

rites of passage for Algonquin & Ojibwe female adolescents:  
the Berry Fast experience

by  
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## ABSTRACT

There is a paucity of modern literature available on the Berry Fast experience which is a rite of passage for Algonquin and Ojibwe adolescent girls. This thesis involved Algonquin and Ojibwe adolescent girls who completed their Berry Fast—a rite of passage embarked upon by the adolescent girls with the onset of menarche. The study participants also included the members of a Community Advisory Committee. The adolescent girls who participated in the study have chosen to revive a traditional First Nation rite of passage ceremony by completing the Berry Fast despite the negative societal attitudes that surround menstruation within mainstream society. Assimilation policies have also attempted to absorb the First Nations population into mainstream society, but have not succeeded. Using a modified photovoice method, this researcher sought to elicit answers to four questions regarding spiritual aspects, lived experiences, life changes and the traditional First Nations' views on moontime (menstruation). The results showed that the Berry Fast strengthened a connection to Mother Earth, Creator, enhanced their understanding of their traditional role as Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women), and culturally constructed a path upon which they follow. The study also developed a model for informal, traditional knowledge transfer. This thesis further discusses how the academic world, modified research methodologies, and the urban Aboriginal community came together.

## RÉSUMÉ

Il y a une insuffisance de documentation contemporaine sur l'expérience du jeûne aux baies (Berry Fast), un rite de passage des adolescentes algonquines et ojibwées. Notre étude a porté sur ces adolescentes ayant accompli ce rite auquel elles participent au début de l'apparition des premières règles (ménarche). Parmi les participantes, on comptait également des membres du Comité consultatif communautaire. Les adolescentes participant à l'étude ont choisi de rétablir une cérémonie de passage autochtone et traditionnelle dans le cadre du jeûne aux baies, malgré les attitudes sociales négatives dominantes entourant les menstruations. Les politiques assimilationnistes ont également visé, sans succès, à fondre les peuples autochtones dans la société ordinaire. Au moyen d'une version modifiée de la méthode Photovoice, nous avons tenté d'obtenir des réponses à quatre questions touchant les aspects spirituels, les expériences vécues, les changements dans la vie et les points de vue traditionnels des Autochtones sur la période des règles. Les conclusions montrent que le jeûne aux baies crée un lien avec la Terre, notre mère et le Créateur, qu'il permet de comprendre le rôle traditionnel des femmes autochtones (Anishnaabe Kweg), et a permis de tracer un sentier culturel qu'elles peuvent suivre. Enfin, l'étude a élaboré un modèle de transfert informel des connaissances traditionnelles. Notre mémoire traite de façon approfondie de la façon dont le milieu universitaire, les méthodologies de recherche modifiées et la collectivité autochtone urbaine se sont conjugués.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Problem Statement*

First Nation adolescent girls are part of the next generation that will be passing down their language, culture and traditions to the next generation. One of the most important traditions for a young First Nation female is her passage into womanhood. The beginning of her moontime (menstruation) marks the transformation of a girl into a woman who now holds great power; the power of giving life. The transformation is marked by her rites of passage, which includes preparing for and committing to a one year Berry Fast.

Since the introduction of the Indian Act and its attempt at assimilation; all cultural ceremonies were banned. According to the 1927 Indian Act, Section 140, any “Indian or other person who engages in any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony...is guilty of an offense and is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months” (Muckle, 1998, p. 72). Until this section was repealed in 1951, all ceremonies, dances or festivals were illegal and punishable by incarceration. Although these ceremonies still took place underground sporadically; the passing down of ceremonies, dances and festivals diminished significantly. There are traditional Native families that still hold these teachings given to them on how to perform ceremonies presently. The issue may be the inability to widely access the wealth of traditional knowledge these woman Elders hold to pass onto the next generation.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to attempt to capture the qualitative essence of the adolescent girls who have chosen to join the resurgence of traditional women and their original roles. These adolescent girls have chosen to revive a traditional First Nation rite of passage ceremony,

complete with Berry Fast despite the unparalleled societal attitudes that rest upon menstruation. Using a modified Photovoice method, I sought answers to four questions that deal with the essence of the Berry Fast, what it means to each individual, life changes, and personal views about menstruation.

### *Significance of the Project for Social Work*

Berry (1999) writes that a positive Aboriginal cultural identity is comprised of a number of interrelated features, including the perception of oneself as Aboriginal, considering this to be important, having positive feelings about being Aboriginal, wanting to remain an Aboriginal person, and expressing these in one's daily behaviour. When the cultural identity is not recognized, this may result in ethnostress. Antone, Miller & Myers (2002) describes ethnostress as a disruption within an Aboriginal person's spirit. The disruption that occurs is the cultural disturbance of Aboriginal peoples' beliefs or identity. This is a result of the oppressive conditions forced upon Aboriginal peoples, the negative experiences felt when interacting with people of other cultures, and the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that get in the way of trying to live a good life.

The significance for social work includes the understanding of how cultural identity can impact on female Aboriginal youth in today's society. If social workers have an understanding of the impact that the Berry Fast or other cultural traditions can have on Aboriginal youth there may be an opportunity to incorporate traditional Elders or resource people into their practice. Being aware of the proposed constructive effects that traditional rites of passage may have on the youth can begin a dialogue within the social service agency network regarding building bridges between clinical practice and traditional knowledge.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Introduction*

The absence of contemporary literature on the Berry Fast may be facilitating the continuing absence of this tradition for adolescent girls who enter into their menarche. Information pertaining to the Berry Fast, through rites of passage was seen through secondary analyses. An interesting pattern emerged when reading the literature. The actions of moontime (menstruation) were similar, but the perspectives were different.

### *Mainstream Views on Moontime*

Biblical passages associated with personal hygiene during vaginal bleeding state that a woman is isolated because of a lack of cleanliness. According to Ben-Noun (2003) a woman shall remain in seclusion for seven days, and anything she touches or those who touch her are unclean and should wash themselves. The article supports the idea that the roots of contemporary obstetric preventive medicine can be traced to biblical times. Leviticus XV:19-22 can be interpreted to mean that when a woman is on her menstrual cycle, she is unclean and will remain that way until seven days after her cycle finishes. While the woman is on her menstrual cycle, she is to remain in seclusion until her menses cease and wait seven days to re-enter society. Furthermore, not only is she unclean but men who may come into contact with her, through touching her bed or sitting, are also unclean (Ben-Noun, 2003). The perspective of being unclean and remaining in seclusion for a set time is the action that is highlighted.

A significant finding for Costos, Ackerman & Paradis et al. (2002) pertained to the transmission of restrictive messages, such as “grin and bear it” (p.55), the invisibility of women’s menstrual cycles, and secrecy, which may be perceived as deceiving a newly menstruating female. This passage illustrates the “grin and bear it” message given to adolescent

girls by their mothers. A participant in the study by Costos et al. stated “It was pretty painful and I was uncomfortable a lot. I would say to my Mom some days that I could not go to school. She made me take aspirin and go anyway, but it did hurt” (p. 55).

The “grin and bear it” message can be interpreted as demeaning a woman’s cycle. Instead of the act of embracing it, adolescent girls are taught to either deal with it or ignore it and move on. A menstruating body requires attention, by resting and experiencing the act. When the act is ignored, so is the young women’s ability to read her own body.

In another passage, a woman recalls the lack of transparency in her home regarding menstruation. “I had no memory of my mother ever getting her period. She kept everything completely hidden. I mean I did not even lay eyes on a sanitary napkin until I got my own period” (Costos et al, 2002, p.54).

The act of this young woman never seeing any menstrual products around the house can be interpreted as wrong or dirty and should be hidden. Although the words that were given to the young woman when she began her menses may have been positive, the actions were the opposite. The act of concealing the practices that come with menstruation can be seen as conflicting with the words that may have been used positively.

Furthermore, as a female goes through puberty, “she must come to terms with the fact she is a woman like her mother, and they both lack power in society. These messages also disconnect mothers from daughters by building a wall” (Costos et al., 2002, p.57). The negativity that is embedded in the mainstream culture has been handed down from mother to daughter for generations. An excerpt taken from the article highlights this message.

Being older and able to understand myself, I see positive sides to being a woman that I didn’t when I was younger when I felt cramped and angry about the way I had been raised.

I see that I don't have to be limited to what maybe my mother taught me (Costos et al., 2002, p. 57).

The mixed message of menstruation as a normal thing; then for it to be hidden and undermined by older women results in a disconnect; this is the action that is interesting in this article.

Koutroulis (2001) focused her study on stigma and also on figuring out the contradictory meanings and women's experiences of menstruation. Stigma is defined as a "bodily sign that indicates a blemished person, someone who is ritually polluted because of an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1968 as cited in Koutroulis, 2001, p. 190). "The consciousness of the body of a menstruating woman has cultural meaning inscribed, and embodied existence, unfavourably different from that of the non-menstruating woman" (Koutroulis, 2001, p.187). This can be seen as a woman who is menstruating is less favourable than one that is not. The reasoning is because of the negative connotations mainstream culture has put on menstruation.

She further invokes the term "soiled identity, in order to exhibit an embodied subjectivity of menstruation" (Koutroulis, 2001, p.198). This term encompasses the mainstream culture's perspectives, but also the regular menstruating women's identity of her body, monthly. An important perspective that permeates mainstream culture is advertisements. "Menarche, especially in advertisements, is typically portrayed as a hygienic crisis rather than a maturational event, with an emphasis on cleanliness and freedom" (Whisnant et al., 1975; Jacobs Brumberg, 1993 as cited in Koutroulis, 2001, p. 192).

An advertisement on the Canadian Tampax website is a prime example. "When it comes to your monthly gift, Mother Nature has met her match" (Tampax, 2009). Menstruation is perceived as the enemy through Mother Nature, with Tampax tampons battling and coming out

victorious. The action of the embodied existence of menstruation within a woman is emphasized and will be later construed from another perspective.

According to Kissling (1996), our ways of speaking and teaching about menstruation influence attitudes toward menstruation. The type of menstruation education girls received at school was basic: what periods are and why women have them. Many girls expressed criticism of the incompleteness of their menstrual education. The physical aspect was covered at school, but the other aspects were missing. This becomes apparent in this excerpt from a young woman in the article.

...they told us a lot about periods but I wish they would have gone into more detail because to me it looked like they took it from an expert's point of view instead of like a child's; we didn't have too many examples of what a girl is going through (Kissling, 1996, p. 491).

Her article further reads recent feminist efforts to re-evaluate and rename menstruation include writings on menstruation that counter the negativity women and girls inherit with menarche. Kissling (1996) discusses Coming of Age parties that were created by Tamara Slayton, director of the Menstrual Health Foundation. The goal of Coming of Age parties is to provide information about fertility and menstruation in an environment that can help girls feel confident about menarche and menstruation. The impulse to celebrate menarche with Slayton's party is designed by adults to reflect what adult women wish menarche had been like. The action of speaking and teaching about menstruation and how it influences attitudes toward menstruation is the key area that is stressed in this review, which is up for reinterpretation.

Britton (1996) identified three themes in her study which are pollution, rites of passage, and the concept of secrecy and social seclusion. The idea of menstrual blood as a pollutant is discussed in this article. A pollutant is "dirt" that is "symbolic matter out of place" (Douglas,

1984 as cited in Britton, 1996, p. 648). Words used by women in this study to describe menstrual blood included “yucky, dirty, goo, and mess” (Britton, 1996, p.648). One participant talks about the different odor in her menstrual blood, “It is not the same as other blood. It is messy, something you want to avoid contact with. But if you had a cut on your leg, you would deal with it” (Britton, 1996, p.648).

However, some women in this study tried to neutralize the negative connotations of menstruation describing it as being positively associated with womanhood. Another participant in the same thread grew up with the belief “that her mother strongly emphasized that menstrual blood was not dirty, it was not different from blood in the body. If she had been pregnant, the menstrual blood would have been the baby’s food” (Britton, 1996, p.648). The negative connotations attached to menstruation have been countered through the positive messages given to this one participant throughout her childhood. Menstrual blood is seen as life-giving, not a pollutant, in the example given.

The article further discusses Western society and the concept of celebrating a young women’s menarche. Menarche is not celebrated within mainstream culture, usually. The rite of passage is the marker for the social transformation from girl to woman. “The secrecy and seclusion of menstruating women of all ages has often been presented in negative terms, whereas feminist perspectives in anthropology have recently emphasized their positive functions” (Gottlieb, 1998; Patterson, 1986, as cited in Britton, 1996, p.650). One mother states by keeping her menstrual cycle secluded from her family, she may have been doing her son a disservice if he enters a heterosexual relationship.

I felt it was wrong that I had hidden it...because I felt I was not educating him for the future with his girlfriends or his wife. He should have more of an understanding of the

emotional side of periods, so that when he had an on-going relationship he could understand what women go through...and when to be sensitive to your partner (Jill, as cited in Britton, 1996, p. 650).

Presently, through the feminist perspective in anthropology, a positive attitude is being placed upon menstruation by believing it has been secrecy and seclusion that has prompted the underground menstruation attitude. If women were open about their menses, then mainstream culture may shift its view into a more open and positive light.

Notions of secrecy are transmitted in various forms within the family. Another perspective is shown in the article that is explained by a young Sri Lankan woman which viewed seclusion positively and as a marker of her femaleness. This young woman who was growing up in a traditional Sri Lankan home talks about her menarche.

When we get our first menstruation it's our culture where you're kept in a room until an auspicious time comes when you can get out of the room. They (parents) go to the astrologer and they get an auspicious time for me to step out of the room into the world as a woman...When you come out of the room then you worship your parents, it makes you feel woman and there is a change in you (Nisha, as cited in Britton, 1996, p. 651).

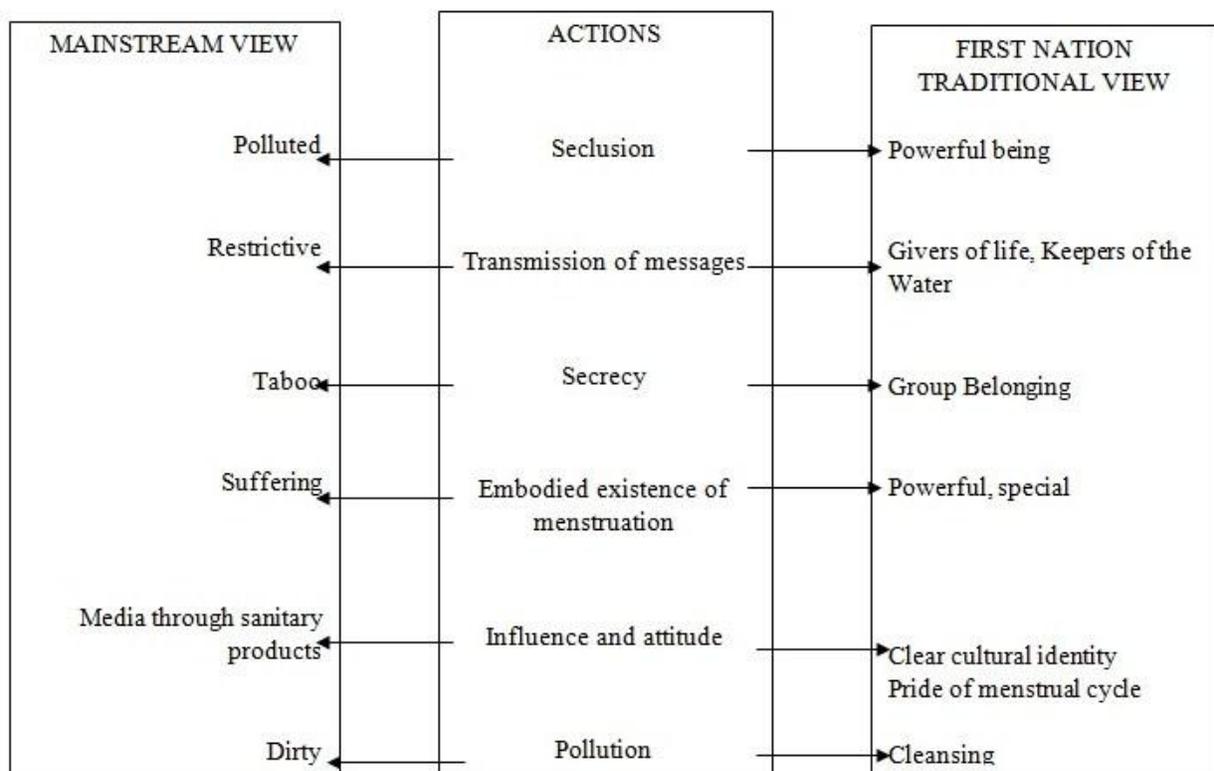
From this excerpt, Britton (1996) believes the rituals Nisha experienced aimed to control impurity, protect her from malevolent forces, and celebrate her womanhood and marriageability. The act of controlling ones alleged impurity as they are menstruating is giving a negative overtone to the menstrual cycle. The act of seclusion to protect her from malevolent forces speaks to the perceived notion that the woman is weak and unable to fend for herself. By protecting her from wicked forces at this important marker of womanhood sets the lifelong tone of menstruating women as being helpless and susceptible to malicious forces. The perspective of

pollution, secrecy, and the rites of passage are deemed interesting and can be reinterpreted from another perspective.

*Traditional First Nations View on Moontime*

This literature review re-interprets seclusion, the transmission of restrictive messages which may be perceived as deceiving a newly menstruating female, the unfavourable perspective of the embodied existence of menstruation within a woman, how menstruation influences attitudes toward menstruation, and three themes: pollution, secrecy, and the rites of passage. These perspectives are contrasted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 –Mainstream and First Nation Traditional Perspectives of Menstruation, Comparison



The perspective of being unclean and remaining in seclusion is contrasted with the traditional perspective.

A woman is considered to be at her most powerful, psychically and spiritually when menstruating. While in seclusion with a young woman's first moontime, the energy is focused on the spiritual plane, on gathering wisdom. Also, in many Native American societies, women would go to a menstrual hut (moon-lodge) to pass the time of their bleeding (Owen, 1998, p.32).

Therefore, a woman who is being perceived as unclean when on her moontime, could be subconsciously sending messages to give her space; which could then be interpreted as unclean and untouchable.

The act of seclusion is not because the woman is unclean. The reason for the seclusion is for the woman to concentrate on herself as a powerful being and to receive messages straight from the Creator. There is a "Cherokee belief that the menstruating woman is performing a function of cleansing, and of gathering wisdom" (Owen, 1998, p.32). The act of cleansing does not have to necessarily be interpreted as dirty. The idea of soap as cleansing does not necessarily make the soap dirty. The same concept can be applied to menstrual blood. The menstrual blood itself is cleansing, not necessarily the act of menstruation.

In an account about Yurok women from Northern California,

A menstruating woman should isolate herself because this is the time when she is at the height of her powers. Thus the time should not be wasted in mundane tasks and social distractions, nor should one's concentration be broken by contact with the opposite sex. Rather all of one's energies should be applied in concentrated meditation "to find out the purpose of your life" and towards the "accumulation" of spiritual energy. The menstrual shelter, or room is "like the men's sweathouse", a place where "go into yourself and make

yourself stronger.” The blood that flows serves to “purify” the women, preparing her for spiritual accomplishment (Buckley, 1968 as cited in Owen, 1998, p.33).

In the traditional Native lifestyle, women on their moontime cannot touch sacred items. The reason is because women are so powerful when on their moontime, they will lessen the power of the sacred item. The dichotomy of menstruating women is the view of being either unclean or powerful.

The power of a woman on her menstrual cycle can be viewed as the woman being the vehicle for spiritual, mental and emotional power. Taylor (2002) recalls a poem that expresses the idea of menstruating as being admired.

“..Menstrual blood

She reveres it

As crimson renewal;

A pulsing flowing

Timeless tide. Venerable

wine of life” (Ptak, as cited in Taylor, 2002, p. 49).

In keeping with Koutrolis (2001) and her term “soiled identity” she argues that a consciousness of the body of a menstruating woman has cultural meaning inscribed, and an unfavourable embodied existence. The definition of the word embody is to represent in human or animal form (Merriam Webster, 2009). The interpretation is the representation of menses is seen as an unfavourable part of a women’s existence.

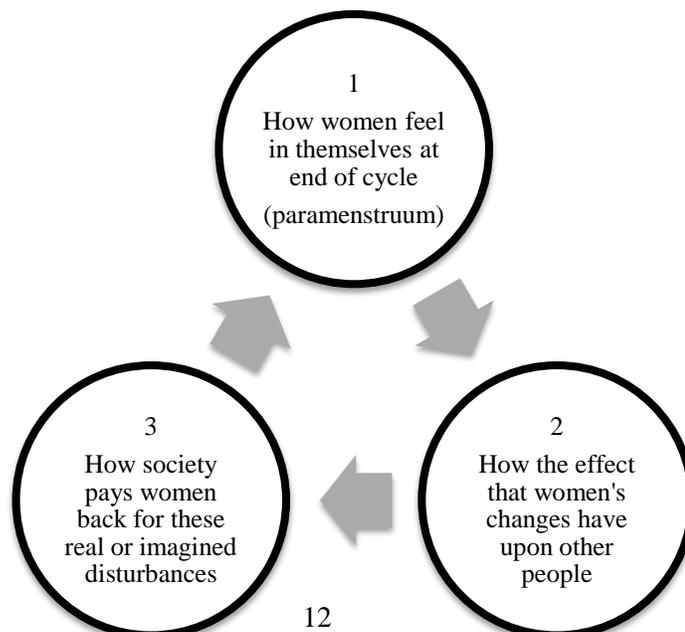
Participants in the study by Taylor (2002) commented on their interpretation of their menses.

I get into touch with a deeper aspect of myself. Menstruation is a time to celebrate your womanly feelings and appreciate the subdued feelings of sensitivity.... It is the force of life. It is the gift of being female. It is more than we know or understand in this day and age. I believe it to be held an honour in our past ages – we've only forgotten" (Taylor, 2002, p. 32).

Instead of menstruation being seen as unfavourable, it is welcomed because it holds power, the ability to be in touch with yourself, and to celebrate the source of life. Menstruation for many women can be healing, powerful, and a source of creativity.

The ways of speaking and teaching about how menstruation influences attitudes toward menstruation negatively affects women. It is cyclical in nature. Shuttle & Redgrove (1978) discuss a 'howback' phenomenon, which is described as a vicious circle or feedback loop. First, there is how the woman feels in herself at the menstruation end of her cycle, the paramenstruum. Secondly, there is the effect that her changes may have upon other people. Thirdly, there is the way society may pay her back for these real or imagined disturbances. The diagram below shows how the cycle can become perpetuative.

Figure 2 – Original Howback Phenomenon (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1978, p. 43)



Because of the holistic vision of life, many First Nation women recognize the importance of passing down the teachings, which involves the celebration of her menarche, coupled with preparation for her Berry Fast.

Women's cycles, or blood time, are considered very powerful medicine for women. It is during the moontime when women release that blood from their bodies that is most sacred. Bringing back the ceremonies of Berry Fasting or First Blood for the young girls involving their moon-time bleeding is critical to restoring the relationships and responsibilities of women to Mother the Earth as Keepers of the Water" (Simpson, 2008, p. 97, 98).

With the roles and responsibilities of girls clarified; this can begin the process of self-direction for themselves and a strong cultural identity.

The 'howback' phenomenon can be loosely applied to the Berry Fast and teachings. If the attitude of menstruation changes to a sacred stage in life, that can change the way a young girl feels about the menstruation end of her cycle. If she is viewed as a critical resource in restoring the relationship and responsibility she has towards Mother Earth by others, this part in the 'howback' process has also positively changed. She is now viewed as a responsible woman doing her part in bringing back the ceremonies of Berry Fasting or First Blood, which helps form her cultural identity. The third part is the way society pays her back for the disturbances of menstruation. She can then be called upon as a traditional resource which can have a positive snowball effect on her family, community, and society. This can turn the 'howback' process into a positive cycle of passing on positive messages in society.

The three themes of pollution, secrecy and the rites of passage that Britton (1996) discusses can also be interpreted in a different perspective. The idea that menstruating women are polluted and therefore should remain in seclusion, is similar to the ten day seclusion First

Nation females encounter at First Blood. The idea is not that women on their menses are polluted, but so powerful that they may disrupt another person's power. The pollution is reinterpreted as power.

The second theme is secrecy. Women talk about menstruation with each other quite freely. The secrecy comes into play when it is introduced into mixed groups. Among the First Nation traditions of menarche, a young woman is given women's teachings, and is visited by women who have already begun their menses. These women give advice, tell their experiences of their First Blood, and explain the roles of a traditional First Nation woman. Males are not allowed to have any contact with the young women while she is receiving teachings or preparing for her Berry Fast. This can be construed as secrecy, but can also be seen as part of a special group of powerful, life-giving females.

Coming of Age parties were created by Tamara Slayton, director of the Menstrual Health Foundation. "The impulse to celebrate menarche with Slayton's party is designed by adults to reflect what adult women wish menarche had been like" (Kissling, 1996, p. 499). This party is seen as a rite of passage for adult women to hold for the new additions to the wonderful world of menstruation. When asked if they wanted the party; the girls were shocked and embarrassed and did not want the party. Responses were, "I wouldn't want to celebrate something that's not very exciting, y'know...No way! I wouldn't do that. I'd say, "Skip it, Mom"... I would not want to celebrate it. Not even a pat on the back" (Kissling, 1996, p. 499).

This may be due to the negative connotations attached to menstruation, which comes back to the vicious cycle of learned behaviours and attitudes that are permeated onto the young girls who have their menarche.

## *Summary*

This literature review has redefined the act of seclusion, the transmission of restrictive messages which may be perceived as deceiving a newly menstruating female, the unfavourable perspective of the embodied existence of menstruation within a woman, how menstruation influences attitudes toward menstruation, and three themes: pollution, secrecy, and the rites of passage. The actions are the same from both perspectives, but are interpreted differently.

## METHODS

### *Introduction*

Using criterion samples, seven First Nation females who have participated in the Berry Fast were involved in this phenomenological study. Criterion sampling has a narrow range, meaning that all the participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell, 2007, p. 128). There were six Ojibwe participants and one Algonquin participant. The participants came from three different reserves, but all were available within the city of Greater Sudbury for the study. Two participants are completing their Berry Fast presently, while the other five have completed the rite of passage.

Photovoice methods can also be compared to feminist research approaches where the goals are to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid the objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative (Creswell, 2007, p. 26). Community-Based Participatory Research model is an attempt to develop culturally relevant research models that address issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation. The study used a modified photovoice method that included six Algonquin and Ojibwe adolescent girls, a keynote speaker, and also an Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee consisted of a

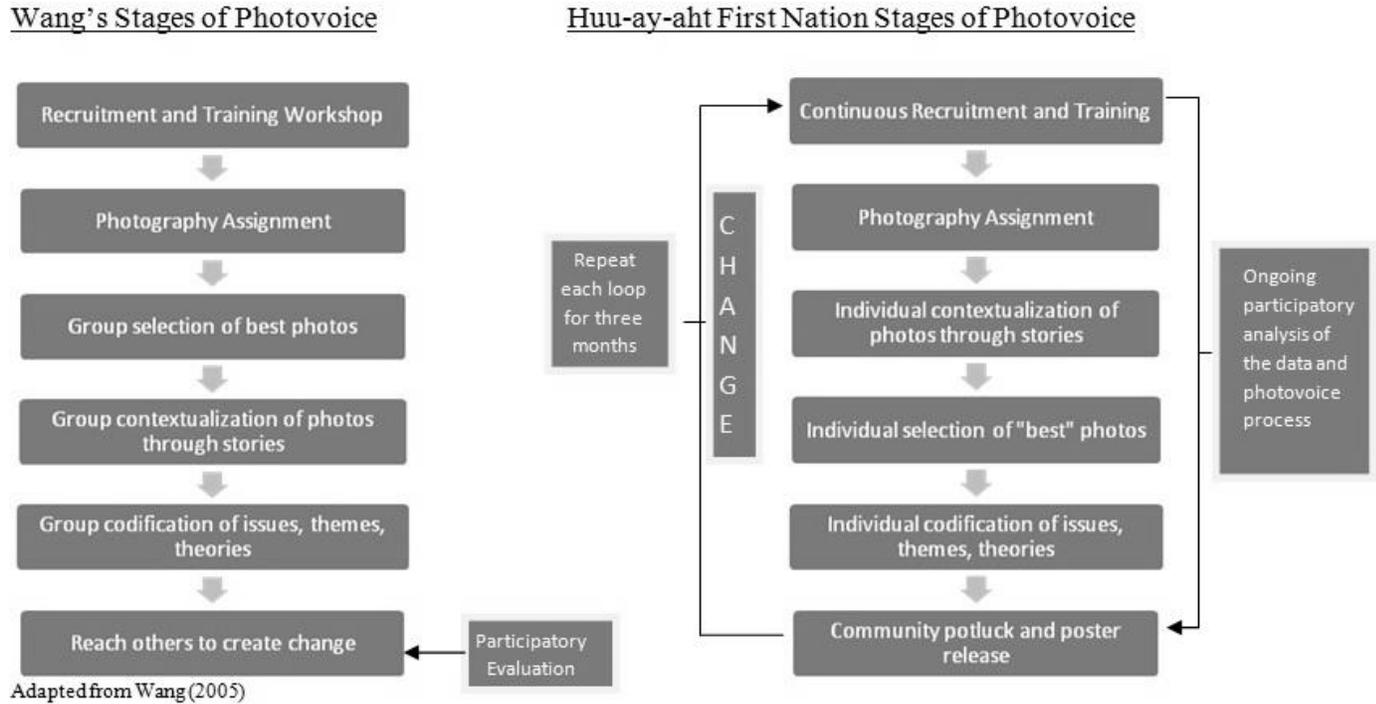
Grandmother, Healing and Wellness Coordinator from N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, and a doctoral student who is currently completing her PhD in Environmental Science.

According to Wang (1999), photovoice is an innovative participatory action research (PAR) method based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and nontraditional approaches to documentary photography. It enables people to identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. The three main goals are to enable people to 1) to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns, 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs, and 3) to reach policymakers.

The modified version of this is illustrated in the diagram below. Photovoice according to Wang (1999) is a fixed method, but the modified photovoice I used in my research included a feedback loop. This is evidenced in the modified photovoice project by Castleden, Garvin & Huuy-ay-aht First Nation (2008) with the Huu-ay-aht First Nation, which is based on the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model.

The rationale for using this adaptation of Wang (1999) and her photovoice method is the cultural differences of the members of the photovoice group. They were either Algonquin or Ojibwe females, and the Advisory committee were women of Aboriginal descent. According to Castleden et al (2008), Community-Based Participatory Research model (CBPR) is an attempt to develop culturally relevant research models that address issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation. The Huuy-ay-aht First Nation and the research that took place on their reserve, is based on CBPR. This is how photovoice was used in this research.

Figure 3-Stages of Photovoice: Comparing Approaches (Castleden et al., 2008)



The goals of CBPR are power, trust, and ownership which are intrinsically linked to one another (Castleden et al., 2008). Many Aboriginal communities, including the urban Aboriginal population, have been overly researched. Another term used for the over researched population is research fatigue (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005 as cited in Castleden et al., 2008).

When Aboriginal communities suffer from research fatigue, there are adverse effects including mistrust, inability to communicate, outright boycotting of the research, and skepticism about where the information ends up. With CBPR, it addresses these symptoms of research fatigue, as community members are involved in all steps of the research, including the re-interpretation of the findings if necessary.

The research data are continuously being collected throughout the modified process of photovoice; it then becomes fluid and changeable. This process works well in Aboriginal

communities because of the culture of this group. The whole process involves looping, which can be interpreted to Aboriginal communities as a circle. The circle is a very important symbol, in the traditional Aboriginal way of being. The understanding of this method may seem clearer to them, rather than a defined linear process.

Castleden et al (2008) explains her rationale for using a modified photovoice method through continuous recruitment and training, individual contextualization of photographs through stories, and a community feast. Some Aboriginal people have their own timeline when it comes to life in general. This is the rationale which underlies the continuous recruitment and training which compliments Aboriginal communities well. The photovoice participants joined at three different intervals when they felt comfortable to do so. This researcher approached them after being giving their names by the Grandmother on the Advisory Committee. I held one focus group at the beginning of the study, and then the additional participants were met with on an individual basis.

The modified version of photovoice allowed for the collection of data on an individual basis, rather than a group process. There was no predetermined date established to contextualize the photos. When the participant was finished taking pictures, I met with her to contextualize the images on the film. The rationale relates to the freshness of the images and the wish of the research participant to express themselves, as soon as possible. This avoided issues with forgetfulness regarding the meaning of the photo, where it was taken, and what train of thought they had while photographing images.

The community feast was one of the most important parts of the modified photovoice project. The gathering of Aboriginal people over food is a common and popular occurrence. A keynote speaker from a neighboring reserve was asked to speak about her experience of the Berry Fast.

This keynote address set a warm tone for the feast and photovoice exhibit where everyone was comfortable enough to share. An informal questioning period took place at this time with the Advisory Committee and community members, which was audio recorded and transcribed.

The current thesis project drew upon practices used in a photovoice project with young Aboriginal people in Australia. The project was flexible and used informal recruitment (Larson, 2001). Due to difficulties recruiting participants in the conventional way, subsequently an Aboriginal woman, Elsie Mitchell recruited Aboriginal youth through word-of-mouth, also known informally as the moccasin telegraph.

Informal recruitment methods such as those used by Mitchell (Larson, 2001) is similar to the concept of a gatekeeper. A gatekeeper refers to the individual the researcher must visit before entering a group or cultural site. The approval of this gatekeeper is vital in accessing the community (Creswell, 2007, p. 243). Mitchell stepped into the role of gatekeeper and facilitator with innate knowledge of the community, family systems, and nomadic way of living in the summer.

The photovoice participants used digital cameras to capture pictures in reference to the research questions given to them by this researcher. When the participants were finished taking pictures, we met and uploaded the images to a laptop. We reviewed each picture using the SHOWeD approach. Caroline Wang (1999) suggests a structured technique of photo selection and guided dialogue. The dialogue around the photographs is guided by a photovoice technique called, "SHOWeD." The letters of this acronym each correspond to a question and the series of questions prompts the participants to critically analyze the content of their photographs. The participants then codify their issues, themes and theories emerging from the photographs and the discussions that arise from the photographs (Wang and Burris, 1997).

- What do we **See** here?
- What is really **H**appening here?
- How does the relate to **O**ur lives?
- **W**hy does this situation, strength or concern **E**xist?
- What can we **D**o about it? (Wang, 1999)

The SHOWeD approach was used, although the last question was not asked because it did not fit with the researcher's research topic. The Berry Fast experience is a positive rite of passage within the Algonquin & Ojibwe culture. When asking about a positive topic, the question of what can we do about it does not fit. This question was replaced by the last research question which was: "How do the teachings of traditional First Nation on menstrual cycles differ from mainstream views?" Another question that was added to this SHOWeD approach was "Is there anything else you would like to share about this picture before we move on?" This allowed for additional input from the participants on their own terms, which also fits in with the modified photovoice methodology.

## Phase Overview

### *Phase One: Data Collection*

After receiving ethics approval from Laurentian University, participants were recruited by word of mouth by the Advisory Committee. Two of the Advisory Circle members had put several girls on their Berry Fast, so they were able to assist with the recruitment. The modified photovoice approach that was used allowed the girls to participate when ready.

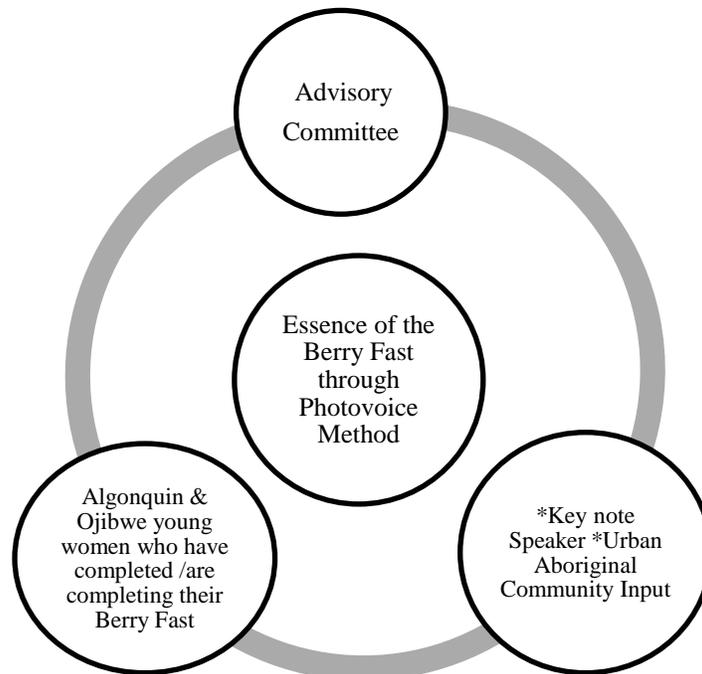
The photovoice participants attended an initial group to sign the consent forms, gain information on the research being conducted, learn about photovoice and also acquire their digital cameras. Following this group, the participants contacted this researcher after taking

their photos and we met to “textualize” the pictures. Each individual interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. At the end of the photovoice process, six interviews were transcribed verbatim, each varying in length between 15 to 40 minutes.

In conclusion, there were three photovoice introduction groups, two focus groups, six interviews, one community feast with Photovoice exhibit & Keynote speaker and four Advisory Committee meetings. I returned to the photovoice and community feast participants to present the final findings and make changes, if necessary to capture the raw essence of the data. The data was collected through focus groups, advisory circle meetings, individual interviews, keynote speaker and community feast via audio recording, followed by transcribing.

These perspectives are vital to the research since it represents well-rounded data from young girls to young women to Elder women.

Figure 4-Perspective Circle



## Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed of the type, locations, times, reason, and results of the research. The research did deal with any issues that could harm the participants; rather it involved awareness raising with the intent of education. The participants were fully aware of the purpose, activities and timeline, at all stages.

Confidentiality was maintained at all times for the participants. Codes were devised in the Non-Identifying Participant Data Form, so real names were never recorded or used. These codes are used in the study and pseudonyms are used when interpretation of the data needed a voice.

The sponsors involved with this research are the Indigenous Health Research Development Program and the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre. The N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre was the location for the photovoice groups, Advisory Committee meetings and Community Feast.

Also, with research funding provided by the Indigenous Health Research Development Program, the photovoice participants were given digital cameras and were able to keep them for participating. Advisory Committee members and Elder were given honorariums when attending meetings, providing input and giving direction to this researcher. "Elders are often well-known for their historical knowledge and wisdom, and are thus excellent resources in the Aboriginal community" (Goudreau, 2006). The Community Feast was also made possible with the same funding.

Informed consent was given before any research began. Also, in order to be culturally appropriate, tobacco ties were given to each participant and Advisory Committee members to ask for their assistance with this research. In keeping with Haudenosaunee tradition, a gift was

offered to one of the committee members as it is not part of her culture to be presented with tobacco. Moeke-Pickering (2006) writes about a spiritual contract being developed between the researcher and Elder through a protocol of giving and receiving tobacco, cloth, tea, or other items (Michell, 1999; Timmins, 2001-2002) when bringing Indigenous values to academic settings. Also, in the Aboriginal community the offering of tobacco is like a contractual agreement that contains a spiritual element. “Tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines, and when a person accepts the tobacco he/she is accepting the responsibility of the task asked not only for himself/herself but for his/her community, the elements of the earth and his/her ancestors” (Goudreau, 2006).

There is a clear benefit of research to participants and few risks by the nature of this research. The support system that may potentially be created through this research will further assist the transmission of the Berry Fast teachings to other girls transitioning into womanhood. Another benefit is that the research can be further used to access funding to implement a support system for the Berry Fast.

#### *Data Validation and Distribution*

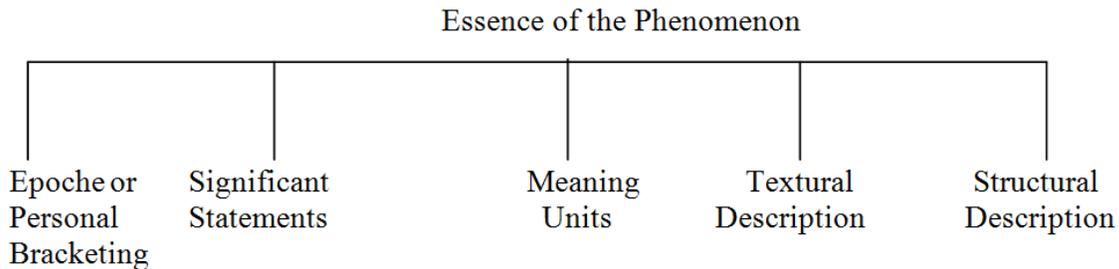
This phase included four steps in which I held the final group with the same participants to allow for member checking through Community Feast, reviewed the analyzed data to examine the soundness of the representation, corrected areas as needed, and handed out copies of initial findings to participants.

#### *Data Analysis*

This next phase involved five steps in which I collected and analyzed data using the phenomenological approach, developed a list of significant statements, grouped statements into

meaning units, created textural and structural descriptions of the Berry Fast experience, and combined the textural and structural descriptions to find the essence of the Berry Fast.

Figure 5-Phenomenological Approach: Template



A template for coding a phenomenological study was followed (Creswell, 2007, p. 170). “Phenomenological data analysis steps build on the data from the first and second research questions, data analysts go through the data and highlight “significant statements,” statements, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). As noted above, data were collected in the individual interviews, Advisory Committee, focus groups, keynote speaker and community feast via voice recordings. I looked for statements that were significant with regard to the perspectives of the participants about the Berry Fast.

I followed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis and representation of data as simplified by Creswell (2007, p. 159).

- 1) Describe personal experiences with the Berry Fast as women;
- 2) Develop a list of significant statements from the transcriptions and photographs of the complete photovoice group;
- 3) Group the significant statements into meaning units or themes;
- 4) Write a textural description of the Berry Fast experience and include verbatim and visual examples;

5) Write a structural description on compilation of data (contextualization of images and coding of themes), focusing on the setting and context in which it happened;

6) Write a combined description of the Berry Fast incorporating both the textural and structural description. This will be the essence of the Berry Fast experience, which will describe the “what” and “how”, with a visual component.

The personal experiences of women who were on their Berry Fast were extracted through personal interviews and collection of their photographs. I developed a list of significant statements which stood out and were repeated throughout each interview transcript and also by picture themes. The themes and statements were then grouped together in adjoining themes. At this point in the coding process, I incorporated photographs and combined textual descriptions in the form of verbatim quotes. With all pictures grouped in themes with accompanying verbatim quotes, the essence of the Berry Fast can be felt and seen.

#### Research Questions

The four main research questions that were answered, and then analyzed using the phenomenological approach pertained to the spiritualness and experiences of the women who went through their Berry Fast. The other two research questions probed the changes they went through in their lives and also what their views are on the differing views of their moontime (menstruation) in mainstream society and their traditional teachings.

#### Essence of Berry Fast

I researched what the females adolescents believe about the Berry Fast and its spiritualness. Is there a spiritual aspect of the Berry Fast and their rite of passage that ensures a positive message is embodied?

## Individual Experiences

As with all life experiences, there are no two experiences exactly the same. What are the lived experiences of a First Nation female adolescent going through or who have finished their Berry Fast?

## Life Changes

This study attempted to extract the types of life changes that First Nation female youth experience during their year-long Berry Fast. What types of things changed in the lives of First Nation adolescent girls since menarche and how has it affected them?

## Personal Views

First Nation female youth have their own views on menstruation. This study examined what type of spiritual effect the Berry Fast had on these female youth, and how differing societal messages were received by them regarding their menstrual cycles. How do the teachings of traditional First Nation on menstrual cycles differ from mainstream views?

## RESULTS

### Introduction

The pictures, textualization, and transcripts provided rich data for this study. The participants took a lot of care with their pictures, answered questions about their pictures with clear insights, and the Advisory Circle offered balance to the study by providing traditional knowledge and the introduction of Indigenous research methodologies.

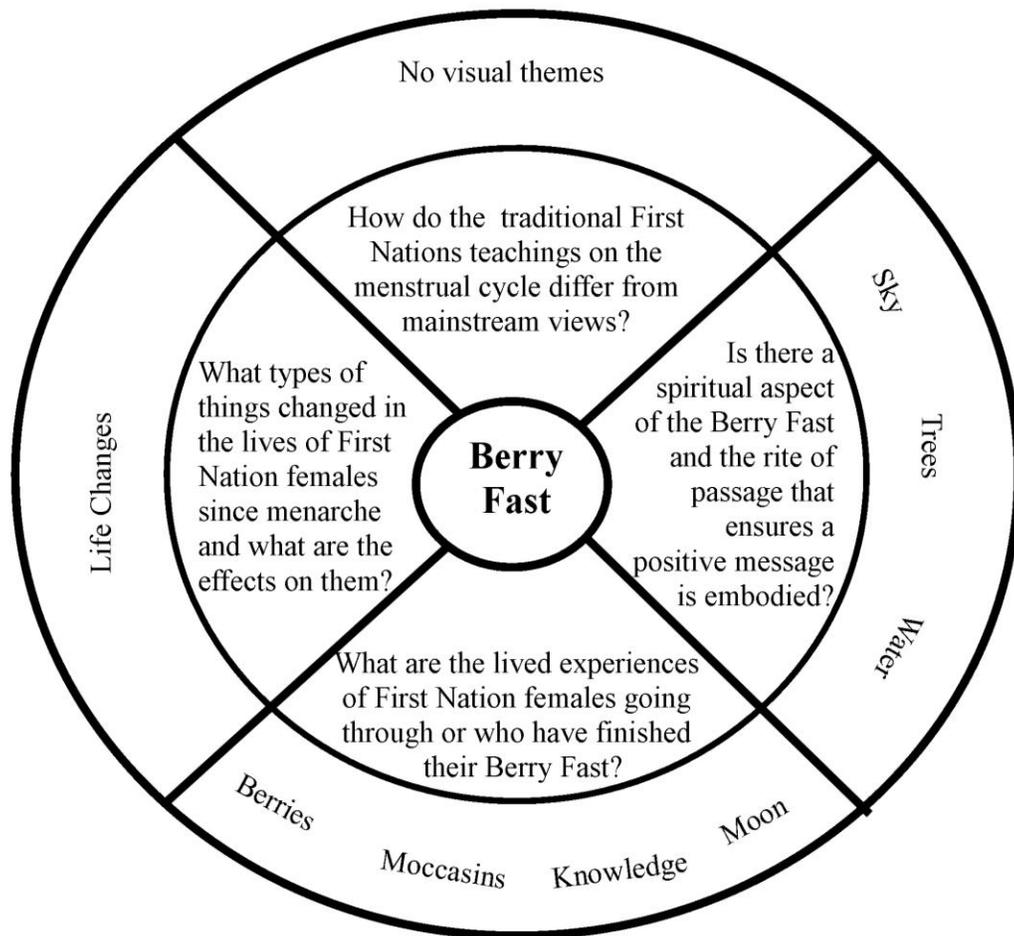
### Presentation of the Findings

When presenting the results, I will use the Medicine Wheel as a tool to visually show the results in a simple, clear manner (see Figure 6). Bopp (1984) writes that the Medicine Wheel is an ancient symbol used by almost all the Native people of North and South America. The

authors refer to the Medicine Wheel being expressed in sets of four and that it is similar to a mirror, which can be used to see things that are not normally visible. Using the Medicine Wheel to present the findings can be seen as a symbolic tool to help us see or understand the presentation of findings because they are ideas and not physical objects (Bopp, 1994, p.9).

In the middle of the circle is the Berry Fast and moving outwards are the questions that were posed to the participants. These questions were captured through the modified Photovoice method and also by specifically asking the fourth question regarding how traditional First Nation teachings differ from mainstream views. On the outer circle are the visual themes that presented itself in the data. Each quadrant will be further explained starting in the East.

Figure 6-Berry Fast Wheel: Questions & Themes



***East: Is there a spiritual aspect of the Berry Fast and the rite of passage that ensures a positive message is embodied?***

The data provided for the question dealing with the spiritual aspect found three separate themes. The spiritual aspect shows connectedness to Mother Earth through pictures taken of the sky, trees, and water and the textualization of them.

The themes that were defined when asking this question are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1-Thematic Elements in the Spiritualness of the Berry Fast Experience

Theme	Participants' Responses
Sky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to Mother Earth, Creator and spirits</li> <li>• Sacrifice</li> </ul>
Trees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cedar</li> <li>• Connection to trees</li> <li>• Medicine</li> <li>• Metaphorical use</li> <li>• Connection to Mother Earth</li> </ul>
Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional role as caretakers of water</li> <li>• Life givers</li> <li>• Mother Earth's blood</li> </ul>
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self care</li> <li>• Grounding yourself</li> <li>• Spirit World</li> </ul>

East Theme 1: Sky

The young women who took the pictures showed a spiritual connection to the Creator, Mother Earth and the spirits that walk among them. There is a realization of something more out there that they can't see or touch, but feel inside. There is a sacrifice taking place that is not for the individual, but for all people. There is a greater respect for the sky, according to Lyse.

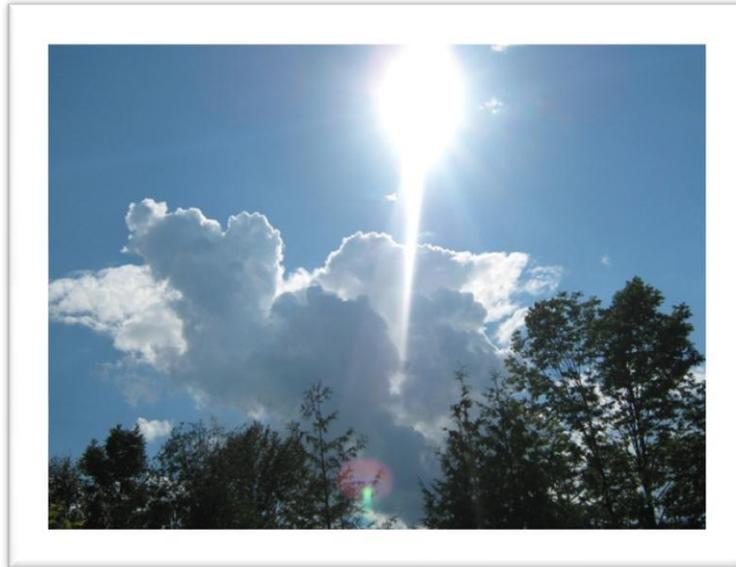


Figure 7. Sky

I took it because, I liked how the sun was coming down and touching everything and that's what the Berry Fast is for. It's for everything, so in here you have the sun, you have the sky, the clouds and the trees and like that's what the Berry Fast is for, it's to give back to all of your people. It's like there's something more you know? There's something more out there for us and for our people and we don't do things for our own benefit, you know? It's that sacrifice that you have for your people and for creation to give back to everyone and protect and help everyone, you know? Lyse

The sacrifice that Lyse speaks of when describing her picture shows the interconnectedness of her relationship with the sky and Mother Earth. This interconnectivity is not found in all individuals and is an integral part of the teachings that accompany the Berry Fast.

Mandy held a view of the sky which is a similar to Lyse; she shows a deep respect at the seclusion stage of the Berry Fast in regard to looking up at the sky.

When you're on your Berry Fast, you can't look at the sky cause um, when you look at the sky, your looking at him, which he's suppose to be looking down at you ... because the spirits are in the sky and we're one ourselves. Mandy

In many First Nations' cultures, looking directly at a person shows disrespect. A teaching that is part of the Berry Fast states that when in seclusion, the young women are not to look up at the sky. This initial sign of respect may teach the young women in seclusion the spiritual connection they are to have with the sky, as this is where the Creator is said to be. There is an understanding also that they are spirits on Mother Earth and we are all interconnected. There is a spiritual aspect to all things on Mother Earth, not just human beings. Lyse demonstrates this connection with what she learned when she was in the Berry Fast and a teaching she received from her father.

I think that was one of the biggest things that I learned when I was in the Berry Fast was about respecting like yourself and other people and taking it to a different level like there's, where it relates to the spirit of everything you know? The way my dad explained it, you may not like a person, but you respect the spirit of that person. Lyse

Although each picture linked to this theme showed a view of the sky there were different perspectives speaking to the spiritualness of the sky, Mother Earth and the relationship that exists not only with family members, but of all living things.

## East Theme 2: Trees

In the context of the Berry Fast, trees are seen as living beings and the medicinal use is talked about among the young women. Cedar trees/bushes were present in many of the photos. Cedar is one of the four sacred medicines that First Nations people were gifted by the Creator.

The tree was also used metaphorically when speaking about the Berry Fast process and life in general.

Jenna first referred to a cedar tree when speaking about the Berry Fast as it is part of the associated ritual, complete with teaching. The second part was a metaphor which speaks to the connection she feels to the tree and where she would be situated if she were in the picture.



Figure 8. Trees

I took this, a cedar tree bush because cedar is one of the sacred medicines and it's important to us. When I was in seclusion, I had cedar in my moccasins whenever I walked, and it's also a tree so it has roots, like I have roots, ancestors, and it grows, and it's old. A cedar tree is like a woman ancestor. If the tree was bigger, I would probably be underneath it because it would shield me from things like the rain, things that people say, that people do or if they diss you, things like that. Jenna

Jenna uses the tree first as a medicine, then as part of the Berry Fast, and lastly as a metaphorical shield from her everyday life. When describing her picture of a cedar tree, Mandy spoke about the relationality between her age and the size of the tree, which speaks to the connection to the tree and also Mother Earth.

It's a cedar tree and it's medicine. I would have to say that when I first, when they first moved into this house, that tree was very small and now that I have been watering all the plants and everything, they have been growing and growing and growing and growing.

Mandy

The medicinal quality of cedar was stated, but the focus of the conversation was on the growth of herself and the tree, which shows connection. Another connection to the Berry Fast was symbolized through a picture of trees in the bush where it is dark, but there was an open area of lighted sky that was visible. This metaphorical statement speaks to the arduous journey of the yearlong Berry Fast.

I see the sunset and the trees in the background. It's very dark. It seems very challenging up close, like the dark, it's the contrast. I really like the contrast. And you may be having a tough time but you can push through and there's light in the back. Like the Berry Fast is hard but I think it's all worthwhile in the end. You feel that extra confidence that you actually finished the Berry Fast. The Berry Fast would be beyond where the trees are its like beyond where that light is. Simone

East Theme 3: Water

Another reoccurring theme that was threaded throughout many of the pictures was Water. Through the pictures and the accompanying interviews with the young women, their traditional beliefs become evident. Water is Mother Earth's blood and it is up to them (young women) to take care of it. They believe that, as part of their traditional roles as women, they take care of the water. Another traditional role that was highlighted throughout the interviews was that, upon their first moontime, they are the givers of life and this is when they are at their strongest.

Elena took a picture of the lake and connected it back to the Berry Fast and also her role as an Anishnaabe Kwe (Aboriginal woman). She writes:



Figure 9. Water

I took a picture of the lake because it keeps you hydrated, it keeps you healthy and it reminded me of when you are on your moontime. Your body is too strong for Mother Nature because the water is Mother Earth's blood so when you are on your moontime you can't go swimming. Not like you are contaminating it but that's when you are at your strongest when you are on your moontime, so I took a picture of the water. I just liked how it reminded me of how you have to be careful of what you do, so you have to take care of Mother Earth too. Elena

As part of the Water theme, the participants talked about the water and trees being alive, which was later connected to the ability to give life. There is an understanding that Mother Earth is alive and has the ability to give life, just like a woman who has began her moontime. Marlee defines the theme of lifegivers succinctly in the following excerpt:

The water, the trees and the landscape it just like represented life because we give life as women. We take care of the water. Water, there is always water in my pictures I think

because that's our job as woman, take care of the water. As woman we walk a life with the earth and we take care of the water. Marlee

#### East Water: Respect

In keeping with the theme of water, respect was found among water-related pictures the young women had taken. There is a respect for themselves and those around them. The teachings that are given to the young women when they are preparing for their Berry Fast and the actions that follow for the full year speak to the self-care and self-respect that develop over the year. One participant states:

You have to take care of yourself. I believe the Berry Fast exists because women do it.

It's teaching you to be close to your self and teaches you that you are sacred and that you have to take care of your self. It changes you when you do the year long Berry Fast. You have to like stay grounded. Elena

Staying grounded for young women at a time in their life when they are going through their rite of passage is important, because this is the time in their life that may impact their future behaviour. Another participant states that "the Berry Fast definitely put the reins on", meaning she had to slow down.

Another part of this theme, is the respect the young women have for the Spirit World. As part of the yearlong boundaries, the young women do not carry infants that are unable to walk. Elena explains the reasoning. "When you're doing the Berry Fast you can't hold babies that aren't able to walk because they're so close to the Spirit World." The amount of respect these young women have for the Spirit World and the cycle of life may be seen as understanding the logic behind certain Berry Fast practices or having the ability to see beyond them. Lyse talks

about respect, not only for herself but for all people and uses a piece of cedar against a bright sky to illustrate her metaphor:

I chose this one because I like that ray, it's like you're looking at, like respect right. That's what I thought of after I took the picture; I thought of it, that it shows like respect for, for our, our way of life you know? You're holding up that medicine you know and it's like you're learning about respect through that Berry Fast you know, you're respecting yourself and respecting your bodies and men and other people and that was the word that jumped out at me when I took that picture and, it looked like respect to me you know? You're holding it in high regard. Lyse

The levels of respect these young women show for themselves, others, Mother Earth and the Spirit World could impact on their behaviours as young Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women) in a clearly defined role for them.

***South: What are the lived experiences of First Nation females going through/who have finished their Berry Fast?***

In this quadrant, four sub-themes emerged from the data and pictures. The themes are Berries, Moccasins, Knowledge, and the Moon. These themes address the question of what type of experiences the young women have lived so far, with the Berry Fast as part of their existence.

The themes that were defined when asking this question are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2-Thematic Elements in the Lived Experiences of the Berry Fast

Theme	Participants
Berries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep appreciation</li> <li>• Act of harvesting</li> <li>• Medicine</li> <li>• Connection to Mother Earth</li> </ul>
Moccasins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking in a good way as an Anishnaabe Kwe(Aboriginal woman)</li> <li>• Cultural path</li> <li>• Mino-Bimaadiziwin (Good Life)</li> </ul>
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional knowledge transfer model               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Grandmothers</li> <li>-Mothers</li> <li>-Young Women</li> <li>-Girls</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Culturally adapted Howlback Phenomenon (Shuttle &amp; Redgrove, 1978)</li> </ul>
Moon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminder of moontime (menstruation)</li> <li>• Lunar cycles</li> <li>• Thirteen moons</li> </ul>

South Theme 1: Berries

Within the theme of Berries, there is an act of harvesting that takes place, a deeper appreciation of berries is found, understanding of berries as a medicine, and a connection to Mother Earth through berry picking.

As part of the Berry Fast you are unable to eat berries for the full year. Mandy shared this by stating: “When you’re in your Berry Fast, you can’t have berries. I can’t have berries because it teaches us a lesson.” Another photovoice participant who was still in the midst of her Berry Fast spoke of harvesting berries and also wanting to take care of them. This act can give the young women a deeper appreciation of the berries as something they cannot have at their disposal at any time. It shows the ability to see beyond themselves enjoying the berries, but of

harvesting them with the intent to share with those they love. The quote by Elena shows this relationship between the berries and the young women.

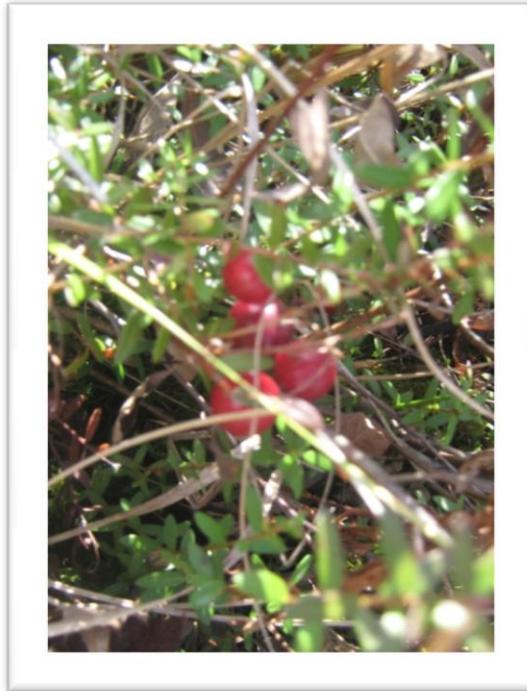


Figure 10. Berries

I think of how like berries are a medicine and you have to take care of them, they're a special kind of medicine. Right now I can't eat berries, not only that I can't eat berries, I have to take care of them. I harvest them, so when I'm done my Berry Fast, to feed to the people that support me when I'm doing my Berry Fast. Elena

The young women continue to have a relationship with the berries in a way that goes beyond only consumption to where they come from and also from the earth on which they came.

This is captured best with what this participant shared with this researcher. She states:

Those berries are special because it can be something that you survived on and it's not boughten or canned or anything like that. It kind of reminds me of turkey dinner when I wanted cranberries on my turkey...it reminded me how it's just a little bit longer until I'm

finished and you can have all of these nice meals with berries, strawberry pie, you can have blueberry pie. I just like how you can find those types of resources in nature and not in a grocery store in a can and there's nothing, no pesticides on them...its just nature taking care of it. Elena

The lack of berry consumption through the yearlong Berry Fast can create a deeper appreciation and a connection to Mother Earth through the act of harvesting the berries and taking care of them throughout the year. The young women also are able to see beyond the berries, which can then have beneficial applications in other area of their lives. They can take the ability to see beyond what is there and apply it to everyday life with various interactivities threaded throughout.

#### South Theme 2: Mocassins

The second theme is moccasins. This theme includes the path that the young women have taken and how they walk as Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal Women). To walk as a traditional Anishnaabe Kwe (Aboriginal Woman) it needs to be done in a good way. 'A good way' is described best when speaking of Mino-Bimadiziwin.

To live a good and healthy life (Mino-Bimaadiziwin), the Anishnaabe people are given teachings from the Creator. The central purpose of the Anishnaabe people is to behave in a manner to uphold Mino-Bimaadiziwin. This depends on the harmonious relationships that occur through respectful coexistence, and learning to contribute to other living beings in a positive, constructive manner (Garrett, 1999 as cited in Goudreau, 2006).

Elena explains this best when she is speaking about her picture that she took of her moccasins. "Those are how I walk strong when I'm doing the Berry Fast. I feel proud when I'm doing the Berry Fast. I walk high and strong and proud."

Another participant, Marlee, when sharing her picture below, spoke of the way she walked while in her fast and also now that she has completed it, the way she walks presently.

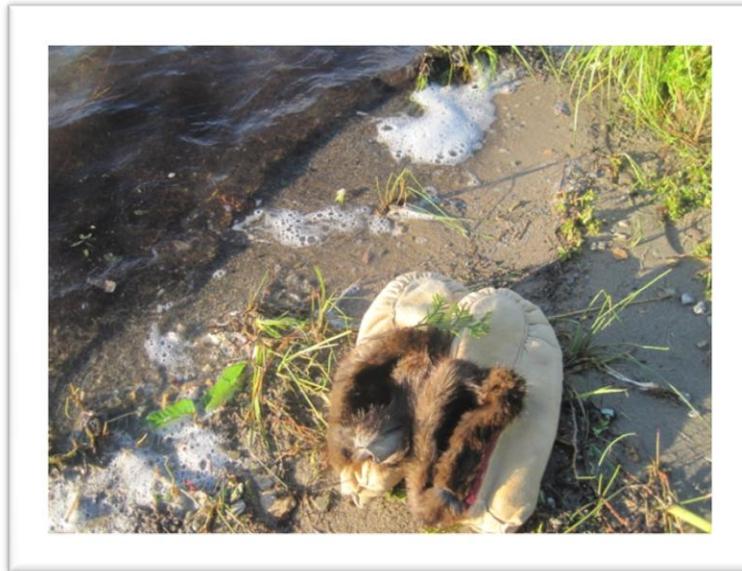


Figure 11. Moccasins

Moccasins are life like, the way, the life that you walk and when I was in my fast, we had to wear moccasins. The cedar represented the inside the moccasins. Marlee

When the young women were in seclusion preparing for their Berry Fast, they walked only in moccasins with cedar in them. In keeping with the concept of Mino-Bimaadiziwin (The Good Life), the participants described choosing which path they choose to walk on. Simone talked about her photograph of her foot in her moccasin with the background being trees and nature. Simone believes, “it really represents the path I feel I need to follow. It’s a cultural path so I don’t stray. I think the lighting really highlights the foot and the moccasin and how important that path is.”

The way the young women walk and the cultural path they choose carry them through their lives in an effort to achieve Mino-Bimaadiziwin (The Good Life). This can assist them throughout life as they move into different stages because whatever obstacles they may come across they have the cultural path in which they follow embedded into them.

### South Theme 3: Knowledge

There is a knowledge cycle that was found in the data that was collected from the young women. The knowledge starts with the Grandmothers, and then with the help of the mothers, it is passed on to the young women, who in turn pass it on to girls. All four combined have the capacity to begin the traditional knowledge transfer to the community.

#### *Grandmothers*

The Grandmothers of the community hold the wisdom for the community's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on. The term Grandmother should not be confused with the biological grandmother term. A Grandmother holds traditional knowledge and wisdom and passes it on to those who are interested in their community. This is evidenced in Simone's picture of her Grandmother's hand clasped with hers. Simone shares, "Grandmothers are always supportive. They're like a mom, but almost more experienced than a mom. They have that wisdom that you wish you had, but you're still growing up, you know?"



Figure 12. Knowledge

#### *Mothers*

In addition to Grandmothers, a mother's role in a young woman's life is more direct and hands on. A mother has the important role of reinforcing the teachings that were handed down to

them. Simone says: “I’ve been kind of getting like, as I was growing up my Mom always wanted to keep me like educated. She wanted to keep me knowledgeable about those things. I guess I got a lot of talks.” This reinforcement of teachings by the mother helps the young women to learn by repetition, and increases the validity of the Grandmother’s teachings. The young women take these Berry Fast teachings from their Grandmother, which is reinforced by their mother and then they understand the importance of passing on the knowledge given to them.

### *Young Women*

The picture below illustrates the passing on of knowledge to a younger girl. The participant believes in her teachings and the importance of passing them on to others.



Figure 13. Young women

I wanted to show those things that you learn you know and pass it from one person to another. That’s why I’m holding that bowl like that, and I’m passing it to her so, it’s somebody that younger than me. Lyse

Mandy, a young woman, talks about her grandmother bag that she made while she was in seclusion at the preparation stage before her Berry Fast and how it relates to her family and her

culture. Mandy also speaks of her reasoning: “We want to respect the good way of what we did, express ourselves, and spread the Berry Fast to other people so they can do it too.

The connection between the traditional Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal Women) who are all at varying stages of life is strong. The strength is in the knowledge transfer between the women and the community.

#### South Theme 4: Moon

As part of the young women’s lived experiences during and/or after the Berry Fast, Marlee answers the question clearly when talking about her picture of the moon.

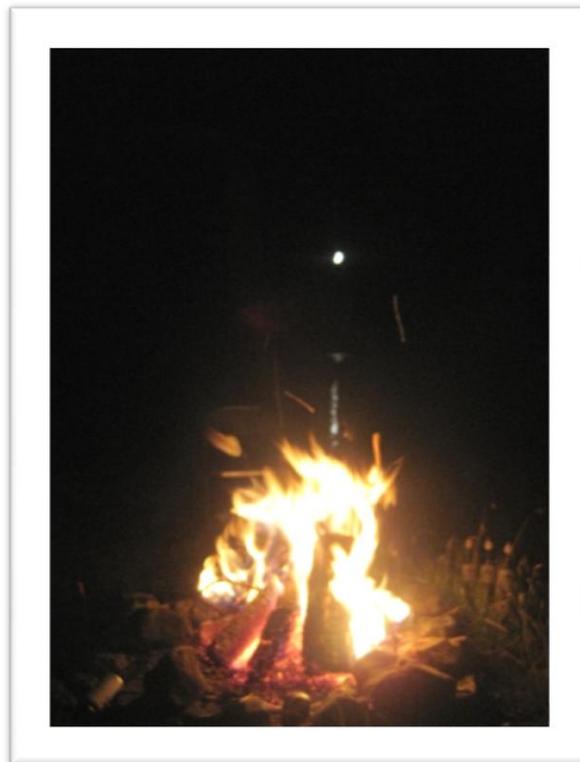


Figure 14. Moon

Well it’s the moon and that’s what the Berry Fast is kind of about, your moon time. So that was one of the pictures that I wanted to choose for it. The moon is a reminder of your moon time like every month, and that’s a part of your life, my life. Marlee

Marlee discussed her moontime being part of her life and the moon in the sky is a reminder of that. She displays a real connection to the moon and its cycle. According to Anishnawbe Health Toronto (2000), there are thirteen moons in the Anishnawbe (Aboriginal) culture, and the changes that come with each passing moon indicate the times for planting, harvesting, hunting and gathering. In the Anishnawbe calendar the names of each month include the word 'moon' and reflect the close connection between the cycles of the moon and the plant and animal life on Turtle Island (Canada).

For example, March is Sugar Moon because of the sap that comes from the trees, June is Strawberry Moon because that is when they begin to grow, and October is Falling Leaves Moon because of the changing seasons. Traditionally there has always been close connection to Mother Earth that is visible through the names of the moons throughout the year.

Marlee explained another picture that she chose to include in the interview. The picture was of the moon, but there was a chair in it that she was unaware of. When speaking about the picture she shared: "the chair represents loneliness actually. The moon, the moon is so lonely. When I was in my fast I was lonely because you weren't allowed to see anybody so that was one of my memories of it." The part of the fast she is referring to is the ten day seclusion that comes before the beginning of the Berry Fast. This time is spent alone preparing a Grandmother bag for the dishes that will be carried for a year, with few visits from only women.

The four themes Berries, Moccasins, Knowledge, and Moon represent the question about the life experiences of the young women throughout their Berry Fast. The Berries, through the young women's deeper appreciation of them, and connection to Mother Earth leads to the theme Moccasins and the cultural path they walk seeking Mino-Bimaadiziwin (Good Life). The young women's understanding of the importance of this rite of passage has them utilizing an informal

traditional knowledge transfer model regarding the Berry Fast. The Moon is a reminder of the connection they have through their moontime (menstruation) that follows the lunar cycles. There seems to be cultural emphasis inscribed in all aspects of their being.

***West: What type of things changed in the lives of First Nation females since menarche and what are the effects on them?***

West Theme: Life Changes

This theme relates to the changes in the young women’s life using their childhood memories and metaphors to explain their inner thoughts on the process, and how it applies to their life today.

The themes that were defined when asking this question are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3-Thematic Elements in the Life Changes of First Nations’ Females Who Experience the Berry Fast

Theme	Participants
Life Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childhood memories</li> <li>• Metaphorical use of rock, berries, butterfly</li> </ul>

The picture below was taken by Simone a few years after she carved her initials in the tree with her friends.



Figure 15. Changes

You see a birch tree with initials carved into them of me and my three best friends. It relates to growing up, because this carving was made 3,4,5 years ago and it's still there. I was so carefree way back in the day. Now, there are a lot more, like homework, school, sports, and maybe your family problems, relationships. You have to focus on all of those now so things are a little bit more complex now. There's the slowdown, you're about to change, you're about to become not a kid anymore. You're growing up. Simone

The young women understand that with the Berry Fast come changes, which clearly delineates the rite of passage. It is a marker in their life where they move from childhood to womanhood. Although the young women are now defined among other Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women) as part of their group, Lyse believes in looking back on your childhood. "I think it's like keeping in mind your childhood, and remembering simple things. It reminds me that back then the way that things were, and my life then and how I thought about the world." She had many fond memories of her childhood. The picture that she described contained little purple flowers that she was holding. The story that accompanied the picture was of the times when she was a child and she would lay in the fields where the flowers grew and she drank the nectar out of them. "It's a reminder of that innocence and purity of things when you're a kid. It's always important to remember before you learned those lessons through the Berry Fast, to remember where you came from and remember the good life."

Another young woman, Jenna, took a picture of a rock and used it to describe the way she felt about the Berry Fast and her everyday life. She sees "strength...and a lot of grey. Not everything has to be black and white." Jenna vocalizes her need to have balance between the two. "It means balance, balancing out my life as a normal person and a person who has to carry out the traditions of the Berry Fast. The greyness shows the balance that I have." The rock

shows the strength Jenna has to try and achieve balance between her culture and her mainstream life. The rite of passage that she has experienced has a profound effect on her when she makes the realization that she understands the need to carry out her traditions that may not necessary be a part of her everyday life.

The participants used metaphors throughout their pictures with the questions that were posed to them. Marlee used one of her pictures to describe the life changes that can accompany a young Anishnaabe Kwe (Aboriginal woman) when they go through the Berry Fast. She uses a picture of two berries in nature. One berry is ripe and the other one is not quite ripe. Marlee shared: “one of the berries is like not ripe and that’s kind of like on your fast. You became a woman but you’re not quite a woman yet. The regular berry is like me now, all grown up and ripe.”

Another participant, Elena, used a picture of a butterfly to metaphorically describe the life changes of a young woman who enters and completes her Berry Fast. Elena has not completed her Berry Fast and she situates herself in the metaphor at the proper stage. Elena speaks of her life changes in the following manner:

The butterfly means to me that it starts off as a caterpillar. It’s just a little girl, like how everybody starts off. When it’s in that cocoon it’s being isolated for a while. It’s kind of like the Berry Fast, being grounded; you can’t do much but not being able to do much is good. It’s getting ready to move on, to grow up and become a woman. When it comes out of the cocoon, it’s like after the Berry Fast when a young girl becomes a woman. I would be in the cocoon, because I’m almost done and then I’ll become a butterfly. Elena

The Berry Fast is a rite of passage wherein the young women understand the process of change from girl to young women. Some of the participants used metaphors to accurately

describe the life changing process of this rite of passage. Some of the young women chose to look back on their childhood. This resulted in a clearly defined passage from a girl to a young woman. This may assist them in their everyday life when they are searching for their identity and who they really are.

***North: How do the traditional First Nations teachings on the cycle differ from the mainstream views?***

This question is better explained in the table below which dichotomizes the views of traditional First Nations and mainstream views. The literature review also contains similar information on contrasting perspectives in the First Nations’ teachings and mainstream views such as peers and media. There are varying degrees of opinions on a women’s moontime (menstruation), so Table 4 should not be used as a comprehensive overview of perspectives; rather it is a brief summary.

Table 4-First Nations’ and Mainstream Views of Menstruation

First Nation	Mainstream
Cleansing	Gross
Women’s Teachings	Media
Purpose	No purpose
Open	Secret

As part of the photovoice project, only one participant used a picture as a vehicle in which to express their answer to the question. The other participants were directly asked the question, which will explain the lack of pictures in this section, but more quotes are provided to elaborate on the meanings.

*First Nations' View: Cleansing*

The participant who chose a picture shared what she believes about the differing views by using a picture of the lake with the sun shining down, with visible foliage on the shore. Lyse describes her picture and then states: “Our bodies need it just like the earth needs it! I like the leaves were in that too because they’re all benefiting from that, just like how our body needs that too.”



Figure 16. Cleansing

Lyse further talks about water as cleansing and says:

You know how common, everyday people see water? That is how we should be looking at our bodies and our moon time.” When I started, everybody knew. All my aunts, my uncles, even my girlfriends knew, my guy friends knew and I didn’t feel ashamed. I didn’t think it was a bad thing that everybody knows that I started my period you know? It was expected, like I knew it would get around because of the ceremony that we were doing. I told a lot of my non-native friends what was going on and why we couldn’t do things and stuff like that. It was like a proud thing almost, it was like I was happy about it, you know. Lyse

### *Mainstream View: “Gross”*

Lyse speaks of the cleansing qualities of her moontime (menstruation) and then shares a story of a girlfriend who started her menstrual cycle and the difference in perspectives.

I remember my one friend told me about it and she was so disgusted by it you know, she made like a ‘ugh’ face when she told me, you know? She thought it was so gross and I’m like me when I started I was 13 and I was like, finally! A lot of my friends had started already and so she wasn’t just happy about it and I was. I wasn’t grossed out because I knew what it meant. Lyse

Through peer interactions, young women can become influenced by each other and begin to share the same views on menstruation. Lyse understood the importance of her moontime (menstruation) before she even started. This may be because of the cultural teachings she received throughout her life. In contrast to her peers who viewed their menstrual cycle as “gross”, Lyse was pleased that her moontime had begun.

### *Media & Women’s Teachings*

Another young woman shared her view when dealing with the media through a commercial for sanitary products. Elena speaks about a commercial where a young woman is talking about her menstrual cycle and how she feels on the first day. The young woman in the commercial is suffering through her first day and wants to hold something soft for comfort. Elena questions the truth behind the commercial until she receives the cultural teachings from her Grandmother. Elena shares, “She gets that from the media but that’s not true. When I got the teachings from my grandma when I started my Berry Fast that’s when I felt that the media wasn’t really that true.”

There is a differing perspective between the two and because of the saturation of media through commercials and advertisements, there is a strong pull in this direction of media because of its reaching effects into all communities. With the cultural teachings on the purpose of your moontime and the accompanying rite of passage, there is a contrast between the two, with the mainstream focussing on discomfort while the cultural teachings emphasize connections to traditional roles which are taught by Grandmothers and mothers.

### *Purpose & No Purpose*

During the focus group, a participant mentioned the lack of purpose some girls in her class display for their menstrual cycle. Marlee shares that there are girls in her class who use birth control pills to avoid having their menstrual cycle at all. Marlee says, "having your period is part of being a girl, so to stop that is kind of weird. It cleanses you and it's just regular, it's just regular old Joe kind of stuff." Marlee understands the normalcy of her moontime and accepts it as a regular part of her life that has a purpose.

### *Secret & Open*

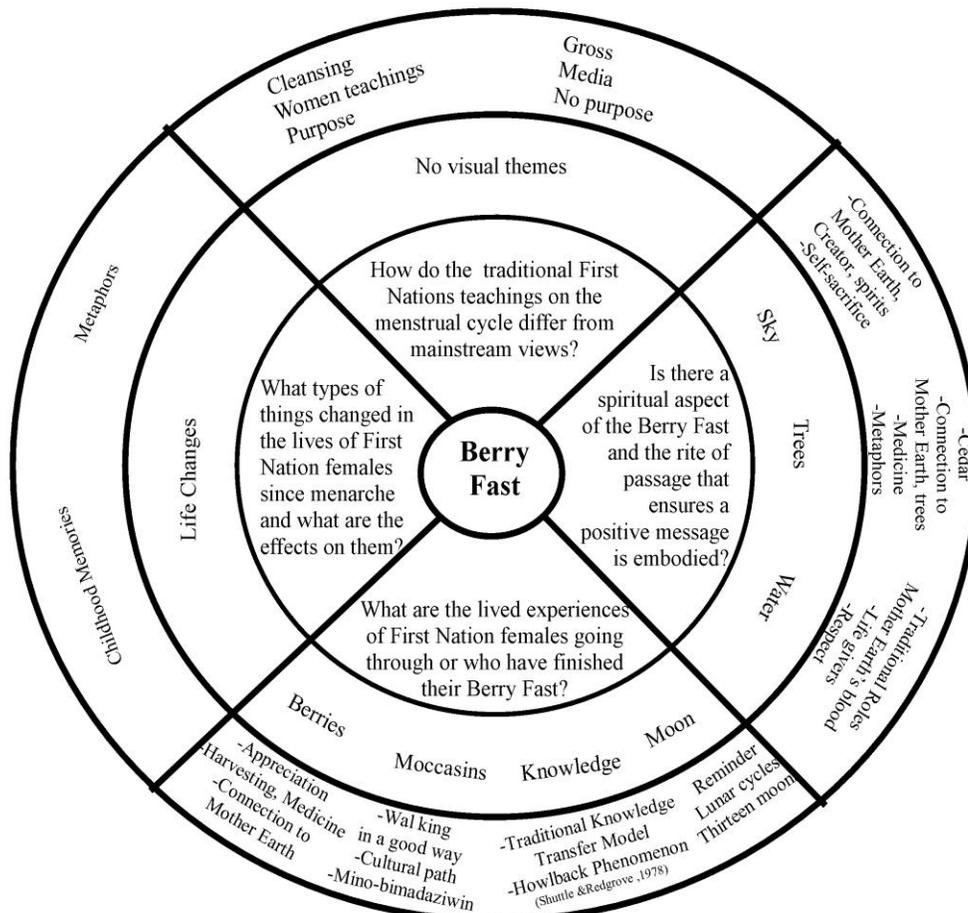
Simone shares the view on menstruation from a mainstream perspective as secretive. She then explains how her mother speaks about their moontime and how she is very open about it. Marlee shares: "My mom could talk about it with me over supper with my brother there. It probably gives him some perspective on girls." This openness not only is useful for the young women and girls in the family but also for the males. It can give the males a cultural perspective on a woman's moontime and they can then begin to comprehend the sacredness of it. Marlee shares part of the teachings her mother gives her. "It's that time of the month where she needs to be quiet, sit and think. It's a sacred time. That's what I have always been told by my mom. You're very powerful at that time."

The participants' explanations for this question show a real dichotomy between the two views-mainstream and First Nations. These young women live with both perspectives and while they walk their cultural path, they have the ability to walk on both paths, with attempting to achieve balance.

*Summary*

In summary, the medicine wheel shown in Figure 7 displays the questions that were asked, the accompanying themes, and the results of the questions. The inner circle is the Berry Fast itself, the circle around it shows the questions presented to each participant, the next circle indicates the visual themes found through the pictures, then the outer circle shows the results of the questions asked.

Figure 17-Berry Fast Wheel: Questions, Themes, Explanations

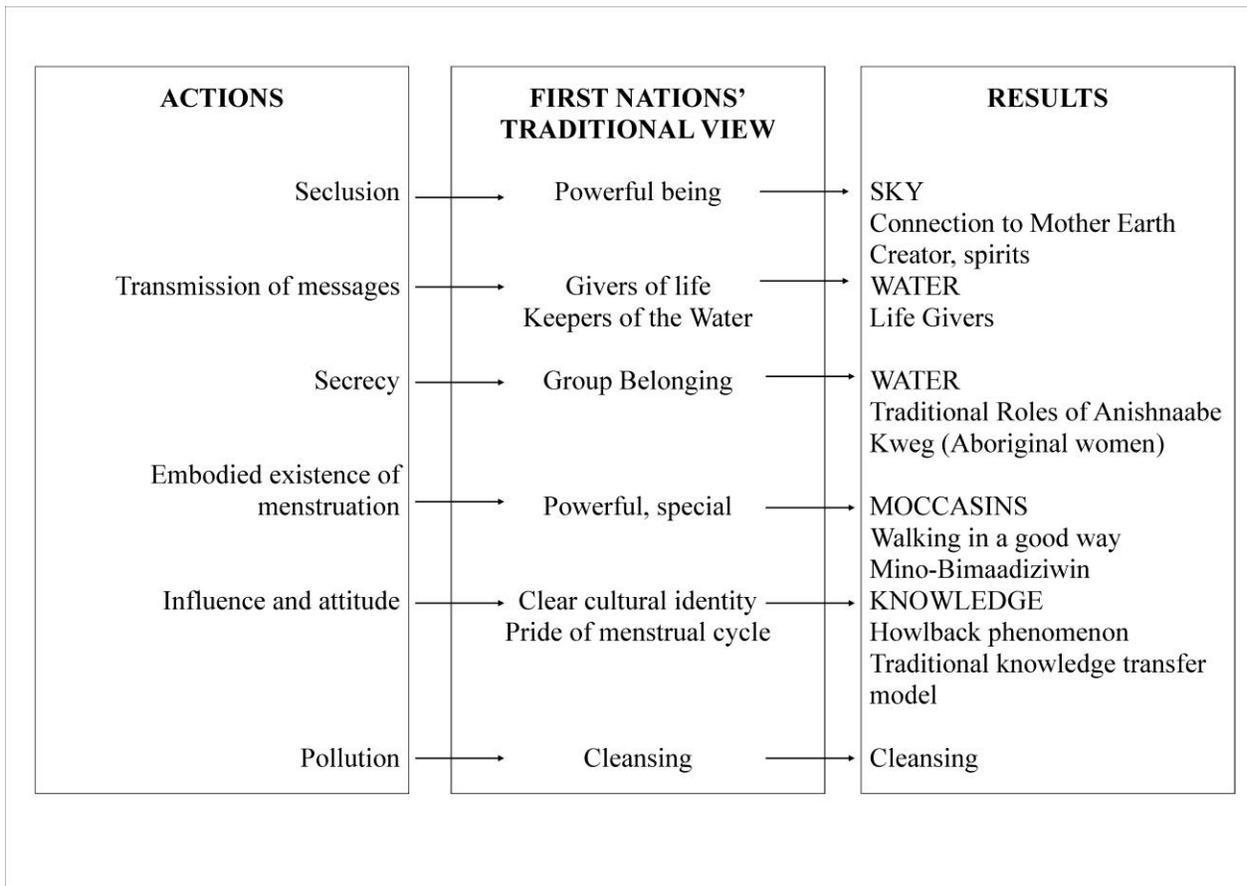


## DISCUSSION

The Berry Fast, a rite of passage that the adolescent girls went through upon menarche resulted in a connection to Mother Earth, Creator, understanding of their traditional role as Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women), and a culturally constructed path upon which they follow.

Connecting the results to the sources that were collected for the literature review are summarized in Figure 9-Mainstream and First Nations Traditional Perspectives of Menstruation, Comparison. These themes discussed in the literature reviews section of this thesis are used to highlight the actions of moontime (menstruation) and the First Nations traditional perspective and used to validate the research results.

Figure 18-Validation of Results



### *Seclusion*

The participants spoke of not being able to look up at the sky while they were in seclusion. Mandy says, “When you’re on your Berry Fast, you can’t look at the sky because when you look at the sky, you’re looking at him, when he’s supposed to be looking down at you.” Owen (1998) wrote about the Yurok people in Northern California. Buckley as cited in Owen (1998) writes about how a menstruating woman should isolate herself because this is the time when she is at the height of her powers. Elena says, “you are at your strongest when you are on your moontime.”

The keynote speaker at the community feast that was held to present the results to interested community members, said: “You are secluded, alone in a sense, but each day an important female family member would come and see me and spend some time with me.” At the beginning of their menarche, the young women complete a ten day seclusion with visits from female family members who give them teachings on how to walk as a proud Anishnaabe Kwe (Aboriginal woman).

### *Transmission of Messages*

The messages that are received from female family members are absorbed by the young women during their seclusion. The messages stay with the young women completing their Berry Fast because of the actions they perform throughout the year. The young women are given teachings that they are able to give life now. Marlee shared a picture of trees and water and explained that it represented life because we give life as women.

Water and the ability to give life flow together. Without one there is no other. Bedard (2008) wrote about being Keepers of the Water and shared within her article a conversation she

had with Josephine Mandamin, a respected Grandmother who walked around the Great Lakes in order to bring attention to the polluted state of the water. Josephine shares:

As women we are carriers of life. Our bodies are built that way. Men are not built that way. We are special. We are very special and unique in how our bodies are made that way. And the water that we carry, is that water of unity, that unites all of us.

The ability to give life and also the water that women carry when they are pregnant is not only for the individual, but also for every woman. It unites all of us together. Without the ability to give life, the human population would begin to diminish. The role of giving life is intrinsically linked to water; both of which are traditional roles of Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women).

### *Secrecy*

The act of secrecy from a First Nations traditional view does not have to do with the absence of any communication between young women and older women. This is the time when young women are learning their roles as traditional Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women), which involves teachings among women. The messages transmitted to the young women are learning the traditional roles of Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women) and being the givers of life.

Through the theme of Water, Marlee shares her traditional role through a discussion about when she went to the lake with her mother and niece. “We take care of the water. We went out to the lake and we did an offering for the water because that’s one of our jobs as women.” Bedard (2008) writes about bringing back the ceremonies of Berry Fasting for the young girls because it is critical to restore the relationship and responsibility of women to Mother Earth as Keepers of the Water (p.98).

The role of Keeper of the Water is defined through actions that belong to women and not necessarily shared with the larger public eye, which can be viewed as secrecy. In the traditional First Nations' perspective it is called group belonging.

### *Embodied Existence of Menstruation*

Koutroulis (2001) wrote about the embodied existence being part of the consciousness of the body of a menstruating woman. The embodied existence of young women's moontime is being powerful and special. Taylor (2002) writes about the qualitative results from research conducted on this topic. Comments such as: "It is the force of life. It is the gift of becoming female. It is more than we know or understand in this day and age." Another comment was: "Menstruation is a time to celebrate your womanly feelings and appreciate the subdued feelings of sensitivity" (p.32). These comments illustrate a powerful embodiment of women on their moontime (menstruation).

Using the theme Moccasins from the results, the special embodied existence of a young women during her Berry Fast is validated by the participants. Elena shares her ability to walk in a good way when describing a picture of her moccasins. "Those are how I walk strong when I'm doing the Berry Fast. I feel proud when I'm doing the Berry Fast. I walk high and strong and proud." Simone shares her picture of one moccasin with the sky and trees as background in her picture. I had it raised so in the background there were trees, like just nature. "I don't want to do bad things, not just physically like poisoning your body but like having good morals and values. I think the lighting really highlights the foot and the moccasin and how important that path is."

The path they are on is part of Mino-Bimaadiziwin (Good Life). Goudreau (2006) explains the term as an Ojibwe concept that most closely defines health. It means living a good life and treating others well. The participants of this thesis project understand the positive aspect

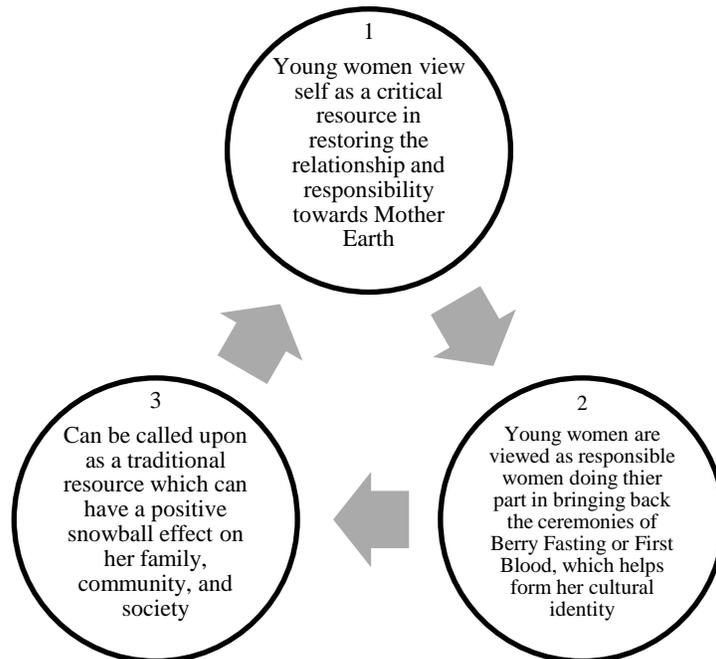
of their moontime (menstruation) and it affects the way they feel on the inside. The keynote speaker at the community feast summed it up in two sentences: “The feeling inside is so strong it’s hard to put into words. You know it’s right and that’s how you feel in your heart.”

### *Influence and Attitude*

Influence and attitude of moontime (menstruation) depends on the surroundings the young women are in and if they have the opportunity to partake in the Berry Fast. The theme Knowledge validates the First Nations’ traditional view. The amount of exposure young women have to these rites of passage in mainstream society is small. This brings us to the type of knowledge transfer process that may be taking place and how it can be improved.

In the literature review section, Shuttle & Redgrove (1978) speak of a howlback phenomenon pertaining to women, menstruation, and the community. The phenomenon can be described as a vicious circle or feedback loop (see Figure 10). Firstly the phenomenon pertains to how the woman feels in herself at the menstruation end of her cycle, the paramenstruum. Secondly, there is the effect that her changes may have upon other people. Thirdly, there is the way society may pay her back for these real or imagined disturbances. A cultural adaptation of the howlback phenomenon can be validated through interviews with the young women when speaking of knowledge.

Figure 19-Howback Phenomenon-Cultural Adaptation



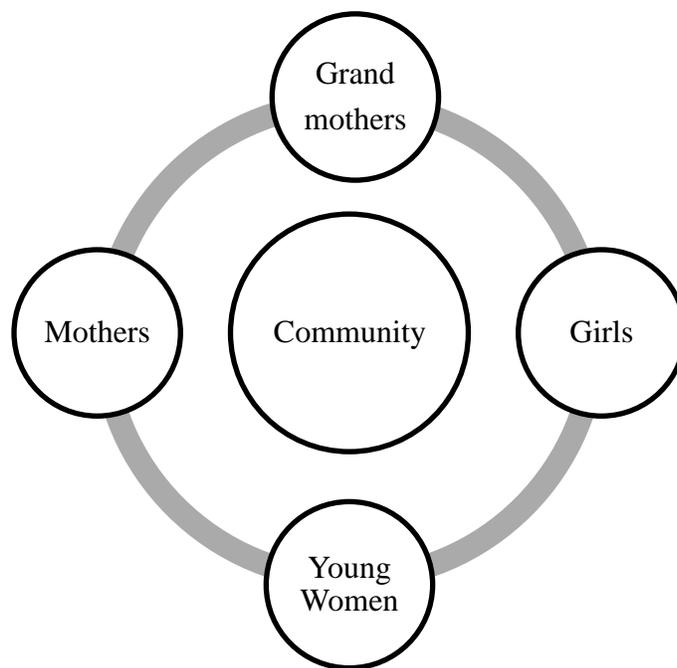
The howback phenomenon that Shuttle & Redgrove (1978) discuss in *The Wise Wound* can be culturally adapted to be used as a traditional knowledge transfer model. Lyse describes the knowledge transfer concisely when she explains that she is asked to speak in the community and at different places about her Berry Fast and her reason for doing so. She says, "We owe it to our ancestors to carry that on because they're the ones who gifted all this stuff to us and it's our obligation, to show respect to them, to pass it on to future, you know? This is also evidenced by the keynote speaker who talked about her Berry Fast experience at the community feast. The name of this young woman was given to me through the Grandmother who was a member of the Advisory Committee. She was called upon as a traditional resource in the community.

From Grandmothers to mothers to young women to girls, the knowledge transfer is occurring at varying speeds. There is no common vehicle to transfer this knowledge evenly to all First Nation adolescent girls, but there are several strong Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women) who understand the need to pass on these teachings. Lyse strongly believes in the

knowledge being passed on to others. She shares the following statement, “I think whenever you learn about things like the Berry Fast, and it’s up to older people to teach others and to share that knowledge and to pass it on.” She then speaks about what should be done with the knowledge that is given. Lyse believes “it shouldn’t be something that you keep to yourself. When I talk to my nieces that have gone through it; I’ve said because of what you’ve learned you’re obliged to share with others.”

As part of the culturally adapted howlback phenomenon (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1978), the results show a traditional knowledge transfer model that is already being used in the community.

Figure 20-Traditional Knowledge Transfer Model



When the girls become young women, the Grandmother puts them on their Berry Fast with the help of the mothers. The young women know about the Berry Fast through their mother, aunts, cousins, friends already because they have gone through them or know someone who has. Each young woman has her own part in the traditional knowledge transfer cycle. It is then up to the young woman to share this experience with others, because of the traditional

resurgence that has begun. Bedard (2008) writes that ceremonies have become a way to resist the Western culture that do not respect the sacredness of water and women's moontime.

It is up to the traditional Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women) to bring these ceremonies back to our communities. The traditional knowledge transfer model can be used as a starting point when dispersing the information in ways the community sees fit.

### *Pollution*

This action of pollution does not fit in with the perspectives of women's moontime (menstruation). The First Nations' traditional perspective of the act of pollution is cleansing. Owen (1998) writes about a Cherokee belief that the menstruation woman is performing a function of cleansing, and of gathering wisdom. Therefore, the menstrual blood itself is not dirty; it can be thought of as soap. The idea of soap as cleansing does not make the soap dirty, which can be interpreted as the menstrual blood itself as cleansing.

Lyse, a participant, explained the act of cleansing through a picture of a lake with visible leaves from a bush. "I can relate this one to the view of on menstruation because like I think, you know, when you look at the water, you think of when it rains and all that kind of stuff and it's pure, it's cleaning, it's refreshing. You know how common, everyday people see water? That is how we should be looking at our bodies and our moon time.

Through the literature and results, there is validity in the First Nations' traditional perspective of their moontime (menstruation). The results show a culturally constructed path which the young women are following coupled with a connection to Mother Earth, Creator, and their traditional roles as Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women). The literature showed the perspectives and the young women reinforced it. The relationship between academic research and culturally based traditions has come to a healthy convergence.

### *Gathering of Thoughts-Researcher's Perspective*

Throughout the gathering of literature, people, and results I strove to bracket my views and keep them separate from the research. I used third person as a way to distance myself and to attempt to remain objective. Throughout the rest of the discussion piece, I will be using the first person to share my perspectives.

I am Algonquin First Nation and I carry my culture and traditions with me wherever I go. I am feeling a bit disconnected from a rite of passage that is so special in my culture so the rest of the discussion will be from my heart. Wilson (2008) discusses in his book *Research is Ceremony* about the need to write on a personal level, rather than in the abstract to an anonymous reader. When Wilson (2008) was completing his dissertation and reviewing notes and transcripts, he felt incomplete without the final coming together that was required deep within his being. I understand what he shares in his book and this will be my final coming together; a reuniting of a researched cultural rite of passage and myself.

The initial spark of interest on the Berry Fast came from a family member who began her moontime (menstruation) and made the choice to embark on this yearlong fast. I began to question the lack of available supports in the community for this rite of passage. The family member who went through her rites of passage had a lot of cultural support from family and friends. I wondered about other young women who wanted to complete these rites of passage and were unable to do so due to lack of cultural and/or family supports.

### *Academic Learning Journey*

Through the initial research proposal, the topic segued from *Creating a Berry Fast Network* to *Is There a Need for a Berry Fast Network?* to the current thesis title. There was a

learning journey that went along with the transformation of the research topic and questions that were shaped with the help of my supervisor and also an interim research professor at the time.

Through the coursework in the Master of Social Work Program at Laurentian University, I was able to take my quest for knowledge on this topic and present it in an academic framework. I believe this is important because of the seemingly lack of community-based health research on this particular topic with the urban Aboriginal population. There is a balance that can be found between the academic world and the community.

My supervisor has been working within the academic setting for several years and has done research within Aboriginal communities. She understands the framing of time between the academic and Aboriginal community, which complimented the research.

#### *Community-Based Learning Journey*

Using the academic skills that I have been taught, I successfully submitted my research proposal and ethics application to begin the research process. I have worked in the urban Aboriginal community, so I had already developed a rapport with the key players that were needed in this research journey. This relationship is similar to the one described by Larson (2001) in which Elsie Mitchell had a strong connection with the young Aboriginal participants in an Australian photovoice project. Mitchell recruited Aboriginal youth through word-of-mouth which is a method of informal recruitment that is similar to the role of a gatekeeper.

I would not define myself as a gatekeeper for this research, but I did have rapport with a Grandmother in the community who can be loosely defined as one. Through this Grandmother, most of the recruitment was completed. As an Aboriginal researcher, there is usually a long standing history with potential participants based on genealogy, family and community connections and through reputation (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2006). There are close ties found

within the Aboriginal community. Through the Grandmother's genealogy, family, community connections and reputation, the young women were open to the research and engaged well.

### *Joe and Rose Ann's Girl*

When I return home to my parents' home community, I am not an Aboriginal researcher to the community members. I am Joe and Rose Ann's girl and I take that role seriously. I feel a need to place myself in my thesis research; in turn, the community members have a need to position me in my role. Moeke-Pickering et al. (2006) believes there is a need to connect each person with her or his on their genealogy and family structure; this should not be treated superficially.

### *On the Research Path*

The path from ethics approval to the end of the data collection had a few twists and turns in it. As discussed earlier in the literature review, Castleden et al (2008) wrote about a community-based participatory research model which attempts to develop culturally relevant research models that address issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation. Castleden et al (2008) modified the photovoice method to include several additional steps.

#### a) Continuous Recruitment and Training

I understand the different timelines that some Aboriginal people may have. This was taken into account when holding the photovoice focus groups. I held three in total, which speaks to the need to recognize the different experiences and timelines of participants. What came unexpectedly was the time and resources required to hold three separate groups.

When working within the Aboriginal community, research takes time. This is evidenced in the year it took to fully complete the research in a good way. When I use the term "in a good way", it means that things are done in a way that I am proud of and did not exploit, hurt or make

others or myself feel ashamed. I try to live according to my traditions which are such an integral part of my life; it is like breathing. When individuals did not attend meetings or missed a focus group, my initial thoughts were 'it wasn't meant to be.' When individuals are ready for the research, they will be there. If I had held a single focus group (Wang, 1999) I would have missed out on several opportunities to encourage the young women to join the research project.

b) Individual contextualization of photographs through stories

I met with each of the Photovoice participants individually which worked well for them and for me. There was flexibility among the locations and times for the interviews, which may not work for all researchers, but I found that it was more fluid that way. There is an Ojibwe hand drumming song about Water that I have learned. The drumbeat starts slowly which signifies a calm body of water. Then it speeds up and the drumming gets faster and louder. I would compare my research to the heartbeat of the Water song. There were times when it progressed slowly and other times there was rapid activity involving interviews, collecting pictures, preparing for Advisory Circle meetings, and the writing of the thesis.

Goudreau (2006) postulates that it is as if the drumbeat connects to our heartbeat and is able to help and guide us on our journey. I understand the different rates of the drumbeat to be similar to the research process. The regulation of my personal heartbeat regulates the research process which can make it more fluid, even in times when there is a flurry of activity.

c) Community Feast

As part of validating the research, I wanted to do some member checking with the community. I organized a community feast that was open to all interested members of the larger community. I invited a keynote speaker to talk about her Berry Fast experience, presented my initial findings at the community feast, and had an informal circle to discuss the results.

The community members who attended the community feast also had a chance to look at the photovoice exhibit which was put on display. This exhibit was viewed by the community members, before the keynote speech by an adolescent participant and presentation of initial findings. The Grandmother who was assisting with this research told me how she wished her mother could have been there to see the exhibit. Her mother is a well-respected Elder and does not currently live in the community. As a researcher, I felt proud that I was able to showcase the participants' photographs in a manner that was acceptable to this Grandmother. The photos and captions were all from the participants, so I redirected the compliment to the young women involved in the project. For some people, this act of humility is a sign of low self esteem/self-worth. Yet, humility is one of the seven Grandfather teachings (Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 64) that many Anishnaabe people strive to live by. Humility is to know yourself as a sacred part of Creation. I am proud to know this teaching and put it into practice whenever possible, along with the other six Grandfather teachings. Deference is not always about low self-esteem/self-worth; it may be about following a traditional teaching.

*Academia Meet Community, Community Meet Academia.*

As I went about completing my research with a group of women from the urban Aboriginal community, I found myself with conflicting thoughts. The Advisory Committee members recommended that I expand my research to Nbisng (Nipissing) First Nation to include young women and also to compare young women who went through the Berry Fast with others who did not.

After speaking with my supervisor, the message I received was that another phase of research was not needed for a Master's level thesis. I found myself wanting to make the community proud and follow their recommendations, and follow my supervisor's suggestion that

I would be prolonging the data collection stage. Moeke-Pickering et al (2006) suggests that often the Indigenous researcher is placed in a situation where she or he needs to decide how the research will be shaped, keeping in mind the competing expectations of the community and academic settings. I compromised on each group's expectations of me. I invited a keynote speaker from Nbisong (Nipissing) First Nation to speak of her Berry Fast at the community feast and I let go of the comparative analysis. I explained it to the Advisory Committee as that could be something I can do at the next level in my academic journey. The Advisory Committee accepted this and I moved on with my data analysis.

In conclusion, this reflection on my role as researcher has allowed me to pull from my memories and reconnect them to the people involved and also to myself. I have reconnected with myself in a way that pulls my traditions, community rapport, and also academic self together. My relationship with the community does not end here along with data collection. It continues on through other avenues. I feel confident in the relationships which I have built with the Advisory Committee and supervisor are strong and will continue on.

### *Limitations*

There were four limitations that were discovered as this research was being completed. The first one had to do with the disconnection between the research questions, the SHOWeD method that Wang (1999) uses, and also the photovoice methodology itself. I first explained to the participants what photovoice was and how it is used. I then talked about the research questions and how they could take photographs that represent the answers. During the interviews while using the SHOWeD method in eliciting responses from the participants, I found there were no pictures relating to the last question. I then remedied this issue by asking the questions directly to the participants.

Another limitation is the premise that somehow the research will capture the essence of the Berry Fast. Yet, the Berry Fast experience is a very spiritual journey. As Moloney (2007) wrote, “researching the elusive concept of female spirituality is like trying to lasso the wind.” The wind is often used as a metaphor for spirit (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002 as cited in Moloney, 2007). How does a researcher capture the essence of a phenomenon if there is no concreteness to it? I worked with the data collected and showcased it in a respectful manner, rather than trying to capture it. The end result is a culmination of text, photos, meanings and themes that somehow come together to catch a fleeting glimpse of the essence of the Berry Fast.

Another limitation is the subjectivity of the results that were coded into themes with meaning further reinforced by verbatim quotes. Bopp (1984) writes that no two people will see exactly the same things when they look deeply into the Medicine Wheel. Yet everyone who looks deeply will see the tree of their unique lives with its roots buried deep in the soil of universal truths.

What I see in the data does not mean that it remains static forever. Another researcher can use the same data and identify different themes. There is no one way of completing research, which can make it very subjective. I am comfortable with the results that were presented at the community feast and to the research participants. Member checking is an important validation strategy.

The fourth limitation that was found throughout this research journey was the recruitment of participants. The participants were recruited by two of the Advisory Committee members who chose which girls were selected. To remedy this limitation for future research, I would recommend recruiting more openly among the community to ensure a broad cross-section of young women are aware of the research project.

### *Implications for Social Work*

The implications for social work practice are the realization of the importance of cultural identity in this stage of Aboriginal youth's lives, and the possible connection between clinical practice and traditional resource people.

The outcome of raising awareness and public education regarding the Berry Fast may give First Nations' girls a more concrete cultural identity, which is needed to foster positive growth and self-direction. The clinical practice and traditional resource people are interconnected with the realization of the importance of cultural identity for First Nations' youth. The use of both approaches within one practice may improve the cultural identity of the First Nations' youth who access the social worker's services.

Another implication in the area of social work research arises through the recording of the results that were retrieved through this research project. The results can be used in accessing funding for the implementation of a support system for the traditional knowledge transfer of the Berry Fast teachings. Other types of funding may include the creation of a Moon Lodge as a site for young women on their Berry Fasts, social media tools to spread the knowledge, and also support groups for the young women to attend.

### *Further Areas of Study*

Further areas of study on moontime (menstruation) can expand to include a comparison between First Nations females who go through their rites of passage and those who did not. This can be measured through ideas put forward by Berry (1999) and the four areas he employs as a tool to explore the different levels of cultural identity. According to Berry (1999), a positive Aboriginal cultural identity is comprised of a number of interrelated features, including the 1) perception of oneself as Aboriginal, considering this to be important, 2) having positive feelings

about being Aboriginal, 3) wanting to remain an Aboriginal person, and 4) expressing these in one's daily behaviour.

Another area of study can include young males when they go through their rites of passage. First Nations' males have their own rites of passage that are different from females. This type of research may be more fitting for a male researcher, hence it is important to be aware of the traditional roles that each sex plays. Presently women are engaged in efforts to bring back the traditional knowledge to Aboriginal peoples, when men have the ability to play a larger role so balance can be achieved.

Another area of study can also focus on the support of the family towards members who go through their rites of passage or start to follow the traditional path of teachings, ceremonies, and way of life. Further studies can explore whether supports from family members modify a traditional person's involvement in ceremonies and teachings.

There are many areas of study that can be conducted in regards to traditional ceremonies and teachings. There should be caution shown when researching these topics so as not to study aspects involving "how-to-do-a-traditional-ceremony". The Aboriginal traditions have been passed on orally since time immemorial. There should be caution so that researchers do not speak about a ceremony or tradition that may not be part of their role. The people who should speak about the ceremony or tradition should be authentic and earn the right to teach others.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ability to research experiences of young women who went through their Berry Fast was a great honour. First and foremost, if it were not for the young women involved in the research there would have been no data to analyze and no experiences to share.

The life experiences that they shared with this researcher resulted in the ability to be able to showcase the Berry Fast in a powerful and optimistic light.

The experiences coupled with the community Advisory committee's understanding of culturally appropriate ways to conduct research with Aboriginal peoples also resulted in the study being completed in 'a good way'. My supervisor had the ability to keep me on track in a manner that I am accustomed to. She understood the academic expectations and shared them with this researcher; but did not try to form my research methods for me according to mainstream perspectives. There was always room to breathe that allowed me to be more creative in my research and in the development of my thesis.

There was also a balance of mainstream research methods in this study, along with Indigenous research methods that were appreciated by the Advisory committee and my supervisor. The coming together of both styles complemented the type of research that was conducted with the young women, which brought about clear and defined results.

In keeping with the results, it must be emphasized that there is a spiritual aspect of the Berry Fast which ensures that a positive message is embodied. There is a connection to Mother Earth, Creator and spirits that are not only found in human form. There is a clear link between their spiritual aspect and their lived experiences while on/during their Berry Fast. A culturally constructed path is connected to the spiritual being of the young women that plays itself out in the positive choices they want to make in life.

The young women used metaphors when speaking about how their lives have changed since their first moontime (menstruation) cycle. The young women captured living elements within their environment to express the changes they went through or are going through. They

spoke fondly of their childhood and understood the clear differentiation between their roles as children and young Anishnaabe Kweg (Aboriginal women).

There is also an intrinsic and extrinsic expression of views on moontime (menstruation) that comes from inside of them and also from the media. The intrinsic feeling or embodied existence of a First Nations' woman on her moontime (menstruation) is cleansing and powerful. The extrinsic messages that flow from from the media about their moontime (menstruation) do not have the ability to permeate them because of their strong cultural identity.

With the Berry Fast being a part of the traditional resurgence of Aboriginal people within Turtle Island; traditional activities, ceremonies, and teachings have a potential to reach more and more people. Aboriginal people on Turtle Island have lived according to their traditions and culture since the beginning to time. With the disruption that occurred with assimilation strategies, the presently different levels of assimilated Aboriginal peoples, and the untouched knowledge that is transferred orally through respected Aboriginal peoples within Turtle Island, there is a resurgence occurring that may swing the pendulum of knowledge back to total immersion of culture, then settling in the middle where Mino-Bimaadiziwin (Good Life) can be found.

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## Rites of Passage for Algonquin and Ojibwe Female Adolescents: The Berry Fast Experience

Investigator: Joey-Lynn Wabie, BSW, RSW

I am an Algonquin from Wolf Lake First Nation in the School of Social Work at Laurentian University studying the spiritual health of First Nation female adolescents and their rites of passage. As part of my thesis, I am conducting research using Photovoice groups with Algonquin & Ojibwe females. The research questions that will be posed in this study have to deal with the essence of the Berry Fast, what it means to each individual, life changes, and their personal views about menstruation. I would like to discover what female adolescents believe about the Berry Fast and its spiritual effects.

This research is intended to provide information to the urban Aboriginal community and neighboring reserves regarding this rite of passage. All of the information gathered belongs to the community and not the researcher, and will be available to interested parties, through a thesis summary report. You should know this research project does not share the cultural teachings or how-to conduct a Berry Fast. The study consists of one focus group (2 hours), independent work at home by taking pictures, a one-on-one interview to collect results, and a community feast where the photographs will be on display (with no identifying information). You will be reimbursed for your time and participation in this event by being able to keep your mounted photographs from the Photovoice exhibit. The focus group, one-on-one interview and community feast discussions will be audio recorded. Your identity and any information associated with you will be non-identifying. All information that is identifiable will be locked in a filing cabinet, which will only be visible by me.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Any new information that will change your consent to participate will be communicated to you, in a timely fashion. You have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study or about being a participant, you can call me at 675-1151 Ext. 1048 or the Research Officer at (705) 675-1151, ext. 3213 for information.

I agree to participate in this study, and I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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Your identity and any information associated with you will be non-identifying. All information that is identifiable will be locked in a filing cabinet, which will only be visible by me.

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Your identity and any information associated with you will be non-identifying. All information that is identifiable will be locked in a filing cabinet, which will only be visible by me.

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Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Non-identifying Participant Data Form**

No names will be used on any form of data collected. Please ensure any papers you write on or draw has your code on it and it is left with Joey-Lynn Wabie.

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EXAMPLE Sage Chevrier Date Of Birth November 19, 1996

CR – Chevrier SE – Sage Birth Year – 1996 Month – 10 Day – 19

Code: **CR SE 1996 10 19**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Code: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

First Nation: \_\_\_\_\_

- On or have completed Berry Fast
- Woman Elder
- Advisory Circle Member
- Community Feast Participant