

# “What About Equality?”: Women’s Experience in the Stó:lō community

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**Abstract.** This study looks at life experiences of two elderly women from different backgrounds belonging to the same First Nations reservation in Chilliwack, British Columbia. Through oral histories, these participants, each members of the Stó:lō community, shared their life experiences. The overarching theme within each history was that of inequality. Each woman shared stories in which inequality was manifested through poverty, patriarchy, marginalized children and individual rights. These themes intertwined and culminated in their individual interpretations of their personal identities, including how they perceived themselves and how others perceived them. Set within an intersectional feminist theoretical framework, participants offered insight into the most memorable moments (both fond and regrettable), that shaped their lives and defined their roles in the Stó:lō community.

## Introduction

The Indigenous people of British Columbia were subjected to the process of colonization which began when European settlers arrived in the 1850s. By the 1890s these settlers had extended control over the last major Aboriginal groups (Tennant, 1990). Aboriginals whom had been living on their territories for thousands of years faced an influx of colonists. Pre-contact, it is estimated that the Indigenous population of British Columbia numbered between 300,000 and 400,000 people (Tennant, 1990). The majority of reservations were allocated after British Columbia entered Confederation in 1871 (Tennant, 1990). The *Colonial Land Ordinance* (1870) had stipulated that while any European man over the age of 18 could claim legal title to any land not occupied by an Indigenous settlement, an Aboriginal could not claim the right of pre-emption. The federal government assumed total control of the Indigenous population of Canada with the introduction of the *Indian Act* (1876); this statute denoted who was a status Indian, governed the lands Aboriginal communities, and paternalistically controlled every aspect of life of Canada’s Indigenous people. The intent of the *Indian Act* (1876) was to assimilate Aboriginals, and for those who resisted, restrict their cultural activities and legal rights. Aboriginals became wards of the government and second-class citizens.

This project seeks to describe the experiences of two women who lived within the Stó:lō community on a reservation currently situated in Chilliwack, British Columbia. Through examining their experiences, the intent is to gain a greater understanding of a woman’s role in past and current First Nations communities. Their stories are important because the lives of women, as recounted from their own perspectives, is under-researched

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in current scholarship. An examination of the struggles First Nations women faced in recent history allows us to better understand how Canadian law continues to shape the lives of these individuals, and allow us to assess society's current shortcomings that impede true equality for all people. These accounts detail how Canada's history continues to shape its present and future, defining the lives of individuals within its borders.

## **Methodology**

There are two distinct types of oral histories: the first is the practice (since time immemorial) of Aboriginal peoples wherein matters of historical record are passed through verbatim story-telling, from generation to generation. The second type of oral history is a qualitative research method in which the recollections of often marginalized individuals are recorded. These life stories and experiences have often not made their ways into written historical accounts (Palys & Atchinson, 2014). Within the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism, each participant in this project is seen as occupying their own unique position in a matrix of disadvantage and privilege based on gender, ethnicity and other aspects of individual identity. This project looks at the lives and experiences of these women and examines their reflections on their pasts to present; the latter form of oral history was a logical method of inquiry.

The sample participants of this study were purposively chosen. Both are female status Indians (as defined by the *Indian Act*), in their 70s, and members of the Stó:lō community. Data was gathered after this project passed ethics review and was assessed as minimal risk. Oral histories were conducted with each participant through a series of interviews over several days, which were conducted in private residences. The interviews themselves were open-ended, in hopes of uncovering the topics which each participant felt were the most important to them, and which memories (whether fond or regrettable), had made lasting impressions on their lives. All of the interviews were digitally recorded, password protected, stored in a secure location and later transcribed.

## **Participants**

Rose<sup>2</sup> was born into a Caucasian, upper-middle class family in Chilliwack. At 16, Rose and her boyfriend John, a First Nations 21-year-old, were married. Through their marriage Rose became a status Indian under Canadian law. Upon her marriage, Rose moved to John's reservation, and went on to have four children and take in several foster children from the Stó:lō community. The second participant, Jane, is First Nations by heritage, and lived on the same reservation with her husband and three children. Jane also acquired Indian status upon marriage (she previously did not have Indian status because her First Nations grandmother had married a non-status man). When her children were grown, Jane went back to university and earned her degree in social work. Immediately upon completion of her degree Jane went to work as a social worker for the Fraser Valley Aboriginal Children and Family Services Society (Xyolhemeylh), and worked her way up through the institution

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<sup>2</sup> Both Participants were assigned pseudonyms.

from frontlines worker, to regional director. After nearly two decades of employment Jane retired.

Emerging from the two oral histories was the overarching theme of inequality. The subthemes within inequality were poverty, patriarchy, individual rights and disadvantaged children. All of these concepts were intertwined, and shaped each woman's personal identity (both self-perceived and as defined by others). Although these subthemes are distinct, there is considerable overlap between them. There were several recollections of Rose and Jane which had commonalities, however, while Rose recalled more specific personal experiences, Jane placed her stories in political context. This juxtaposition allowed me to elucidate on an elusive piece of history: the unique experiences of women living in a First Nations community, who experienced changes under Canadian law that gradually recognized and delegated more legal rights to them. However, this research suggests, by no means does either participant believe they have achieved equality within society.

### **Poverty**

Poverty was, and remains, a reality to many First Nations communities in British Columbia. First Nations in all of Canada not only remain in a position of lower development than the rest of the country, they do not have access to the same opportunities (Kendall, 2001). Dale Booth stated in 1996 that "measures must be taken to ensure that one of the most successful countries in the world does not continue to have a 'third world' within its borders" (as cited in Kendall, 2001p. 55). An important aspect of this research is that the First Nations community to which each woman belonged was not remote. Rose explained that the reserve itself was minutes from what was 1960s Chilliwack's city centre (known as Five Corners). On one side of the street was the Indian Reserve, and directly across the street were modern subdivisions filled with families of European descent. When the Stó:lō people were originally delegated their reservation, it was located directly where downtown sits today.

Downtown used to be the landing where the ferry boats came, and then when people could travel by car they drained the lake, and the people from town didn't want to live there anymore. So they switched with the Natives. That was only 120 years ago. Can you believe that? The White people just told the Native people what to do, and they did it. (Rose).

Despite the close proximity of the two communities, living conditions were completely different from one side of the road to the other. Rose recalled the initial culture shock she felt when she was married and moved to the reservation. Initially Rose and her husband stayed in his father's house which had no electricity, heat, or running water. Instead of an oven she found herself cooking on a coal and wood stove. Rose's living conditions were not unique, and she recalled that only five houses on the reserve had running water at the time.

There were pumps at six locations around the reserve. They all had to go with their buckets and pump the water and take it to their house. No garbage pickup, no

water...they all had outhouses. I mean it was that close to town where everything was modern, but it had nothing. These people had absolutely nothing. (Rose).

Rose indicated that a problem associated with the lack of easy access to water was a serious threat to the health of the reserve residents, particularly the infants. Babies required bathing, their bottles required washing, and at that time diapers had to be washed by hand. The lack of proper hygiene was responsible for many infections and illnesses, some with fatal consequences. According to statistics this is a problem that persists; 5.3% of reserve units still need indoor plumbing, while 39.1% need piped water and 55.9% need piped sewage service (Alcantara, 2007).

Rose's parents were shocked by the conditions on the reserve. Despite the fact that they lived just blocks away from the reservation for several years they had never been there, (as was the case for most in the surrounding community). In order to build her first house, Rose went to Indian Affairs, which was located at the local post office. The protocol as set out in the *Indian Act* stipulated that Aboriginals confer with an Indian agent in order to get on the housing waiting list. Indian agents were in charge of making all the decisions for Aboriginal people, regardless of whether a band had their own council in place (Tennant, 1990). The Indian agent told Rose the list for her reserve was very long and warned her there would be a significant wait for housing.

I told them what happened at Indian Affairs, and my dad said, well what about if you give them some money, will you get a house faster? I said I don't know, he didn't say anything about that. So when I went back to Chilliwack I went to the Indian Affairs office again, and I said what if I give you some money, will we get a house faster? And he said, well yeah. Nobody has given me money before. You can get a house right away if you give me some money. How much will you give me? And my dad had said he'd give us \$500, and so I said \$500. So he said yeah, we can start building in a month. (Rose).

So a reserve house was not like a white person's house. It's plywood floors, plywood walls, no cupboards, no bathroom...well there's a room that could be a bathroom but you don't get a bathroom. There's a room that could be a kitchen, but there's no water, there's no cupboards, there's nothing. That's what a Native got for a house. Nothing. Every house was built exactly the same, and looked the same. The Dutch contractor that Indian Affairs got bought all these old wooden windows, pre-wartime, nobody even used anymore...nobody knows where he got them from (*laughs*). (Rose).

The lack of infrastructure and lack of even the most basic of amenities was an eye-opener for Rose, who had grown up in a much more modern fashion. Not only did the reserve lack the services of the nearby town, but the surrounding community was completely unaware of some of the inequality that their First Nation neighbours experienced in terms of living conditions.

Gradually over time the band took over getting dumpsters and getting water put in because they started getting more money from the government. It was getting out that these Natives were living in deplorable conditions just down the street, right? (Rose).

Jane explained poverty was not relegated to the 1960s. First Nation communities are still often living in standards well below the rest of Canada. Many have no choice but to live off-reserve in substandard housing rentals because ss. 28 and 89 of the *Indian Act* does not allow for the seizure of Aboriginal assets by lending institutions, making securing mortgages to build houses extremely difficult (Alcantara, 2007). Through her work as a social worker and director for Xyolhemeylh, Jane made it clear that lack of housing for First Nations people continues to be one of the major social problems. A particular concern of Jane's was while there is now more money being put in programs for Aboriginal people, she believes it is being wasted through bureaucracy and by being poured into "useless programs." She described how money failed to make it to those who needed it most.

They're going to do this and that. They're going to have community care committees. Well this has been done - been there done that. So you have all these people that get paid. They have meeting after meeting but nothing ever gets done on the ground level where you need it. Where's the housing? Where's the new houses, where's the money for more daycare? For more support for those families that really struggle cognitively? (Jane).

Jane stated that today there are opportunities for bands to generate income through leasing land which would raise the standard of living for everyone. Like in any other community, there is little agreement within First Nations communities on how to go about creating revenue.

I think it's wonderful if it brings revenue to the band, and I hope that someday they will own some of those stores like Home Depot, and manage it and employ their people. It's wonderful that bands get that revenue. And some old timers would say no we shouldn't sell our land - well it's a different world. We need the revenue. What good is the land sitting there when there are people living in town that can't afford to build a house on the reserve? And there a families living in squalor with mold up their walls. (Jane).

Jane continually expressed frustration at how Band governments turned down opportunities that would have benefitted entire communities, through development of empty land through high-revenue generating businesses. Jane felt it was unfair that members of the band who could not afford to build a house on the reserve were afforded no benefit by the community owned property.

There was a big project that was supposed to happen up there at the lake. A nice chunk of land there which used to be a go-kart track...the project would have given the band like five million dollars, never mind the owner of the 27 or 30 acres that was going to be developed. The band could have had it. They live in poverty up there. They could of had a preschool, they could have had a gym, or whatever, and it took one family where the guy was not in agreement, to shoot it down. (Jane).

A further problem in creating revenue arises from the limitations set in place by the Canadian government. While a Certificate of Possession (CP) allows the holder of the certificate to develop land, certain types of development are allowed and others are not.

Both women stated the ways in which band revenue was currently being generated was senseless, and not in the best interest of the entire community. Each made reference to a recent situation in which reserve land designated as a gravel pit was turned into a garbage dump, and expressed a great deal of concern regarding the environmental impact. While reserve land is ultimately Crown land, a CP allows a band member to have security of tenure, allowing them to use that property without interference from band council or third parties (Alcantara, 2007; Woodward, 2014). Sometimes with disastrous consequences. The dump in question is called the Over the Edge Landfill and is owned and operated by a band Councillor, whose mansion looks over the pile of garbage and gravel (Woodward, 2014).

The dumping is pretty much done now. The hole is full, and he got away with it. Nothing happened. And the other dump is not on our reserve but farther down the river. Nobody stopped it. It's just towering, 20 stories now, leeching into the river... It's on the news, it's on the Internet. It's been everywhere, and it's still growing higher and higher. I blame the government for letting it happen. The band down there is collecting money for every truckload and who's to blame? I guess the government because they need a place to dump it. They're just turning a blind eye, aren't they? (Rose).

Because someone got a CP...and that's how they are generating income. By allowing their land to be a garbage pit! You know what the government's gain is? Making the Native people look bad by allowing that to happen, yet they won't allow First Nations people to build a Casino on the reserve where the big bucks really are. How the hell does that work? (Jane).

The current living conditions are far better than they were in the 1960s on this reservation. However, while some people have been able to overcome the poverty that had at one time been universal for that community, others continue to struggle today. There are dilapidated houses, derelict properties, and overcrowded households dotting the reserve. There is no specific section that seems more poverty-stricken than the next. These houses appear randomly throughout the community between family farms and modern houses

### **Patriarchy**

While poverty was an intrinsic aspect of life on the reserve for many people, women had this problem compounded because of their gender. With colonization came the European-Canadian cultural provision that women were the property of men. Under the *Indian Act* Aboriginal women were given a status inferior to men, were unable to vote, and banned from participating in community decision making (Carter, 1999). Many situations discussed by both Jane and Rose relayed that women did not, and still do not, have rights comparable to those of men. Women were described as having very little power, be it personal or political, in the community. This inequality was manifested through uneven division of labour within the household, with women often taking on the roles of both caretakers and providers. Another problem for women living on reserves was that the land was Crown land, and not subject to sale. If a woman wanted to leave her husband there was no equitable split of the family property. Jane felt strongly that the uneven distribution of power between genders had roots in colonialism.

If you look back at history the First Nations people were very matrilineal. The women played the important role in the family. If you married a woman you went and lived in her community, she didn't move to your community. With contact...they were led to believe men were the powerful ones, and women were chattel, and they did the cooking and the sewing, and the men did all the fun stuff. My grandmother was full First Nations from Spuzzum, and she married a non-First Nations man. So right then, what happened was you're not allowed to go back. You were shunned. My grandmother was very bitter about that for a lot of years that her people actually shunned her. (Jane).

Despite a lack of parity, it was often the women who were the ones who supported their families. Many women went to great lengths to provide for their families: knitting, weaving, selling fish and taking low-paying jobs off-reserve. Research suggests the decrease of positive involvement of Aboriginal fathers in the lives of their children can be traced to “government intervention, pandemics, political conflict [and] migrant labour” (Ball, 2009, p. 30). The relative absence of Aboriginal fathers in their children’s lives is considered a serious social problem in Canada.

John had an aunt and she had a bunch of kids, but her husband pretty much never worked. She was the breadwinner. She used to make money knitting ‘Indian sweaters’ out of raw wool, the old Indian way in the round. She also taught her daughter-in-law how weave and knit. That’s how the daughter-in-law supported the family when her husband went to jail. He stabbed a guy to death. (Rose).

Some scenarios set forth indicated incarceration, and the fear of incarceration of First Nations men, was often to blame for the pressure on women to support their children alone. This is not surprising because Aboriginal adults account for 28% of admissions to sentence custody, while only making up 4% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2015). Most situations described by Rose revealed that violence was to blame for conflict with the law. Rose’s own husband had deserted her and the children for several months because he feared incarceration for an assault he had committed after a night of drinking and fled to the United States. Rose was in her 20s and had four small children to provide for.

So there I am with kids, cows, horses – he’s gone. I got two stallions that are supposed to be in different fields, I don’t know how they ended up in the same field. They’re fighting, tangled in the fence...cows calving, my neighbour’s helping me pull calves out of cows. Meanwhile, I get a phone call from my husband – “I’m sending some money, we’re haying.” He sends me this little tiny bit of money, and I’m like barely making it with these kids all this time. (Rose).

The violence that repeatedly makes its way into stories about life on the reservation is reflected in current scholarship. Colonization theory posits that colonialism and systematic oppression of generations of a community fuels violence among individuals within it. In turn, Western society sees the resulting behaviour of these populations as problematic, and assumes the violence to be inherent in their culture, when in fact it is colonialism that is the root cause (Vine & Alaggia, 2006). Violence as a common cause of incarceration, and the nonchalant mentioning of various people from the community who had been involved in

murders were frequently referenced throughout Rose's interviews. She mentioned three murders while discussing topics that were unrelated to crime.

One of the most frustrating aspects of patriarchy described by each participant, was that there was very little recourse for women who lived on the reserve who wanted out of their marriages. As described by Jane, in the majority of marriages post-colonization, it was now the woman who moved in with man's family and relocated to his band's reserve. It did not matter what reason a woman had for wanting to dissolve a marriage. If a woman wanted to leave her husband there would be no equitable distribution of property.

It was always the man's house, not only in my life, but in families I dealt with. Women and children lots of times had to leave the reserve while the men stayed and found a new wife and had new kids or whatever. So the Aboriginal woman left with nothing except her suitcase and personal belongings. That was made clear to her if she ever thought about leaving. That you're leaving with nothing. "We can't sell this, we don't share it." That may have been an eye-opener for some women who went onto reserves. It was for me. If I wanted to leave I left with the shirt on my back and my three kids because that's the way it was, eh. (Jane).

The women are still pretty powerless, and in the court system, like for me, when I left the reserve I had nothing. No house, no horses, nothing. Nothing and four kids! Everything stayed, and it's pretty much almost that bad now. Now the women can go to court and get something, but they'll never get as much as someone off-reserve, because it's Crown land. So whatever you build, even if it's all your own money, it's still built on Crown land it can't be sold. In that way so you're pretty well screwed. (Rose).

Patriarchy is not found solely in the context of familial relationships. Jane related a story from one of her first experiences with patriarchy related to the practice of hiring men over their more educated female counterparts within the Stó:lō Nation. The names of the women specifically mentioned were removed from the comment below, however, it should be noted that one is currently a university chancellor, and the other a member of university faculty.

When I first went to work as a social worker for the Stó:lō Nation they had three job postings out for different higher up jobs, and there were half and half women and men who applied (some that were really strong women)...So this was like 16 or 15 years ago, and not one woman got a job, and they were way more educated than the men who applied. I put an email out saying "what about equality? How many women are sitting on land claim committees? None!"...So it's the good old boys school, still well and alive today. To have these strong women that are not given a chance. So anyway that email went out and I was almost fired, and (*laughs*), I guess I shouldn't be sending out stuff like that. I was fresh out of university and was very enthusiastic still, and you know from a feminist perspective, thought things should change here. If I'd been there for 20 years I would have thought "oh, it's just the status quo." (Jane).

### **Disadvantaged Children**

Like the women, children from First Nations communities also faced a great deal of disadvantages. Today 50% of Aboriginal children live in poverty, and they are placed in



foster care at 10x the proportion of non-Aboriginal children (Statistics Canada, 2015). In 2016 the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the federal government is racially discriminating against First Nations children and their families who live on-reserve by giving them welfare funding of only 65 cents for every one dollar an off-reserve child receives. (Blackstock, 2015). This legacy of disadvantage was noted by both participants, and the stories shared paint a bleak picture of a marginalized community's most vulnerable.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Federal Indian Residential School System, in place from 1867 to 1998, was a tool of cultural genocide used by the Canadian government. The government removed children from their families and placed them in dilapidated buildings with inadequate resources. There, the children endured malnutrition, isolation, lack of sanitation, sexual abuse and corporal punishment (Potvin, 2015). Rose noted that when she first arrived on the reserve many community members who were former subjects of residential schools were suffering from depression and anxiety, and some engaged in self-medication with alcohol.

A lot of Native people, when I first went there, would never look you in the face. If they didn't know you they would just talk to you looking at the ground. I think it is all related to residential school, from abuse and mistreatment. I think if you look at old movies from the residential schools, that you will see the children have downcast eyes. (Rose).

It is likely that many of the social problems for Canada's Indigenous people are directly related to the oppressive laws under which children and adults were subject, but in regards to the residential schools themselves, Rose stated "people really didn't talk about that." Many researchers suggest that residential schools, and the mistreatment and abuses suffered by the children who attended them, are directly responsible for many of the problems associated with dysfunction in Aboriginal families. When children were taken from their families and isolated, it impeded them from learning proper parenting skills that are best taught through loving environments, role-modeling and healthy relationships (Vine & Alaggia, 2006). When these youth grew up and became parents themselves, some were not equipped to parent psychologically, or were unaware of the most basic skills associated with raising healthy children.

Rather than educating the parents, common practices of child welfare in the 1960s simply removed the children from their families and placed them with non-Aboriginal parents Rose recalled some of the more horrific examples of lack of parenting skills from the 1960s.

Parents going to town and not coming home, and the rats come in and chew on the baby. That was common. "Babysitter, what's a babysitter?" If your kids were all under six, you didn't go next door and get someone who was 18. That's how it was. (Rose).

Alcoholism and child neglect within First Nations families fuelled a mass number of child apprehensions and placements with non-Indigenous families. While some considered these actions well-intentioned, this practice (referred to as the Sixties Scoop), was also called "a fiasco in its application...the wrenching of children away from good families in a

continuance of federal and provincial government policies of forced assimilation or genocide” (Milner, 2001, p. 154). Rose recalled that there was some consideration given to placing children from Aboriginal families with families on the reserve in the latter part of the 1960s. Up until that point, she said it was common practice to place First Nation children with local German and Dutch families, which came with its own set of problems.

The kids were totally out of their element. They were going from a home that had no water, no nothing, into these homes where they were expected to sit at a table and have manners. Well they didn't understand! They didn't know about brushing their teeth and having baths...they didn't have bathtubs. (Rose).

Rose had four small children of her own when she agreed to take in local foster children. Her first charge was a teenage boy who lived with them for a year and a half, and she was later approached and asked to take in his younger brothers. Rose also fostered the daughter of her husband's cousin, Lila.

Lila's mother had shot her father down in the States, and paralyzed him, so the family broke up. I took one of the girls, and John's mum took one of the girls, and I kept Lila for quite a while. (Rose).

Jane's involvement in child protection took place later in her life during the 1990s upon completion of her social work degree. Through her education and career Jane became aware of the cycle of dysfunction that resulted in generation after generation of Aboriginal children being displaced from their families and communities and placed in the care of social services. Reflecting on her past she stated “you know when I think back, I think geez, I had little kids. I easily could have taken in a couple more. It was off my radar.”

Jane also made mention of the intergenerational trauma associated with residential schools. At Xyolhemeylh, the goal was to have Aboriginal social workers serve the Aboriginal community whenever possible. However, when Jane was promoted to management she noticed some of her employees had difficulty creating close bonds with the children in their care, likely because they themselves had never had a chance to attach to their own parents.

Being a supervisor I soon found that sometimes First Nation people are their own people's worst enemy. And maybe not knowingly, but if a person doesn't know how to attach, how do you become a social worker? How do you have that empathy and caring ability, because a lot of them are flat affects. So if you've got a worker that's really not emotional, how do you attach the kids? And I'd say to whoever “you've got to have a meaningful relationship. Like, do you see them?” Well...no. “Well you have to.” You have to let them know you're the go-to person if anything goes wrong in their life, so you have to build that relationship with them. You have to show them you have genuine feelings for them and you really care for them. And they look at me like (*cocks her head quizzically*)...you know? So it was a struggle to get them to know that concept. So while it's good to have First Nations staff you've got to make sure that they're strong, and they are able to do those things, and that they're able to connect with kids and families - because a lot of them aren't. (Jane).

It is noteworthy to mention that Rose made many mentions of death on the reservation; death seemed to befall First Nations children on the reserve far more often than in the surrounding community. Children and infants with untreated medical issues faced high mortality rates. Another source of many deaths in the community was the Fraser River, which bordered the reserve.

I mean, everyone on the reserve fished, but no one could swim. If they fell in the river, that was the end of them. Kids playing around the water, if they fell in, that was the end of them. Some of the bodies would be found downriver caught up in log booms. Some bodies were never recovered...as soon as my kids were old enough to walk around, I put them in swimming lessons. (Rose).

For many people on the reserve, swimming lessons were out of reach, either because of the expense, or simply because of discrimination. Perhaps there would have been an outcry in the surrounding community if the children had been of European descent. At the time, it did not appear that the drowning deaths on the reserve received much contemplation or consideration from the government. Rose stated “some families had four or five drown. If you had ten kids, maybe six lived.”

### **Individual Rights**

The ambivalence of the surrounding community in regards to the perceived worth of the life of a First Nations child was part of a larger problem reflecting the lack of legal rights afforded to all members of the Canada’s Indigenous population in the 1960s. The fact that Indigenous people had less rights than their European counterparts likely shaped the attitudes of non-Aboriginal townspeople regarding their neighbours. Upon her marriage Rose gained Indian status, gaining both the privileges and disadvantages that came along with it.

We had one doctor we were allowed to go to, Dr. Wilson. As soon I was declared an Indian, the day I married John, I couldn't go to my own doctor. I had to go to the Indian doctor. So on your BC Medical card it had an R. That meant you were a Native...well, in those days it meant you lived on the reserve. Everything went through Indian Affairs, so you went to the Indian Doctor. (Rose).

Rose recalled how unfair she thought the system was at the time. When children on the reserve needed shots, they were not allowed to go to the clinic a few blocks down the road. All status Indians were mandated to go to Coqualeetza in Sardis, several kilometres away. Coqualeetza Indian Hospital was a former residential school that had opened its doors in 1924. In 1941 the residential school was converted into a tuberculosis sanatorium (Wells, Galloway, Maud, & Weeden, 1987). Finally in the 1960s it became the hospital which Aboriginals were mandated to go to, much to Rose’s ire: “they wanted the women to go to Coqualeetza to have their babies! I said, no, I’ll go to Chilliwack General.” It is not difficult to comprehend why any woman, regardless of status or ethnicity, would prefer to go to the modern hospital in town over a converted residential school/tuberculosis sanitarium kilometers away to deliver their baby. Canada’s Indigenous population were a part of a two-

tiered medical system where they occupied the position of the least advantage and the lowest quality care.

Status Indians also were not allowed to go to liquor stores or into beer parlours. Rose recalled if an Aboriginal wanted a case of beer, they would have to wait around in front of the liquor store and ask a White person to buy it for them (usually for a fee). Jane also mentioned that restrictions that First Nations people faced in the 1960s.

Cultural activities weren't allowed by law; they'd be put in jail if they had a potlach. They couldn't have a lawyer, represent them. These things all changed slowly. After one ban was lifted, of course there were different bans. They couldn't drink, they couldn't go to beer parlours. A lot of them gave up their status just so they could go to a beer parlour and have a beer with people (*laughs*). They gave up their status for that! (Jane).

While the right to have a beer may seem like a trivial issue, it was clearly motivation enough for some to waive their status. The government used this to increase assimilation and lower the number of status Indians. Despite the *Indian Act's* ultimate failure to achieve its intention of complete assimilation, it has proved to be resilient through seven generations. Despite the contention surrounding it, the *Indian Act* has only undergone partial reform. Some of the patriarchal provisions under the act were addressed through Bill C-31 in 1985 by returning status to women who had married non-status men, with further reinstatement of status changes made in 2010 (Morden, 2016). These changes have been incremental, and it is argued by that Canada must consider greater political and institutional changes to redefine its relationship with Indigenous people. The argument has been made that current provisions of the *Indian Act* provide First Nations leaders with too much power in their communities, while affording them very little power within the Canadian government (Morden, 2016). Jane does not underestimate how deals between the federal and tribal government members are to the detriment of the rest of their people. She believes the traditional ideologies of sharing and equality between members of First Nations communities has been slowly worn away as First Nations people continue to live under colonialism. She stated many First Nations leaders had learned well from their colonizers.

I think too many people out there beating their drums, are just beating their drums for themselves. There are people out there beating their drums in the name of First Nation needs, and then the government will give them a job to shut them up. By giving them a high paying job. "Be on this board and we'll give you a \$100 000." Oh? OK good, good, (*laughs*), and then all of a sudden everything's fine. (Jane).

In 1969 Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had attempted to reform Canada's relationship with its Indigenous people with his introduction of the White Paper. One of the provisions was a removal of Indian reserves – an idea that was rejected when it was met with vocal opposition (Morden, 2016). For Jane, the incremental changes in First Nations rights were not enough to remedy the inequalities she experienced throughout her lifetime.

This is my opinion, and I think other people may share it but I don't know if they are brave enough to come out and say it. I don't think there should be reserves. I think every family should be given a plot of land, and a sum of money. There should be one

big cultural place that they can go to, say like Stó:lō Nation out here, where there's a smokehouse, where there's a meeting place. I think every community should have that for them, but I think they should dissolve reserves. There should have never been reserves in the first place. We need the opportunity to own something. What's the point of having a nice house if you can't sell it or you can't reap anything? Why bother keeping your yard clean? You're a ward of the government right? If your kids move to Merritt and you want to move up with them you couldn't move unless you gave your house away for next to nothing, or if there was some rich person in the band. But you would never get what the white guy got just up the road. (Jane).

## Identity

Individual identity is best examined within the wider cultural and community context in which it exists. Because of the restrictions placed on Indigenous people by the *Indian Act*, in the 1960s in the Stó:lō community, most of their traditional activities had been lost. The outlawing of celebrations of culture, languages and spirituality drastically changed the way of life for First Nations people. Rose described her community as particularly disengaged from their culture when she arrived. Potlaches had been replaced by barbecues. Hunting, fishing and canoeing remained key aspects of life, yet a recognition of their former traditional practices were absent. Activities like drum making and drumming (which have recently returned to the Jane and Rose's community) were never engaged in in the 1960s.

The traditional notion of Native activities really didn't exist in the '60s. I guess it's coming back now. It started coming back 25 or 30 years ago. Like the wearing of blankets, and such. That wasn't there before. I think when the Native Brotherhood started getting more popular, and people started organizing themselves, that's when things started building. I would say in BC, anyway, that was probably the biggest thing. And John's Mum, the Chief, was a big part of that. And of course the Brotherhood had lawyers and they had scholars, so they had people with education and bright minds. They started getting people rights, so a lot of the bad things were starting to improve. So you could go to whatever doctor you wanted to go to...of course this all started happening later, in the 70s, 80s, 90s. (Rose)

Jane described her father-in-law (who had himself been taken from his family and put into residential school), was suspicious of traditional practices after his colonial education.

There are some First Nations that are really cultural families, and there are some that aren't. Joe's dad particularly was not. For whatever reason he thought it was all kinds of like voodoo, and didn't believe in it, and I don't know why that is. (Jane).

Despite the attempted eradication of First Nations culture, each participant agreed that a return to some tradition ways was occurring, and believed this was great for the community. Rose noted that the preschool on the reserve was doing a fine job attempting to

bring back the Halq'eméylem<sup>3</sup> language. She was pleased her grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were being exposed to it at young ages. Both participants thought the cultural resurgence within their community was great for their people; Jane described cultural assimilation akin to losing one's religion.

In acknowledgement of the many changes their community underwent over the last half-century, both participants described identity as a complex issue. Their legal identities are defined under the legislation of the *Indian Act*. But identity includes additional aspects: how one sees oneself, and how other members of the community see you. Inclusive in these categorical definitions are status/non-status, on-reserve/off-reserve and blood quantum (referring to the amount of pure Aboriginal blood one has). Rose recalled some of the family members of her ex-husband trying to have her band membership dissolved when she divorced. This attempt was unsuccessful and she continued to go to band meetings and vote for council members who she felt would be in her children's best interests. For Rose, the matter of her personal identity was one she had never quite figured out stating "that's the hardest question anyone has ever asked me in my life." She lived on the reserve for many years, had been forced to give up some aspects of her White privilege when she became a status Indian, and had raised four children in the Stó:lō community.

Despite Jane being Indigenous through ancestry because of her light complexion she was not accepted as such by all members of the community either.

There are people who would say I, or people like myself, are not First Nations because, (*points*) "you're white. Look at you. You're white." So there's those. They call themselves FBIs. Full-blooded Indians. Some look down on people, but their *own* families are all mixed. So for them to have someone like myself, or say someone like my niece who is blonde, to be considered First Nations is discomfoting for them, and I can see that. So some people say your mixed blood, you're not real. And I can identify with some of what they're saying.

## Conclusion

Generations of First Nations people lived through the *Indian Act's* most oppressive installments. Jane and Rose articulated how Canadian law has shaped their lives and experiences and described what it is like to occupy their unique positions of disadvantage and privilege within the Stó:lō community. They each experienced or witnessed inequality related to poverty, patriarchy, disadvantaged children and individual rights of both themselves and other First Nations people over the last half-century. These many experiences shaped their current identities, whether they were able to articulate exactly who they felt they were or not. There has been considerable improvements made in the lives of some members of their community, however they believe the legacy of inequality continues to be a daily reality for many First Nations people. While each participant had suggestions and opinions on how their community should go about ensuring equality for all its members, neither was particularly optimistic about the future. After facing lifetimes of

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<sup>3</sup> Though the Band has no current fluent speakers of the Halq'eméylem language, there are six members who understand it or speak it somewhat, and 25 members actively learning.

disadvantage and oppression from colonizers, governments and even members of their own community, it comes as no surprise two women with over 150 years of shared life experience would see the incremental changes in fair treatment of Stó:lō women as lacking in both speed and breadth. Jane stated “you kind of lose your enthusiasm for fighting for equality. I’ve got other things I want to do before my life is over.”

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