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# Three Generations of Navajo Women: Negotiating Life Course Strategies in the Eastern Navajo Agency

JOANNE McCLOSKEY

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## ABSTRACT

Three generations of Navajo women respond to the vast historical change of the twentieth century with distinctive as well as common elements in their life course patterns. The lives of these women bear the imprint of major historical events such as stock reduction, the funding of on-reservation projects by the Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act, and the implementation of the Navajo Family Planning Program. At the same time their education, wage work, marriage, and childbearing patterns maintain the unique stamp of a Navajo worldview. Navajo women confront challenges posed by a historically constructed reality with culturally constructed courses of action that arise from persistent pronatalist values toward children and their egalitarian position in a matrilineal society.

## INTRODUCTION

Generational differences in the lives of Navajo grandmothers, mid-life mothers, and young mothers from Crownpoint, New

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Mexico and surrounding chapters of the Eastern Navajo Agency reflect the vast changes undergone by the Navajo people during the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> In relation to the historical period that shaped their lives, the three generations of women identified in this study diverge in educational, work, marriage, and child-bearing patterns. By situating these Navajo women's lives in their age-related historical contexts, fundamental generational differences emerge. The twentieth century colonial encounter between the Navajo and the *Bilagáana*, or the white man, led to irreversible change that came about, not as a "single, metahistorical formation," but as a "heterogeneous and historically specific set of phenomena."<sup>2</sup> Navajo women's lives bear history's indelible imprint, yet at the same time reveal unique responses that set them apart from the dominant society.

Underlying distinctive life course patterns is a resilient cultural core sustained by Navajo values and beliefs. In response to recent historical events, Navajo women have made choices and devised strategies that merge elements of imposed change with persistent Navajo frameworks of meaning. Cultural persistence emanates from "the maintenance through time of systems of knowledge, beliefs, values, and operational norms" that create stable frameworks of meaning.<sup>3</sup> In Navajo women's lives, cultural persistence derives from frameworks of meaning that guide their choices and decisions over the life course.

Three relevant sociocultural principles affecting Navajo women's lives are: (1) the egalitarian nature of Navajo society that fosters complementary relationships between males and females;<sup>4</sup> (2) the matrilineal legacy that traces clan membership through the mother;<sup>5</sup> and (3) a pronatal attitude toward children that is expressed in the dramatic growth of the Navajo people during the 130 years since their imprisonment at Ft. Sumner.<sup>6</sup> Essential to their frameworks of meaning, these principles shape Navajo women's patterns of education, work, marriage, and childbearing. As they enact these principles, women are "culturally and historically constituted subjects who become agents in the active sense."<sup>7</sup> Agents who base their courses of action on continuing views of family and clan, Navajo women carve life pathways often distinct from those of women in Western society.

The year of birth of the oldest woman in each of three generations serves as a guidepost to divide one hundred years of Navajo history into three periods (Table 1). The oldest grandmother was born in 1895; the oldest mid-life mother was born

in 1934; and the oldest young mother was born in 1961. During the early decades in their lives, the grandmothers witnessed a transition from a life firmly anchored in Navajo cultural traditions and the land-based economy<sup>8</sup> to one that required contacts with the larger society after the hardships imposed by stock reduction. The mid-life mothers grew up and reached adulthood at mid-century when legislation such as the Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act brought roads, schools, hospitals, and numerous federal and tribal agencies to Crownpoint and the entire Navajo Reservation.<sup>9</sup> During the more recent period from the 1960s to the present, young mothers have faced a bicultural milieu of lifestyles and values as

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**Table I**  
**Relationship of the Lives of Three Generations of Navajo Women to Major Local, Tribal, and National Historical Events**

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<u>LIFE SPAN OF</u> <u>NAVAJO WOMEN</u>	<u>HISTORICAL EVENTS</u>
<b>Grandmothers (1895-Approximate Year of Birth of Oldest Grandmother)</b>	
1910	BIA Agency Headquarters Established in Crownpoint
1912	First School Opens in Crownpoint
1918	Spanish influenza epidemic
1921	Oil, gas discovered
1922	Tribal government formed
1933	Beginning of Stock Reduction
<b>Mid-life Mothers (1934-Birth of Oldest Mid-life Mother)</b>	
1940	Opening of Old Crownpoint Hospital
1941	Start of World War II
1950	Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act
1955	Indian Health Service takes over Medical Care from BIA
1956	Opening of McKinley County Public Elementary School
1963	Opening of New BIA Crownpoint Boarding School
1967	Opening of McKinley County Public Junior High and High School
<b>Young Mothers (1961-Birth of Oldest Young Mother)</b>	
1974	Navajo Nation Family Planning Program
1987	Opening of New Crownpoint Hospital
1989	Opening of Crownpoint Shopping Center

well as a common need for education and wage work in preparation for survival in the cash economy.

Referred to in Navajo songs and prayers, the view of the life course as a journey, or a "'walk' through time,"<sup>10</sup> complements that of the life-course perspective. The life course of individuals refers to "pathways through the age differentiated life span, to social patterns in the timing, duration, spacing and order of events."<sup>11</sup> The pathway is shaped by life events and transitions or turning points in the life course, and events that are important turning points in life "redirect paths."<sup>12</sup> Overall, the life-course perspective focuses on the ways in which a particular historical context shapes individual lives while acknowledging the role played by human agency.<sup>13</sup> The social timing of lives highlights the optimal sequence of social roles and events such as education, marriage, and childbearing.

Viewing women's lives as a process of negotiated life events and transitions over the life course lessens the temptation to categorize Navajo women as "traditional" or "modern and acculturated." When these women's lives are examined closely, they resist placement into these worn-out categories. Where do you place the 94-year-old great-grandmother who herded sheep and farmed all of her adult life, yet as a young woman attended school and now switches back and forth between Navajo and English when speaking? How do you categorize a professional mid-life woman who arranges Navajo ceremonies for herself and her children? The division between modern and traditional is a distorting simplification that ignores the life-course strategies selected from various options presented by both the Navajo world and the *Bilagaana* world.

Characteristic patterns of education, work, relationships with men, and childbearing emerge for three generations of Navajo women. As girls and young women, the grandmothers, who were firmly rooted in the land-based economy and extended family, marked the transition to womanhood with a *Kinaaldá* (the Navajo puberty ceremony) and to adulthood with an arranged marriage. Those who attended school were more likely to work in the labor force while living in an urban center and less likely to have a *Kinaaldá* or arranged marriage. Regardless of their level of education, most grandmothers married and began bearing children in their early twenties, had relatively stable marriages, and had large families. Mid-life mothers, for whom a high school education became commonplace, often worked in the labor force, favored smaller families, and

tended to reside in an urban center such as Crownpoint. Rare among the grandmothers, divorce and single parenthood became more frequent among the mid-life mothers. However, like the grandmothers, they married and began having children in their early twenties. The young mothers in some respects departed further from norms for marriage and family and in some respects reverted to the grandmothers' patterns. Many young mothers gave birth to their first child during their teens before formalizing a marriage; however, the young parents relied on extended families in their prolonged transition to adult status.

Between February 1988 and September 1989, I interviewed seventeen grandmothers, thirty mid-life mothers, and fifteen young mothers who grew up, lived, worked, or went to school in Crownpoint or surrounding chapters of the Eastern Navajo Agency, including Becenti, Lake Valley, Little Water, Nahodishgiish, Pinedale, Smith Lake, Standing Rock, and White Rock. As I gained a deeper understanding of Navajo women's lives in their cultural and historical context, my focus shifted. The life history interviews included questions about childbearing patterns, the original focus of the study, but also provided information on persistence and change in generational patterns in Navajo women's lives. The ethnographic fieldwork methods used were open-ended interviews and participant observation in the community. The opportunistic sample of women interviewed was identified through networks of relatives and friends. The interview guide, available upon request, addressed life-course issues pertinent to all women as well as issues specific to Navajo women. The grandmothers' desire to pass on their vast cultural knowledge and traditions to the younger generations drew me back to Crownpoint and the Eastern Navajo Agency for more interviews between December 1995 and November 1997, when I reinterviewed seven women from the original sample, plus thirteen additional grandmothers, one mid-life mother, and one young mother.

## GRANDMOTHERS

### Historical Context

The thirty grandmothers grew up, married, and raised their families throughout the first six decades of the twentieth century. Their dates of birth ranged from 1895 to 1937.

Significantly, this span of time incorporates vast differences in the lives of the Navajo people—from a time of prosperity when livestock herds continued to grow, through the catastrophic aftermath of stock reduction, to the shift from the land-based economy to a cash economy and labor force participation.<sup>14</sup> As a result of stock reduction, more than half of the livestock owners in Crownpoint suffered the loss of sheep, goats, and horses. Permits limited maximum herd size to eighty-eight sheep units—far below the estimated minimal subsistence level.<sup>15</sup> Stock reduction created a dilemma for the Navajo people:

[F]or decades they were encouraged to increase their herds. For decades they had insufficient and inadequate schools. And because the livestock industry appeared to be viable, they had little incentive to go to school. When the livestock were reduced, an undereducated population was forced into marginal participation in the job market.<sup>16</sup>

No longer able to depend on the land-based economy, Navajo men sought jobs both on- and off-reservation. Initially, federal job programs and later World War II enlistment provided opportunities to men that were not open to Navajo women.

The blow fell heaviest on Navajo women who were offered few alternatives—federal jobs were in forestry, irrigation, road building, and the construction of schools—man's work.<sup>17</sup>

Federal programs attempted to create an economy based on wage labor by targeting Navajo men for jobs. Meanwhile, Navajo women remained at home to care for the depleted herds.

Because there was not enough classroom space to educate the Navajo school-age population, the vast majority of Navajo boys and girls received little or no education during the period following stock reduction.<sup>18</sup> The resulting lack of education restricted the grandmothers' opportunities to learn English. Education, or the lack of it, thus emerges as the major factor determining the grandmothers' life pathways. Approximately three-fourths of the grandmothers in this sample never went to school or attended for only a few years and now speak only Navajo. The remaining one-fourth of the grandmothers who reached the eighth grade or beyond are bilingual and can read and write English.

Two full sisters illustrate the differences in life-course pathways that resulted from school attendance. Loretta Benally and Nuse Capitan were born in 1919 and 1923, respectively. Their father was married to two sisters, who together bore twenty-two children. The oldest of all the children, Loretta never attended school because she was needed at home to herd sheep. When she was twenty-one, she had a traditional arranged marriage: "My husband's parents asked for me and paid seven horses. I did not see him before the wedding day."<sup>19</sup>

After her parents died within a month of each other, Loretta finished raising her younger siblings and made sure they went to school. While raising her own children, she herded sheep and wove rugs. When federal funding created the VISTA program during the 1960s, she worked as a Navajo arts and crafts teacher.

Initiated by her boarding school attendance, Nuse's life pathway diverged from that of her sister. After graduation from Ft. Wingate Boarding School, she worked at the Crownpoint Hospital as a ward aide for two years before she was asked for in an arranged marriage. Later, her education enabled her to return to work:

My husband came home that week and said, "I'm laid off. I'm not going back." I said, "Good. "I'm going to work, and you can babysit!" So I got a job at Standing Rock (Boarding School) as an education aide. I worked there for 33 years. I retired in '85.<sup>20</sup>

Since retirement Nuse has helped her son care for sheep and goats, and, like her sister, actively participates in traditional Navajo ceremonies.

The Navajo puberty ceremony, the *Kinaaldá*, celebrates the first menstrual period as the transition to womanhood. "One cannot overestimate the importance of this rite in creating a positive self-image in a young girl."<sup>21</sup> For grandmothers like Loretta who did not attend school, the *Kinaaldá* was a major life event signaling the transition to adulthood. For those like Nuse, graduation from high school became an important event marking the end of childhood. Also, being away from home when menstruation started made a girl less likely to have the ceremony.<sup>22</sup>

Educational differences also affected marriage types and residence patterns after marriage. Grandmothers with little or



no education most often had a marriage arranged by the bride's and groom's relatives, who selected and agreed upon an appropriate partner, decided on the bride-wealth to be paid by the groom's family to the bride's, engaged a medicine person to conduct the wedding ceremony, and provided livestock and a hogan in the residence group of one set of parents, most likely the bride's. Grandmothers with lower levels or no education thus began their married life in an extended family residence group, where they continued their work in the land-based economy that began when they were young girls. In contrast, the grandmothers who attended school were more likely to marry a man with enough education to qualify him for employment or to join the military after leaving school. These women more often began their married life in a separate nuclear household, whether on- or off-reservation. All of the grandmothers met prevailing expectations for adult Navajo women by contributing to the household economy throughout their married years, including the years when they were mothers with young children. The type of work they did, however, related to their level of education. Grandmothers with less schooling owned and helped care for livestock, raised crops, and carded, spun, and wove wool. Most of them experienced periods of working on their own or with relatives when their husbands worked off-reservation, or after they were separated, divorced, or widowed. More recently, some of these grandmothers have worked as foster grandparents and temporarily in ten-day chapter projects. Grandmothers with higher levels of education worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and for the Indian Health Service (IHS) as cooks, teacher aides, hospital aides, and dormitory aides, as well as for Foster Grandparents, a tribal program that places grandparents in local schools and agencies.

Regardless of the amount of schooling, the Crownpoint grandmothers' marriages were remarkably stable, in contradiction to reports of frequent divorce, particularly during the early years.<sup>23</sup> Divorce did occur among the grandmothers, but the majority of marriages have endured until widowhood or to the present. Grandmothers embraced pronatal attitudes toward children that led to giving birth throughout their reproductive years. Their long reproductive spans began at marriage and continued well into their forties or until menopause, filling most of their adult years with pregnancies, nursing, and child care. Thus, the grandmothers' childbearing followed a pattern

of natural fertility, in which there is no attempt to limit births.<sup>24</sup> With few exceptions, most bore between five and eleven children and had a mean family size approaching seven children. Irrespective of their level of education, grandmothers desired large families and opposed abortion and the use of birth control. Repeatedly, grandmothers emphasized that the number of children a woman had was up to the "Holy People." Children were felt to be a blessing, a measure of wealth, and a demonstration of the strength of women. In essence, reproduction is sacred, integral to a traditional worldview that favors increase.<sup>25</sup>

The divergence in life pathways continued throughout the Crownpoint grandmothers' adult years and into more recent decades. Only grandmothers who worked in the labor force have retired from productive activities. Those grandmothers with little or no education who are in good health continue in their life-long work, herding sheep and goats or raising cattle, weaving, working as foster grandparents, or working in the informal economy. For example, Annie Burnside, who herded sheep until a few years ago, now owns cattle which require less constant attention. In addition, she makes jewelry and sells food from her mobile cook stand at the four-way intersection in Crownpoint.

Whether the grandmothers went to school or not, most participate in traditional Navajo ceremonies and have an affiliation with a local Christian church as well. In addition, many are active in the Native American Church. Few grandmothers claim only Christianity as their religion. Conflict arises when those who have adopted fundamentalist Christian beliefs oppose Navajo traditions and ceremonies and advocate that medicine bundles be destroyed.<sup>26</sup>

Deriving mainly from their level of education, two life-course pathways emerged among the grandmothers which affected whether or not they had a *Kinaaldá* at puberty, whom they married, where they lived, how long their marriages lasted, and whether they worked in the land-based economy or the labor force. On the other hand, regardless of level of education, grandmothers worked throughout their childrearing years to contribute to the family economy. As they matured to become senior members in their matrilineal family group, they increasingly represented their clan as decision-makers and planners. All grandmothers valued large families, and only those who had medical problems or divorced after a few years of mar-

riage had few children. As a group they exemplify enduring values and lifestyles distinctive of Navajo women.

## MID-LIFE MOTHERS

### Historical Context

The dates of birth of the thirty-one mid-life mothers, which span the years 1934 to 1958, bracket a transition period for the Navajo people.<sup>27</sup> After stock reduction, the beginning of World War II lessened the impact of reduced herds when Navajo men enlisted and took advantage of wartime jobs. Following the war, the Navajo economy collapsed. "After the Great Depression and World War II, Navajos lacked both livestock and wage work."<sup>28</sup> When Navajo workers were laid off at war plants and enlisted men were discharged, other opportunities for wage work failed to develop. At times, Navajo families had to rely on their limited livestock for food. Because stock reduction had already reduced herds to preclude earning an adequate income from the sale of wool and lambs, the need to butcher animals brought further impoverishment. Between 1944 and 1947, sheep and goat herds declined by 30 percent.<sup>29</sup> Smaller herds, loss of land,<sup>30</sup> and a market value for the sale of wool and lambs that did not keep pace with the prices of consumer goods led to further reliance on wage labor. The proportion of Navajo income derived from livestock and agriculture fell from 55 percent in 1930 to 2 percent in 1974.<sup>31</sup> Some families stopped herding entirely and moved to Crownpoint to be closer to work sites or schools.

In response to the economic plight of the Navajos during the post-World War II years, Congress at first allocated relief funds. An early program between 1945 and 1951 relocated some Navajo families on farms on the Colorado River Reservation along the California-Arizona border.<sup>32</sup> Not until the passage of the Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act, which allocated ninety million dollars between 1950 and 1962, could any serious Navajo revitalization and restructuring get under way.<sup>33</sup> That legislation funded infrastructure for health, education, road construction, and industrial and resource development. At the same time, the act authorized the Navajo Nation to manage its own income from energy development.<sup>34</sup>

Mid-life mothers benefited from the newly built-on reser-

vation schools funded by the Navajo-Hopi Long Range Rehabilitation Act. Throughout the reservation Navajo student enrollment expanded to 90 percent of the school-age population during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>35</sup> The impact of formal education on the Navajo outweighs other outside influences in shaping contemporary life.

The universal education of children had a much more profound influence on Navajo life and attitudes than economic change. This was particularly true during the 1950s and even into the early 1960s. Indian schools trained students in skills they needed to survive in the Anglo-American world, but also indoctrinated them with Anglo-American cultural values.<sup>36</sup>

The mid-life mothers represent the first generation to achieve a high school level of education and to be extensively exposed to the values of the dominant society.

In contrast with the grandmothers' young adulthood and early married years, when wage work opportunities were most often made available to Navajo men, mid-life mothers with a high school education and some further training found newly created job opportunities in on-reservation schools, hospitals, and tribal and federal offices. Although the Rehabilitation Act initiated on-reservation, stable employment for women and men alike, a high proportion of new jobs targeted women to be teacher's aides, secretaries, clerks, nurses, and nurse's aides. This female employment advantage continues to the present. For example, during 1991, 1,505 women and 970 men (65 percent and 35 percent, respectively) were employed in the Eastern Navajo Agency headquartered in Crownpoint.<sup>37</sup>

Following their own mothers' examples of economic partnership in the land-based economy, mid-life women who found employment worked during their early married and childbearing years and have continued to do so to the present. Because new labor force positions did not keep pace with the growing number of high school graduates, the younger mid-life mothers, those born during the 1950s, were not as fortunate in finding employment after high school, even if they had vocational training. Thus, while the oldest of the mid-life mothers, who were born during the 1940s, reached their young adult years during a period of expanding opportunities in the labor force, the youngest of the mid-life mothers reached adulthood

to face more limited opportunities.

As the mid-life mothers reached adulthood during the 1960s and 1970s, the high unemployment rate made it difficult for even those with education and training to find work in the labor force.<sup>38</sup> High unemployment continues to the present. Today some unemployed mid-life mothers work in the informal economy, while others rely on state or tribal public assistance. Mid-life mothers working in the informal economy earn a cash income through such activities as babysitting, housecleaning, sales of food, weaving rugs, or handcrafting other items such as jewelry and sandpaintings. These efforts may be regular, part-time, or sporadic, but they fill a vital need for a cash income.

Once they are in the labor force, mid-life mothers may pursue higher education as a route to advancement in their professions or to another occupation. Students working toward college degrees are often those with current or prior employment experience as teacher's aides, nurse's aides, and clerical workers. More Navajo women pursue college educations than do Navajo men. Motivated by the availability of reservation jobs to provide for their families, many Navajo women return to school to earn higher degrees. For instance, among students enrolled at the Shiprock and Tsaile campuses of Navajo Community College between 1991 and 1995, 72 percent were women,<sup>39</sup> who were often "non-traditional students" well beyond their late teens and early twenties.

### Childhood and Education

Between the 1940s and 1960s educational opportunities for the mid-life mothers varied greatly, depending on the year that they started school. The original Crownpoint Boarding School, which opened in 1912, was replaced by the current BIA facility in 1963, providing a first-through-eighth-grade education. The McKinley County Elementary school opened in 1956, followed by the opening of the original combined McKinley County Junior High and High School in 1967. In general, the mid-life mothers who were born between 1934 and approximately 1949 had to go to boarding schools for much of their schooling, while those born between 1950 and 1958 could attend local public schools in Crownpoint to complete a high school education.

Three sisters illustrate the expanded options for education. Born in 1942, Mary Joe attended Crownpoint Boarding school

until the third grade, when she transferred to a Gallup school. From the fourth to seventh grades she lived in the Gallup dorm, a "peripheral town dormitory"<sup>40</sup> for Navajo students, while attending Central Elementary school in Gallup. During her eighth- and ninth-grade years, she moved back home to Becenti, New Mexico and rode the school bus to Crownpoint daily. Because school ended with the ninth grade, Mary continued her education in Albuquerque where she again lived in a border town dorm until she graduated from Valley High School. In contrast, two younger sisters, born in 1952 and 1956, attended only local schools through high school, riding the bus from Becenti until the family moved to Crownpoint. After high school, the three sisters either went to business school or began a college education before marriage. Exemplifying a frequent pattern for Navajo women, all three pursued higher education when they were in their thirties or forties, after they had their children. Mary commuted to the University of New Mexico (UNM), Gallup branch to earn an associate degree in recreation; a middle sister attended UNM in Gallup and Albuquerque to earn a bachelor's degree in elementary education; and the youngest of the sisters, Bonnie Benally, attends classes at the recently opened branch of Diné College in Crownpoint.

While the majority of the grandmothers had a *Kinaaldá*, only one-third of the mid-life mothers had this ceremony. If they experienced their first menstrual period while away at boarding school, it was difficult if not impossible to make the necessary arrangements. Also, membership in one of the growing numbers of Christian churches in Crownpoint discouraged some families from observing Navajo traditional ceremonies. Unlike the grandmothers, some mid-life mothers expressed ignorance of the *Kinaaldá*.

The transition to adulthood for the mid-life mothers became more complex than it was for the grandmothers, who, after having a *Kinaaldá*, continued their childhood work in the land-based economy until marriage. In contrast, graduating from high school, leaving the reservation for vocational school or college, and entering the labor force before marriage and parenthood became common experiences for the middle generation.

### Relationships with Men

Marriage patterns remained the same in some ways and diverged in others for the mid-life mothers. Similar to the

grandmothers, mid-life mothers were most likely to marry in their early twenties. The traditional arranged marriage virtually disappeared, although a transitional pattern emerged. After a couple began seeing each other in this modified pattern, parents of the bride and groom stepped in to decide on the bride-wealth and make arrangements for the wedding ceremony. Most mid-life women and their future husbands followed a third pattern, however, in which couples decided on their own to marry, even though they might elect to have a traditional wedding ceremony. The mid-life women often established an independent household in town rather than living in the rural residence group with either the bride's or groom's parents as the grandmothers did after marriage.

More mid-life women experienced disrupted and shortened relationships with men, sometimes resulting in multiple partners who fathered their children. In addition, a few mothers never entered a common law or legal marriage. Among those who did marry and then divorce, some remarried and gave birth again, while some had additional children but chose not to marry the father. Whereas few grandmothers raised their children alone as the result of separation or divorce, single motherhood for the mid-life mothers became a more frequent reality. A mid-life mother representing this pattern divorced after an early marriage and now has a long-standing relationship with her boyfriend. From the beginning of the relationship she made it clear that she preferred to remain single.

### Parenthood and Childbearing

The mid-life mothers, like the grandmothers, gave birth to their first child during their early twenties. However, while the grandmothers welcomed all children as blessings from the Holy People and opposed birth control, these women frequently limited their family size—a profound change in childbearing attitudes and behavior. In this generation, family size is half that of the grandmothers, ranging from one to seven children and averaging three or four. This dramatic reduction in family size in one generation's time indicates a receptive response to Indian Health Service efforts to promote family planning and the institution of the tribal family planning program in 1974.<sup>41</sup> Although families are smaller, mothers felt that having two children was not enough, and those with one or two children regretted the circumstances that prevented hav-

ing more children. In comparison to a mean family size of two children for the entire United States, the intermediate family size of three or four children in this sample and 3.7 for the entire Navajo Nation<sup>42</sup> clearly represents a continuation of a strongly pronatal attitude toward childbearing. In addition, the mid-life mothers, like the grandmothers, opposed abortion.

Universal education for Navajo children became a reality for mid-life mothers during their school-age years as many more boarding schools, day schools, and public schools opened in Crownpoint and the remainder of the Navajo Reservation. At the same time, when the land-based economy disappeared as a viable economic option, women sought new ways to provide for their families. Because jobs became scarce in proportion to qualified job seekers, some self-employed women depend on their entrepreneurial activities. The employed mid-life women held onto their jobs, and established long-term employment histories that continued throughout their early childrearing years to the present. The respected position of Navajo women in their families, clans, and communities endured and was reinforced by their employment and pursuit of higher education. Although family size decreased among mid-life mothers, the pronatal attitudes prevailed, and children were desired regardless of marital status and material circumstances.

## YOUNG MOTHERS

### Historical and Contemporary Political Economic Context

Born between 1961 and 1972, the sixteen young mothers reached adulthood during the last two decades.<sup>43</sup> These young people faced poverty and unemployment as they matured. Analyses of the contemporary Navajo political economy compare the Navajo Nation to an underdeveloped nation in the Third World.<sup>44</sup> The Navajo live in a rural underdeveloped area where limited economic growth contributes to high rates of unemployment and frequent reliance on forms of public assistance. According to the 1990 census, the mean per-capita income was 4,106 dollars per year, and 56.1 percent of those living on the reservation fell below the poverty level.<sup>45</sup>

Early childbearing, incomplete educations, inability to obtain housing, and fragile conjugal relationships are common in the lives of the young mothers. These patterns generate life-



course strategies not demanded of former generations. One explanation for teen childbearing suggests that early parenthood offers a more certain path to adult status when faced with the uncertainties of attaining economic stability.<sup>46</sup> Another interpretation sees adolescent fertility as a favorable life-course strategy for African American female teenagers who have grown up in conditions of economic and social disadvantage.<sup>47</sup> Young Navajo women face these same disadvantages, compounded by the frequent necessity to leave the reservation to achieve independence. The young women who stay on the reservation and have children often must rely on extended family support and nurturance in the early stages of parenthood.

As the young mothers reached maturity in the 1980s and 1990s, they confronted both high unemployment and increasing competition for available scholarships for higher education. Although the number of scholarships awarded to high school graduates by the Navajo Nation has doubled since 1962, the number of applicants has far outstripped the scholarships. Whereas all students who applied received funding (1,643 students) in 1972, in 1996 approximately one-fourth (3,153 of 13,723 applicants) received scholarships. Students must appeal to other sources such as the BIA, IHS, the Annie Wauneka Scholarship Fund, or the Native American Scholarship Fund. Yet even with higher education, employment is not assured. Between 1980 and 1996 the Navajo Nation unemployment rate ranged from a low of 22 percent in 1988 to a high of 45 percent in 1996.<sup>48</sup>

### Education and Childhood

Although the young mothers attended a mixture of boarding schools, mission schools, and public schools, the development of an extensive system of daily busing made attendance at local public schools possible for many young mothers. Boarding schools and mission schools remained alternatives, particularly when their own mothers worked. In contrast to the mid-life mothers who herded sheep at home during vacations, young mothers usually did so only when they stayed with grandparents living in rural areas. The educational level of the young mothers ranged from eight years of public school to two-and-one-half years of college, but about two-thirds of them did not graduate from high school. Navajo high school dropout rates are high; a study of Navajo reservation high schools found that

31 percent of students dropped out before graduating.<sup>49</sup> Young Crownpoint women's reasons for dropping out of school included pregnancy, "not caring," falling behind because a disrupted home life contributed to frequent absences, disliking school, and wanting to be independent. One young woman who left school during the ninth grade is typical.

I used to ditch a lot with my friends. In the ninth grade I started going wild. I went partying. I ditched school. I thought, "Hey, it's my life."<sup>50</sup>

Another study examining the relationship of high school dropouts to teen pregnancy found that most young women left school for reasons other than pregnancy.<sup>51</sup> In Crownpoint, the adolescent mothers were about equally divided among those who became pregnant after leaving school for other reasons, those who left school when they had a baby, and those who finished high school despite pregnancy and childbirth.

Almost half of the young mothers marked their first menstrual period with a *Kinaaldá*. Those who did not gave reasons similar to those of mid-life mothers, as well as pointing to disruptions in their natal families that interfered with observing the passage to womanhood. For example, one young girl's parents had separated by the time she had her first period. Another, abandoned by her mother, was raised by an aunt who had *Kinaaldás* for her own daughters but not for her.

### Transitions to Adulthood

The steps in the transition from youth to adult status is often associated with an optimal sequence and timing of life events. Accordingly, the sequence and timing for finishing school, finding a job, establishing an independent household, marrying, and becoming a parent act as prerequisites to a successful adult life. Underlying assumptions suggest that on-time life events promote the development of a favorable life course while off-time life events detract.<sup>52</sup> This normative sequence, based on timing patterns found among middle-class whites, however, may be less easily followed by Navajo youth.

Young Navajo women experience alternative timing patterns when they give birth as an early step in the transition to adulthood. Examined closely, however, the life histories of these young mothers suggest that early pregnancy and parent-

hood do not necessarily impair their subsequent lives. Whether married, living with their boyfriends, or single, most of the young mothers share the same household or residence group with extended family members who do not expect immediate independence. While they are starting their families and perhaps completing high school, these mothers benefit from shared economic and child-care responsibilities as well as a common residence. In fact, the junior status of the young couple maintains the traditional Navajo extended family residence pattern, wherein the young couple resides with either the bride's or groom's parents after marriage. As junior members of extended families, newly created families rely heavily on the senior generation.

Lacking a high school diploma, some young mothers enrolled at the Crownpoint Institute of Technology (CIT) to prepare for General Equivalency Diploma (GED) exams. They benefited from the CIT day care center where they left their children while attending classes. Other young mothers who had graduated from high school were making plans to go off reservation for further training or higher education.

Even with post-high school specialization, young mothers struggle to find steady sources of income. Becky Yazzie, for example, completed a course at International Business College in Albuquerque, New Mexico after her son was born. Returning home, she voluntarily worked at the IHS Crownpoint Hospital in the hopes that a job would become available. When no opening materialized, Becky and her husband found employment in Albuquerque. They now return to Crownpoint on their days off to be with their two young children who stay with Becky's mother. Another young mother, Mary Roper, is a talented weaver who works late at night to complete orders for Navajo rugs. Among boyfriends and husbands of the young mothers who located work, two found local jobs with the BIA, while two were hired at Giant Truck Stop on I-40, approximately forty-five miles from Crownpoint.

### Marriage as a Process

The high proportion of single mothers found among the Crownpoint sample is similar to that reported for the entire Navajo Nation. Of all births in Navajo Indian Health Service hospitals between 1983 and 1986, 49 percent were to single Navajo women.<sup>53</sup> Based on New Mexico rates of births to single

Navajo mothers, the trend appears to be increasing. In New Mexico, 60.8 percent of births in 1989 and 67.9 percent of births in 1993 were to single Navajo women.<sup>54</sup>

Young Crownpoint mothers were almost equally divided between married and unmarried women. Age was a major factor associated with marital status in that the young mothers who ranged between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two in this sample were not married, whereas almost three-fourths of those between ages twenty-three and twenty-seven were married. Although several women had on-again-off-again relationships with the father of their child or had ended the relationship, most unmarried young mothers had steady boyfriends who contributed to their support. Those who married often did so when they were pregnant or after the birth of one or more children.

How can young mothers' relationships with men best be understood? As young couples face uncertainty in their efforts to further their educations, secure jobs, and locate housing, marriage becomes a process accompanying the quest for economic independence.<sup>55</sup> In the unfolding process, the birth of a child to a couple is one of the major validating events which solidifies a relationship.

In a steady relationship for seven years with the father of their two boys, a young Navajo mother reflects on her reluctance to marry. "We're not married. People ask me why we're not married. I don't want to get married until we have a house where I can raise my kids."<sup>56</sup> Economic instability becomes an obstacle to marriage. In a sense, young Navajo couples are stranded between the arranged marriages of earlier times and current dating patterns. In the past, members of the younger generation depended on their parents to locate marriage partners and to negotiate for the livestock, land, and hogan that provided the foundation for a young couple to build their life together. In contrast, contemporary young couples build their own relationships, often while still in school, but they lack the means to establish households on their own. In the absence of economic independence, the birth of a baby becomes a validating step in the marriage process.

### Childbearing

Because the young mothers are in the midst of their reproductive years, their families are still growing. Nevertheless, family size varies from one to six children, representing a range of atti-

tudes toward childbearing. Most young mothers approve of birth control and are currently using it or have used it in the past. As with the mid-life mothers, young mothers rather than young fathers assume responsibility for birth control. Only one father had had a vasectomy.

Although they disapproved of abortion as the grandmothers and mid-life mothers did, two young mothers had had abortions, unlike members of the older generations. One young mother who had an abortion at fifteen, before she was sent to the New Mexico State Girl's home after getting into legal trouble, now feels that abortion is wrong. Another young mother in her twenties stayed at my home in Albuquerque the night before she had an abortion. Divorced and receiving welfare, she had a small infant at the time she learned that she was again pregnant.

For most young mothers, the birth of a child remains a welcome event, a blessing from the Holy People, regardless of the age or marital status of the young mother. A young mother from Little Water, who gave birth to her son the day after she turned fifteen, resisted suggestions by hospital personnel to have an abortion or else give the baby up for adoption.

That's what they were saying at PHS (Public Health Service or IHS) when I had my little boy, and I said, "No." I said, "I'll raise him myself," and I did. I don't want to have an abortion 'cause I don't think it's the Navajo traditional way.<sup>57</sup>

This young mother was influenced by her own mother, who believes that abortion is not right. Finding it difficult to return to school and care for her baby, she dropped out. When I interviewed her, she was nineteen and working toward her general equivalency diploma at the Crownpoint Institute of Technology.

Whether the young Navajo family lived with the maternal or paternal grandparents, these grandchildren received resources from both sets of proud grandparents. When nonresident grandparents came to visit, they brought gifts such as a supply of Pampers for the baby, forging a characteristically Navajo close bond with their grandchild, even when a tenuous relationship existed between the mother and father of the child.

Early parenthood and family responsibilities for young Navajo mothers may not be the supposed barrier to further training and education that thwarts life chances for other teen

mothers. The need to leave the reservation to obtain higher education or training beyond high school requires relocating, often in a big city in New Mexico, Arizona, or more distant states. When young Navajo couples and their children move to an urban area, relocating as a family unit eases the transition to a markedly different environment and culture.

Representing a marked departure from the marriage and childbearing patterns of the grandmothers and mid-life mothers who married and gave birth to their first child in their early twenties, young Navajo women often delay marriage and give birth to their first child in their teenage years. Marriage becomes a process as Navajo young people navigate the obstacles to adult status. Young Navajo mothers rely on their natal families or those of their boyfriends for economic and social support when they become parents themselves. The extended family residence patterns replicate those of the grandmothers who lived with the bride's or groom's parents during their early married years. Anticipating the need to contribute to the family economy, young mothers make plans to complete their educations and to find employment in order to assume the adult roles expected of Navajo women.

## CONCLUSIONS

Characteristic patterns differentiating the seventy-seven Eastern Navajo Agency grandmothers, mid-life mothers, and young mothers' lives represent three historical periods over the course of the twentieth century. Before mid-century, efforts to initiate labor-force participation largely affected Navajo men in on- and off-reservation jobs while women continued to work with extended family members in the land-based economy. During the second half of the twentieth century, the male labor force advantage was reversed. Similar to the experience of other Native North Americans, women now have a selective edge.

The distribution of labor opportunities was based on location, education in skills relevant to the larger society, and white-defined gender roles. As groups were absorbed in the national economy, employment opportunities were often more available for women than for men.<sup>58</sup>

The extensive development of schools, hospitals, and federal

and tribal agencies after mid-century provided Navajo women such opportunities when the cash economy expanded and the land-based economy withered. The young mothers reach adulthood with expectations that may not be met due to limited education and employment opportunities. Accompanying economic changes are pervasive changes in education, marriage, and childbearing.

In the context of formative historical events, Navajo women's lives reveal patterns of profound change and sometimes more subtle cultural persistence. Cultural persistence is found in frameworks of meaning that endure despite a twentieth-century transformation in lifestyle and material possessions. Among Crownpoint women cultural continuity exists in the value women place on motherhood and children, the reliance on the extended family and clan, and in the egalitarian position women assume in Navajo society.

Grandmothers, mid-life mothers, and young mothers who did not themselves have a *Kinaaldá* are now planning to have the ceremony for their daughters or granddaughters. Overwhelmingly, abortion remains an unacceptable course of action. Children are welcomed into the extended family, which is often the major source of economic and emotional support for young parents. The high value placed on children continues although they can no longer be sources of help during childhood. The birth of a baby signifies the perpetuation of the mother's matrilineal clan. Rather than a reason to cancel or avoid the pursuit of additional education and careers, children motivate mothers to seek improved ways to provide for them.

Just as the grandmothers participated equally in the land-based economy with Navajo men, mid-life women continue to act as economic partners within the household and as decision-makers in egalitarian relationships. These contemporary women contribute through their wage work or work in the informal economy, and young women expect to assume this role when they complete their educations. Navajo women more often pursue post-secondary education and fill on-reservation jobs than do Navajo men. Despite the acceptance of family planning methods, birth rates remain high in comparison to those for the entire United States, as Navajo parents welcome additional family members regardless of the age, marital status, and economic stability of the parents.

Efforts to educate and assimilate the Navajo people reinforced women's already secure position in Navajo society.

While the colonial encounter brought both impediments and opportunities, persistent egalitarian principles encouraged Navajo women's ready response to change. As Navajo women negotiate between historically posed possibilities and challenging constraints, empowering cultural factors serve as guideposts for Navajos and non-Navajos alike in the coming twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. Initial fieldwork was carried out between February 1988 and September 1989 as part of my dissertation research. Ongoing friendships continue to the present. Although I originally compared women in the labor force with those who worked in the informal economy, relied on public assistance, or were unemployed, it soon became apparent that the major differences in women's lives were age-related. Thereafter, the three generations served as a basic comparative framework. A woman was classified as a grandmother if she was more than fifty years of age and if the majority of her children had children of their own. A woman was classified as a mid-life mother if she was in her thirties, forties, or fifties and if the majority of her children were still single. A woman was classified as a young mother if she was in her twenties or thirties. All women whose names are used wished to be identified.

2. Nicholas B. Dirks, introduction to *Colonialism and Culture*, Nicholas B. Dirks, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 12.

3. Rushforth and Chisholm find that persistent "frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility" among Bearlake Athapaskans are expressed in values of industriousness, generosity, restraint, autonomy, and control. Patterns of behavior construed as morally right or wrong support these values. In applying these concepts to Navajo women, I will emphasize the frameworks of meaning that guide their behavior and disregard the moral implications for judging the correctness of the behavior. Scott Rushforth and James Chisholm, *Cultural Persistence: Continuity in Meaning and Moral Responsibility among the Bearlake Athapaskans* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1991), 15.

4. Louise Lamphere, "Historical and Regional Variability in Navajo Women's Roles," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 45:4 (1989): 431; Ruth Roessel, *Women in Navajo Society* (Rough Rock, Navajo Nation, Arizona: Navajo Resource Center, Rough Rock Demonstration School, 1981); Rebecca Tsosie, "Changing Women: The Cross Currents of American Indian Feminine Identity," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 12:1 (1988).

5. Mary Shepardson, "The Gender Status of Navajo Women," *Women and Power in Native North America*, eds. Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

6. Stephen J. Kunitz, "Underdevelopment, Demographic Change, and



Health Care on the Navajo Indian Reservation," *Social Science and Medicine* 15A (1981): 183; Trib Choudhary, "The Navajo Population Growth—A Historic Trend," *Economic Development Forum*, Division of Economic Development, Navajo Nation, 13 (1992): 6-7.

7. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, introduction to *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12.

8. Because almost all grandmothers depended on large gardens as well as livestock when they were growing up and raising their children, I will refer to the economy as land-based rather than pastoral. Klara B. Kelley and Peter Whiteley, *Navajoland: Family and Settlement and Land Use* (Tsaile, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1989).

9. Garrick and Roberta Glenn Bailey, *A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1986); Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*; Mary Shepardson, "The Status of Navajo Women," *American Indian Quarterly* 6:1-2 (1982): 153.

10. Gladys Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 37.

11. Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Family History and the Life Course," *Transitions: The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective*, ed. Tamara Haraven (New York: Academic Press, 1978), 21.

12. Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Perspectives on the Life Course," *Life Course Dynamics: Trajectories and Transitions, 1968-1980*, ed. Glen H. Elder, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 35.

13. Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Time, Human Agency, and Social Change: Perspectives on the Life Course," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57:1 (1994).

14. Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*.

15. Eric Henderson, "Navajo Livestock Wealth and the Effect of the Stock Reduction Program of the 1930s," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 45:4 (1989): 394.

16. David Aberle, *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho*, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology 42 (New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation, 1966; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 106 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

17. Shepardson, "The Status of Navajo Women," *American Indian Quarterly*, 151.

18. Aberle, *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho*; Bailey and Bailey, *A History of the Navajo*.

19. Loretta Benally, interview with the author, 19 September 1988.

20. Nuse Capitan, interview with the author, 20 September 1988.

21. Shepardson, "The Gender Status of Navajo Women," *Women and Power in Native North America*, 164.

22. Charlotte Johnson Frisbie, *Kinaaldá A Study of the Navaho Girl's Puberty Ceremony* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1967; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993); Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Molded in the Image*

of *Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

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24. Louis Henry, "Some Data on Natural Fertility," *Social Biology* 8:2 (1961); reprint, 29, no. 1-2 (1982).

25. John Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1984).

26. Charlotte J. Frisbie, *Navajo Medicine Bundles or Jish: Acquisition, Transmission, and Disposition in the Past and Present* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico, 1987).

27. Among the thirty mid-life mothers interviewed between 1988 and 1989 were fifteen women who worked in the labor force and fifteen who worked in the informal economy or relied on a form of assistance from the tribe or the state of New Mexico.

28. Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*, 137.

29. Bailey and Bailey, *A History of the Navajos*.

30. Fred York, "Capitalist Development and Land in Northeastern Navajo Country, 1880s to 1980s," Ph.D. diss. (State University of New York at Binghamton, 1990).

31. Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*.

32. Robert W. Young, *The Navajo Yearbook: 1951-1961, A Decade of Progress*, Report No. viii, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior (Window Rock, Arizona: Navajo Agency, 1961).

33. Bailey and Bailey, *A History of the Navajos*.

34. Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*.

35. Robert Roessel, *Navajo Education, 1948-1978: Its Progress and Its Problems*, Navajo History, Vol.III, Part A (Rough Rock, Navajo Nation, AZ: Navajo Curriculum Center, Rough Rock Demonstration School, 1979).

36. Bailey and Bailey, *A History of the Navajos*, 277.

37. Navajo Nation, Division of Economic Development, "Navajo 1991 Employment and Income Statistics" (Navajo Nation, Window Rock, AZ, 1992).

38. Despite the growth of the energy industry on the Navajo Reservation in the 1950s and 1960s, high unemployment continued for Navajos seeking work. Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*. For example, in 1974 estimated unemployment rates were between 35 and 60 percent. In Kelley and Whiteley, *Navajoland*, cited from Navajo Tribe, Office of Program Development, *Navajo Nation Overall Economic Development Program* (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Tribe, 1974).

39. Records and Admissions, Diné College, Shiprock, New Mexico, 1995.

40. Roessel, *Navajo Education*.
41. Shepardson, "The Status of Navajo Women," *American Indian Quarterly*, 161.
42. Cheryl Howard, *Navajo Tribal Demography, 1983-1986: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993).
43. Many conversations with friends from Crownpoint frequently focus on young mothers whose early childbearing and fragile relationships confirm the patterns found in the sample. A selective bias prevails in this sample of young Navajo mothers for two reasons. First, to be interviewed a young woman had to be a mother, which eliminated young women who had not yet given birth. In addition, the need to leave Crownpoint after high school to pursue further education or training or to find employment excluded young adults from the sample who may be continuing their education and who are working off-reservation. As a result, young mothers who did not finish high school, who are unemployed or self-employed, and who gave birth to their first child during their teens, are overrepresented in this sample.
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47. Linda Burton, "Teenage Childbearing as an Alternative Life-Course Strategy in Multigeneration Black Families," *Human Nature* 1:2 (1990): 123-143; Arlene T. Geronimus, "On Teenage Childbearing and Neonatal Mortality in the United States," *Population and Development Review* 13:2 (1987): 245-279; Arlene T. Geronimus, "Teenage Childbearing and Social and Reproductive Disadvantage; The Evolution of Complex Questions and the Demise of Simple Answers," *Family Relations* 40:4 (1991): 463-471.
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Dropout Study" (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Division of Education, The Navajo Tribe, 1986).

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51. Dawn M. Upchurch, and James McCarthy, "The Time of First Birth and High School Completion," *American Sociological Review* 55:2 (1990): 224-234.

52. Orville G. Brim, Jr., and Carol D. Ryff, "On the Properties of Life Events, *Life-Span Development and Behavior*, Vol. 3, eds. Paul B. Baltes and Orville G. Brim, Jr. (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

53. Howard, *Navajo Tribal Demography*, 81.

54. New Mexico Bureau of Vital Records and Health Statistics, *New Mexico Selected Health Statistics, 1993, Annual Report*, Department of Health, Public Health Division (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexico Department of Health, 1995).

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56. Young Navajo mother, interview with the author, 30 December 1996.

57. Young Navajo mother, 5 June 1989.

58. Daniel Maltz and JoAllyn Archambault, "Gender and Power in Native North America: Concluding Remarks," *Women and Power in Native North America*, eds. Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 240.