives of Self' recalled strategies that the women used to achieve these loose outside alliances. One woman explained how understanding the norms and values of her socio-political context enabled her to achieve goals:

> You have actually got to be able to operate as a part of the institution and to win some sort of recognition for the value of your contribution, rather than your contribution always only being over there for your own mob. **Anna (Elder: 511-513)**

Thus, social capital also had involved reciprocal expectations; a concept which is not estranged to Aboriginal ways of knowing. A number of other strategies were found to be effective in this engagement including very 'soft' strategic choices of action and interaction such as, *standing in relatedness to others, working with and for others*, *making changes*, *confronting and resolving problems, assuming responsibility and care,*

accepting difference, building and maintaining relationships, cultivating belonging, seeking harmony, seeking justice, working to empower others, reconciling self and environment, developing and maintaining relationships and *seeking harmony* to assist in *'building cultural competence and a resilient identity'*. To understand the goals of the strategic approaches adopted by the women, one Elder expressed "we'll have far more power if we're in the middle of this, where we can influence people, you can't influence people if you're shut out" **Anna (Elder: 481-483)**. The understanding and building of social relations across borders is what was described as *'building cultural competence'*. Anna clearly adhered to the notion that people achieve more through cooperation. This is one of the fundamental tenets underlying theories of social capital and intrinsic to women's ways of wielding power (Andrews, 1996). The capacity to achieve change, then, is in many ways dependent on the ability of individuals to have opportunities to interact with a broad spectrum of people and "build up a level of trust through positive rather than negative experiences" (Cox, 1995, n.p.). Cox (1995) drawing on Putnam's work on social capital explains that "[e]xperiences which engender trust and a recognition of common ground, allow people to move comfortably from the defensive 'I' to the mutual 'we'" (n.p.). This statement implies links to the notion of reconciliation; a concept advocated by the women in this study.

The Place of Identity in the Empowerment Process

Decisively, the benefits constituted by strong bonding ties and weaker bridging and linking ties were mediated by the women's agency, thus informing the nature of their achievements in the process of empowerment. These outcomes then fed back to resources, not only building on their stocks of knowledge and skills but, perhaps more significantly, producing and reproducing new identities. Boehm and Staples (2004),

drawing on a number of prominent theorists, indicate that personal empowerment is about "the way people think about themselves as well as the knowledge, capacities, skills, and mastery that they actually possess" (pp. 270-271). Thus, notions of identity are clearly caught up in any understanding of the empowerment process; a link also proposed by a number of feminist theorists over the years. In contrast, Brough et al. (2006), in their article on the connection between social capital and identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, contend that this relationship is both "conceptually and methodologically immature" (p. 399).

Butler's (1999) theories of performativity constitute a critical perspective in this study. Butler suggests "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender […] identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (p. 25). Simply, for Butler, gender is a performance; it is the effect of actions performed at particular times by the individual rather than an essential core self. Butler's theorising can be expanded beyond gender identity; it may also allude to the potential of individuals to re-invent myriad identities as indicated in the women's building of social capital.

Butler (1999), in her understanding of the 'performativity' of identities, takes the "social agent as an *object* rather than a *subject* of constituent acts" (p. 270). In other words, deeds or acts, be it language or actions, actively constitute the formation of our identities. Further, for Butler, there is no demarcation between the personal and political; indeed, she avers that even our most personal acts are determined by social conventions and ideologies. In this view, since social discourse rests upon continual re-enactment by subjects, discourse itself can be challenged by producing alternative acts.

Therefore, one can see from Butler's poststructuralist perspective, that *Becoming Empowered* cannot be engaged without action congruent with our 'authentic' selves.

Empowerment theorist Staples (1990) went as far as to suggest that "self-definition is the foundation, as well as the heart and soul, of any conceptualisation of empowerment" (p. 38). Research conducted by Saunders and Kashubeck-West (2006) found a positive relationship between feminist identity development, gender-role orientation and psychological wellbeing. The findings of Saunders and Kashubeck-West (2006) show strong support for the role of identity as a social determinant in developing the wellbeing of the individual. Similarly, the evidence in the findings of this study confirms a positive constructive relationship between the ethnic identity development of the women and engaging in the process of *Becoming Empowered*. Ethnic identifications of Aboriginality held a position of prominence in the women's narratives as giving positive meaning to their sense of self and agency. For example, the voice of one woman clarified this; "you know my Aboriginality has been my guiding force right from the beginning" **Meghan (66: 524-525).** Another woman expressed that her Aboriginality underpinned all that she did. Thus, this study identified a critical link between the ability to construct an ongoing narrative of self with personal relevance and meaning and engaging in the process of empowerment (Giddens, 1991). Likewise Bond (2007), who explored the nature of Aboriginal identity in an urban Aboriginal community, argues conclusively "that Aboriginality is a resource for living […] it is not simply a facet of wellbeing, but instead is analogous to wellbeing" (p. 155).

8.10.2 Human capital

It is clearly apparent that the women's agentic capacity was not independent of others and social structures. Rather, it was largely developed through social interactions and their ability to sustain those relationships. Theories of social capital offer an interpretative framework for understanding how differences in people's capacity to mobilise resources from social networks shapes what they can and cannot achieve in life. In tandem with these social resources, human capital, viewed as the stocks of knowledge and skills embodied in people and which, by nature, allows for epistemic flexibility, enhance people's capacity to mobilise resources (Lin, 2001). In this study, the women developed and drew on a range of valuable skills and knowledge that were viewed as enabling factors in the process of empowerment—existential knowledge, experiential knowledge and formal education.

All of the women invested considerably in human capital by attaining a formal education. As a result, the women were active participants in the socio-economic environment. They naturally improved their economic position and prospects of employment but education also fostered upward mobility and a range of other benefits. For example, as Aboriginal women, they were also enabled to contribute substantially to the wellbeing of self, their family, community and ethnic group. Hence, they were able to connect their own development to that of others. It is well documented in literature that human capital education and human development are closely linked and that educational attainment brings a host of benefits that have a positive flow-on impact on family life, such as ensuring their children are educated and increased health and wellbeing. Existential knowledge and experiential knowledge were unique to each

individual woman's circumstances but, nevertheless, contributed to the banks of skills and knowledge bestowed upon them.

8.10.3 Agency: choice as control

Common to the theorising of both Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) and Zimmerman and Warschausky (1998) are notions of mastery and control. While these theorists spoke of individuals integrating perceptions of control and mastery into their lives, the women in this study talked about having the ability to choose, that is, to be self-determining and live a life of their own choosing. For example, one of the younger women, Amanda, specifically noted that, because of the enduring experiences of colonisation in the lives of her family, she was indeed the first to experience freedom of choice and live a life of her own choosing. She further acknowledged the struggles of her Ancestors in fighting for that freedom. Shae, as did many of the other women, also referenced the many educational opportunities now available to which they previously had no access. Shae said of the younger generation; "like what they got now, everything's in front of them" **Shae (46, 172)**. All of the other women made mention of opportunities previously denied but to which they now had access. Thus, the women viewed choice as control. Amanda's words showed the interchange of the terms power, choice and control:

> I'm in a position where I have almost complete power over my life and what goes on in it. I am always mindful of others in my life, but if I chose not to be tomorrow I could do whatever I wanted, no one would stop me. The only thing I can't control is the actions other people take that will affect me and my life.
> **Amanda (20: 309-312)**

What is apparent is that, when she spoke of power and control, she was indeed referencing choice.

The women's focus on the "expansion of freedom of choice and action" (World Bank, 2002, p. 11) is consistent with the broad definition of empowerment advanced by the World Bank and Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment, viewed as "the expansion of women's life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (p. 437). Kabeer qualifies choice further by stating that choice must be "made from the vantage point of real alternatives" (p. 460) or in the absence of "punishingly high costs" (p. 460). The terms on which access to resources is achieved is just as important as the resources themselves (Kabeer, 1999).

Kabeer (1999) suggests that empowerment cannot be attained by those who were not disempowered in the first instance. To qualify the notion of 'disempowerment' or 'relative powerlessness' the interpretation of Solomon (1976) is proposed. Solomon's conceptualisation suggests that 'powerlessness' is "the inability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge, and/or material resources in a way that effective performance of valued social roles will lead to personal gratification" (Solomon, 1976, p. 16). For those motivated toward change, this initiating point of departure connotes fluidity and movement. Supporting this notion of temporality, empowerment theory submits that the state of powerlessness can be surpassed by individuals because deficits are not located within the individual themselves. Rather, individuals are located in a position of powerlessness because society fails to adequately meet the needs of all population groups (Gutierrez, 1990). Because the deficit is with society, all people have potential

for positive change. Therefore, powerlessness is but a ‘position’ that shifts and changes as people move through the empowerment process.

In this sense, the women in this study, at various times in their lives, experienced relative powerlessness. Nevertheless, they made themselves available to ‘real’ opportunities of choice, often by taking up, for example, further education and also by increasing their choices through their own strategic actions and behaviours—meaningful choices. Conversely, two of the women, Leila and Millie, spoke of taking on choices made in the face of no ‘real alternatives’. Both women spoke of rekindling abusive relationships to fulfil the fundamental human need of love. While in both cases the relationships degenerated into abuse again, and this type of choice can obviously not be seen as an ‘empowering’ choice, the women demonstrated agency in their capacity to make the choice to leave—‘a real alternative’. This highlights the contextual nature of the empowerment process and the inherent contradictions experienced within that process. Nonetheless, the notion of having available real opportunities and choices is significant because, as Wallerstein (2006) insists, “[w]ith new opportunities socially excluded populations have the capacity to move beyond their restricted life conditions” (p. 17).

Fundamental to formulating choice is the notion of agency and its manifestations in the effort to exert power to achieve social change, that is, the *power within*, a critical moral consciousness; the *power with*, relational power; and the *power to*, decision-making (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002; Parpart et al., 2003). For Aboriginal women residing in a colonial world, viewing the nature of power in this way means that it is not the exclusive utility of dominant groups and, thus, can be employed by those

who strategically seek it in relation to social and self-transformation. Having considered the two latter formulations of power, the *power within* is now discussed as it evolved in this study.

The Development of a Critical Moral Consciousness

In this study, the women were involved in specific processes of inner transformations, of coming to a critical, moral and ethnic consciousness and identity-building process which enabled them to not only choose the conditions of their lives but also to become self-defining subjects and behave in accord with their own expectations and beliefs; a point supported by Kabeer (1999). Thus conceived, the process of empowerment held personal relevance for those involved in the process of change. The development of a critical consciousness is a concept cited across much of the empowerment literature as a vital and, indeed, essential component of the empowerment process (Freire, 1970, 1973; Gibson, 1995; Gutierrez, 1990; Keiffer, 1984; Parpart et al., 2003; Summerson Carr, 2003). Similarly, feminist scholars often describe this process, among others, as ‘raising consciousness’.

Conscientisation

The development of a critical consciousness is preceded by ‘conscientisation’, a concept introduced by Brazilian educator Freire (1970). It is

> an ongoing process by which a learner moves toward critical consciousness. This process is the heart of liberatory education. It differs from ‘consciousness raising’ in that the latter may involve transmission of preselected knowledge. Conscientization means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new

> levels of awareness—in particular, awareness of oppression, being an "object" of others' will rather than a self-determining 'subject'. The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming part of the process of changing the world. (Goldbard & Adams, 2006, p. 115)

The process of 'conscientisation' was prominent in the women's narratives. As a point of reference, Bree's story of realising racism and her subsequent processes of self-reflection combined with her formal knowledge of history was highlighted in the *'Seeking Authenticity'* while Anna's story provided a succinct version of the strategies she used to 'become part of the process of a changing world'. What is important to reinforce, here, is that self-reflection, knowledge and dialogue are interdependent constructs in coming to a critical consciousness. Living within a colonising project and understanding the inherent power relations of their existence enabled the women to reconsider their options and construct identities and realities irrespective of the dominant forces.

Following this line of thought, Freire concedes that conscientisation is the key to the liberation of the individual; the critical reflexive precursor to becoming empowered. Closely emulating his philosophy, Parpart et al. (2002) provide a succinct interpretation of Freire's libratory theorising. They understand conscientisation as the '*power within'* and a necessary antecedent in bringing about socio-political change "both individual conscientization (*power within*) as well as the ability to work collectively which can lead to politicized *power with* others, which provides the *power to* bring about change" (p. 4). However, as Parpart et al. infer, the source of this process lies *within* the

individual and involves a relational journey toward change. This perception of seeking change played out strongly in the women's narratives of agency. For instance, in the performative facet *'Capturing Autonomy'*, the women worked with and to empower others and enlisted the support of others in their quest to fulfil their role and responsibilities as Aboriginal women.

Further clarification around the concept of conscientisation is required given its place of prominence in the study. Understanding the nature of conscientisation, as espoused by Freire, also provides an interpretation that assists in locating the position of morality and spirituality in the process of *Becoming Empowered*; two elements that have received little, if any, attention in theories of empowerment but identified in the signifying facet *'Seeking Authenticity'*. It should be noted that the application of Freire's theory of conscientisation represents a humble beginning to conceptualising the two dimensions of morality and spirituality and considerable scope for further exploration is evident.

Freire (1985) explains that conscientisation is fluid, dynamic and unpredictable. It occurs as "a process at any given moment" (p. 107), enables humans to expand current knowledge and is a fundamental "requirement of our human condition" (p. 55). Thus, conscientisation has "ontological, epistemological and educational dimensions" (Roberts, 2007, p. 513). Similar to the existential questions the women asked of themselves in *'Seeking Authenticity'*, conscientisation "involves seeking to know oneself, others and the world" (p. 513). However, Freire understands 'knowing' in the deepest sense of the term. It engages one's entire being "with feeling, willing and action as well as with reason" (Roberts, 2007, p. 513) and thus demands ethical and political

commitment; a cultivation of critical awareness and *conscience* (Roberts, 2007). Even so, conscientisation involves much more than engaging in reflection and action to bring about social change. Indeed, reflection and action are deeply intertwined and highly subjective given their ontological and epistemological premise.

It is here that the emergent theory of *Becoming Empowered* extends existing theories of empowerment. Despite advancing a far more complex understanding of the concept of conscientisation, the focus of much theorising of Freire's work lies predominantly with the individual's 'discovery' of socio-political realities. Nevertheless, he did explore the place of human conscience, including morality and ethics, in the process of conscientisation. Along with developing a group consciousness, spirituality, ethical conduct and morality were identified in this study as being constitutive of '*Seeking Authenticity*'. This research suggested that a spiritual sense of self, moral stance and humane values were integral elements in the process of conscientisation and, thus, to *Becoming Empowered.* Further, in a world of social interaction, such grounding held the women in good stead in relationships with others and the world. Methodologically, this highlights the criticality of linking micro level analysis to meso and macro level theorising. Thus, any study of the individual cannot be conducted isolated from the social and political milieu in which people function.

'*Seeking Authenticity*' closely emulates the moral responsibility, ethical and political assumptions represented in Freire's interpretation of conscientisation and some feminist interpretations of women's empowerment. This is, however, omitted in theories of empowerment. Feminist theorist Gilligan (1982) suggests that most women tend to develop towards a morality of care and responsibility and not only do so by ascertaining

and conforming with an ordered set of highly differentiated rules but also by aspiring to "a vision of concerned involvement with others while respecting oneself" (Tietjens Meyers, 2004, p. 96). Tietjens Meyers (2004), contemporary feminist theorist, argues that resolving tensions in this way "people progress to higher stages of development […]. In short, they have become morally self-governing and hence free" (p. 97). This progressive transformation may well be considered as mirroring the personal transformation of the women in this study.

Still, one must also enquire as to the utility of conscientisation in the empowerment process or if it is indeed a similar concept. The value of conscientisation according to Zimmerman (1995) is that individuals gain an understanding of their community and socio-political issues. This, in turn, enables awareness of their "behavioural options or choices to act as they believe appropriate to achieve goals they set for themselves" (p. 589). Still, individuals must be able to understand the norms and values of their particular socio-political context so that they may identify, access and manage the resources needed to achieve their individual goals and gain an understanding of factors that potentially inhibit or enhance their efforts to influence their socio-political environment (Zimmerman, 1995). This task is further complicated for Aboriginal people who often experience social exclusion in one form or another.

Despite their earlier experiences of social exclusion, the women who shared their stories in this study demonstrated a highly developed understanding of their socio-political environment. This understanding was achieved, in the most part, through *'witnessing'* (formal and informal mentoring relationships, opportunistic observations of behaviours, role-modelling and past memories) and formal education. Davies (2000)

sheds more light on how individuals come to understand their socio-political contexts. She writes on the articulation of agency and insists that people are spoken into existence by the various discourses in which they engage. These are the same discourses that impose limitations to the subject positions and ideologies made available. Thus, for change to occur, it is necessary to become "speaking subjects aware of the different ways in which we are made subject, who take up the act of *author*ship, of speaking and writing in ways that are disruptive of current discourses" (Davies, 2000, p. 66). The 'disruption' to which Davies refers is highlighted in the theories of empowerment and identified as the process of conscientisation.

The significant points to be made are that, firstly, to 'disrupt' discourses, one must engage with those discourses through social relations. Also, it is pertinent to note that 'awareness' leads to the development of new knowledge about the self and also a new formulation of knowledge about structures and systems. New strategies can then be developed and activated based on this knowledge. Hence, the holding of new knowledge enables movement from object to subject and, according to Summerson Carr (2003), "affects the position of agents in terms of their ontological positions and self-conceptions" (p. 18). Thus, the move toward new realities and ways of being in the world and aspiring to sustainable change becomes a complex cyclic process of empowerment.

The women's narratives showed how the historical, socio-political and cultural contexts in which they experienced the world contributed to the specific ways they experienced the process of *Becoming Empowered.* By engaging in a process of conscientisation, they were able to move from relative powerlessness to become self-

determining subjects. Conscientisation, for the participants, was facilitated through opportunities of knowledge acquisition, through both formal and informal avenues, engaging in dialogue with others and a process of reflection and action. In light of acquiring new and relevant knowledge, or *'witnessing'*, the women were enabled to better understand and re-interpret their position in the world and, in particular, those structures and discourses that were enabling and constraining. As a result, they began to conceive of alternate realities and subject positions and, thus, possibilities for agency and new identities and subjectivities.

It was in the facet of *'Seeking Authenticity'* that the ways in which this study extends existing theories in empowerment were significantly expanded. *'Seeking Authenticity'* was identified as a spiritual journey because the individual women gave it existential meaning by calling in moral responsibility, personal values and constituting new perceptions of self. Additionally, by incorporating these meanings into their repertoire of identity attributes, a belief in self-efficacy emerged for the women. Belief in self-efficacy, according to Bandura (2000) is the foundation of human agency because "it affects behavior not only directly, but by its impact on other determinants such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perception of impediments and opportunities in the social environment" (p. 75). In addition to praxis, defined by Freire (1970) as an iterative process combining social action and reflection, I argue that, because the women demonstrated such a strong belief in self-efficacy that was grounded in their very ways of knowing, being and doing in the world, the sustainability of the process of empowerment was enhanced to the point that it propelled toward social change.

8.11 Achievements

While the intended focus of this research was the process inherent in the performance of agency for Aboriginal women, a number of social, cognitive, emotional, behavioural and psychological achievements were identified as consequential to the process of *Becoming Empowered.* These achievements depict the pathways identified in their attainment. Nevertheless, empowerment has its critics, which, in the most part, hone in on its seemingly individualistic nature. Speer (2000) criticised empowerment for being "overly individualistic and conflict-oriented, resulting in an emphasis on mastery and control rather than co-operation and community" (p. 58). Notions of a focus on mastery and control in this research were dispelled earlier in this chapter and shifted the emphasis to 'choice as control'. The achievements identified in this research attest to the value of personal empowerment in a gendered Aboriginal context that reaches far beyond self-centred individualism. Firstly, the process of *Becoming Empowered* is characterised as relational. Secondly, the underlying belief systems supporting the actions of the women in this study, for example, the conceptually referenced *assuming responsibility and care* for self and others, promoted, as also found by Bandura (2000), "a prosocial orientation characterized by cooperativeness, helpfulness and sharing" (p. 77). This orientation directly correlates with, and supports, Aboriginal values. Gracie, like the other women, explicitly confirmed this in her narrative; "that's the Aboriginal way, you help other people, you don't look down on other people, you don't judge you just; everyone's equal" **Gracie (42:15-16)**.

Other studies of empowerment also report successful outcomes for participants partaking in empowerment programs in an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander context, noting outcomes categorised under social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural

level. For instance, the evaluation of a ten-year community research strategy focussed on empowerment, the Family Wellbeing Program, demonstrates that the program facilitated the "capacity to regain social and emotional wellbeing and begin to rebuild the norms of their families and communities" (Tsey et al., 2007). Thus, empowerment at the individual level has proved to also profoundly impact the welfare of families and communities.

8.12 Synthesis

As Aboriginal women, we continue to hold close to our cultural traditions and roles, simultaneously balancing and evolving along with the socio-cultural and political environment in which we live. The process of *Becoming Empowered* involves the complex building of relationships and social networks to use as resources in conjunction with individual banks of skills and knowledge. To function within a process of empowerment is to demonstrate behaviours and patterns of thinking that support notions of the spiritual, ethnic and ethical self, awareness of self in environment and history, knowledge acquisition, participatory action, cultural competence and self-determination. These mechanisms afford individuals expanded horizons of choice and opportunities to acquire skills to become competent decision-makers, develop their agentic capacities and manage and mobilise resources. This study, similar to the theorising of Zimmerman (1995) and Zimmerman and Warschausky (1998) on empowerment, reports that the process of *Becoming Empowered* is defined by intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural components. Integral to the process of *Becoming Empowered* is that the women made strategic life choices. The women's agency propels those choices toward outcomes of positive change in their lives and the lives of others. Critically important in achieving change is the ability to draw on

extrinsic and *intrinsic* resources (Batliwala, 1997). The building of social relations accounts for how the women were enabled to have real alternatives available to them from which to choose. A repertoire of strategies or actions creates new subjectivities and new subject positions from which to operate. The process is underpinned by a spiritual sensibility and guided by an ethic of morality and justice.

The conceptualisation of Aboriginal women's performance of agency as a specific process of empowerment highlights that there are a number of dimensions and considerations to be taken in account. The process should be seen as:

- being grounded in a spiritual sensibility and directed by moral responsibility
- a gendered perspective on empowerment
- operating at the individual level, however, influenced by and influencing the community and organisational levels
- recognising the critical mediating role of bridging and linking capital in the development of cultural competency and its significance to *Becoming Empowered*
- recognising the crucial role of developing a critical, moral and ethnic consciousness in contributing to personal and social change
- recognising the mediating role of bonding, bridging and linking social capital (networks of relations) in the production and reproduction of identities
- identity-building
- a time-oriented process, indeed a lifelong learning process that develops differently and at different paces depending on the opportunities available to individuals
- recognising the significance of ethnic identifications and affiliations

- both a process and an outcome
- requiring intrinsic and extrinsic resources.

Methodologically, considerations should be made about:

- the interdependence of agency and structure, which indicates that any study of the individual cannot be conducted in isolation from the social and political milieu in which people function.

8.13 A new agenda: a response to social exclusion

It was my aspiration that this research would stimulate new dialogue and act as a catalyst for change in the effort to improve the personal, socio-economic and political conditions and status of Aboriginal people in Australia. The implications of this study are framed as insights that prompt conversations into a response to the social exclusion of Aboriginal people.

'Being Aboriginal' has inherent implications of social exclusion in a colonised context. Simultaneously, this study showed that security also lay with maintaining a coherent Aboriginal identity, and as such, programs, policies and educational and employment institutions need to consider positive support mechanisms for nurturing difference. Paramount is the need for such inclusions in parenting programs and early childhood education.

Illustrated in the findings were the complexities of life for Aboriginal women. The findings of the study confirmed substantial differences in the way Aboriginal

women negotiated power in their lives and that identified in the vast majority of literature on the process of empowerment. This then raises awareness that context matters; that the ‘one size fits all’ approach is irrelevant for application in Aboriginal contexts.

The basic social psychological process of *Becoming Empowered* sheds new light on the creative ways in which Aboriginal women ‘disrupt’ discourses and perform alternate modes of existence. By taking these processes into consideration, the findings of this study have implications for improving quality of life by informing the practical development of social and health policies and interventions that resonate with Aboriginal women’s ways of knowing, doing and being. However, it would antithetical to the meaning of empowerment and self-determination to prescribe interventions that are not flexible and tailored so that they hold meaning for, and are valued by, those for whom they are developed.

Quite apparent in the study was that the women viewed ‘control’ in life as the expansion of ‘choice’. Therefore, an urgent need exists to support those ‘choices’ as determined by Aboriginal women themselves. This has important implications for practice, program development and policy-making that will require ongoing consultation and negotiation with Aboriginal women.

In the 1995 Boyer lectures, Cox urged governments to spend on social capital. She argued that it was the responsibility of governments “to provide social structures that foster trust, reciprocity and cooperation, while also valuing diversity and egalitarianism” (Cox, 1995, n.p.). Similarly, the findings of this study certainly suggest

that initiatives centred on building stronger bonding and bridging relationships may well promote further opportunities for agency in an Aboriginal context and contribute to the nation's agenda on Reconciliation.

Empowerment theory advocates that change cannot be imposed upon the individual and neither can one confer empowerment upon another. These theoretical perceptions were endorsed in the findings of this study. The imposition of culturally unsafe policies and programs has, in the past, done little to 'close the gap'. To encourage and hasten the progress of social change for Aboriginal people it is suggested that the principles of self-determination are upheld in the implementation of policies and programs.

The findings indicated that the larger proportion of the women in this study took up opportunities relatively late in life. Those women who had opportunities to develop their capacity available at a young age were better positioned to make choices at an early age. Thus, there is an imperative stressed in the findings of the study to support early intervention programs for children to enhance their opportunities in life. For example, policies and programs are needed that facilitate the expansion of 'choice' and enhance 'control' from an early age by the inclusion of specifically tailored guiding philosophies and curriculum in primary health care and childcare facilities, pre-schools and primary schools is recommended, as well as including these guiding principles for practical implementation in parenting programs and the helping professions.

Coming to a critical consciousness was fundamental to enabling movement from thought to action for the women participating in the study. For this reason, it is strongly

recommended that Aboriginal people, and children in particular, are enabled to not only understand the oppressive history of the circumstances that informed their position in life but to also understand how this is embedded in culture and social structures. This is not to promote ‘victim mentality’; rather, its focus is to remove the burden that Aboriginal people’s position in life is their fault, their lot in life, and that they are incapable of change. Equally significant is that the rest of Australian society understands the history of the prevailing relations and contemporary position of Aboriginal people; not to ascribe new meanings to Aboriginal people as victims of patriarchy and colonisation but so that awareness leads to a more equal distribution of power in society and practice. Historical curriculum is a necessary inclusion for all students, from pre-school to tertiary level. However, development and delivery of this history requires careful consideration. Educational processes are also required for individuals and communities as an opportunity to understand social processes.

Social networks are an important resource for developing capabilities and resilience in individuals. As such, social policies and programs should be directed toward building networks at various levels—bonding, bridging and linking ties.

Equally important in the process of *Becoming Empowered* are the human resources the women accessed to enhance their abilities for making strategic life choices. Attention to education is needed, particularly in vocational and lifelong learning opportunities.

Evidenced in this study is that improving women’s socio-economic status will improve the overall socio-economic situation of family and community. A specific

focus on Aboriginal women's empowerment is required. As one of the fundamental aims of this research was to inform pro-social development for all Aboriginal women, the conduct of community forums and more open discussion of the findings can be suggested as a possible pathway to beginning to achieve the reality of that benefit.

8.14 Recommendations for further research

This study identified the multidimensional process of Aboriginal women's performance of agency across their life spans. The findings add a gendered ethnic standpoint to the extant literature and contribute a new perspective on ways of addressing social exclusion. In light of the significant contributions of this study, a number of recommendations for further research were evident and are now summarised.

The research was restricted to urban-dwelling women and, as such, further research may be considered with more diverse populations. There may be value in conducting research with Aboriginal women, residing in remote settings, and Aboriginal men to evaluate points of convergence and divergence within the existing research findings to promote deeper understanding of the empowerment process.

The focus on Bourdieu's approach to social capital, specifically its analysis of power and structure as it enhances and constrains the capacity of individuals to achieve quality of life, contributed to explicating the ways the women accessed social resources, the nature of those resources and how they used them. The link between social capital and empowerment is most certainly worthy of further exploration, particularly given the contemporary shift toward understanding the social determinants of health and wellbeing by international organisations, such as the World Bank and the World Health

Organization. Closer to home, a similar shift is seen at conventions such the 2008 Fulbright Symposium, *Healthy People Prosperous Country,* held in Adelaide and in relatively recent publications like *Beyond bandaids: exploring underlying social determinants of Aboriginal health* (Anderson, Baum, Bentley & Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2007).

According to Brough et al. (2006), studies into the connection between identity and social capital are conceptually and methodologically immature. Similarly, based on the findings of this study, further investigation of this connection is warranted.

The role of spirituality and morality is a significant omission in empowerment literature. According to the findings of this study, further research, focussed on gaining a deeper understanding of the role of spirituality and morality in the process of empowerment, is needed.

Given the significant contribution of social capital as an enabling resource in the process of Aboriginal women's empowerment, further research is undoubtedly required to understand this dynamic. Given the dynamic between agency and structure, it is also necessary to acknowledge the differences in the capacity to access such resources.

A narrative approach to theory and method in this research convincingly complemented the participant women's inherent ways of knowing, being and doing in the world and proved to be rich and productive. As such, this approach validates the research methodology and methods used in this study and can be recommended for further use, particularly in Aboriginal contexts.

8.15 Ponderings

A comprehensive ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment was identified in the study. It showed that adversity can be overcome and posited that agency mediated the relationship between socio-political context and *Becoming Empowered*. I am both burdened and elated by the research. Burdened because, on reflection, I would like to return and conduct the research differently given the huge personal and professional growth I have experienced; elated because I view the research not as an ending, but as an exciting new beginning in the implementation of this cutting edge theory of empowerment that has enormous potential to contribute to personal, social and political change for Aboriginal people.

Cast All Imaginations sought out, listened to and documented the voices of twenty Aboriginal women; it was a privilege to accompany the participant women en route to achieving their goal of *Performing Aboriginality*, which was facilitated by the process of *Becoming Empowered* – their ways of transcending survival and flourishing in life. It is incumbent upon me as the researcher to engage research transfer (Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAH), 2006). The time has now come to feel the reverberation of *Umbi's* voices in expressions beyond the written word.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics		Number of Women
Age	18 – 25	2
	25 – 35	3
	35 – 45	7
	45 – 55	5
	55 – 65	1
	65+	1
	Elder	1
Educational Level	Year 10 or below completed	2
	Year 12 completed	16
	Certificate or Diploma only (TAFE)	8
	University Degree	12
	Postgraduate Completion	3
	Currently Studying	16
Children	Yes	17
	No	3
Partnered	Yes	8
	No	12
First Language English	Yes	20
	No	0
	Speak Language	1
Position/Role	Paid	17
	Unpaid	3
	Current Board Position	7

Appendix B

Participant Information Package

All interviews will be carried out in strict confidence and will be used solely for academic purposes. A copy of the interview transcript and analysis will be returned to you for your own records. The interview transcripts will be stored in lockable storage, without names or any other details which may identify you, so that your participation remains in the strictest of confidence.

Through the interview, I want to understand how you came to be the woman you are today.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

So to begin, could you tell me a little bit about yourself?
Who are your people?
How old are you?
Are you married? Children?
What position do you hold?
What level of education have you achieved?
What is your sexual orientation?
What language/s do you speak?
What religious/spiritual beliefs do you hold?

GROWING UP
Where did you grow up?
How were you raised?
Can you tell me about your family and your relationship with family members?
What values were instilled in you as a child?
Does your family keep Aboriginal traditions or rituals?
How would you describe your childhood? What was it like for you growing up?
What your neighbourhood like?
Where did you family fit in your neighbourhood?
What kind of school did you attend?
What was it like for you at school?
Who were your friends at school?
Can you tell me about your adolescent years?
Can you describe any particular problems you experienced growing up?
Can you describe an event that made you particularly happy when you were growing up?

TODAY

What are the cultural backgrounds of your friends?
How important is it for you to maintain friendships and social relationships with Aboriginal people?
What importance do you place on your career/work?
What motivated you to achieve the position you hold today?
What importance do you place on your personal relationships/family relationships?
What is the single most important aspect of your life?
Do have any specific political beliefs you would like to share?
An older person or mentor is often very important in shaping the lives of people by providing guidance and encouragement. Could you explain if this is true for you?
In what environment do you feel most comfortable?
Where do you draw your strength and inspiration from?
Do you recall a time that was pivotal in shaping the direction of your life today?
Many people act out set of beliefs which dictate choices. It may be religion or politics or a personal philosophy. Do you act in accordance with any beliefs or philosophies on life?
What do you believe has assisted you in becoming the person you are today?

YOURSELF

What does Aboriginal identity mean to you?
If I asked "who are you?" what comes to mind, how would you describe yourself?
What do you believe are the most important aspects of who you are?
How do you think others see you?
Are you comfortable with who you are? Or are there aspects of yourself you would like to change? If yes what?
Do you feel you conform to others expectations of you, or are you your own person?
You identify as an Aboriginal woman, what meaning does that hold for you?
How do you view and define your role as an Aboriginal woman?
What visions do you have for yourself?

Thank you. Do you have any other comments you wish to make? Or any questions of me?

INFORMATION PAGE

Project title: Cast All Imaginations: Sisters Speak
Introducing myself: My name is Roxanne Bainbridge. I am a descendent of the Gungarri/Kunja/Wadjalang people from Western Queensland. I am a PhD candidate researching a project grounded in the life experiences of Aboriginal women. My research is conducted through the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University in Cairns.

Researcher: I am the principal investigator of this research project. Should you have any questions relating to the research project, I can be contacted at James Cook University on (07) 40421730 or Mobile 0403047690. Alternately, my supervisors, Associate Professor Sue McGinty can be contacted at the School of Indigenous Australian Studies (Townsville) on (07) 47814642, or Felecia Watkin-Lui at the School of Indigenous Australian Studies (Cairns) on (07) 40421044.

Research Project: The project will examine the process evidenced in becoming a strong woman. Specifically, the research will explore how Aboriginal women have developed experiences of self, how they perceive of themselves as Aboriginal women, and how their experiences and perceptions affects their conduct in contemporary Australian society. The research question asks – what are the lived experiences of Aboriginal women in finding voice in contemporary Australian society?

The Participants: Up to 40 Aboriginal women throughout Australia will be invited to participate in the project. Initially, I selected those individuals I know. I plan to network to find other participants for the study. Your privacy will be protected at all times, and you will not be asked to provide anyone's personal contact details. However, you may be asked to pass on the details of the project to potential volunteers, who may then contact me directly if they are interested in the study.

Confidentiality: The protection of your confidentiality and privacy is very important. I will not use your actual name or other identifying information in the project report and any other material without obtaining your permission. You will be made aware that because research participants belong to a distinct group, it is impossible to ensure the protection of your identity, but confidentiality will be maintained on all accounts. You can ask to remain anonymous or request the use of a false name. I will ask your permission to allow anyone else to listen to your audiotape or read your transcript.

What you and I will be talking about: The research explores issues shaping the lives of Aboriginal women, and the ways in which they are reclaiming positive and powerful images of themselves. As the researcher, I will be asking questions about issues relating to your life experiences. Specifically I will ask questions about:

- Your background;
- How you grew up;
- Your role and status in your community;
- Transformative life experiences;
- Your relationships;
- Your issues and concerns.

There are no right and wrong answers to the questions; I would just like to hear your stories. The initial interviews will take approximately 1-2 hours, and depending on the outcome, a follow-up interview of the similar duration. The interview/s will be in person. The interview will be audio-taped with your permission. You will be free at any time to withdraw your participation from the project for whatever reason.

Counselling Service: Your physical and mental safety will be a priority during this research. Should you become distressed for any reason during or after the research process, culturally appropriate counselling will be made available.

Human Ethics Sub-Committee: Should you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of the research project, you may contact the Ethics Administrator. Contact details are: Tina Langford, Ethics Administrator, Research Office, James Cook University, Townsville. Qld. 4811. Phone: (07) 4781 4342 Fax: (07) 4781 5521 Email: Tina.Langford@jcu.edu.au.

Regards,

Roxanne Bainbridge

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Roxanne Bainbridge

PROJECT TITLE:

Cast All Imaginations: Sisters Speak

SCHOOL: School of Indigenous Australian Studies,

James Cook University (Cairns Campus)

CONTACT DETAILS **Phone:** 40421730 **Mobile:** 0403047690

Email: roxanne.bainbridge@jcu.edu.au

DETAILS OF CONSENT:

Brief Description of Proposed Research: This research project will examine the experiences of Aboriginal women becoming strong in contemporary Australia.

The research will explore how Aboriginal women have developed experiences of self, how they perceive of themselves as Aboriginal women, and how their experiences and perceptions affects their conduct in contemporary Australian society. Up to 40 Aboriginal women Australia wide, will be participating in the project.

Participant's Role in the Research: You are invited to be involved in the project on a purely voluntary basis. You are free at any time to withdraw your participation. Interviews will be audio taped, with your approval and consent. All transcripts and recordings of interviews will be kept confidential. This information will be safely stored in lockable storage, and destroyed at the end of the project should you wish no record of our discussions to be kept.

Confidentiality: The protection of your confidentiality and privacy is very important. I will not use your actual name (or any other identifying information for you and your family) in the project report and other associated material without obtaining your consent. You will be made aware that because you are part of a distinct cultural group, it is impossible to guarantee anonymity, but confidentiality will be maintained on all accounts. You can request to remain anonymous or request the use of a false name. I seek approval from you to present your project information to a wider audience and to audiotape your interview.

Investigator's Role: I (Roxanne Bainbridge) agree to explain the research in detail and to answer any questions you may have about the project. I agree to adhere to James Cook University's policy in relation to ethical research practices. I can be contacted through the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, JCU Cairns, Campus Ph. 40421730 or mobile 0403047690. My email address is: roxanne.bainbridge@jcu.edu.au.

CONSENT

The aims of this study have been clearly explained to me and I understand what is wanted of me. I know that taking part in this study is voluntary and I am aware that I can stop taking part in it at any time and may refuse to answer any questions.

I understand that any information I give will be kept strictly confidential and that no names will be used to identify me with this study without my approval.

Permission to audiotape interviews: **YES NO**

Permission for project information to be used at conference presentations and in publications: **YES NO**

Name:	
Signature:	**Date:**

Appendix C

Ethical Clearance, amendment to ethics, Informed Consent

ADMINISTRATIVE DOCUMENTATION HAS BEEN REMOVED

ADMINISTRATIVE DOCUMENTATION HAS BEEN REMOVED

Appendix D

Introducing the Participants

Amanda is twenty years old, has just completed her degree in journalism but has taken up post-graduate studies. She also works as a historical researcher. You just have to love her; she has a most eccentric and dynamic personality. Raised in a highly political family, Amanda indeed seeks to resist streamlined Aboriginal politics and expand her career horizons into areas she has not yet identified. Amanda always returns to her home community to help out her Nan in profiling Aboriginal concerns when she has the opportunity.

Andie is in her late fifties and employed in an executive position in education. She is a well-grounded woman and is very easy-going in her approach to life and people. Andie has a kindness and generosity of spirit that would rival the gods; she also possesses the patience of a saint. Humility is Andie's most outstanding virtue. She sees herself as very fortunate in life and her responsibility is to assist others who are less fortunate. Andie currently studies at a tertiary level and represents Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on numerous boards at national and international levels. She is highly active in the community.

Anna was born and raised in a remote area of Australia. She is in her late fifties and worked in management positions in both primary and tertiary education for many years, originally starting out her career as a teacher. Anna is married with two grown children. She has a very candid approach to life and may appear a little aloof to some; even so, the sparkle in her eyes when she smiles shows her gentle, warm and caring nature. She is most determined in her work to improve Aboriginal education.

Ava describes herself as a "tough old chook". To all who know her, she is pragmatic and has a heart of gold. Ava is married with five grown children and many 'grandies'. She is fifty-four years old and is passionate about achieving change for Aboriginal people; in particular her interest lies in reducing family violence. Ava has a wide variety of life experiences and wisdom and spent many years active in a number of different positions, including law enforcement and child welfare. She continues to study at this time. Ava is a quiet achiever. She prioritises the needs of others and is very active in the community and holds board positions at a local and national level.

Beccie resides in a large country town, her born Country. She is a 42 year old married mother of one girl and one boy. Beccie's sense of responsibility is overwhelming. She works with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in an educational setting. Beccie is very community-minded, teaches art in her spare time and runs a number of community activities each year. She is naturally gifted in the creative arts, although she does not recognise it. Beccie is a very warm, loving and sensitive woman with a most unassuming manner and beautiful smile.

Bree was born and raised in a small country town. She is a 38 year old married mother of two young children, a girl and a boy**.** Bree is currently employed in academia and is studying towards her Masters degree. She describes herself as a "proud Aboriginal woman" and a "Mission Christian". Bree has a very strong work ethic and sees herself as "a bridge to two worlds"; reaching out to people from all backgrounds. She is indeed passionate about achieving social change for her people and workable reconciliation between Aboriginal people and the White population in Australia.

Carrie is the embodiment of the resilience of the human spirit. She is a 45 year old social worker, who is currently studying towards her doctorate. Carrie takes a very active role in her community, particularly with the youth. She has a high regard for establishing the rights of others. She is married with children and 'grandies' and resides in a small country town. Carrie's family are very precious to her.

Debra is a pretty bubbly, eighteen year old 'social butterfly' currently studying at a tertiary level. Debra is single and enjoys spending much of her free time with her friends; indeed she considers her friends as family. However, she always manages to return to her home community during her holidays where she assists her father with community development activities. Debra aspires to love and be loved. She hopes to become a teacher and travel and then settle into helping her people achieve positive change through education.

Dolly is 58 years old. She currently resides in a large country town with her adopted children; her husband now lives in a nursing home and her natural children are grown. As a young girl, Dolly always visualised that she would assist in raising Aboriginal children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Her vision realised, Dolly now wants to call an old Queenslander home. She continues to study at this time and contributes greatly to the welfare of Aboriginal people both young and old. She begrudges the violence and lack of trust that permeates contemporary society.

Gracie is a 42 year old lone mother of three children and also has two grandchildren. She is a warm, compassionate, spiritual woman and works with children as a health worker. Gracie is tertiary educated and continues to study at the present time. She is divorced, extremely independent and resides alone. Gracie gives her all to everything she does and is a very talented artist and singer. A spiritual sensibility saturates Gracie's ways of being in the world and gives rise to her deep sense of moral authority.

Isla is the 45 year old mother of one grown son. She works in a higher educational institution. Isla found a new love later in life; perhaps this explains her inner glow and radiant smile. For herself, Isla seeks inner peace and happiness; she considers that she has demonstrated resilience in her life and strives to improve upon her inner values as part of her spiritual development. Isla is called by Country more and more and she anticipates that one day she will return to give back to her own people.

Jane is a single 39 year old living in a long-term relationship. She is currently working in the area of Aboriginal mental health. Jane is an extremely modest, highly intelligent, quietly spoken, high achiever. She is also a wonderful mentor, role model and confidante and is active within the community on a number of fronts. She is a

brilliant artist and indeed successful at anything to which she turns her hand. For Jane, family and relationships are very important.

Jessie is 26 years old and teaches high school catering and hospitality. She has one daughter and is single mother. Jessie holds a leadership position supporting secondary Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students with whom she has excellent rapport. She is active in the school community and runs a number of different activities tailored specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Jessie also tutors in education subjects for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students at a tertiary level. Jessie is petite and pretty and appears younger than she really is. She also loves sport and is very active in the field, playing touch football and netball at a competitive level.

Leila is in her early forties and works in a community-based and controlled health organisation. Leila lives alone with her children, to whom she is devoted; however, she is also open to the possibilities of a loving relationship. She aspires to achieve quality of life for Aboriginal women through being there for each other and organises a number of responsive programs to develop women's life skills. Leila recognises the significance of education in achieving change for herself and her family and continues to study at this point in time in the area of community welfare.

Meghan is an Aboriginal Elder in her mid-sixties. She is the oldest participant in the study. Meghan is single and has one son but is a Grandmother, a sister and Aunty to many. Meghan grew up in a highly political environment and is still actively engaged with the community. She is tertiary educated and continues to study at this time. For Meghan, her Aboriginality has always been her "guiding force"; doing things for her people inspires her energy.

Millie is currently working as a project officer in the field of health in her home community. She is in her early 40s and demonstrates a deep concern for the welfare of her children and her people. However, at times she seems to carry the entire load of family and community concerns on her own shoulders, working tirelessly to attend to the needs of others and, thus, overlooking her own. In this regard, Millie strives to achieve more balance in life. She is studying community welfare at the present time so that she can integrate it into her work.

Shae is a sole parent of four boys. At 46, she is currently studying after many years devoting her time to raising her family and the welfare of her people, in particular, the mentoring of young girls. For Shae, culture and spirituality are important aspects of who she is. She views education as key to achieving her goals in life. Shae is fortunate in that she had the opportunity to learn language and is currently focussed on reconnecting with her spiritual self.

Simone is a caring, compassionate, vivacious, out-going, fun-loving 31 year old married mother of two young children. She is a beautiful woman, friendly, has a great sense of humour, a very strong sense of social justice and places the utmost importance on family. Simone is tertiary educated and continues to study at this time. She is employed as a child care director in a rural location, is actively involved in community organisation and has a deep desire to oversee the welfare of others, particularly children.

Those around her are inspired by hope and optimism that stems from her embodiment of a belief in the good of humankind.

Sissy is a 50 year single mother of three children; two grown girls and a boy; and also a grandmother, aunty, daughter and sister. Her children are her world. Sissy believes that a world of possibilities is opened through education and opportunities. Sissy is tertiary educated and continues to study at this time. She also works as a casual teacher and in the field of health. She is community active and is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative on a number of local boards.

Tina was raised with a politically-inspired extended family. She is a spirited friendly 30 year old mother of two. Tina's enthusiasm for life is infectious and has inspirational impact on those drawn into her circle. Despite being young, Tina has worked in health for a good many years and holds a number of executive board positions in which she exercises the important roles of leadership and decision-making.