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Building Bridges of Friendship *Intercultural Grandmothers Uniting*

The women of the Intercultural Grandmothers Uniting (IGU) group draw on their identities as grandmothers to build bridges of understanding, respect, and friendship across boundaries of race and generation. This paper explores important intersections among gender, race, class, age, and cultural and family identity through an examination of older women's friendships within IGU. An oral historical approach draws on the life experiences of IGU members to provide insights about specific social institutions and cultural processes that have facilitated and hindered friendships. The women of IGU build bridges of friendship upon the common ground of "grandmotherhood" and then use their friendships to take a family-based identity beyond the private sphere to the public through community activism. The Grandmothers enhance their ability to choose friendship across societal boundaries by creating opportunities for interaction within a respectful environment. Taking their friendships into the public crosses societal boundaries and is a political statement. The Grandmothers' ability to provide and receive support is a critical component of their friendships. The Grandmothers perceive themselves as both benefiting and providing benefits within their friendships, creating a sense that their relationships are based on who they are, not just what they give. This paper challenges assumptions about gender, identity and women's friendships and explores the interconnectedness of gender, race and age as demonstrated in the Grandmother's intercultural friendships.

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IGU. IGU is a network of Saskatchewan First Nations, Métis, and other Canadian older women. Historically, many women belonging to these groups have lived side by side without ever interacting. Building relationships between the groups is of increasing importance given Saskatchewan's aging population, the growth of Aboriginal populations and migration to urban centres.

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Context

At the core of IGU are Gatherings conducted in an atmosphere of respect. Gatherings are held in spring and fall with projects and workshops organized throughout the year. A Project Working Council (PWC) composed of volunteers representing their participant groups meets to make consensus decisions about the group's activities and direction. Administrative functions are carried out by a coordinator employed by the University of Regina Senior's Education Centre.

Although I will use the term "Grandmothers" to refer to the research participants, the women who attend the Grandmother's Gatherings are not a homogenous group. Like any group of women, IGU is composed of a vast array of individuals with differing backgrounds, cultures and life experiences. However, the PWC and the women I talked to individually use the term "Grandmothers" to describe themselves and the other women in the group and encouraged me to do the same.

When the Grandmothers get together they gather in a circle. To start Gatherings, Kate, a Cree Elder and a member of the PWC, offers a prayer to the Creator in Cree. Then Laura, a Euro-Canadian Grandmother, also on the PWC, offers a prayer in English. On a table in the centre of the circle are the groups' ceremonial objects that act as symbols of the groups' continuity. The objects include a tatting made by Laura, a drum and a candle. The candle stands in as a replacement for burning sweetgrass as negotiated by the Grandmothers when a long-time member was going to have to leave the circle due to an allergy to sweetgrass smoke. Kate offered the group use of the Talking Rock tradition and it has become an important part of their process. A Talking Rock is passed around the circle in the direction the sun moves across the sky and whoever has the rock can speak about whatever they wish. Gatherings are usually held over two days with the Grandmothers staying in the facility and sharing meals

together. The Grandmothers' Gatherings take place within the context of Saskatchewan's intercultural relations.

Intercultural relationships in Saskatchewan have a complex history that I can only sketch in a paper of this length. Jim Miller, in *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens* (1989), describes early relationships between Europeans and First Nations people as cooperative but by the nineteenth century white settlers were taking more and more of the resources and began viewing the First Nations people as an impediment to expansion. This led to a "coercive policy of land acquisition and directed cultural change" (Miller, 1989: 273-74), including the use of forced residential schooling for First Nations children. Constance Deiter in her 1999 book, *From Our Mothers' Arms: The Intergenerational Impact of Residential Schools in Saskatchewan*, found that the assimilation program has caused, among other things, a loss of parenting skills, identity and self-esteem, as well as the "vilification of [First Nations] culture and language" (78-79). It is an understatement to say that First Nations people have been mistreated at the hands of the settlers who have come to their lands. Today's intercultural relationships exhibit the strain of this history. Furthermore, the damages of the residential schools are believed to have contributed to increased social problems in First Nations communities (Deiter, 1999: 78). As a result, there is a large disparity in social status indicators with incomes, employment and life expectancy statistics being far lower for First Nations people. While First Nations are moving to re-establish self-government, positions of social power in Saskatchewan are still held primary by those considered as white. Women in Intercultural Grandmothers used the word "segregation" to describe how we live our lives in the same province, but yet do not interact. Segregation and other social factors make choosing friendship difficult.

Choosing friendship

Echoing other researchers, Willard Hartup found that "societal forces frequently restrict friendship opportunities to individuals who resemble one another...friendships derive only partly from choice" (1993: 14). Roger Hewitt (1986) argued that structural racism prevented inter-racial friendship and even intervened to end long established friendships between adolescents in inter-racial London neighbourhoods. Choosing to hold onto the differences of power enforced through structural racism can prevent the formation of friendship.

Adele, a Euro-Canadian immigrant woman, was the only interview participant to declare that she has not made any friends in the IGU and in fact has not made any friends since her arrival in Canada after World War II. She faults Canada's mix of races and uses words like "savages," "uncivilized," "uncultured," and "stupid" to describe the women of all races she has met in Canada. Her belief that she is of higher status than the other women she meets echoes traditional imperialist views and has prevented her from forming any friendships. Expressing the same point but from a vastly different perspective,

Mary, a First Nations woman, claimed that an attitude of superiority was a barrier to interracial friendships. She thinks that the friendships in the Intercultural Grandmothers Group work because everyone is treated as an equal. In contrast to Adele, she sees herself as having formed several friendships in IGU. Respecting each individual as equal simply by virtue of their humanity supports the development of friendship.

Researchers who place a greater emphasis on choice support Mary's view. For example Mary Hunt, in her 1991 book, *Fierce Tenderness*, described friendship as a way for "good people to choose to live in right relation" (4). Similarly, Neera Badhwar claimed that friendship goes beyond attraction or proximity, it "is a practical and emotional relationship that arises from and is sustained by, choice" (1993: 5). The Grandmothers enhance their ability to choose friendship across societal boundaries by creating opportunities for interaction within a respectful environment.

Intercultural Grandmothers Uniting actively brings together women of different cultures, races and classes as well as creating opportunities for older people and youth to meet. Claiming the identity of a grandmother enables the women of IGU to bridge their differences. During our interview, Mary, a First Nations grandmother, told me that being a grandmother is "like its no, its no, uh nationality, you know. You are a grandmother, you're a Grandmother. You know! You all have something in common." The Grandmothers consider any loving and caring person a Grandmother and they carry an attitude of care and affection with them into their interactions.

The desire to make friends and learn from others allows them to bring people together who might not otherwise interact and in that coming together look beyond stereotypes to the individual. At a camp retreat held with Grandmothers and at-risk youth one of the youth said, "I thought old people were just...old. But they're really cool!" and the Grandmothers found their friendships across generations "enriching." An interest in youth has taken the Grandmothers into schools to model intercultural friendship, to parenting groups to support young mothers and into communities through the development of a violence prevention program for girls. One Grandmother, Eleanor, thinks that children and youth are comfortable with Grandmothers because they represent safety. "No one's scared of a Grandmother," she says, playing on common stereotypes even though she realizes that there are all kinds of Grandmothers. Janice Raymond believed women, in choosing friendships, "claim social and political status for their Selves and others like their Selves" (1986: 9). In the case of the Grandmothers, "others like their Selves" are fellow loving and caring people. Beyond the activities the Grandmothers carry out, simply declaring another woman as friend or being seen with her in public is a political act. The political power of public friendship is enhanced when societal boundaries are crossed as was illustrated in a story told by one of the Intercultural Grandmothers group coordinators.

This story centres on a murder that occurred in Regina, a city with a large

Aboriginal population. Two young, white, middle-class men murdered a young, poor, Aboriginal woman, Pamela George. When the trial began, the Intercultural Grandmothers took turns going to sit with Pamela George's mother, Ina. Here is the story as told to me:

Pamela George, was murdered. . . . Eventually the two men who killed her went on trial, and when her trial, when Pamela George's trial came up which was *two years* after the incident, uh, three or four of the Regina Grandmothers, and that would mean at least three of them would be white, went to the courthouse and sat with Ina George . . . to demonstrate their support to a mother who had lost her daughter.

They didn't know this woman, but they did that out of many motivations, but certainly one of the motivations was because the media kept flaunting, naming this woman as a prostitute.

And they said, "This woman who was killed was a *daughter* and a mother. And she *has a mother* who is in court, you know, *grieving* and calling for justice for this daughter."

So they went there to stay with her! To demonstrate their commitment to human life and one of the most amazing things about it was that one of the grandmothers who went to sit was a good friend of one of the grandfathers of one of the young men who was alleged to be, and then convicted, so *those*, uh, powerful acts, I call them "Bearing Witness Acts" you know, they are certainly powerful acts of human solidarity. . . . Crossing boundaries, *Crossing Boundaries*, [then quickly] crossing boundaries, crossing boundaries, crossing boundaries!

This story gave me goose bumps and moved me almost to tears when I heard it. It is a graphic illustration of the power of friendship and what can be done when friendship provides the courage to cross boundaries. The Grandmothers drew on their collective identity as Grandmothers and their friendship to offer support and friendship to a stranger they felt was in need. The Grandmother who was the first to sit with Ina told me that the faces of Pamela's male relatives lifted to see support offered across race and to realize that not all white people devalued Pamela. Intercultural friendship provided a powerful political message across societal boundaries.

Choice is extended beyond the initial decision to make friends. Friendship must be maintained by a choice to continue to act as a friend. Eleanor, a Euro-Canadian woman living in a small town, felt it was important to display her choice of friendship by saying hello to, and chatting with, her First Nations friends when she saw them downtown, in contrast to accepted norms of the community.

So when I see them on the street I always make acknowledgement and they'd all look a little embarrassed but they don't anymore . . . they seem to feel freer

to say hello and the other morning we had tea and gabbed.

The importance of the Euro-Canadian women approaching First Nations women was emphasized by Ursula, a First Nations Grandmother living in Regina. She told me she appreciates the white women's friendliness and that their approaching her and starting conversations had enabled her to make friendships. Eleanor has also chosen to accept invitations to attend First Nations events and to reciprocate by inviting First Nations women she has met to her home. She is concerned about segregation in her community and believes her choice to reach across racial boundaries demonstrates her friendship with the First Nations women. Her willingness to transgress unspoken social boundaries is a political act. Her sentiments speak to the agency of women who choose, act and commit to themselves, to each other and to their friendship.

Another choice that maintains friendships is the decision to deal with conflict. The existence of conflict or disappointment does not preclude the possibility of friendship; in fact many believe that surviving conflict strengthens a friendship. I have been told of an incident early in the group's formation where some of the First Nations women complained the Euro-Canadian women were rude for interrupting dinner conversation. The Euro-Canadian women, on the other hand, felt the First Nations women were rude for not wanting to stop talking to pass food. The Grandmothers openly discussed the conflict using their Talking Rock while sitting in their circle and came to understand that neither group was rude, but rather had different dining customs. Leaving these different expectations unacknowledged could result in disappointment for all parties, particularly given that the group has, as one of its central goals, bridging cultural gaps and these conflicts are clearly rooted in cultural traditions and expectations.

Support

"Throughout adulthood, women turn to their close friends for personal, emotional, and affective support" (Roberto, 1996: 55). Use of the word "support" attempts to distill many friendship functions into one category. Clearly, the friendship characteristics detailed in providing "personal, emotional, and affective support" are vast. As a result, this discussion of support will encompass a number of areas of friendship that very well could have been considered on their own. Researchers tend to agree that women appreciate support from their friends and provide support to their friends. The explanations for this vary. In one of the many incarnations of the nature versus nurture debate, support is often conflated with nurturing and attributed to either an essential nature of women (Block & Greenberg, 1985) or the socialization process (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1988). The focus of this section is the manifestation of support in the friendship relationships of the Grandmothers.

Related to support is the issue reciprocity. In friendship literature, reciprocity indicates an equal exchange of benefits between friends. Many definitions of friendships refer to the importance of a reciprocal arrangement (Duck, 1991; Reisman, 1979; Roberto, 1996; Stern-Gillet, 1995). Neera Badhwar, for example, stated that friendships are relationships of “mutual and reciprocal goodwill, trust, respect, and love or affection” (1993: 3) and Janice Raymond similarly noted that friendship “involves certain reciprocal assurances based on honor, loyalty and affection” that results in the individuals expecting mutuality or reciprocity (1986: 9). Underlying the emphasis on reciprocity is the belief that, without it, one party in the relationship is taking advantage of the other and a true friendship does not exist. The Grandmothers valued reciprocal support and this carried into their friendships.

One of the main ways the Grandmothers demonstrated both support and reciprocity is through sharing and listening. Interestingly, listeners often see sharing as the gift and sharers see listening as the gift! Mutual benefits and appreciation make sharing and listening a perfect example of reciprocity and was identified by many of the Grandmothers as a critical component of their friendship. “We do a lot of sharing. Sharing’s a very big part of our getting together,” says Lee, a Euro-Canadian grandmother. Mary, a First Nations grandmother described a different circle that is composed of First Nation women but she felt was very similar to IGU.

Anyway, we go these gatherings every once a month and I like doing that because we share. We share the good things and we share the bad things... And the Grandmothers, too, it’s very open, you feel very much at ease. Although they’re (pause) I’ll call them whites, uh? Yeah, whites. Yeah, we all, its, I learn we all have the same (pause) same feelings no matter what nationality you are the Grandmothers go through the same things, exactly the same things. We go through the hardships. We go through, we’re stronger for it.

Jean, a Euro-Canadian grandmother, echoed Mary’s sentiments. Jean has been part of IGU since it began and was part of the older woman’s network that preceded it. For Jean, each gathering has a mixture of old friends from the previous network, what she describes as her “anti-nuke” days, new friends she has met at previous gatherings and strangers who are attending their first gathering. She marvels at the fact that, in spite of this mixture, women, including her, feel free to share with the group and receive their support:

There is something about how we can sit with complete and total strangers, both um, um, First Nations people and, and those who are not. And we share things that we maybe haven’t even told our children and our grandchildren! And its just, we like to talk. And because there’s, um, kinds of revelations that we hold forth are confidential, but it’s just incredible to me that you leave there feeling that these people have just, have been your

friends longer than that couple of days you're with them and that they will be always.

Both Mary and Jean struggle over the appropriate terminology, “white” or “First Nations,” to use in discussing the groups. They seem to be concerned that they do not cause offence. Moreover, they think of the women as friends and Grandmothers and have to pause to re-categorize them into cultural groups. Lee attributes the comfort the women feel with each other across boundaries of race to the safe and secure environment created by the group.

Yeah, they're [the Grandmothers] safe and secure ... and some of them got in there and really shared some of their innermost concerns. Because we always went around the circle, like the first day with the rock. And some of them had a lot of problems, but they were willing to share and they knew that this sharing wasn't going any further. That was one of the things we did. Confidential. Everything was confidential.

The environment that allowed for the exchange of sharing and support was created and supported by IGU's guidelines and the ritual of the Talking Rock. Guidelines, such as those pertaining to affirmation and confidentiality create a climate suitable for sharing. The women know that their disclosures are safe, both from ridicule and from gossip.

The importance of the opportunity to share life stories must be emphasized. As Eleanor said, “So you learn your life story, a lot of them, I think it's the only time they've ever had the opportunity to, to cry out their story. And that comes with a lot of tears lots of times. That's a release it's important.” Sharing is not only an opportunity for others to learn about your life, rather, people discover their own life story in telling it to others. It is almost as if the sharing and being heard makes it possible to make sense of a life experience that until then had been a source of anxiety and guilt. The Grandmothers shared several such examples with me. For the first time, Jean was able to share her guilt about having to institutionalize her mother and through that sharing the Grandmothers taught her “that it isn't all that bad to cry.” The most dramatic of such incidents occurred when the PWC watched video about residential school abuse in preparation for their literacy workshop. All of the First Nations women at the PWC meeting had attended residential school and several found the video very disturbing.

*And it was in their generation that, you know, you did not talk about those experiences. That was not, that was considered unseemly in, you know? Well the pain that came out of that was just enormous and then we... Well what do you do? When that kind of pain and grief... What do you do when that arises? And the talking rock helped us every time.
(Sue)*

The Talking Rock and the willingness to support those in need allowed women who had experienced and witnessed abuse in the residential school setting to finally speak of that time in their lives. The residential school experience dramatically altered life for these women. Even those grandmothers who told me that they did not experience abuse spoke of loneliness, hunger and harsh treatment that could be characterized as abuse nonetheless. The pain and confusion of that time was kept inside for many years until finally the Grandmothers felt it was safe and allowable to tell of their experiences and express their feelings related to them.

The sharing that occurs in the circles leads to learning which was reinforced at a variety of workshops. Ursula, a First Nations woman living in Regina and raising all seven of her grandchildren on her own, learns a lot from IGU. “It’s really helped me quite a bit, too.” She is more willing to speak in the group now and appreciates the opportunity to:

just to get to understand people, understand how to handle the kids, your children, your grandchildren. And you get to understand how to, uh, how to cooperate with different people, I guess... Well mostly with white people, you know... We learn a lot from there too, you know. They help us all out, one another... When you want different answers, like you know, you're stuck on something like that, well they're there to help. To help you with whatever you need and that....

When I asked Ursula “So do you feel like you get a chance at those meetings to share some of what you learnt with other people too?” she replied,

Mmm, mhm, yeah. That's what, that's what they tell us to do, like you know, share what you need and what you learnt from them and all of the different people. So I think we have to do it, like.

Ursula has recently moved into Regina from the reserve she calls “my good home.” She is working hard to raise her grandchildren and also takes time to visit her adult son who has been institutionalized because of physical disabilities. IGU gatherings provide a respite for Ursula where she can rest away from her daily duties and share concerns and knowledge with other Grandmothers.

There's a lot of, lot of experiences, like you know. Yeah. I sure got a lot of help anyway. I don't feel so down, like. They always talk to me every time I go to these meetings. If I didn't have that, those meetings and to go along, like, I don't know what I would have been doing now (cough). Like that's helped me quite a bit. Grandmothers, the elders.

The move to the city has been difficult for Ursula but she finds solace in her friendships at the Grandmothers gatherings. She takes her turn with the

Talking Rock to “give words to the people.” I appreciate her use of the word “give.” The sharing is a gift, a gift of “words to the people.” The ability to give and receive demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the support in IGU.

To Wilma, sharing is an integral part of First Nations culture. As the “s” on the end of “First Nations” implies, there are several nations each with different cultural norms and expectations, but some qualities, such as sharing, are considered common themes.

We as Native people share a lot. And that's what helped us... Of course we, everybody has their problems. But. We work them out. Yeah. Yeah. We find ways and means of workin' it out. Yeah.

This sharing goes beyond sharing verbally and includes sharing goods and help in time of need. Wilma told me when people on her reserve came to her and her husband for help they would give them “straight half of what we had.” The Grandmothers maintain this spirit of sharing. One of the First Nations Grandmothers on the PWC was going through a family crisis during the time I was conducting interviews. She had to miss the Gathering I attended because one of her adult sons had gone missing. The other Grandmothers were very concerned for her, calling to check in on how things were doing and whether she had any news. Apparently this support continued through the entire ordeal.

Joyce was going through a very difficult time and she's been with the Project Working Council since the beginning. Uh, her son was missing for three months and those women just kept faithful to her. Ah! I mean, I just, I just think that is, such a testimony to their, well faithfulness! You know, they just kept faith with this woman. They'd drive out [from Regina to the reserve], take lunch, go and sit, go and visit. (Sue)

Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian grandmothers supported Joyce and often travelled together to visit her. The Grandmothers' ability to both provide and receive support is a critical component of their friendship. Because they feel that they are both benefiting and providing benefits, the Grandmothers feel secure that their relationships are based on who they are not just what they give, which is the essence of reciprocity.

Conclusion

The women of Intercultural Grandmothers Uniting are drawing on their accepted roles as grandmothers to bridge societal gaps in our segregated society by forging friendships across boundaries of race, culture and generation. The atmosphere they create through their choices leads to friendship relationships that offer individual and collective support that serves as a lesson to the generations that follow.

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