Community Part One

Family and Community Relationships

The Work Part

**Respond to each of the following questions in complete sentences.**

1. Google “core values” and find a list. Now, pick from that list at least three values that have been demonstrated by Aboriginal people through their lifestyle as described in this reading. Explain your choices. In what ways does our culture reflect these values? Or does it at all?
2. Explain the difference between “matrilineal” and “patrilineal” and how the clan system works.
3. Describe two primary ways by which Aboriginal children learned. Are these ways exclusive to Aboriginal culture?
4. Why was collaboration such a vital part of Aboriginal social organization?
5. Culture has been identified as an essential part of education for Aboriginal students. Discuss the degree to which your culture is included in your education. Do we do a good job of covering it? If so, what benefits are there? If not, what kind of damage is that doing? You may have to look up a definition of culture to answer this one. Lucky for you, I have a Prezi all about culture.
6. Create a diagram or other graphic representation of your world view and where you fit into it. Where does your family fit in? Your community? Your nation? Your beliefs? In other words, graphically demonstrate how connected / interacting or isolated these elements are.

**Assessment**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Criteria / Level** | **Level 4** | **Level 3** | **Level 2** | **Level 1** |
| Knowledge | Responses are packed with accurate supporting details | Responses contain considerable accurate supporting details | Responses contain some accurate supporting details | Responses contain limited accurate supporting details |
| Thinking | Nothing is copied. All thoughts are clearly the student’s own and are very insightful | Nothing is copied and insights are pretty clever | I think I see some copying there. Think for yourself! | You’re responses aren’t wrong, but a lot of it isn’t actually you |

The Reading Part

In this reading, you will look at various family models in Aboriginal societies to understand their connections with Aboriginal world views and why these models helped to maintain healthy and successful communities. You will also consider the disruptive effects that government laws, programs, and policies have had on family bonds, and how these disruptions struck as the root of Aboriginal identity and self-esteem. Finally, you will look at some of the ways Aboriginal leaders and organizations are working to renew and regenerate their family and community relationships.

**Family Roles and Responsibilities**

Every society finds a way of organizing itself to ensure that its people enjoy a good measure of health and well-being. How do we provide ourselves with food, clothing, and shelter? How do we deal with our neighbours, and how do we share our wealth? How do we choose our leaders, and who will perform the tasks necessary to keep our community safe, clean, and sustainable? These questions are answered by each cultural grouping by finding solutions that work within each unique set of circumstances.

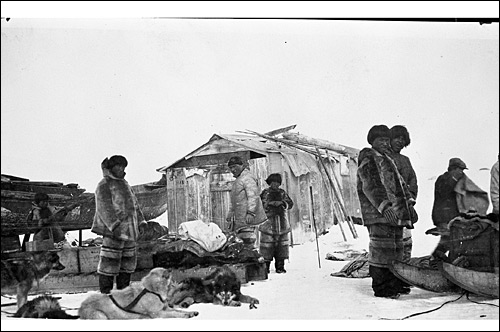
Before European contant, First Nations and Inuit societies had developed sophisticated and sustainable social organizations that were quite different from those in European countries. For most First Nations and Inuit, societies were based on kinship (family) ties, and the **extended family[[1]](#endnote-1)** formed the basic social unit. Members of the extended family did not necessarily live in the same household but included maternal and paternal aunts, uncles, and grandparents, who shared in child rearing and economic responsibilities. These kinship ties defined each member’s identity, responsibilities, and social and political roles.

Strong kinship systems were necessary in hunting and gathering societies because the survival of the group depended on harmony and collaboration; two core values for Aboriginal peoples. Each individual had to contribute to the greater good of the Nation.

***Clans and Kinship***

In many First Nations, extended family groups belonged to a hereditary clan system that formed the basis for a Nation’s type of government. Clans had traditions and rules. For example; marriage between members of the same clan was not allowed.

Some Nations were matrilineal; that is, they were assigned the line of a person’s descent through his or her mother. The Tsimshian of the Pacific Northwest and Haudenosaunee in the Eastern Woodlands were both matrilineal societies, and the children in these societies belonged to their mother’s clan.

 Other Nations, such as the Anishinaabe in Ontario, were patrilineal; that is, the children traced their descent through their father and belonged to the father’s clan. A few Nations, such as the Mi’kmaq of the East Coast, had a bilateral line of descent and the children traced their descent through either their mother or their father. Lines of descent, whether from a mother or father, were important because they determined such things as inheritance, leadership and clan affiliation.

Inuit had strong kinship systems that were not necessarily based on lines of descent or clans, but on the survival of the group. For example; their winter camps consisted of several extended families because Inuit had a complex kinship system based on birth, marriage, and adoption. Even when no blood relation existed, families created kinship so that almost everyone in the camp was related to each other in some way. These kinships ensured social cohesion and improved everyone’s opportunity to live a good life.

Family and community ties determined responsibilities in other Aboriginal societies. The Innu and the Pacific Coast Nations designated rich hunting and fishing territories according to family affiliation, and the Woodlands Cree hunters shared meat from the hunt with the entire community on their return. In the natural order of things, every person had a role matched to his or her abilities. In such a system, gathering kindling was just as important as providing meat for food, since the family needed fire to cook the meat and keep from freezing. Reciprocity, the practice of exchanging goods or labour with other people for mutual benefit, was a core value among First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.

In Metis communities in the West, extended families joined in the bison hunt, including women and children, who were needed to help transport the hides and butchered meat. While the men were generally the hunters and defenders, the women were camp organizers and children’s teachers. Historically, it was mainly the First Nations women who combined the languages, dress, music, and dance of the First Nations and the Europeans in to the cultural traditions of the Metis.

***Women’s Many Roles***

The roles of Aboriginal women were varied, and their work was valued equally with the work of men. Women held a special role in Aboriginal world views because, through childbirth, they are the bearers of new life. With this role came a special relationship with water, because water comes before all life. For example, in Anishinaabe communities, women were the water carriers.

Women’s ability to bear children was tied to their primary responsibility of raising and nurturing them as well. This, in turn, determined women’s role as tenders and gatherers of the crops. Women managed the fields and allocated the tasks. They did their work together in the fields while the children played, and the other girls took care of the younger children. Women also did the cooking and prepared the hides for making clothing, tents, watercraft, and various household items.

In many First Nations, women had a governing and advisory role. In Onkwehonweh families, for example, the role of clan mother was hereditary, and clan mothers selected the Nation’s chiefs. Since women spent a lot of time observing children as they were growing up, it was felt that women were best qualified to determine who had the most suitable qualities to serve as chief. The clan mothers also had the right to impeach (remove from power) a chief for inappropriate conduct.

Having said all that, it should be noted that men’s and women’s roles were flexible and interchangeable within the extended family and kinship networks, especially in times of distress.

***Children***

In many Aboriginal cultures, children held a special place of honour. One reason for his was the belief that children had a close connection to the spirit world. Inuit believed that a newborn child received the spirit, or soul, of a recently deceased ancestor. This spirit made itself known through a physical resemblance and by certain habits or behaviours that reminded people of the dead person. The child not only received this ancestor’s name, but was also given the same measure of respect that person received while alive. This is one reason why Inuit children were seldom disciplined or told what to do. Parents assumed their children knew what they needed, and they respected their children’s ability to think for themselves.

The Haudenosaunee believed that their relationship with their children began even prior to the point of conception. Tradition held that it took the agreement of seven ancestral grandfathers to bring a child into the world. The child spent time with those grandfathers in the spirit world before being born and was under their protection until the age of seven. At that age, children became responsible for their own actions, since by then they could understand the difference between right and wrong.

Often, child-rearing practices in Aboriginal families might have seemed too permissive to outsiders. Aboriginal parents generally did not lecture, scold, or use direct instruction. Instead, they allowed their children to learn the consequences of unwise behaviour for themselves. Since non-interference was a core value for many Aboriginal peoples, children were often not directly confronted about their misconducts. Instead, adults and older family members modelled acceptable and appropriate behaviour.

***Aboriginal Learning***

The education systems developed by First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples were experimental and “hands-on.” Children learned primarily through observation and participation. They watched their parents and older family members perform tasks such as picking berries or preparing an animal hide, and then took an active role in these activities themselves.

The other common way of acquiring knowledge in Aboriginal cultures was through oral tradition. Teaching stories were adapted to fit given situations and then passed on by older family members to the young. Master storytellers had lived and learned a lifetime of lessons, and were often referred to as Elders or Wisdom Keepers. Elders played a vital role in transmitting knowledge to younger members of the community and were given great respect, another core value among First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.

Many Aboriginal stories involved characters known as Trickster, Raven, Coyote, Nanabosho, or Wisahkecahk. The stories also taught the young about the good and bad things in their environment, such as when to pick the sweetest berries or which tree’s branches make the strongest teepee pegs. Young people spent many cold winter nights by the fire listening to the living memories of their Elders and drawing lessons from them. Later in the year, when these youth encountered challenges on the hunt or in their daily tasks, they were armed with a collection of these stories to guide their actions and decisions.

**Aboriginal Families Meeting Challenges**

For countless generations, the extended family worked well as the basic social unit in Aboriginal communities. Contact with European settlers, however, placed severe stresses on Aboriginal families and forced communities to find ways of adapting to changing times and circumstances. These stresses ranged from disease and starvation to reserve restrictions, residential schools, and conflicts with child welfare agencies. By examining some of these outside pressures, you may come to a better understanding of the different ways in which Aboriginal families and communities are meeting the challenges that face them today.

***Disease and Starvation***

When the Spanish colonized the islands of the Caibbean in the late 15th century, Aboriginal communities in North America were decimated by diseases introduced by the newcomers. First Nations and Unuit had no immunities to these diseases because they had never been exposed to them. As a result, epidemics killed tens of thousands of Aboriginal peoples throughout North America and, in some cases, wiped out entire communities.

In 1837 on the Western Plains, as fur traders moved into the territory of the Blackfoot First Nation, people in several villages became ill with smallpox. They developed fevers so severe they could not lift themselves from the ground, and their faces were covered in blisters that left permanent scars, assuming they survived the illness itself. Smallpox spread rapidly from teepee to teepee, village to village, and within a few months, 6000 Blackfoot people had died, more than two-thirds of the Nation’s entire population. Just think for a moment about how we completely lose our minds if so much as five people die from something like SARS or H1N1.

This disease was not the only epidemic to strike the Blackfoot Nation in the 19th century. In 1864, the Nation was ravaged by scarlet fever and, in 1868, smallpox struck again, killing about 800 Blackfoot people in the lands that later became Alberta and Saskatchewan.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, the Blackfoot and Plains Cree Nations also suffered from starvation as the bison herds disappeared due to overhunting by the newcomers. Without these herds, the people lost their main source of food. In some cases, the government made this bad situation worse by refusing to give rations to starving First Nations as a way of forcing them to sign treaties.

Whenever a community experiences a severe decline in population, the social bonds that have held the community together are strongly affected. Families that lose several members feel the stresses most directly. Many Aboriginal communities responded to the population losses by reassigning family roles and responsibilities.

Since so many mothers, father, and older siblings died from disease or conflict, the survivors had to cross gender lines in order for the community as a whole to continue functioning. Women who had lost a husband learned the men’s songs and stories so they could teach their sons. Men who had lost a wife learned to cook so they could feed their children. Girls replaced their brothers on the trapline, and boys learned how to gather herbs and make healing medicines from them.

Disease epidemics and times of famine continued well into the 20th century. The influenza pandemic of 1918 affected all of Canada, but hit First Nations reserves in the North particularly hard. In north-western Ontario, at the Wabauskang reserve and nearby communities, about 1000 people died. Virtually the only Wabauskang residents who survived belonged to 10 families who were away on their traplines. These 10 families then moved from Wabauskang and founded the Grassy Narrows reserve. The Christian Island reserve in Georgian Bay lost 60 members, or two-thirds of its population, during the same epidemic.

In 1950, because of a change in caribou migration routes in the Arctic barren lands, famine struck several Inuit communities, killing many people. In all these cases, the survivors had to adapt their roles and responsibilities to meet the challenges presented by sudden and widespread population losses.

**Rekindling the Fire**

The Aboriginal family in Canada seemed to have reached a crisis point. Many families had been devastated by residential school experiences, and in many other cases, parents had had to stand aside as government officials gave their children to non-Aboriginal foster homes or adoptive parents. As a result of these pressures and others, many Aboriginal communities suffered unusually high rates of family violence, alcoholism and suicide.

Across the country, First Nations, Metis and Inuit parents and community leaders sought ways of healing to repair the damage that had been done to their families. In Ontario, the late Anishinaabe Elder Art Solomon referred to this healing process as “rekindling the fire.” For Art Solomon, the fire consisted of the “sacred Knowledge” that was almost lost after years of colonial policies and attempts at forced assimilation. This knowledge was still alive, though hidden; it was glowing like embers under the ashes. The question was how to build the knowledge up again into a fire that would warm and restore families, communities and Nations.

***Taking Control of Education***

Aboriginal leaders focused on getting control of education for a number of reasons. Not only is education key to a person’s career prospects, but it also has a strong effect on a person’s sense of identity and self-worth. In 1970, the Blue Quills Residential School, in Alberta, became the first band-controlled school in Canada. Then, a 1972 position paper by the National Indian Brotherhood (later, the Assembly of First Nations) helped persuade the federal government to pass on responsibility for First Nations education to the reserve communities.

The National Indian Brotherhood paper titled “Indian Control of Indian Education” proposed to implement two principles of education that would make school more relevant to students and their communities:

* parental responsibility
* local control of education, including the right to hire staff and develop curriculum

The federal government responded favourably to the paper, and eventually handed over responsibility for primary and some secondary education to band councils on reserves across the country. By 2004, there were 496 First Nations administered school in Canada, with approximately 60 percent of non-reserve students attending them. Although local administrative control was transferred to band councils, funding allocation and program criteria remained in the hands of the federal government.

In the area of curriculum, First Nations parents, teachers and school principals emphasized courses on language, history, and culture. By learning their own language and by understanding their own culture and history, First Nations children can develop pride in themselves and their people.

***Identifying Core Values***

As part of the attempt to “rekindle the fire,” Aboriginal thinkers and scholars have worked to identify and explain the values that sustained their people for centuries. Value systems help people make sense of the world, and shared values help those in the same community to interact with each other in productive and mutually supportive ways.

In her 2002 paper “Aboriginal Family Trends,” Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano points to one version of the Medicine Wheel that illustrates the interdependence of the individual, family, community, and natural and spirit (unseen) worlds. What happens in one sphere affects other spheres because people and the environment are connected. This belief is just part of the Aboriginal teachings of Bimaadizwin, or “living in a good way in life.”

Inuit have a similar concept about living a balanced life in harmony with one’s environment. By following traditional knowledge that is handed down through the generations, individuals, families and communities can achieve wholeness and resiliency in the face of challenges.

Throughout this chapter, you have read about some of the values that characterized relationships in Aboriginal extended families – and the communities in which they existed – successful and flexible social units. They helped Aboriginal peoples to deal with the challenges that life presented to them.

1. A family unit that includes parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)