Participation in Governance and Well-Being in the Yukon Flats

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Participation in Governance and Well-Being in the Yukon Flats
by
Jessica C. Black

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Washington University in St. Louis

August 2017
Dedicated to my grandparents, Sarah and Isaac, who instilled in me our traditional values and a strong, cultural foundation while fishing on the banks of the Yukon River. I am forever grateful.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Participation in Governance and Well-Being in the Yukon Flats

by

Jessica Black

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Professor Michael Sherraden, Chair

This dissertation explains the relationship between participation in governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats. To garner a deeper understanding of this relationship, definitions of governance and well-being are sought from the participants, thus providing holistic, Indigenous definitions of these concepts. Both formal and informal governance are also explored to understand the important institutions that underpin these larger relationships. Lastly, this dissertation investigates the relationship between participation in traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering and well-being in the Yukon Flats. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, observations, and photographs are all used to document these relationships.

Applied thematic analysis is used due to its efficacy when conducting team research and also because of its effectiveness in presenting stories and experiences of participants truthfully and inclusively. These methods are also culturally congruent with Alaska Native epistemologies. This research has relevancy for Alaska Native and American Indian communities, policymakers, and state and federal officials who are all charged with sustaining natural resources and simultaneously creating healthy communities where people are well in all aspects of their life.
Chapter I

Issues, Questions, and Terms

American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) have endured historical oppression and exclusion due to European occupation of American Indian lands, and continuing violence, cultural pressures, and exclusion (Braveheart & DeBruyn, 1998; Burnette, 2015; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart, & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998). Under the various banners of Manifest Destiny, gold and silver, God’s will, and advancement of civilization, Europeans took over the Americas during the past 500 years, with little appreciation or respect for the people who already lived here. As a result of systematic oppression, land theft, and violence, American Indian and Alaska Native people today live disproportionately in poverty and hardship. They have high rates of health problems, including depression, cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, and suicide (Anderson & Smith, 2003; Espey et al., 2014; Landen, Roeber, Naimi, Nielsen, & Sewell, 2014). American Indian and Alaska Native lifespans on average are lower than their non-Indian counterparts. American Indians/Alaska Natives born today have a life expectancy that is 4.4 years less than the U.S. all races population, 73.7 years compared to 78.1 years, respectively (Indian Health Services, 2016).

Nevertheless, despite enduring a devastating history and coping with challenging current conditions, AI/AN people and communities are resilient. They have pride and strength in their cultures. Against long odds they take strides toward economically sustainable and self-determined societies (Jorgensen, 2007). One pathway is through asserting their decision-making authority and organizing to create strong tribal governments (Cornell & Kalt, 2003).

Through applied research, we know that strong tribal governments are associated not only with economically sustainable tribal communities, but with other positive outcomes as well.
(Cornell & Kalt, 2003; Chandler & Lalonde, 2004). For example, Chandler & Lalonde (1998, 2004), who have studied cultural continuity as important protective factors against suicide among Canada’s First Nations people, report:

Suicide is lower within communities that have succeeded in their efforts to attain self-government, or have a history of pursuing land claims, or in gaining control over education, health, police and fires services, or have marshaled the resourced needed to construct cultural facilities with the community (p. 19).

Additionally, the work of Cornell & Kalt (2003, 2010), through in-depth case study research, document that across Indigenous communities, increased self-determination and self-government lead to economically sound tribal communities that fit into the local context. Among numerous examples they describe the case of the Winnebago tribe of Nebraska. The Winnebago tribe developed Ho-Chunk, Inc., which is an economic development corporation, created by the tribe to diversify their economic base. Initially, the tribe operated a lucrative casino, however with increasing competition from other casinos within the state and surrounding states they decided to reinvest some of their casino profits into other business ventures, including construction, consulting, dotcom, and retail. The corporation went from employing one person during its humble beginnings in 1994 to employing over 1000 people presently. As a result, the unemployment rates became lower, the median household income rose and external effects also transpired, such as increases in school enrollments, graduation rates, and life expectancy (Ho-Chunk, Inc., 2017). This is hugely important knowledge, and it is now time to investigate further and take the next step. We do not yet know whether and how individual participation in tribal governance is associated with well-being indicators, such as physical health, mental health, and retention of tribal traditions and customary practices. This knowledge has the potential to inform
strategies for tribal leadership, organization, educational programs, and social services. It also has the potential to inform American Indian and Alaska Native families and support their active engagement with the community.

In this dissertation I seek to understand if and why participation in tribal governance is associated with the well-being of tribal members in the Yukon Flats area of Alaska. The project has implications beyond the Yukon Flats. American Indian and Alaska Native tribal communities\(^1\) and many other communities globally are attempting to remain economically, environmentally, socially, culturally, and spiritually sustainable amidst tremendous outside pressures and influences, such as rising fuel prices, climate change, and continued threats to tribal sovereignty and self-governance (Kalt & Singer, 2004; Saylor & Haley, 2007; Tsosie, 2003).

Additionally, this project is important for local practical reasons. The Yukon Flats is an area where tribal members continue to rely on threatened natural resources, such as fish, big game animals, waterfowl, and timber, to meet daily needs for survival as well as fulfilling other, important needs. Understanding whether and how self-governance can contribute to success in daily living has direct relevance to how people may be able to survive and prosper in the Yukon Flats over time.

Finally, this project is important because specific aspects of well-being, as understood by American Indian and Alaska Native people, is an understudied area, leaving gaps in understanding that may have implications for theories of self-governance, community politics, and social development. In other words, this specific inquiry with American Indian and Alaska Native population can also contribute in a meaningful way to overall bodies of knowledge.

\(^1\) American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribal communities refer to Alaska Native villages, American Indian Reservations, and other tribally owned land.
Research Aims

In this study, I seek to understand the concepts of governance and well-being as perceived by tribal members in the Yukon Flats, as well to understand the relationship between these concepts. The research aims are:

1. To understand the conceptual definitions of governance and well-being as perceived by tribal members in the Yukon Flats.
2. To understand whether or not there is a relationship between tribal members’ participation in governance and well-being, both at the individual and community level.
3. To understand the specific mechanisms through which these relationships exist.
4. To understand formal and informal institutions in tribal communities and whether or not they increase or decrease tribal members’ ability to exercise governance and achieve well-being (again at both individual and community levels).
5. To understand policy implications for expanded definitions of governance and well-being at tribal, state, and federal levels.
6. Building on the above, to inform the ability of tribes to express and vitalize their sovereignty in a manner that fits their context, culture, and unique political history.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the research aims, the specific research questions for this study are:

1. What does well-being mean to tribal members from the Yukon Flats? For the individual? For the community?
2. What aspects of well-being are most important?
3. What does governance mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?
4. What formal and informal governance structures exist in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats?

5. What aspects of governance are most important?

6. In what ways do tribal members in the Yukon Flats participate in governance?

7. Does a tribal member’s participation in governance affect his or her individual well-being?

8. Does a tribal member’s participation in governance affect community well-being?

To answer these research questions and to achieve the study aims an interview questionnaire guide, with prompts, was created and is attached in Appendix 1.

**Key Concepts**

Key concepts in this dissertation are governance, tribal governance, citizen participation, well-being, American Indians, Alaska Natives, American Indian/Alaska Native communities and/or tribal communities, institutions, common-pool resources, and culture. A thorough understanding of these concepts is essential, as these concepts are used throughout this dissertation and several of the terms have differing empirical definitions depending on the context in which they are used and who is defining them. Thus, it is important that definitions be clearly articulated in an effort to help the reader understand what is being discussed within this dissertation.

**Governance.** Governance, according to Rosenau (1992), is the creation and implementation of activities or rules, backed by the shared goals of citizens and organizations. Governance, in other words, is a more encompassing phenomenon than government… “It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms whereby those persons and organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy
their needs, and fulfill their wants” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 4). With this definition of governance, “governing” is viewed as an action or the establishing and enforcing of rules, which the citizenry has helped to establish or create and has an intimate part in. This definition of governance is comprehensive and inclusive and will be used unless the writing specifically refers to tribal governance.

**Tribal Governance.** In the book *Rebuilding Native Nations: Strategies for Governance and Development* (Jorgensen, 2007), Stephen Cornell writes:

We can think of governance as tools, the instruments that Indigenous nations use to address and solve the problems they face—maintaining good relations among themselves, surviving hard times, interacting with other nations, caring for the land, educating the young, and so forth. Prior to the European arrival in North America, Native nations governed and sustained themselves through the skilled use of such tools (p. 59).

When referencing tribal governance throughout the document this is the definition I will be referring to as it allows each individual tribe, with its varying differences, to govern based on the tools that fit their particular situation. In this manner, this definition of governance is similar to the definition of governance put forth by Rosenau, except the “tools” which tribal governments use to get things done may differ than other forms of governments. For example, the tools that tribal governments may use when interacting with other nations are “consultation of elders” on how to best proceed on interacting with other nations.

**Citizen Participation.** According to Glass (1979), citizen participation is defined as “providing citizens with opportunities to take part in governmental decision or planning processes” (p. 180). This definition of citizen participation is narrow and does not entirely
capture what is meant by citizen participation in this dissertation. Instead I draw on participatory development theory and research as it more adequately captures what is meant by citizen participation. Eversole (2003), who draws on the work of Chambers (1994) and Mohan & Stokke (2000) in studying citizen participation in development, states “participatory development refers to involving the ‘beneficiaries’ or more generally the ‘local people’ in development processes” (p.781). She then goes on to state that this type of development requires a power shift, where outsiders give up control of the development process and make room for local knowledge to surface and flourish (Eversole, 2003). In participatory development local viewpoints, participation and ownership in the process is sought (Chambers, 1994). This dissertation has drawn on the participatory development theory and research, mainly as it pertains to citizen participation in the decision-making around common pool resources (CPRs and other important decisions to be made in AI/AN communities).

**Well-being.** Well-being is often understood as a multi-dimensional concept, including dimensions of income, education, capabilities, basic values, universal psychological needs, and universal human values (McGillivray, 2007). Some scholars (Cross, 1997) suggest that this is the definition of well-being taken on by American Indian and Alaska Native communities, who view well-being as multidimensional. However, due to the wide diversity of American Indian and Alaska Native populations, a comprehensive definition of well-being that encompasses all the beliefs about well-being of the 500 plus tribes in the United States would be difficult to develop.

The United Nations definition of well-being, as a much simpler measure of social development, includes level of income, educational attainment and quality of health (United Nations Development Programme, 2011). This is one of the most commonly used definitions of
well-being, for very good reason. It is basic and simple and allows comparisons across many different contexts and groups.

Amartya Sen’s conceptualization of well-being relies upon whether or not people have “substantive freedoms—the capabilities--to choose a life one has reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 74). In other words, for Sen, possessing these capabilities which allow individuals to make free and varied choices, is well-being. This definition of well-being fits soundly within an American Indian and Alaska Native perspective because it allows for a self-determined concept of well-being. It allows American Indian and Alaska Native tribes or tribal citizens to decide upon a definition of well-being that fits their particular context and culture and engage in decisions that will enable them to achieve their definition of well-being. Thus, if tribal citizens in Alaska view living in their own community, interacting with their family members, and eating food from the land as “well-being”, to Sen this is perfectly acceptable, as this is the capability to “choose a life one has reason to value” (p.74).

**American Indians.** American Indian(s) is an overarching term used to identify the Indigenous people of the United States, though tribal nations commonly refer to themselves in according to their individual tribal designation (e.g. Lakota). Similarly the overarching term for the Indigenous people of Alaska is Alaska Native(s). In the United States, there are 565 federally recognized tribes. In 2010, 5.2 million people identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2011; Jones, 2006). Federal recognition means that American Indian and Alaska Native tribes are officially acknowledged by the federal government as “a unique political entity which has a formal relationship that is ultimately traceable to the Indian Commerce Clause and the Treaty Clause… recognition also established that a recognized tribe has certain inherent rights and powers of self-government and is entitled to specific benefits and
services enumerated in various federal laws” (Utter, 2002, p. 60). Some of the benefits and services available to federally recognized tribes are medical and dental care, programs for education housing programs, help in developing tribal programs (e.g. tribal courts) and other services (Utter, 2002). Some tribes are not federally recognized, even though they may be “ethnologically identifiable tribes” (Utter, 2002, pg. 61). Over 150 tribes in the U.S. are not federally recognized. There are many reasons why these tribes were not federally recognized. For example, a tribe may not have had any contact with the U.S. government. Some tribes were isolated and did not come into the purview of the federal government. Some tribes purposefully avoided any contact with the federal government or officials for fear of aggression and some tribes that were once federally recognized got their federal recognition removed during the “termination era” (Utter, 2002). Many of the unrecognized tribes continue to fight for federal recognition, as federal recognition provides certain benefits and services (outlined above), and more importantly provides them with powers of self-government, but the process of achieving federal recognition is lengthy and difficult.

**Alaska Natives.** Alaska Natives, which in this study is often used synonymously with the term American Indians, is specifically a term to describe the Indigenous people of Alaska. Alaska Natives include the Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Eyak, Inupiat, Yupik, and Aleut populations. While the term “Alaska Native” is used to refer to the Indigenous people in Alaska, it should be noted that like “American Indians”, this term is used to describe diverse and distinct groups of people who speak different languages and have varied histories and cultures (Krauss, 1974).

**American Indian/Alaska Native Communities and/or Tribal Communities.** American Indian/Alaska Native Communities and/or tribal communities refer to any American Indian and
Alaska Native community in the United States that defines itself as such. This includes American Indian reservations, First Nations Reserves, Alaska Native villages, and other lands where a substantial number of residents are tribal members. In an effort to support tribal self-determination, I am taking this more liberal approach to defining tribal communities versus the federal government’s definition, which is according to its system of federal recognition.

Institutions. In the book *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, North (1990) defines institutions, as “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990, p. 3). North argues that institutions exist due to uncertainties in human interaction, and that institutions can reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life. According to Ostrom (1990), these “rules” can be formal or informal, such as state and federal laws that govern hunting and fishing in Alaska or traditional norms established by Alaska Native Elders, who pass down the norms to their family members and sanction those who violate them. In this study, the term institution is used in the way that Ostrom and North suggest, by including both formal and informal institutions or rules.

Common-Pool Resources. Elinor Ostrom defines common-pool resources (CPR) as a “natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 30). Common-pool resources can represent resources such as fisheries, irrigation systems, and groundwater basins used by a group of individuals who in most cases live in relative proximity to one another. In Alaska, CPRs are sometimes referred to as “natural resources”, although not all natural resources are CPRs for the fact that natural resources can be privately owned, which is not the case with most CPRs.
**Culture.** Triandis (2007), who draws on the work by Geertz, explains culture as having these general criteria: “culture emerges in adaptive interactions between humans and environments... second, culture consists of shared elements...third, culture is transmitted across time periods and generations” (p. 44). This definition of culture is useful in explaining how some American Indian and Alaska Native peoples, in the case of this dissertation Alaska Native people, perceive culture.

Many Alaska Native tribes exhibit these same general criteria Triandis explains when practicing their culture. For instance, culture and cultural practices for Alaska Native peoples has evolved as a result of interactions with the environment. Historically and even today, the Gwich’in and Koyukon people of the Yukon Flats region of Alaska have to be keenly aware of nature and especially the weather, as the weather is at times unpredictable and also extremely cold in the winter. So over time a lot of the culture has been shaped around observing and spending time out on the land in an effort to not only practice the culture, but also to better understand the land and coinciding systems (i.e. weather). Secondly, the shared elements of Alaska Native people (tribal specific) are their cultural values and practices, which have allowed them to sustain their traditional way of life, weather tough periods of time and maintain a certain balance throughout time. Lastly, because many of the same families have lived in close proximity to one another, whether it was when Gwich’in and Koyukon people were more migratory to modern day Gwich’in and Koyukon life, where most people live in isolated villages, culture is still transmitted across time periods; though the actual practice of culture may take different forms than previous time periods. Henceforth, culture itself is an institution, as it dictates how people behave and provides protocols (through rules and norms), which people do not often have to consciously think about because it is so engrained in them. Other institutions
that exist in communities in the Yukon Flats also influence culture. For instance, prior to Gwich’in and Koyukon people permanently settling into communities in the Yukon Flats, they lived a nomadic lifestyle, moving with the seasons and following wild fish and game. Both before and after their permanent settlement, outside influences started to impact these villages to include different ideas on how communities and governments should be structured. Thus, Indigenous governance systems were restructured to mirror non-Native governance institutions including what laws were developed and how they should be enforced. These new institutions did not wipe out culture as an institution but changed it greatly.

In closing, this introductory chapter has described the key research aims, questions, and key terms. These questions and concepts are essential to understanding the research. At the same time, given the unique and complex way in which land ownership and/or tenure was settled in Alaska, applicability in the Alaska context is quite varied. These unavoidable differences have important implications for individual and community well-being, a complexity that is taken up in the following chapters.
Chapter II

The Setting and People: Unique Circumstances in Relationship to Land and Governance

Alaska is the largest state in the United States with a landmass of approximately 572,000 square miles, but relatively few people. Many Alaska communities are small and isolated. They have few roads, and some are only accessible by small airplanes. The majority of the populations of rural Alaska communities are Alaska Natives. They are people Indigenous to the area and represent 11 distinct cultural groups. Two of the subgroups are the Gwich’in and Upper Koyukon Athabascans. They inhabit nine communities in Northeast Alaska, and for the Gwich’in, their people and lands extend into Northwest Canada. The area the Gwich’in and Koyukon inhabit is called the Yukon Flats, which is a broad, marshy, lake-dotted floodplain. These communities are organized under tribal governments with elected chiefs and councils (Gwich’in Steering Committee, 2017). The largest of these communities, Fort Yukon, is located at the convergence of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers northeast of Alaska’s second largest city, Fairbanks. Fort Yukon was originally established as a fur trading post in 1847. It was also the first English-speaking community in Alaska (United States Department of Interior, 1974).

The Yukon Flats is home to approximately 1,209 Alaska Native people living in the eight communities (See Figure 1). Although subsistence\(^2\) is still an integral part of the lifestyle (hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering of plant foods), most people supplement their subsistence foods with commercially available supplies. The word subsistence was defined in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), though many Alaska Native

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\(^2\) According to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) the term "subsistence uses" means the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, or transportation; for the making and selling of handicraft articles out of nonedible byproducts of fish and wildlife resources taken for personal or family consumption; for barter, or sharing for personal or family consumption; and for customary trade (United States Fish and Wildlife Services, 2011).
people share that the word doesn’t accurately describe their livelihood, which not only includes the traditional and customary use, but aspects of physical sustenance, spiritual connection, cultural values in action, and communal and reciprocal sharing (Black et al., 2016). Of the 1, 209 residents that live in the Yukon Flats, nearly 58% of the people considered themselves as not working (Stevens, 2010). This percentage is likely under-reported and can be conservatively estimated at between 50 and 70 percent. The limited workforce consists of a job market that is governmental (federal, state, or local). Thus, large majorities of the people who live in the Yukon Flats are not working in a formal job, requiring both innovation and interdependence to sustain themselves and their families (Stevens, 2010).

Figure 1: Map of the Yukon Flats
The Gwich’in and Koyukon are traditionally migratory people. Prior to permanent settlement in Alaska Native communities, they followed and hunted traditional foods—such as muskrats, beavers, ducks, geese, salmon, moose, caribou, hares, grouse, and whitefish—in order to sustain themselves. Their lifestyle followed the seasonal patterns of the wildlife. Summers were spent fishing and gathering berries along the major rivers. In fall, families joined together to hunt caribou and moose. Winter was spent ice fishing and trapping, and in the spring, camps were set up along rivers to trap muskrat, hunt birds, and fish (Black et al., 2016; Christman, Evans, Mark & Vick, 1980). While many families still engage in this migratory lifestyle, spending the spring season trapping muskrats at their rat camps, as they refer to them, the establishment of permanent communities or villages has changed this migratory lifestyle. Yet the importance of this traditional hunting and fishing lifestyle and interdependence with the land and the food cannot be understated. According to a 2014 Alaska Department of Fish and Game Subsistence Update, “though relatively small in the statewide picture, subsistence fishing, hunting, and gathering provide a major part of the food supply of rural Alaska…Our best estimate is about 34.2 million lb. (usable weight) of wild foods are harvested annually by residents of rural areas of the state…on a per person basis, the annual wild food harvest is about 275 lb. per person per year for residents of rural areas” (p. 2). In the Yukon Flats, these numbers are even greater, according to the report Survival Denied (2013), “approximately 94 percent of households consume moose or bear meat, and the region is responsible for 28 percent of Alaska’s ‘subsistence’ fish harvest” (Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, pp. 4-5). Thus, regulations that limit this hunting, fishing, and gathering lifestyle, such as the limited openings for Chinook [king] salmon in the Yukon Flats due to the year 2000 crash has hit families hard. The closures have had a devastating effect on families and communities, not only physically and
eco
nomically, but spiritually as well (Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, 2013). Beyond de-incentivizing people to continue their hunting, fishing, and gathering lifestyle, the inability to engage in these seasonal ways of life has hit the spiritual core of people living in the communities in the Yukon Flats, especially those who fish for salmon.

Today, most families hunt, fish, and trap right outside of their village homes, traveling each day to their fishwheels, their traplines, and hunting spots. This change occurred when villages were being established, and the Bureau of Indian Education setting up schools and mandated that children attend, thus reducing migration from seasonal hunting, fishing, and gathering camps/traditional use areas. More recently, this change from fishing at fishcamps to fishing near a village is a result of limited fishing openings and seasons and accompanying laws which de-incentivize people from moving to fishcamps during the summer where they would have very limited days to fish. Additionally, most seasonal formal employment in villages in Alaska occurs in the summer (e.g. firefighting, road maintenance, and construction). Lastly, the cost of equipment that makes hunting easier (e.g. boats, snowmachines, and four-wheelers), plus the gasoline and other equipment needed make hunting, fishing and gathering expensive. This prevents some people from engaging in hunting, fishing, and gathering. However, despite the many changes that have occurred in these communities over the last two centuries, the Gwich’in and Koyukon remain spiritually connected to their land and actively involved in their traditional hunting and fishing practices.
Alaska Native Self-Determination

Alaska Native tribes, while self-determined according to the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) of 1975\(^3\), are in very distinctive situations in regards to governance of land and resources, compared to American Indian tribes in the U.S. mainland. First of all, the first interaction of Alaska Natives with non-Natives occurred much later in time than that of American Indians on the mainland United States. The first contact Alaskan Natives had with non-Natives, according to written records, was during the late 1700s when Russian explorers landed on the western coast of Alaska, both in the Aleutians and on Little Diomede (Graburn & Strong, 1973). The Russians maintained exclusive control of trade until Alaska was purchased by the United States in 1867. This purchase is referred to as the Treaty of Cession. While some Alaska Native peoples such as the Unungan (Aleut) were severely impacted, other Alaska Native groups were unaware of Russian rule, or the Treaty of Cession. The treaty did not resolve Native claims in the State of Alaska, and for the most part Native people continued to live as they had for hundreds of years—hunting, fishing, and gathering food and materials from the land. The Treaty of Cession is referred to as a “quit claim”, whereby whatever “dominion” Russia had over Alaska Natives was transferred to the United States when they purchased Alaska from Russia. Accordingly, because Alaska Natives held their lands by aboriginal title under Russian rule, the status of aboriginal title would continue under U.S. Government “until extinguished in the treaty or subsequent federal legislation” (Case & Voluck, 2010, p. 62).

The reality, however, was that while many Alaska Native people were not significantly impacted by Russia or had even heard of the Russians, after the Treaty of Cession the United

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\(^3\) The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (Public Law 93-638) authorized certain government secretaries, within the U.S. Government (e.g. Department of Interior), to enter into contracts with, and make grants directly to, federally recognized Indian tribes. This meant that tribes would have the authority to administer funding as they saw fit, giving them more power over decisions that directly impacted their tribal citizens (Utter, 2002).
States claimed dominion over all of the people and the entire territory of what is now Alaska, thus significantly impacting Alaska Native people regarding their use and ownership of Alaska Native lands.

The Treaty of Cession referenced Alaska Natives as "the uncivilized tribes" …which “will be subject to such laws and regulations as the United States may, from time to time, adopt in regard to aboriginal tribes of that country." (Case & Voluck, p. 63). This distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ tribes was eventually ignored, but led to a long period where tribes in Alaska were treated differently under the law based upon whether the tribe was considered ‘civilized’ (and not subject the federal Indian law) at the time of purchase.

From the time of first contact with non-Natives, including Russian fur traders, commercial whalers, U.S. government officials, and those who aimed to get rich from the gold rush, Alaska Natives experienced many of the same traumas that American Indians on the U.S. mainland faced. These traumas included forced removal of Alaska Native children into boarding schools, seizure of land, and massive disease epidemics (Jester, 2002; Kraus & Buffler, 1979). The main difference in the Alaska Native experience was that these events took place at a later date and a much faster pace, less than one hundred years.

As previously mentioned, the way Alaska Natives land tenure was settled was much different than American Indians on the U.S. mainland. Again, when the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, there was no recognized [legal] Alaska Native land ownership. Alaska Natives were not allowed to own private land until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. It should be noted that the concept of land ownership was a foreign concept to some Alaska Native people especially those who migrated from one traditional use area to the next (Hensley, 1966). While Alaska Natives did use certain lands for hunting, fishing, and gathering, as did the
generations of family before them, they did not own the land. Yet, Alaska Native people respected the traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering areas of others and so while there was no formal, western law that prohibited one person from using certain lands, traditional laws did dictate who could use what.

Alaska was regulated by the military until 1884 when the Organic Act was passed, which essentially provided Alaska with a civilian government. The Act seemingly provided the basic protection of lands for the Alaskan Natives. In the Act, section 8 states that:

Indians or other persons in said district shall not be disturbed in the possession of any lands actually in their use or occupation or now claimed by them, but the terms under which such persons may acquire title to such lands is reserved for future legislation by Congress (Case & Voluck, 2012)

Though Section 8 in the Organic Act of 1884 appears straightforward, it has through the years caused much controversy, as on one hand it stated that Alaska Natives should be left alone regarding the lands they used and occupied, yet title to the lands would be dealt with by “future legislation by Congress”, which left the future of Alaska Native lands in limbo. The future legislation regarding title to the lands did undeniably come much later and several pieces of legislation happened in that interim.

In 1906, Congress adopted the first land grant to Alaska Native people through Alaska Native Allotment Act. This act entitled Alaska Natives to 160 acres of unappropriated, non-mineral land to Alaska Native people in restricted status, meaning the right to sell the land was restricted by the federal government. (University of Alaska Fairbanks Tribal Management, 2017). Today, there are approximately 13-15 thousand Native allotments in Alaska. They are primarily located around the villages and in hunting and fishing use areas. In 1926, the Alaska
Native Townsite Act was passed, which was “a special type of Townsite designed to give Alaska Natives small lots under their homes in villages in a restricted status. There was no payment for lots and they were to be nontaxable and inalienable, meaning they could not be taken away or sold without approval of the federal government. Some 106 Alaska Native Townsites were created” (University of Alaska Fairbanks Tribal Management, 2017, p.1).

Prior to the 1936 Alaska amendments to the Indian Reorganization Act approximately 150 Alaska Native reservations were established by executive order, which essentially meant they were “reservations at will”, meaning they were not secure and their status as reservations could be revoked. At the time, these reservations were important because they “established the historical fact of the legal relationship between the federal government and the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska” (Case & Voluck, 2012, p. 81). It should be noted that all of these reservations, except for one (Metlakatla), would later be abrogated. In 1936, amendments were made to the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which effectively sought to reverse the policy of allotment and parceling out of tribal lands. These Alaska amendments bode well for Alaska tribes, as it supported and promoted their right to self-government including creating formalized tribal governments, adopting constitutions, stopping the loss or taking of Alaska Native lands, and honoring the government-to-government relationship between the United States government and tribal governments, similar to what was already established between tribes and the United States government on the U.S. mainland.

It was not until oil was discovered on the north slope of Alaska in Prudhoe Bay in the 1960s that the issue of Alaska Native land ownership and status was propelled to the forefront of the U.S. government’s agenda. The resulting legislation to deal with land tenure issues in Alaska was the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANSCA), which distributed forty-four million
acres of federal lands in Alaska to newly established Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs). Of the forty-four million acres, approximately half of the land was distributed to more than 200 village corporations and the balance was distributed among thirteen regional corporations including Doyon Limited, which is the largest Alaska Native corporation landholder and the corporation that owns land in interior Alaska, including the Yukon Flats. The village corporations owned surface rights to their lands while the subsurface rights were deeded to regional corporations. In addition to land owned by Alaska Native corporations, the state and federal governments (depending on the area) and tribal governments also own land. For example, in the Yukon Flats, some of the land such as the Yukon Flats Wildlife Refuge and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, were put into conservation under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, which was a law that established more than 100 million acres of federal land in Alaska into conservation system units (CSUs) (Gallegher, 1988).

In addition, ANILCA:

Effectively completed the carving up of Alaska land into a complex mosaic of federal, state, and Native ownerships. Alaska Natives became owners of relatively small enclaves surrounded by relatively large blocks of public land. These public lands are managed by the state of Alaska or by one of several federal agencies. Each management entity has different management goals that guide substantially different land management programs. These programs may alter the amount of access to resources on public land, and they may determine how Native people can use their private lands (Gallagher, 1988, p. 92).

Tribal governments in Alaska own relatively small amounts of land in and around their community. Some of the land that tribes in Alaska own are village townsites, parcels of land in
and around the townsite (such as traditional use areas) and in the case of Venetie and Arctic Village, title to 1.8 million acres of land organized under the Native Village of Venetie Tribal Government. Therefore, while tribes in Alaska do own some land, for most it is not substantial and what they do own they have very little governance over. They can manage people, such as those who violate tribal law (e.g. domestic violence or breaking a local, tribal law), but they do not have governmental authority over land owned by the Alaska Native Corporations and cannot regulate hunting and fishing on tribal lands (Alaska v. Native Village of Venetie Tribal Government, 1998). On federal lands, the federal government has authority under the ANILCA law. For state and private lands, such as ANCSA and tribal lands, Alaska Natives are subject to State of Alaska regulations and management. Essentially, the management system in place today does not allow for Alaska Native governance over traditional Alaska Native lands or a hunting and fishing priority, even on lands traditionally used by Alaska Native people. Consequently, these laws all serve to disenfranchise Alaska Natives from decision-making. A complex mosaic of corporate, federal, state and Native land ownership describes the situation of land tenure in the Yukon Flats, with complex set of laws governing each land base and also the specific species one is hunting and fishing (See Figure 2). Therefore, the Yukon Flats area provided a good location to study whether or not an association exists between people’s participation in governance and well-being. Let us look at this more closely.

First, the complex system of land ownership and management of natural resources continues in the Yukon Flats. These systems involve several layers of government structures that the Gwich’in and Koyukon peoples must navigate. While troublesome, this situation provides an opportunity to study the governance systems, the motivations behind those involved in the different systems, and tribal members participation in changing these systems.
Second, while Alaska Native people continue to practice their traditional hunting, fishing and gathering practices [often referred to as subsistence practices] despite these complex systems, their ability to do so has been limited, especially during the past 10-20 years, with depleted salmon runs and tightening hunting and fishing regulations overall. This also provides an opportunity to learn about people’s thoughts regarding governance of resources and regulations, as well as their thoughts on whether or not they can participate in amending or changing the laws and regulations.

Third, because traditional hunting and fishing practices are still regularly practiced in the Yukon Flats, it is useful to examine impacts of these practices on people’s economic, social, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Last, an examination of what constitutes well-being for the Gwich’in may contribute to more informed efforts by tribal, state, and federal governments in increasing well-being among this population. This is important given the immense social, economic, and political challenges faced by those that live in the communities in the Yukon Flats. Research data on study participants as they define well-being can inform those implementing programs to enhance well-being among Yukon Flats tribal members.
Figure 2: Land Ownership in Alaska

Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry (2006)
Chapter III

Theory and Prior Research in the Context of American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes

The topic of governance holds special importance to American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, as they have battled for centuries, mostly with the federal government, for their right to be sovereign. In actuality today they are semi-sovereign and govern their own land, resources, and programs that impact tribal citizens. Researchers at the Native Nations Institute (NNI) and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development have conducted much of the research on governance in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. These two institutions have collaboratively examined hundreds of case studies and have found many examples of Native nations that have remained resilient, making strides to create economically sustainable, self-determined societies (Jorgensen, 2007). One pathway is through asserting their sovereignty and decision-making power in creating strong tribal governments (Jorgensen, 2007). Tribal governments are what North (1990) and Ostrom (1990) refer to as formal institutions. Strong institutions, both formal and informal, are essential for thriving economies (North, 1990) and successful management of Common Pool Resources (Ostrom, 1990).

Institutional Theory

Douglass North critically examines institutions, their changes, and their impact on economic performance over time. North defines institutions as “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990, p. 3). North argues that institutions exist due to uncertainties in human interaction, and that institutions can reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life. Institutions are made of three different dimensions: informal constraints, formal constraints, and enforcement mechanisms.
Informal constraints can be described as norms of behavior, or codes of conduct, that different societies or cultures develop over time. Formal constraints, which include political, judicial, and economic rules, can in some instances complement informal constraints. Examples of formal constraints would be state laws, constitutions, and contracts. North (1990) states that formal rules can increase the effectiveness of informal constraints by transforming them or overriding them. This increased effectiveness results from lowering information, monitoring, and enforcement costs. Enforcement is an essential element to institutions since “the inability of societies to develop effective, low-cost enforcement of contracts is the source of economic stagnation” (p. 54).

Traditionally, enforcement often comes in the form of a third party, which tends to be an entity like the state or another governing body (e.g., federal officials). The problem with third-party enforcement, according to North, is that the state becomes a coercive force able to monitor property rights. These enforcement mechanisms are relatively impersonal and complex, and therefore incapable of being self-enforcing. Allowing the state this power, which would otherwise be a role that tribal governments and informal constraints (i.e. cultural values/codes of conduct) would assume, may result in enforcers (i.e. the state or federal government) using their authority to advance their own interests at the expense of the rest of society. Large impersonal exchanges are in strong contrast to tribal societies, which are self-enforcing since individuals in these societies have frequent contact and repeated dealings with one another. Therefore, due to these frequent contacts and repeated dealings, in addition to their abidance with cultural values, most individuals tend not to break the rules in the first place or when they do, make reparations. Deviation from these traditional laws does at times happen and causes discord, however this is the exception. Additionally, because people are in frequent contact with each other, they are
more likely to “check” one another on inappropriate behavior or shame others when they are not acting appropriate. Much has changed in tribal societies in Alaska over the past centuries, including changes in the way traditional values are practiced and experienced, as well as changes in the ways that people interact. While the empirical literature on these subjects is limited, changes have occurred. Some of these changes are revealed through the research.

From the viewpoint of institutional theory, we can examine institutional changes for American Indian and Alaska Native tribes. The process of institutional change for both American Indian tribes on the U.S. mainland and Alaska Native tribes in the state of Alaska has vacillated between a series of incremental changes and radical breakthroughs. From the 1400s when non-Natives first arrived until the early 1970s, change was rapid for American Indian tribes. In a few centuries, tribes were discovered, removed from their original homeland, placed on reservations, forced to assimilate, and subjected to termination policies. It was not until 1975 with the passage of the ISDEAA that tribes received some real reprieve and support from the U.S. federal government to govern as distinct political entities as they are defined in the U.S. Constitution. The process of garnering the support and recognition other than by law of tribal self-governance and self-determination by state and federal governments has been a more incremental process for many tribes. According to Begay (1998), “many people mistakenly think threats to Indian sovereignty ended at the close of the nineteenth century, but challenges continually arise from outsiders trying to reduce tribal sovereignty or gain access to Indian lands” (p. 42). This has been the case for changing existing state and federal traditional hunting and fishing laws in Alaska. It often takes tribes years of meeting with state and federal officials, lobbying Congressmen, and demonstrating strong governance practices to change or amend existing laws for their benefit (Stevens, 2010).
Today, tribal governments are responsible for many decisions that impact the well-being of their citizens, ranging from decisions regarding natural resources, education programs, and physical and mental health. While tribal governments are an important formal structure, informal governance structures are also at play, impacting day-to-day living and decisions of formal leaders. However, these more informal governance structures are not reflected in the empirical literature.

Fully examining governance in the Yukon Flats through North’s Theory of Institutions enables tribes to assess in what ways and to what extent informal institutions (e.g., elder guidance and teachings), formal institutions (e.g., tribal governments), and current enforcement mechanisms operate in their villages. Doing this also enables tribes to understand how these different institutions encourage or discourage participation in governance, and in the programs and services that ultimately affect them.

Theory of Common Pool Resources

In her seminal work, *Governing the Commons* (1990), Elinor Ostrom studies the problem of collectively managing shared property and goods or “common-pool resources” in a way that ensures long-term economic viability. Common-pool resources (CPRs) represent a “natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 30). CPRs include natural resources such as streams, groundwater basins, fisheries, and hunting grounds that are used by a group of individuals who in most cases live in proximity to one another.
Through her extensive research Ostrom determines why some populations consume more than their share of CPRs and distribute them unjustly while others find a way to sustain and distribute CPRs so as to benefit everyone.

Ostrom finds that in order to create institutions for collective action, where the problems of free-riding, commitment, supply of new institutions, and monitoring individual compliance with rules are overcome, eight “design principles” must be followed (see Table 1).
Table 1: Eight Design Principles Illustrated by Long-Enduring Common Pool Resources (CPRs) Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Principle</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearly defined boundaries</td>
<td>Individuals or household who have rights to withdraw resource units from the CPR must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions</td>
<td>Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective-choice arrangements</td>
<td>Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated sanctions</td>
<td>Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or by both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-resolution mechanisms</td>
<td>Appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low-cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal recognition of rights to organize</td>
<td>The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nested enterprises</td>
<td>Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Ostrom (1990)
The case study examples that Ostrom provides range from successful management of Swiss grazing pastures, Japanese forests, and irrigation systems in Spain and the Philippines, to the unsuccessful management of Turkish inshore fisheries, California groundwater basins, and irrigation systems in Sri Lanka. Ostrom concludes that societies successful in managing their CPRs had to first overcome social challenges for effective institutions to flourish and collective action to occur.

For instance, in the case study of Swiss grazing pastures and forests in Törbel, Switzerland, Ostrom found that the local people have been successful in maintaining this CPR for centuries because there are clearly defined rules regarding land ownership and grazing times and an established venue to work out differences should issues arise. In the Alps Association, users of the CPR can vote on statutes impacting them and they can also run for a position on the board. Additionally, there is an established enforcement mechanism should someone deviate from the communally established rules for using the CPRs. The CPR users themselves provide enforcement, which also makes the system cost-effective.

Due to the many changes that have occurred in American Indian and Alaska Native communities and impacted the people over time, Ostrom’s theory may be a useful guide for tribes who are struggling to govern their CPRs. This conceptualization encourages tribes to revisit their traditional forms of governance because some governance systems yielded results similar to those of Ostrom in her review of long-enduring CPRs. In the Alaska tribal context, traditional forms of governance required people to act collectively in an effort to withstand the harsh elements of Alaska while at the same time maintaining their CPRs. In this way Alaska tribes’ traditional values and governing systems aligned with Ostrom’s Design Principles. For example, if a tribal member deviated from acting collectively, elders and other identified leaders
would scold or sanction the tribal member. This practice of a traditional value—*Elders as wisdom keepers and leaders who enforced rules*—falls in line with Ostrom’s design principle number 4, which is: *A system for monitoring a member’s behavior exists; the community members themselves undertake this monitoring.* The enactment of this design principle still occurs in the communities in the Yukon Flats, especially by elders and elected tribal leaders, however there also exist other systems for monitoring, such as state and federal officials and under certain circumstances these systems take precedence.

Furthermore, so much has changed in the past two to three hundred years whereby many traditional, tribal governance systems have been replaced or heavily influenced by the incursion of new and different governing systems. So, while useful, Ostrom’s theory and design principles are not fully operational in the Yukon Flats. For example, the design principle *collective-choice arrangements*, whereby those individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules (Ostrom, 1990), is not fully operational in the Yukon Flats, because the opportunities tribes have to participate in modifying operational rules for natural resource management are limited and geographically far from their home communities. Should state and federal governments truly honor the government-to-government relationship referenced in the U.S. Constitution, and engage with tribes in meaningful dialogue and consultation regarding management of natural resources Ostrom’s Design Principles could be fully implemented by tribes. Slow, limited progress has been made in this arena, but there is still much room to grow. President Obama re-affirmed an executive order originally executed by President Bill Clinton, stating, “Executive departments and agencies are charged with engaging in regular and meaningful consultation and collaboration with tribal officials in the development of Federal policies that have tribal implications, and are responsible for strengthening the
government-to-government relationship between the United States and Indian tribes” (Executive Order No. 13175, 2000). Tribes understand that they have the legal right to hold federal agencies accountable to this executive order. However, as it stands now, the state and federal governments make the rules and enforce them [particularly in terms of managing natural resources] while involving tribal governments in a limited manner, therefore progress is slow and doesn’t allow for long-enduring CPRs in the Yukon Flats. Nonetheless, Ostrom’s theory is useful and relevant, as it aligns with the traditional values of the people.

Other Theories and Evidence

Acheson (2003) has studied lobster fisheries in Maine, and Trawick (2001) has carried out over three years of fieldwork in Peru to better understand modes of hydraulic organization and water distribution. Both researchers report that management of CPRs was successful due to the ability of the local populations to solve collective action dilemmas and collectively manage the CPRs. Local populations were integral in the planning of management systems as well as carrying out the day-to-day implementation of rules and norms.

Acheson, an economic anthropologist, conducted over 30 years of research in the coastal fishing communities of Maine. In his book Capturing the Commons he examines the success of the Maine lobster fishery. Acheson finds that the Maine lobster fisheries differ from others in ability to solve collective action dilemmas. He states, “Members of the industry have been very effective in organizing themselves to lobby for legislation with the state government to obtain rules they wanted, and they have had some success in influencing the federal fisheries management agencies” (p. 206). Acheson goes on to say that, in cases where the government would not or could not act, the lobster fishermen generated informal rules to regulate the fisheries; generating informal rules is illustrated by five island communities, which have rules for
defending territorial boundaries, limiting entry into harbor gangs, and setting trap limits for themselves. In a specific example, the village of Mohegan was successful in instituting territorial rules, limiting entry rules, and setting a trap limit. This occurred after an attempt to introduce state legislation had failed. What made Mohegan successful was the strong sense of community that already existed, which was enhanced by a few key variables: Mohegan’s relatively small size, frequent resident interaction which aided in development of common goals and values, and the power to sanction those who defected from the rules. Similar to examples presented by Ostrom, Acheson finds that the fishermen also had to overcome a strong tendency for people to free ride on the efforts of others.

Ostrom’s framework for assessing long-enduring CPRs has been salient around the world. One reason this framework has been successful is that it views those most impacted by CPR decisions as the ones making the decisions, managing the CPRs, and holding each other accountable. This participatory approach to CPR management has also been a focus in development spheres, where during the 1970s a participatory approach to development replaced more colonial development practices.

**Participatory Development Theory**

Research in participatory development and studies conducted in the area of CPRs has established that citizen participation in governance-related decisions can produce positive benefits for the local citizenry. These decisions reflect citizen preferences, a more democratic government, and long-term viability of CPRs. Including tribal citizens in decision-making also prepares the ground for new ideas to sprout and develop. Renewed energy and innovation are vital in tribal communities, which continue to grapple with oppression and social ills with deep historical roots.
A participatory development approach suggests that local people should be intimately involved in development work from the very initial stages through the life of a project and then with follow-up measures (Chambers, 1994; Eversole, 2003). These locals are more than passive local residents; they are active agents and leaders in the development process (Eversole, 2003). This level of involvement is deeper and stronger than “providing citizens with opportunities to take part in governmental decision or planning processes” (Glass, 1979, p. 180), as advocated in citizen participation. Eversole (2003) specifies that participatory development requires a power shift, where outsiders give up control of the development process and make room for local knowledge and capacity for change to surface and flourish.

Efficacy of the participatory development approach is verified by research conducted by both Ostrom (1990) and Jorgensen and colleagues (2007) at the Native Nations Institute (NNI) and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. This research finds that when tribal governments (who are made up of local tribal citizens) assert their sovereignty and apply a Nation-Building Approach to development, they are much more likely to create thriving economies. The Nation-Building Approach “refers to the efforts of Native nations to increase their capacities for self-rule and for self-determined, sustainable community and economic development” (Native Nations Institute, 2011). The Nation-Building Approach includes five important characteristics. (See Table 2).
Table 2. The Nation-Building Approach

Native nations assert decision-making power.

Native nations back up that power with effective governing institutions.

Governing institutions match Indigenous Political Culture.

Decision making is strategic.

Leaders serve as nation builders and mobilizers.

Cornell & Kalt (2003)

One example is the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. Notwithstanding marked economic success with Indian gaming, the Winnebago Tribe decided to diversify its investments beyond strictly gaming. They did this because in the early 1990s the state of Iowa where the Winnebago Tribe had a successful gaming casino, decided to amend its laws so that other river casinos could be opened. The Winnebago Tribal members knew that changing regulations could alter their financial niche as exclusive operators of a casino (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2000). Therefore, in 1994, the tribe wrote and enacted the Winnebago Business Code, which enabled them to charter Ho-Chunk, Inc. (HCI), an economic development corporation owned by the Winnebago. As part of the diversification plan, HCI established four hotels, a host of convenience stores, a distribution center for tobacco and gasoline to over 25 tribes, and internet-related businesses including an e-commerce company, AllNative.com.
Important to the tribe’s success in addition to asserting decision-making power, the Winnebago separated businesses from politics, which demonstrates effective governing institutions. Ho-Chunk, Inc. has a five-member Board of Directors, which acts independently of the tribal council. The board is responsible for selecting HCI’s Chief Executive Officer who oversees day-to-day management and makes all major strategic decisions for the Corporation. The board’s other responsibilities include providing the tribal council with an annual report, audited financial statements, and an annual development plan (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2000, p. 3). Grant & Taylor (2007) summarize cases, including the Winnebago, where tribes have asserted sovereignty and backed this assertion with effective governance systems. In this synthesis, they find that Native governments that are stable, predictable, and fair have several attributes in common: well-designed checks and balances, staggered council terms, clear and predictable rules, independent dispute-resolution mechanisms, and civil serve professionalism (Grant & Taylor, 2007).

The Winnebago Tribe has achieved economic success as a result of casino profits and a diversified business portfolio. The tribe invested their 9 million dollars in casino profits in 1994 into Ho-Chunk, Inc. and the revenue in 2016 was 260 million. (Ho-Chunk, Inc., 2017). Also noteworthy is the Winnebago assertion of control and sovereignty. They have achieved economic success through HCI, and in the process enhanced tribal members’ sense of pride.

In summary, the Winnebago Tribe exercised a Nation-Building Approach. They asserted their decision-making power by reinvesting casino profits into HCI, and this decision was strategic. The Winnebago also backed that decision-making power with effective governing institutions. A five member Board of Directors, two of which sit on the tribal council, govern
Ho-Chunk, Inc. The Board of Directors act independently of the tribal council to ensure the corporation is meeting their goals and following the independent strategic plan.

**Sen and Freedoms**

In his landmark book *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen defines an alternative to the standard economic formula for alleviating poverty and increasing well-being. He suggests that, instead of viewing well-being strictly in terms of income or GDP, well-being should be conceptualized as “substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one has reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 74). He sees GDP as only a means towards achieving these freedoms or capabilities, which in turn lead to well-being. The five freedoms that Sen finds essential to achieving well-being are:

1) *Political freedoms*, which include citizens’ abilities to determine who should govern, checks and balances on authorities, and freedom of political expression.

2) *Economic facilities*, which refers to citizens’ abilities to utilize resources as they fit (i.e. consumption or exchange), given the resources available to them and the state of the market.

3) *Social opportunities*, which refers to citizens’ access to social opportunities such as health and education, which allows them to live a more productive life. These social opportunities are important, beyond strictly affording an individual an education, for example. Moreover, the social opportunity of education enables citizens to become literate, which allows them to participate in the economy and politics, thus expanding their freedoms.

4) *Transparency guarantees*, which means a more open and transparent government and for all interactions with others to be open and transparent. This transparency allows
people to trust their government and one another, which is essential to achieving well-being.

5) **Protective security**, which refers to citizens being provided a safety net, should they ever meet abject poverty and misery. According to Sen, *protective security* should include institutional measures, such as unemployment compensation in times of need, as well as famine relief in times of drought or intense starvation.

Sen goes on to argue that it is not enough merely to have these freedoms, but these freedoms must also “interlink” because the freedoms reinforce one another. Sen uses the example of the freedom of a social opportunity, such as education. This freedom allows individuals not only to read, but also to engage in political action and economic opportunities because the individual is better equipped for an informed vote and to secure a job. Sen’s capabilities framework can be situated within Institutional Theory—it is through robust institutions that one acquires these freedoms.

Sen’s capabilities framework is an appropriate framework from which to assess well-being in American Indian and Alaska Native communities because it allows American Indian and Alaska Native tribes or tribal citizens to decide upon a definition of well-being that fits their particular context and culture and to engage in decisions that enable them to achieve that definition of well-being. Thus, if tribal citizens in Alaska view living in their own community, interacting with their family members, and eating food gathered from the land as well-being, to Sen this is perfectly acceptable. This is the capability to “choose a life one has reason to value” (p. 74). Additionally, examining the extent to which well-being, as defined by Sen, exists in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats and how institutions either support or prevent the
acquisition of these capabilities is essential to understanding how interventions that increase well-being can be successfully implemented.

**Added Approaches to Studying Well-Being**

Historically the concept of well-being was scarcely studied in American Indian and Alaska Native communities, with most research focusing on the problems and issues American Indians and Alaska Natives faced. According to Weaver (2002) much of the research regarding American Indians and Alaska Natives has centered on the problems such as substance abuse, depression, diabetes, cancer, and other physical and societal ills. This trend is changing as more and more researchers are focusing more of their efforts on the strength, resilience, and predictors of well-being that lie within American Indian and Alaska Native communities and how they can serve as protective capacities. Although it is important to be knowledgeable about the problems that exist in American Indian and Alaska Native communities, it is equally important to understand predictors of well-being. Understanding these predictors of well-being and implementing policies and programs that reflect them can help to create thriving and healthy communities.

Moreover, while often these problems are studied from the individual perspective, the individual problems, such as alcohol abuse or individual traumas, often become collective or social problems that impact the entire community. Most American Indians and Alaska Native scholars studying problems and societal ills acknowledge community-level effects; however, a deeper understanding of well-being at the community level is seldom achieved.

Turning to measurement, wellness⁴ is often thought of as balance with one’s body, spirit, and mind (Hodge & Nandy, 2011; Hodge, Limb, & Cross, 2009; Weaver, 2002). In many

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⁴ Wellness and well-being will be used interchangeably, as the literature at times uses the word wellness and at other times uses the word well-being.
American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, “wellness not only means the absence of disease, but also the environmental traits that together maintain good health status” (Ojibwa, 2010). While a majority of studies examine health and well-being in tribal communities from a deficits perspective, a growing number of scholars study issues from a strengths-based perspective. This includes a study by LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck (2006), who examine resilience factors among a group of American Indian adolescents from the Midwest, and explore facilitators of pro-social behavior. The work of Goodluck (2002) and Goodluck & Willeto (2004) focuses studying American Indian and Alaska Native communities from a perspective of resilience and not merely deficits. The field of social work, in general, has moved towards studying issues from a strengths-based perspective, factors that may empower communities (Ronnau & Poertner, 1993; Ronnau & Shannon, 1990; Saleebey, 1992; & Weick, 1992). In what follows will be a review of the very limited number of empirical studies specifically focusing on well-being or wellness in American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

Among the limited set of studies, well-being is often viewed as multi-dimensional. Yurkovich & Lattergrass (2008) conducted 44 semi-structured interviews with adults with Persistent Mental Illness (PMI). Their findings reveal that well-being is not merely the absence of disease, but also having balance in one’s life, experiencing a sense of harmony, and being in control of spiritual, cognitive, emotional, and physical realms. This study also reveals the centrality of spiritualism to those who suffer from PMI and the importance of a healthy context (i.e., environment) in maintaining their overall well-being. Similarly, a study conducted by Panelli & Tipa (2007) reports that having a sense of place is important for the Maori in New Zealand, where well-being is viewed not as an individual state, but in terms of its relation to one’s culture and environment. The findings from the study demonstrate that the Maori in New
Zealand cannot experience well-being apart from their environment, as their attachment to tribal lands is integral in “determining tribal identity” (p. 456). These studies have particular relevance to studying well-being in the Yukon Flats, as many of the tribal members in the Yukon Flats continue to live a hunting and gathering lifestyle. Thus, I hypothesize that they rely on their relationship with the land not only to provide sustenance, but also to increase their well-being.

There appears to be a multidimensional view of well-being in the Yukon Flats, similar to the findings of Yurkovich & Lattergrass ((2008) and Panelli & Tipa (2007). However this multidimensional view has yet to be empirically established. In this study, I intend to specify more clearly the meaning of well-being in the Yukon Flats.

Given that we know participation in governance over CPRs (Acheson, 2003; Ostrom, 1990) leads to long-enduring CPRs, a participatory development approach leads to projects that are desired and useful for the communities (Eversole, 2003) and that tribal citizen participation in tribal governance leads to thriving tribal economies (Jorgensen, 2007), I hypothesized that there is indeed a positive relationship between participation in governance by tribal members in the Yukon Flats, both informal and formal, and individual and community well-being. I initially hypothesized that this is not a direct relationship, but rather the specific mechanisms by which the relationships exist are through feelings of empowerment and effectively managed resources. The theoretical statement outlined in Figure 3 illustrates my initial hypotheses. As illustrated, participation in formal governance, such as voting in tribal elections, leads to feelings of empowerment, which in turn leads to individual and community well-being. Participation in informal governance, such as consultation with elders or following traditional laws, leads to effectively managed resources, which in turn leads to individual and community well-being. It was hypothesized that individual and community well-being are measured by increased
economic development, increased educational attainment, and increased cultural knowledge and practices.

Figure 3: Theoretical Statement
Chapter IV

Research Methodology

In this chapter, I summarize the reasoning and choices for research methods. Every inquiry should be designed to address, in the most effective way possible, the issues and context in which it is undertaken. The methods here are designed for better understanding of participation in governance and well-being among the Alaska Native people of the Yukon Flats.

Research Questions

Based on the preceding explanation of my research topic and context, the aims of this study are two-fold:

- To understand the conceptual definitions of governance and well-being, as defined by the participants in this study.
- To understand if a relationship between governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats exists and through what mechanisms this relationship exists.

Specific research questions developed to achieve these study aims are:

1. What does well-being mean to tribal members from the Yukon Flats? For the individual? For the community?
2. What aspects of well-being are most important?
3. What does governance mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?
4. What formal and informal governance structures exist in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats?
5. What aspects of governance are most important?
6. In what ways do tribal members in the Yukon Flats participate in governance?
7. Does a tribal member’s participation in governance affect his or her individual well-being?

8. Does a tribal member’s participation in governance affect community well-being?

**Research Design**

To address the research questions above, I have used intensive qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and photographs. The methods are applied in community case examples where topics and themes have been explored over time and in detail.

Needless to say, ordinary people are not scholars with their heads full of concepts and variables. They think more in terms of stories. This may be especially true among American Indian and Alaska Native peoples, where stories are a primary vehicle for understanding, reflection, and wisdom. Historically the pattern of research in Indigenous communities has consisted of outside researchers implementing a top-down approach to research, resulting in “analysis and diagnosis by external observers with minimal or no input of local perspectives” (Simonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2185). This approach has resulted in research that has at times “disempowered communities, imposed stereotypes that reinforced internalized racism, and conducted research that benefited the careers of individual researchers, or even science at large, but brought no tangible benefit to the communities struggling with significant health disparities” (Simonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2185). Many Indigenous scholars have led the charge of reversing this paradigm, calling for the decolonization of the research process (Deloria, 1969 & Smith, 1999). Part of the decolonization requires that Indigenous scholars lead Indigenous research and that “Indigenous voices and epistemologies are in the center of the research process” (Simonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2185). This requires that scholars honor, respect, and
utilize Indigenous protocols and place Indigenous values at the center of research (Smith, 1999). This decolonization process is reinforced by a community-based research approach, where Indigenous communities are at the helm of identifying and leading research conducted in Indigenous communities as well as “advances the development of culturally centered research designs and public health interventions, as well as the integration of Indigenous research methods” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Simonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2186).

In an effort to decolonize the research process and adhere to traditional values and protocols in the Yukon Flats I remained intentional in my actions from the beginning of the research process throughout the life of the research and during follow-up. There is no formal IRB process for conducting research in the Yukon Flats, so to garner permission to conduct research in the Yukon Flats I started out by researching out to the Executive Director of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG), who directed me to write a letter to the Board of Directors explaining the research I wanted to conduct in the Yukon Flats. The CATG Board of Directors is made up of the chiefs from each of the villages in the Yukon Flats and they unanimously approved my research. However, prior to conducting research I decided to reach out to each individual, tribal government in each community. I wanted to do this to recognize and honor tribal sovereignty. I called each tribal office or met with the Executive Director of the tribe upon my first visit to each community, to let them know I was approved to conduct research and offered to speak in front of the council if need be. The ED of each tribe relayed the message to the tribal or village council, who were aware, given I had first sought CATG approval, and each council approved me to start collecting data. I also made sure to visit with the elders in the communities, to inform them of my research and gather suggestions they had. My experience growing up within the culture made me aware that elders are important
leaders and provide valuable input into projects and bless community events, including research. The process was not formal; in fact it was informal how I was approved to conduct research. I believe because I not only garnered permission from each of the chiefs of the villages but also approached the tribal council and elders for approval I was trusted and encouraged to begin research. By being transparent and honoring tribal sovereignty I believe the tribe trusted me to move forward. In the future I think it is important that research protocols be developed for the Yukon Flats, so that when researchers want to conduct research in the region they have a set of guidelines or protocols to follow, the communities are aware that research is being conducted in their community, and a respectful relationship between the researcher and participants/communities can be developed. Many tribes in the U.S. do have very well developed, formal research protocols and they must be followed by the researcher. Each tribe in the U.S. is also unique and because of their inherent sovereignty they decide whom, when, and how research can be conducted given their specific context and style of governance.

Utilizing the Indigenous protocol of storytelling is an important way for Indigenous knowledge to be relayed, among other methods (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008; Deloria, 1999; & Smith, 1999). This research applied semi-structured interviews as an Indigenous protocol that encouraged participants to share stories based on their experience in the subject matter, and most Indigenous communities and peoples are very familiar with this format of communication. In the present case, collecting participants’ stories or perceptions of a particular phenomenon, in this case well-being, governance, and the relationship between these concepts are culturally appropriate and very comfortable in Alaska Native communities. Engaging in these methodologies allowed for a natural progression of inquiry to occur, whereby I was able to ask questions of the participants in an effort to answer the research questions of this study and for the
participants to answer the question in the manner they felt appropriate. At times this led to multiple visits with participants, hours of storytelling, including sharing personal information, history of families and community, and answers to the interview questions. These extended periods of time were necessary to build a comfortable atmosphere and reciprocal relationship whereby information could be exchanged. Additionally, by engaging in the qualitative methods of interviewing, observations, and institutional research I was able to reach a holistic understanding of how the concepts of well-being and governance are defined and experienced by tribal members in the Yukon Flats as well as the relationship between these concepts. Quantitative measures would not be able to capture these same holistic understandings.

For example, direct and participant-observation were utilized as a method in the study to capture non-verbal and nuanced examples of governance and well-being, as well as to understand better the relationship between participation in governance and well-being. For observation to be successful, the researcher has to become an accepted part of the community. Therefore, observations were carried out over many weeks, with the researcher fitting into the community context. Being a Native of the region has made this much more possible. Another example was documenting traditional values in action, which were documented through answers to interview questions and also through observations.

Lastly, photographs of the participants in their communities were used to capture the context and human actions that inform these topics. These photographs were reviewed to triangulate the interview and observational findings.

Regarding case examples, the research was conducted in three different communities over the course of a several months. The three communities provided variation in context and participants and the extended time periods in residence enabled particular actions and events to
rise to the surface in terms of frequency and importance.

Overall, the methods used are appropriate because they yield both descriptive and explanatory understanding, and “emphasize the study phenomena within its real-world context” (Yin, 2012, p. 5). Due to relatively small sample size, qualitative methods do not enable widespread generalization. However, there is a positive trade-off. The great challenge and potential in using intensive qualitative methods is in reaching a deeper level of insight and understanding.

**Survey Instrument and Use**

The semi-structured interviews started with either the participant reading the consent form or the researcher reading the consent out loud to the participant and then asking for written consent. Questions were entertained and answered at any time prior to the start of the interview, during the interview, as well as after the interview.

The interview followed a set of semi-structured interview questions, which were created to inform the larger research questions in the study. These interview questions served only as a guide. Some of the participants would tell longer stories, which initially did not seem to answer the question asked. However, after the interviews were finished and the recorded interviews reviewed, answers to the questions were found embedded in some of these longer stories. This was the case with many answers of the older participants. Also, if a participant got off topic, but the topic related to some aspect of the overall study, the researcher used this as an opportunity to explore topic more in-depth. In this manner, some of the interviews did not flow in the expected order, but were more cyclical in nature, coming back to themes the participants wanted to emphasize. After a few instances of this experience, I decided that directing the participant back to certain questions repetitively would be both unproductive and disrespectful. When the
participant was intent on telling the story she/he wanted to share, or answering the question she/he wanted to answer, the interview went in that direction. One of the participants acknowledged that he appeared to not be answering the question, but went on with sharing his story. At the end of the study, this proved to be informative and productive.

**Measurement**

**Well-being.** Definitions of well-being were examined at the individual and community level. Participants were asked: (1) what does individual well-being mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats? (2) What does community well-being mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats? From the participant initial responses and subsequent follow-ups, definitions of individual and community well-being emerged. The data from interviews were then compared to the observations, photographs, and institutional data.

**Governance.** Definitions of formal and informal governance were explored through the semi-structured interviews and observations. Participants were asked about the ways in which they participate in formal and informal governance. Additionally, participants were asked whether or not they believed participation in governance, formal or informal, affected individual or community well-being. These questions were multi-layered and somewhat confusing to the participants. Particularly, the questions on whether participation in formal or informal governance affected well-being confused some participants. The participants who were confused often equated “affect” as a bad thing—as in reducing well-being—rather than to mean any impact in an objective sense.

**Relationship between governance and well-being.** I examined the relationship between governance and well-being in the responses by participants in answering questions that addressed this relationship. Also, examination of the data from the question on importance of hunting,
fishing, and gathering to well-being contributed to better understanding of this relationship. Hunting, fishing, and gathering are important aspects of daily life for the Gwich’in and Koyukon people, and formal governance of hunting, fishing and gathering rights is overseen by state and federal systems, with little or no tribal input. There are, however, traditional laws in place in each community that guide life and ensure community members are practicing their traditional values when hunting, fishing, and gathering. This study would refer to these traditional laws as informal governance, but they are in actuality the ways in which communities formally governed for centuries.

**Sampling**

The communities in the sampling frame were the eight communities in the Yukon Flats. Purposive sampling was used in selecting three communities. There were 21 participants interviewed, eight women and thirteen men. The age ranged from early twenties to early eighties. All participants were leaders in some capacity, whether formal or informal. It should be noted that many of the participants in the study were in formal leadership positions or had been at one time, though not all of them had been. These participants were appropriate for the study because the research questions require some level of knowledge regarding the different governance systems that exist in tribal communities and if and how they are associated with individual and community well-being.

A representative sample was endeavored, however some women did not want to be interviewed, whereas most men said yes. I worked closely with staff in the Natural Resources Department of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG), which is the entity responsible for research conducted in the Yukon Flats, to identify communities and possible participants. Criteria for inclusion [for communities] were geographic location, population size,
established leadership (both formal and informal) in each community, and community history. Each community was distinct, yet similarities across the communities emerged through the research.

**Participants.** Initially, I planned to recruit certain participants identified with partners at CATG by first sending them an informational letter, and then following up with a phone call. However, research partners advised that it would be best to start by visiting each village and talking with potential participants face-to-face. Therefore, I visited each village. The first trip to each village I used to get acquainted with the village, the people, and contextual circumstances. I also used most of the initial visit to meet with the tribal government if need be, get to know the staff at the tribal offices, who served as the informal hosts in the villages, and also to meet potential participants. The first visits were also used to make observations, answer community members’ questions, and reacquaint myself with village life. While most participants wanted to talk casually first to become acquainted, some were willing to be interviewed during the first visit to each village. During initial visits, participants would either state that they were willing to be interviewed right then and there or would ask to conduct the interview at a different time. It was important for me to have a flexible schedule and informal protocol because it is culturally appropriate in American Indian and Alaska Native communities to talk first before asking someone to do something. Consequently, this required two visits to each of the villages where research was conducted--one visit to get acquainted with the village and participants, and the second visit to interview those who had not yet been interviewed, and follow-up with those had been interviewed.
**Data Collection**

**Semi-structured interviews.** For this study there were eight research questions, however certain questions were broken-up into two, separate questions for clarity (e.g. Question 1: What does well-being mean to tribal members from the Yukon Flats? For the individual? For the community), so overall a set of eleven questions was asked of each participant (see Appendix 1). To ensure the questions were analyzed to the fullest extent possible, revealing comprehensive findings, different methods were used to analyze each question. Each research question, with the corresponding method used to analyze the question, is outlined in Table 3.

Based on these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 to 8 individuals from each community, with varying characteristics, backgrounds, and levels of experience in governance. The participants had varying levels of education as well. Most participants had a high school diploma, while a few did not, and one participant had a college education. There was also diversity within how much traditional knowledge and education participants had: Approximately half of the participants (mainly elders) spoke their language as well as had lived out on the land at some point in their life.

Criteria for consideration included: type (i.e. formal or informal) and level of experience in governance (i.e. many years of experience or few years of experience), gender, and age. These criteria as well as potential participants was decided on by the research team and I relied heavily on my partners’ expertise in deciding who from which community, as they had worked with the different communities and conducted research in the Yukon Flats over many years. My research partners also suggested I remain open to interviewing people we had not thought of to interview during our initial brainstorming session, suggesting that the each tribe and participants might recommend someone to interview that we had not thought of and that would be appropriate.
This openness was especially important as it ensured some objectivity (i.e. not just choosing those we knew or felt comfortable with) and also was acknowledging the fact that we collectively did not know everyone in each community and so it was important to remain open to interviewing someone we had not originally identified, given they met the above outlined criteria.

Sets of probing questions were developed to use when participants needed clarification or help understanding the research questions (see Appendix 1). Again, I as the researcher and the CATG Natural Resources department collaborated to identify potential participants who fit the specific criteria and made a list, including extra names, should individuals on the list not want to be interviewed. Those individuals who had previously identified themselves as willing to be interviewed were considered and their names written down as well. Thus, the overall sample for the study covered a wide range of participants, with varied levels of experience with governance, both formal and informal. Key informants also contributed to the study with observations and knowledge about their communities, which they willingly shared with me. These key informants were identified both by the research team and also other participants in the study. For example, one participant from a smaller community who worked for her tribe told me I should speak with a certain elder in the community as he had forty plus years in the topic area and knew the historical timeline of the community as well as how formal and informal governance operated in the community. This elder had also been identified by the research team as an important person to interview due to his vast experience and knowledge in the subject area. However, there were key informants that were not originally identified by the research team that were identified by other participants. Some of these individuals were interviewed and others were not, based on a host of factors, including: they did or did not meet the criteria for research,
there was or was not enough interviews already conducted from a specific community, there was or was not a diverse sample a participants interviewed from a specific community, they did or did not want to be interviewed, and there was or was not time to conduct research.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semi-Structured Interview Questions</th>
<th>Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does individual well-being mean to you as a tribal member in the Yukon Flats?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Photographs, and Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does community well-being mean to you as a tribal member in the Yukon Flats?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Photographs, and Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the ability to hunt, fish, and gather [sometimes referred to as ‘subsistence’] in the Yukon Flats important to well-being?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Observations, Photographs and Institutional Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does [formal] governance mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Observations, and Institutional Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are examples of community members participating in [formal] governance?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does participation in [formal] governance affect individual well-being</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does participation in [formal] governance affect community well-being?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews and Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does informal governance mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways do tribal members in the Yukon Flats participate in informal governance?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews, Photographs, and Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does a tribal members’ participation in informal governance affect individual well-being?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews and Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does a tribal members’ participation in informal governance affect community well-being?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews and Observations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observations. Observations were used as a research method. These included direct observation of the daily activities in the communities, observations of the environment, observations of the participants in different environments, and participant-observations, where I (the researcher) engaged in activities when invited. These daily observations helped to build a more comprehensive understanding of daily life and activities related to governance and well-being.

Observations both strengthened and specified content from interviews. Sometimes, life in the village can best be described by what people are actually doing. Consider, for example research question #3: “Is the ability to hunt, fish, and gather [sometimes referred to as ‘subsistence’] in the Yukon Flats important to well-being?” The answer to this question relied not just on the interview, but also on observations of hunting and fishing and other activities in the daily life of each of the communities.

Photographs. In addition to semi-structured interviews and observations, photographs were taken to capture daily life in each of the communities. This data helped to create a holistic picture of what constitutes governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats as well as the relationship between these concepts. The photographs also helped to bring to life and triangulate content gathered from the interviews and observations. This triangulation was conducted during the analysis phase of the research. The photographs captured people engaging in daily activities or daily life: For example, on any given day people were out on the land gathering wood and/or water or visiting friends and relatives. These activities, seemingly simple, exemplified informal governance (i.e., traditional values in action). These activities were not always explained in the interviews, as daily life and activities were not always discussed, but observing them and also taking photographs helped to create the holistic understanding of the topics and answers to the
research questions. Primarily photographs of the participants were captured; however, if there was a community event, especially if it portrayed activities centered on well-being and governance, these photos were captured as well. Permission was always granted prior to taking photographs.

**Institutional assessment.** I gathered institutional documents in an effort to gather supporting documentation, not only to answer the research questions, but also to frame a historical timeline. These documents illuminated Gwich’in and Koyukon history, as well as relationships between governance and well-being, and the key concepts embedded within constructs.

**Researcher Positionality**

I would be remised if I did not acknowledge my own positionality within this research process. Positionality reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). I am a Gwich’in woman from Ft. Yukon, Alaska, which is one of the communities in the Yukon Flats. As a Gwich’in woman raised in Ft. Yukon for part of my life and returning there every year since becoming an adult, I have a unique understanding of the history, strengths, and weaknesses of my own community and more general understandings of these same phenomenon of the other communities in my home region. While these statements are true, it is also true that I do not live in my home community or region, but instead live in the closest city to this region, Fairbanks. I therefore am not privy to the occurrences, politics, and relationships that exist and occur on a daily basis in the communities in the Yukon Flats. Accordingly, some people consider me an outsider in my home region, though I have not felt any negative repercussions from being considered such. Most people from my
community and region readily welcome me home, invite me to visit, and share what they have with me.

In the empirical literature, especially in the fields of sociology and anthropology, the insider-outsider position is acknowledged as important and written about as it pertains to the research process. Outsiders are generalized as being more objective or neutral whereas what insiders lack in objectivity they make up for in fuller understandings of community nuances and ability to connect with community members who are potential participants in research studies (Muhammad et al., 2015). More recently in the empirical literature it is acknowledged that as researchers we often come to the research with multiple identities (e.g., Indigenous-insider or Indigenous-outsider) and our relationships with communities and their belief systems are not black and white, but rather multi-dimensional (Muhammad et al., 2015). Consequently, I worked hard to remain open, humble and reflexive at all times, examining my own positionality within the communities and the research itself. Trimble and Mohatt (2006) state that, “reflexivity on the part of the researcher is the ability of the researcher to continually think about what he or she is feeling, thinking, and doing, and with humility” (p. 330). I was especially conscious of this given the tumultuous history and horrific experiences American Indian, Alaska Native, and Indigenous people across the world had experienced at the hands of researchers. Brayboy & Deyhle (2000) shared, “The process of gathering stories itself, in American Indian Communities, is particularly political because of the history of research in in the lives of Indigenous peoples” (p.163). An experience that remained salient in my mind as I engaged in the research process was being approached by an individual in one of the communities I was conducting research in and asked me to not write bad and untrue things about the community, as
had been done many times before by researchers. This encounter was consistently in the back of my mind and I reflected on it, its meaning, and the impact on my behavior and the research itself.

I also considered and reflected on the potential positive aspects or strengths of conducting research in my own community; the fact that I was aware of cultural values and protocol that exist among my Gwich’in and also Koyukon people, an awareness of the deep connection people had to the land and how it impacted their sense of place, a general understanding of the history of each community, and knowledge of the Indigenous epistemologies that guide daily life in the communities in the Yukon Flats. These strengths gave me a heightened awareness of when it was appropriate to dig deeper into the research and when to pull back. Because of my insider status and because of these strengths I felt that the participants felt comfortable with me and as a result felt comfortable being honest with me, scolding me, and at times helping to guide the research (e.g., telling me when the best times were to collect data).

During the course of research in the Yukon Flats I felt the benefits of being an insider in the region, as everyone either knew my mom, my partner, my extended family, or me. This opened the door for meaningful relationships to be established, based on kinship and shared culture. I genuinely felt like all of the participants in the study wanted me to do well, because they felt connected to my family or I in some way. Therefore, I did not feel I had to work hard to build rapport, yet I still purposefully set aside large blocks of time to build rapport and allow space for the participants to ask questions and get to know me better. Specifically, I wanted the participants to understand I was in the community as a researcher, conducting research, and not simply visiting. While this seems obvious, as I had to work with the tribe(s) and garner consent prior to conducting research, I had to revisit this conversation with people in the community throughout the process as they shared with me various aspects of their lives. This was important,
because I was recording observations and taking pictures. Also, as an insider I constantly had to remind myself to remain objective and record what I observed and heard in the interviews and not what I assumed the participants were saying based on my own experience. Again, it was a reflexive process.

On the contrary, despite my insider status I will still viewed as an outsider by some; especially those from other communities other than my own. There were community members and participants who felt comfortable asking me personal questions, questions about my research, and wanted to know who I planned to talk to during the course of research. I did not take offense to their questions, but rather I acknowledged that these communities and community members had experienced a lot of research being conducted “on them” and it was a good thing that they were questioning who I was, my motives, and the research itself.

Overall, I think the continued process of reflexivity and asking myself questions such as: “Who am I in this process?” “Am I being too friendly?” “Am I sharing too much?” “Should I be taking notes?” “Is observation appropriate at this time?” was useful. The process allowed me to remain aware, objective, and also open to learning from the participants and the process

**Data Analysis**

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed to answer the eight research questions. A structured interview guide with prompts was created to answer the overall research questions. While there are eight overall research questions, there were eleven research questions created in the questionnaire guide, as some questions were broken up into separate questions so not to confuse the participants. Results were then triangulated using observations, photographs, and institutional documentation. This triangulation of data from multiple sources strengthened the analysis of interview data (Patton, 2002).
Applied thematic analysis was used to analyze the semi-structured interviews. This proved to be an effective method for “presenting the stories and experience voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 16). Applied thematic analysis enables the researcher to search for themes that emerge as important to the description of concepts or phenomena and to the key questions in the study (Daly, Kellehear, & Glikhsman, 1997) through a process of “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). Additionally, applied thematic analysis is well suited for team research (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012), and my study relied on numerous partnerships. The iterative and interactive nature of the research, during data collection, analysis, and also during the writing phase is characteristic of grounded theory. Grounded theory was first defined by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and emphasized studying phenomenon in the field while engaging in data collection and analysis through an iterative and comparative processes. According to Guest, MacQueen, & Namey (2012) grounded theory “is a set of inductive and iterative techniques designed to identify categories and concepts with the text that are then linked to formal theoretical models” (p. 12). However, because I came into the research process with a hypothesized theoretical model (see Figure 3) and during the course of research the research questions never changed the study did not fully represent grounded theory. From the data the theoretical statement/model of Alaska Native well-being was refined and specified. The model indicates that well-being is contingent on the ability to practice one’s traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering lifestyle (See Figure 9).

To begin the analysis process I undertook a review of all of the transcripts from the recorded interviews. This review was iterative to ensure accurate understanding of key themes as they emerged from the interviews. Once the interviews and observations were examined, I
created a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet wherein the interview questions were listed in one cell, the key theme that emerged in response to the question listed in the next cell, and then supporting content (i.e., quotes) listed underneath the cell with a particular theme. Exploratory [content-driven] data analysis was used to identify key words, themes, and/or ideas identified in the data. These themes were compared to observational data and photographs to ensure validity. This helped to further refine the overall themes. Simultaneously, one of the research partners from CATG came up with a list of her own themes through exploratory data analysis. After several iterations, the research team collectively met several times to review the respective lists and worked to build a final list of emerging overall themes and content. The analysis strategy is diagramed in Figure 4. These themes and content were used to the theoretical statement/model of Alaska Native well-being.

**Figure 4: Analysis Strategy**
Chapter V

Results

In this chapter, I describe results of the study of governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats. The goal is to understand better the key constructs of governance and well-being as perceived by tribal members in the Yukon Flats and to describe relationships between these key constructs. The reasons understanding these concepts is important are American Indian and Alaska Native communities collectively experience immense challenges including disproportionate poverty and hardship. They also experience some of the highest rates of health problems, including depression, cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, and suicide (Anderson & Smith, 2003; Espey et al., 2014; Landen, Roeber, Naimi, Nielsen, & Sewell, 2014).

Yet, American Indian and Alaska Native communities also exemplify well-being. These same communities that experience challenges and hardship also are communities that exhibit individual and community well-being by maintaining culture practices and values, revitalizing traditions, taking care of one another, and asserting their tribal sovereignty. Yet, the empirical documentation of well-being in American Indian and Alaska Native communities is not as well documented as the challenges and hardships. Furthermore, limited research conducted in Indigenous communities is actually conducted by Indigenous scholars, though this trend is rapidly changing. There is a continued need for Indigenous led research that is grounded in Indigenous values, emphasizes a Community-Based Participatory Approach (CBPR), and contributes to the movement of decolonizing research. Lastly, this research aims to create culturally grounded definitions of governance and well-being, as perceived and defined by Indigenous people, and also explains if and to what extent a relationship exists between these concepts. The answers to these research questions can provide important understandings and
solutions to the vexing challenges facing Indigenous communities and create culturally-grounded solutions that hold legitimacy and buy-in in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. These approaches are in contrast to the status quo, which for decades has implemented programs to achieve health and well-being in Indigenous communities with little effectiveness (Rasmus, Charles, & Mohatt, 2014; Waldram, 2004; and Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Time is of the essence; Indigenous lives are not expendable and the exponential rate at which American Indian and Alaska Native people are experiencing poverty, hardship, and even death is appalling and warrants immediate action.

As applied social science, the purposes of this study are both to increase understanding and to inform positive action going forward. This is an enormously challenging task, and study results are at the heart of effort.

Defining Well-Being

To develop a more holistic, Indigenous definition of well-being as perceived by Gwich’in and Koyukon tribal members in the Yukon Flats, I asked the participants the following questions: (1) What does individual well-being mean to you? and (2) what does community well-being mean to you? The following section is a discussion of the prominent themes that emerged from the participants’ responses to these questions. I refer to these themes as “elements” of well-being, as these elements are parts of the whole that constitutes well-being rather than individual themes.

Individual Well-being

The elements essential to individual well-being in the Yukon Flats center around respect for oneself. Embedded within respect for oneself are several elements: sobriety, staying busy, spirituality, passing on culture/traditions, and developing a strong identity as a Native person.
(See Figure 5). In the following section I detail each element of respecting oneself.

**Figure 5: Elements of Individual Well-Being.**

![Elements of Individual Well-Being Diagram]

**Respect for oneself.** Participants discussed many factors important to having respect for oneself or “taking care of oneself”, as many put it. These factors or subthemes included eating healthy foods, staying busy, and being responsible and/or accomplishing goals, among other things. Respect for oneself allowed other positive things to happen, such as living a sober life, practicing spirituality, and developing a strong identity as a Native person.

**Eating healthy foods.** Embedded in the element of respect for oneself was eating healthy foods, especially traditional Native foods. One participant who worked in health care stated, “Making the right choices. Not, not choosing these store bought foods that they eat that our
bodies are not used to, you know? Try to go all natural, being the lean mean fighting machines that we used to be a long time ago.” Another participant who worked for her tribe and grew-up spending time out on the land hunting and fishing talked about individual well being as “eating food, eating healthy foods is good foods, especially Native foods; moose meat, fish, ducks, muskrat, porcupine. I got a porcupine in the fridge right now for lunch.”

Another participant who was a single parent and also a tribal leader, reflected on the importance of eating healthy and staying busy. He stated:

I try to eat good and I try do a lot of work, because I am a workaholic and I just keep going in order to keep myself healthy because all the Native food that we got is pretty healthy for us too because you know drinking a lot of water and stuff like that to keep myself healthy and staying away from alcohol and stuff like that because I don’t want my kids to see this, you know.

It should be noted that, although many participants described eating healthy foods as an aspect of respecting oneself, observations revealed that a lot of pop, energy drinks, candy, and chips were consumed, especially among children and young adults. Yet, overall families cook and eat a lot of traditional foods for main meals (e.g., fish, caribou and moose meat).

**Achieving goals.** Others spoke of individual well-being as being responsible and doing what it is you set out to do. For instance, one of the participants stated, “You know, if you have a goal to accomplish that goal…if for some reason something gets in the way, whatever it may be, you know, it’s usually from within.” This participant shared that he wanted to learn to trap and live out in the woods when he was a young boy, so he took it upon himself to learn as much as he could from his dad, his uncles, and other men willing to teach him. He said that doing so helped him to achieve his goal and also gave him satisfaction and pride because he accomplished
a goal he had set for himself. He also shared that he had accomplished a lot of his goals in life and so there was not much more he needed to do before he died. Other participants did not talk about or use the words “setting goals” but most of the participants talked about staying busy and living in a way that demonstrated your ability to accomplish whatever you set out to do.

Examples would be hunting until you got a moose or caribou (within the bounds of the laws) and not giving up, checking your fishnet or fishwheel everyday, making sure you had enough wood for winter, making sure you checked on your parents, grandparents, or other elders in the community on a daily basis, and daily chores (e.g., getting water, checking mail, and picking kids up from school). In this manner accomplishing goals and daily tasks demonstrated respect for oneself.

Having respect for oneself was at the center of individual well-being and by having respect for oneself other elements of individual well-being emerged, as outlined in Figure 5. These elements of individual well-being are sobriety, spirituality, passing on culture/traditions, staying busy and developing a strong identity as a Native person.

**Sobriety.** Sobriety was identified as a key element of individual well-being and was mentioned by most of the participants, regardless of age and geographic location. This element emerged when asked the question, “What does individual well-being mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?” Many participants answered the question by also talking about the barriers to well-being. For example, an elder shared, “Change of life is really hurting us now anyway all over the state of Alaska anyway; everywhere with addictions.” Another elder spoke about the problems with drugs and alcohol and his worry for the future. He stated, “We don’t know what’s going to happen, because there’s so many drug, and all the problems they get to it. It’s bad, really bad.” He continued to talk about how it is a problem that needs to be addressed region-wide. He
stated, “I don’t want to talk bad about them, you know. They try their best, but the drug is stronger than them [younger generations].” A younger participant in the study talked about individual well-being as sobriety and leading a drug-free and sober life. He stated, “Individual well-being, well it’s, it could mean, that can definitely mean a lot of things. It could mean, right off the bat I think about sobriety, drug free, drug and alcohol free.” These sentiments were echoed throughout the study. Similarly, even in informal conversations, some participants would brainstorm ways to make their community stronger in an effort to increase well-being and almost every conversation included ideas about how to promote sobriety. Observations in the study also showed that those individuals who engaged in traditional activities, volunteered for various activities in their community, either abstained from alcohol, or used it sparingly. The participants shared various reasons for choosing to abstain from drugs and alcohol, which included personal reasons, family, work, and wanting to set an example for others.

**Staying busy.** Another theme related to individual well-being was staying busy and taking care of oneself and one’s family. Daily life in the village is different in comparison to living in larger cities. Daily life can be consumed with meeting basic needs, especially if you live in a village with limited or no running water and heating oil. Daily life would require participants and others in the community to go out and collect these items; these activities kept people busy, especially if they were also collecting basic necessities for others. The older people in the communities were observed to engage in these daily activities as well. One of the elders stated:

Nowadays people complain and believe in sickness too much. I hear that. I’m not say I’m the best but I, the way I do is even big scratch right here [points], I’ve got a scar from here to here, I’ve got plate in my neck; I can’t sit down and just pretend like sick.
No, I’ve got to do something. I just keep on doing it you know. Reason I do that so the people could see me doing it. So that’s why I try to do something all the time here.

Staying busy was especially important to this participant, as he had experienced some injuries in his life, which caused some pain in his neck and elsewhere in his body. As reflected in the quote, it was of utmost importance for him to constantly remain busy for his own health and physical well-being, in addition to setting an example for others. This element of individual well-being resonated with other older participants, who also shared reflections on how life “used to be” and how everyone was always busy. Staying busy was not a choice in earlier times, but a matter of survival, as modern conveniences such as water and permanent homes were not available. Another elder participant from the same village reflected on how life used to be, and stated, “Everyday people work, you know how hard it is, work for food and whatever they need, every day they work.” Interestingly, when interviewing older people who had lived a more traditional life growing up, upon asking them to define well-being and governance, they would often refer back to the way things used to be in the past.

The observations in this study also confirmed staying busy as an important element of individual well-being as many participants in this study, as well as other community members in each community, could be observed hauling water, washing clothes, tending to gardens, cutting meat, running children to school, and splitting wood all within a day’s time. One participant, who lived in a central location in town could be observed on a daily basis in his coveralls, cutting up meat, cleaning out his cache, taking a ride to look for traditional foods, and cooking food on the stove to feed his visitors and grandchildren. There were not many moments when he was sitting down, other than the time during the interview and in the evenings before going to bed.

These reflections and observations can be compared and contrasted to current times,
where life is much easier for current generations and not as physically demanding as compared to the way those who are 60 years old and older experienced. Also, the communities in the Yukon Flats deal more with a cash economy than when the elders were growing up. Each community in the Yukon Flats, depending on its size, can range from having a few permanent jobs in the smaller communities to having a variety of permanent jobs in the larger hub. These permanent jobs employ some of the population in each community; however, a majority of the economic income that supports peoples’ livelihoods comes from seasonal work and transfers from the federal and state government, such as Energy Assistance (to offset the cost of electricity), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), or General Assistance (GA). One elder, who was reflecting on the changes from a self-sufficient economy to a cash economy, stated:

The way I should say it is, people more look for making money in every day activities. And when I group up, we did we there’s not much money anyway in the community, so all we do is subsistence life year round; every year, same thing; that’s uh…our main nutrition is caribou and moose, and people been using it every day. And it’s not much problem with that food anyway; sharing and everything. But when the money was taking over and they can’t do anything without getting paid. They’re more looking for money every day whatever they do. It never happened before, in my time anyway, even before; so that’s quite a change since last 30 years. Now that’s the reason we have a lot of problems now in every community; they got to have money for whatever they want and all that money is a good, just like, the way I explained it to them is, we used to have a lot of meat in the cache, dry meat, fish and everything.

This elder, as well as other elders, felt that this move from a self-sufficient society to a
more dependent, cash driven community inhibited well-being, as money motivated people to capitalize on opportunities to engage in more self-interested pursuits (e.g., jobs out of the village, more time on technology, substances, and other material items). This traditional, self-sufficient livelihood still exists through hunting, fishing, and gathering; however, that too takes cash, as people have moved from traditional transportation and tools for hunting to more modern technology, all of which costs money. Also, while most young people in the village do know how to and still do hunt, fish, and gather, these same young people are also interested in many of the same things youth everywhere are interested: technology, television, socializing, and sports. From the elders’ viewpoint, this is a marked change from when the elders were growing up.

Staying busy is more of an option in current times versus a necessity, as permanent villages and homes as well as jobs and the aforementioned government subsidies have made life easier. Though most families must and still do engage in subsistence activities, including hunting, fishing, hauling wood and water in order to offset the expenses of living in the village, such as fuel and electricity costs.

**Spirituality.** Spirituality was evident in everyday life in each of the three participating communities. This element of well-being guided all activities, especially as they related to culture, such as hunting, fishing and gathering or “being out on the land.” Engaging in these traditional activities is considered ceremony; from the way people spoke about hunting and fishing to reliance on prayer to guide all efforts and events. For example, the actual hunt, the putting away of one’s catch in the most respectful way possible, and sharing one’s catch. When people go out to hunt, instead of stating, “I am going to hunt moose or go moose hunting,” many of the participants would refer to hunting and fishing by saying, “I am going to go look around” or “I am going to go out in the boat and check the net.” These phrases, seemingly simple,
represent a fundamental philosophy of how to conduct oneself out on the land and in relationship with the land and animals that is anything but simple. These activities are recognized as spiritual, as participants have awareness that these activities sustained their ancestors, grandparents, and parents during times of need and of celebration. Participants found it difficult to express this spiritual relationship, as it seemed to be intertwined with the way things just are: yet through observation it was very evident that spirituality played a larger role in participants’ lives. In addition to traditional hunting, fishing and gathering activities, prayer was infused into daily life. At the start of every meeting or gathering a prayer was offered. There were spiritual leaders [identified as such by community members] at every important gathering. People in the study and in the community regularly spoke of having faith in God, the Creator and/or the Higher Power to help them in a variety of situations or circumstances, including hunting, fishing, and gathering.

One participant in the study was very involved in the Episcopal Church, had a strong faith in God and his contributions to the church and church activities were very important to his individual well-being. He spoke of his faith and God in almost every interaction we had and was observed to pray multiple times a day. He spoke about how happy it made him to contribute towards helping to bead the alter cloth and also lead church services when there was no priest to do so. At the start of the interview, he spoke in his Gwich’in language then shared, “And to have a healthy lifestyle I believe we have to always thank God and remember God and Jesus name and give him all the thanksgiving”.

Another participant from a different village stated, “I pray all the time; we have to pray all the time you know. This is like, this is you/our cultures.” These testimonies were not surprising as the Episcopal church arrived in this region of Alaska in 1861 and has had a strong
presence and influence ever since. Many people from the region, as well as researchers and historians, believe that the reason Christianity took such a strong foothold in their respective communities is that the principles that underpin Christianity mirror the values practiced within the culture.

Other participants in the study spoke of spiritual guidance and how that was a necessity of well-being. One participant shared, “Well, like last Sunday we talked about that spiritual guidance and that’s what was really strong among the people a long time ago.” He went on to share that spirituality was reinforced in a different way with the arrival of missionaries in the 1800s. He talked about how the missionaries “spread the words among the people, the good news, and people really been touched spiritually and then they all living like that for many, many years in the state of Alaska.” Again, this participant explained that this connection to the church was very natural for the Native people in the Yukon Flats as the biblical teachings mirrored their spiritual and cultural teachings, as well as their traditional values that have been passed down for generations.

Spirituality was observed to be an important element of individual well-being. For the participants, all who held some form of a leadership role within their community relied heavily on spirituality, whether orthodox religion (i.e. Christianity) or their own traditional beliefs. The Episcopal Church had and continues to have a strong presence within the Yukon Flats. Most of the participants in the study mentioned a belief in God or the Creator, who provided all things, including the land and animals on which the people depend for sustenance. Even when participants did not mention the word God they would refer to the importance of prayer and spirituality. However, it should be acknowledged that tremendous impact and cultural disruption the Episcopal Church has had on the Gwich’in and Koyukon people of the Yukon Flats and their
traditional way of life. With organized religion came a cultural disruption in how people prayed, expressed their spirituality, and structured their families and lifestyles. They changed from a nomadic, hunter-gatherer, interdependent society to a more sedentary society with people moving into individual households. Over time people have spent less time on the land moving from place to place; some of the traditional songs have been lost, and several generations lost their Gwich’in and Koyukon languages. This impact is felt at both the individual and community level. Despite these traumatic experiences and immense losses that occurred across generations in the Yukon Flats as a result of organized religion, a duality exists where participants still acknowledge how important the church and God are to their everyday life. This duality speaks to the fact that cultures are not static and adapt to the changes around them, using what is useful to maintain their own individual well-being and yet demonstrate resiliency in maintaining aspects of their traditional spiritual beliefs.

**Passing on culture / traditions.** During the course of the study, it was a normal occurrence to observe family and community members from different generations spending time together, whether it was visiting, helping each other, or engaged in a specific activity with each other (e.g., cutting meat). Several of the elders in the study mentioned wanting to spend more time and teach younger generations. Some of the younger participants in the study echoed this sentiment, sharing how important the elders are to them. Terms such as “young people” or “youth” or “elders” were used to describe the different generations. One elder focused his time on influencing the younger generations in a positive way through allowing his allotment land to be used for Christian camps for young people. This camp was run by a Christian nonprofit, but the kids also learned cultural values, as the elder and his family would come and spend time with the kids each summer.
Another elder from a different village started his interview expressing his desire to spend more time with younger people and teach them: “More time with our younger, you know, we need more time with our younger people. Focus on some of the important issues that we’re facing for our future…. we don’t get enough time to go and focus them on what’s important for their life and their future.” This particular elder had a lot of knowledge of tribal history, Alaska politics, tribal sovereignty, and intergovernmental relations. He had served many years on the village council and also traveled extensively in an effort to protect his peoples’ land, resources, and tribal sovereignty. In the interview, he expressed his desire to pass on his knowledge to those who also wanted to lead. He spoke to the importance of getting young people who went away and got educated to return home and work for their people. In the interview, he stated:

And another thing too that people that went to school like you, we have, we’ve got our people that have been to school that have gone to college and stuff like that, we have them. But what they do, these non-profit people, like TCC and like Doyon, they grab them. They pay them good wages and they grab them so we never get a chance. But, eventually what we will put in place is to get them back, like I told you, if you have really educated people in the tribe that could do these work, you have no worry.

Another elder expressed his desire to share whatever he could with his people. He said he had a lot on his mind and wanted to share. I visited with this elder in the days leading up to the interview and as we visited he shared his thoughts about life in general, his people, and his concerns regarding the influence western culture had on his people. These influences included money, technology, and substances. He mentioned that he wanted to pass down knowledge to the younger people, especially in his village, so that they would be equipped to deal with these challenges and know the right way. Many of the elders in the study expressed similar
sentiments, wanting to spend as much time as possible passing on their knowledge to all those who were willing to learn, but especially the younger generations, to help them feel strong and also to help them navigate difficult situations as they arose. In the time spent with these elders they talked about many things, including the past, the present, and what they hoped for the future. Other topics also included spirituality and the importance of family. In reference to defining individual well-being and governance, the above-mentioned elder shared:

I don’t think there’s too many of us [elders] left now here. And what the young people still know about what’s going on, and so they know they’ve got their own this land and they know this is a self-government. But then its only way we could do now is we have to keep working with them [younger generations] I think.

While a lot of elders spoke about passing on culture / traditions, a lot of adults also spoke to the importance of learning from elders and teaching younger people certain skills they need to know live a positive life. A participant who is in his early 50s expressed the desire to help younger generations learn their traditional way of life and also stay away from negative behaviors and learn more about their culture, the land, and the traditional hunting and fishing way of life. He shared:

On the other hand, you get someone in here that wants to do good, I’ll go out of my way to help them. I’ll burn my gas, I’ll spend my time, I’ll spend my money to help somebody that’s helping themselves, that wants to do something positive and uh, I’m not the judge of anybody but I think I have a good idea on what positive is. And um, I’m always in support of someone like that.

This participant was constantly busy and frequently had one of his grandchildren in tow, whether it be running errands, engaging in his traditional activities or running a business. Rarely
did I observe him sitting around. In the interview and during our time together he also spoke of some of his own trials in life and how he had to come to terms with his mistakes and decide to live in a different way. During our visits he alluded to how his culture helped him live in a good way, though he did not specifically say those words.

One of the limitations in this study, which I will further elaborate on in the discussion chapter, is the fact that no youth (under 18) were interviewed. I believe this would have added a lot of depth to the study, as there appeared to be generational differences. For example, young people today were observed to be more interested in technology (e.g. Facebook) than older individuals from their same communities. This could be attributed to younger people growing up in an era where an emphasis on technology is paramount versus how the older people from their same village were raised. This phenomenon could also be attributed to the compounded impacts of colonization, where over time cultural activities and practices were intentionally and systematically replaced by western culture and practices to assimilate American Indians and Alaska Natives into mainstream society. I did, however, observe youth spending time with their families, across generations, and willing to help when called to. It was during these times that culture was passed down to them, as well as during hunting, fishing, gathering, and communal activities. This is an important observation, as it speaks to the fact that families are still very much engaged in traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering activities and that these activities not only fill freezers and shelves, but also create the time and space for family gatherings and connections.

This theme, passing on traditions / cultures, is an important element of individual well-being as shared by the elders in this study, but others as well. The elders spoke about it more frequently, which could be attributed to the fact that they felt their time to transmit their
knowledge was more limited and had witnessed rapid changes in their lifetime, compared to other participants in the study. There was a sense of urgency expressed by the elders to impart their traditional knowledge and history so that the younger generations would be prepared for the future and yet maintain a strong connection to their culture and traditions.

**Developing a strong identity as a Native person.** Another theme that emerged around individual well-being is developing a strong identity as a Native person. This was tied into knowing, practicing, and being proud of your traditional values, such as sharing, language, practicing Native traditions, spirituality, and your traditional hunting and fishing way of life. One participant, who is a cultural leader in his community, stated:

> I teach Gwich’in and that’s our identity. And I believe that when we have our identity as Gwich’in people, Koyukon, Inupiaq, or whatever heritage, background we have, if we know our identity we’ll be strong in our language and be strong in our heritage, in our cultural values and we will know all that and I believe we could be successful in anything we do.

This philosophy was reflected in other participants’ responses. For example, an elder from one of the villages stated:

> Never forget that roots of being; Native is always going to be with you the rest of your life. But what gives the tribal power is that you become very knowledgeable [in these roots] and have a good life and secure life that’s Indian power to identify.

This elder was engaged in politics and organizing around issues of protecting his peoples’ traditional homelands through asserting tribal self-determination (i.e. sovereignty) for most of his life. He also helps and supports young people in need. He was very adamant that young people learn about their tribal history, their culture and get educated so that they could help their people.
He shared that when people know who they are and where they come from and advocate for their way of life that was considered “Indian Power”. He also believed that that Indian power coupled with western education is a strategic step in navigating some of the challenges that his people face.

Other participants emphasized the importance of being proud of your culture. One participant, who is a leader in her community, but leading behind the scenes helping people in need stated:

Ok, first of all, I am proud to be a Native. I’m proud of who I am. And that’s how we should think all the time. Be proud of who we are…when I was young, my grandma she always talked to us about a well-being, and she always say be proud of who you are.

One way in which participants and others in the research communities developed their identities was by setting and accomplishing a goal(s) they set for themselves, such as learning and practicing their traditions. Speaking to the importance of practicing your traditional way of life as a way to achieve individual well-being, a participant stated:

Well, you know, growing up as a small boy listening to my uncles, visiting my dad, telling me stories about trapping and stuff and far back as I can remember that’s what I always wanted to do. I always wanted to go off trapping, live off in the bush you know and, have dogs you know, that’s been my dream since I was a little boy. And I accomplished it. I am really satisfied. I feel so satisfied I it doesn’t matter to me anymore if I ever set another trap or drive another dog team. I’m pretty satisfied and accomplished what I set out to do.

While observing daily life, activities, and community events, these words shared by participants were echoed by others in the community who told younger people to be proud of
who they are, learn their language, and culture and stay busy. The challenge, as previously mentioned, is the fact that younger people live in a world where the traditional, hunting, fishing and gathering lifestyle is juxtaposed a rapidly changing world, where in the larger, global context other values are being emphasized, such as capitalism, consumption, and western knowledge systems (e.g., technology). Young people in the research communities must constantly maneuver between two very different ways of life and find their place.

These elements of individual well-being are multifaceted. Passing on culture/traditions, sobriety, staying busy, spirituality, and developing a strong identity as a Native person often overlap and are interrelated. By learning your culture/traditions, you develop an identity as a Native person. By developing your identity as a Native person, you gain a strong spiritual foundation. By gaining a strong, spiritual foundation, you develop respect for yourself. Respecting oneself is at the heart of individual well-being.

**Community Well-Being**

The three major elements that emerged regarding community well-being were 1) taking care of one another; 2) working together; and 3) self-sufficiency, as illustrated in Figure 6. Participants varied in their responses to the question, “What does community well-being mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?” The older participants in the study tended to reflect back in time and share memories of growing up or shared historical accounts as a point of reference to answer the question. Other [younger] participants shared their reflections of what community well-being meant to them, which included some examples of specific events or activities that demonstrated community well-being. Some of these [younger] participants also reflected back to earlier times in their life when they felt community well-being was present and strong. For those participants who had a difficult time or wanted more information the question was posed,
“If you lived in a perfect community what would it look like?” The participants’ responses are grouped into three major elements as outlined above.

**Taking care of one another.** Despite the many changes that have occurred in the communities since their permanent establishment and the arrival of westerners, one thing that continues to be an important part of village life is the practice and transmission of cultural values across the generations. In this study, a theme that emerged in response to the question “What does community well-being mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?” was taking care of one another. Taking care of one another is a value expressed across Alaska Native cultures and these values are recorded and documented by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2017). One participant who had moved to the village of his deceased wife spoke about the love and care he was shown and now he considers this village to be his home. He stated:

> Well, so far I’m living here, the people are nice, they really nice, they take good care of me. I don’t even buy water, I don’t even, they just take care good of me all the time. They come around and if they see the water out, they bring it for me and stuff like that. Reason we community here, that’s where we live, it’s where we’re from; we’re comfortable with it, we take care of each other.

This love and care was observed in everyday life, as people share what they have, including food, wood, and other items. People were also observed helping each other on various projects and assisting elders in whatever capacity needed (e.g., getting water). In one of the communities where research was conducted running water was not available, so people had to gather water for daily life at the washeteria (i.e., laundry mat), and for elders this was more difficult because the water buckets that are filled are large (i.e., 32 gallon barrels) and heavy, so
young and able men in the village usually fill the water buckets up for elders, women, and children. Certain men in each village hauled water for many families in the village. While hauling water might not be viewed as an important job in western society, it is a very important and necessary job in the village(s), and a job that is viewed with respect. According to oral stories, in early history when Gwich’in and Koyukon people were nomadic, families had to rely on one another to meet their basic needs. If there were widows with children, either the chief or another provider would take care of them (Williams, 2013). Thus, sharing and taking caring for one another are deep-rooted cultural values passed down through the generations. While times have changed and the level of interdependence is not a life or death matter, there continues to be a commitment to caring for one another, as evidenced by the words of the participants in this study.

A young leader from one of the communities spoke about how she did not have to worry too much about anything as a member of her community, because even in times of difficulty, she had her family and community to support her. Responding to the question of what community well-being meant to her, she replied, “It’s just a feeling of being tied in to the community, and you know, knowing that if something bad happened to me tomorrow then there would be like 20 people helping me out. So, it’s just helping each other.” During hunting and fishing seasons, this element of community well-being was demonstrated through hunters and fishermen passing out meat and fish within their own family and to others in the community, such as elders and those who didn’t hunt (e.g., single parent). In this way, even the most vulnerable in the communities are cared for with a place to live and food to eat. During the course of the study it was observed many times how these [vulnerable] individuals dropped by different homes in the village and were welcomed in to eat and get something to drink. Certain people in each
community are known to open their homes to feed and care for others. These same people are relied upon in many ways in their communities by individuals who need their help, but also the community at large. Their role(s) within their communities will be discussed further in the following sections.

Participants in the study mentioned that even when people didn’t get along, people would still come together and take care of one another and that was one of the best parts of living in the village. An example that was referenced in the interviews, but was also noted in the observations, was community fundraisers. These fundraisers were held to support a wide variety of events. For example, if a family experienced a death in the family, or if someone was going through medical treatment for an illness, the communities would come together to host a fundraiser to support the family. At these fundraisers community members donate items, baked goods, and their time to raise money for a cause. These events aimed to provide moral support for those families enduring hardship as much as they aimed to raise money. Substantial funds were raised at these fundraisers, especially for such small communities with not a lot of monetary resources. This speaks to the communities’ values, which include taking care of one another even when financial means are limited in one’s own family. The fundraisers are also held to support positive events, such as school trips for elementary, middle, and high school students. More recently, social media has been utilized to gain support for these fundraisers [both in items donated and cash donated]. Across the board, in each community, participants agreed that supporting events like fundraisers was something that made them feel good and was the right thing to do. These events required a lot of effort to be successful and different people in the community working together. This next element of community well-being, working together, emerged in both the interviews and through observations.
Working together. Along the same lines as taking care of one another, many participants discussed the importance of working together, both in good times and times of hardship. One participant, who is a musician and has served in different capacities within his community, stated:

I think community well-being to me it would characterize or it would it would uh it would show a getting together and accomplishing things with a unity and we would be ok and in case of tragedy ok no one is bickering we bind together maybe we would search maybe it’s another tragic ending. Maybe it’s a search and rescue effort, regardless of who the person or persons could be no matter what anyone thinks everyone is really positively working together and we have the same goal. That’s very good accomplishment. Very good, very good uh identity of well-being in the community.

This participant talked at length about all of the good that can occur if people worked together instead of against each other. He spoke of events where people came together at a tribal council meeting to influence positive change and by coming together and working together things got accomplished. He compared this to what happens when people gossip and berate each other and acknowledged that those things did happen in his community and inhibited community well-being. He shared how he did not like it when people used public venues, such as a tribal council or community meeting, to yell or shame others. He stated, “And I don’t have to air out dirty laundry in public and embarrass everybody, make a scene…it’s bad. I don’t like that kind of public forum when that happens you know.” People were reluctant to talk about it on the record, but participants did discuss these topics during our time together. Participants expressed the desire for this type of negative interaction or dissent to change and for people to get along and work together in a way that unites people instead of creating division.
Another participant, who is an older woman and had traveled a lot in her lifetime, talked about the importance of always working together. Prior to starting the interview, she reflected back on her childhood as a reference point to a time when she felt that well-being among her people was present, sharing stories of her life growing up, and moving around out on the land. She used these examples from her childhood experiences to ground herself and share her thoughts regarding community well-being:

We just need to work together and understand each other and go forward. I think that will really save our future for our future generations, because we can’t go back to bow and arrow, we can’t be somebody we’re not, we’ve got to live in this world, so we have to borrow good truth from western world and good truth from traditional world because we’re both not perfect and we’ve got to go forward together, for our children.

This participant was raised in a traditional way by her parents, traveling along her father’s trapline and living in several different villages throughout her life. She has continuously served as committed leader and advocate among her people, working to protect the land, animals, and traditional way of life. In the interview, she spoke about how she could not do her advocacy work alone and that it took everyone to help her do her job. She stated:

For me a lot of times people tell me ‘oh you’re doing great, keep it up’ and all that stuff, and I say if it weren’t for you I wouldn’t do it. You know, you’re part of it. I’m not the one, it’s not up to me, it’s not me, and it’s everybody. And what helps me is you, being who you are.

For this participant, the fact that her fellow community and tribal members live a traditional lifestyle, hunting, fishing, and gathering and live in the physical place they collectively called “home” was enough to keep her motivated to do her work, because by doing
so gave her words authenticity.

In a similar vein, a young man who served in different leadership capacities in the village talked about the importance of working together as a demonstration of community well-being. He stated, “And, you know, and being a community as a whole and not fractioned by families or being so clannish; just everybody working together for a common good.” For others, including another young, male leader from a different village, these statements resonated, “But, community well-being to me means, you know, the community coming together as a whole entity to solve certain problems that arise.” This participant referenced the flood scare his village experienced where it was predicted the river would flood a certain part of the village and he shared how the community came together and created a plan of action if the flood were to happen. This same leader also shared how everyone comes together in his community when someone passes away and helps the grieving family. He shared, “When there’s a death in somebody’s family, everybody goes to that family and comforts them.” This quote was supported with observations in each of the communities. If someone passes away in a community, people usually gather at the family’s home and bring food, share memories, and visit. People also hunt for the grieving family, so they had traditional foods for the community potlatch that follow the burial. A potlatch has different meanings in different communities across Alaska, but in most communities it is a ceremonial event to honor the life of a loved one after they have passed away or celebrate something significant, such as a young person’s first harvest. It is signified by sharing and serving traditional foods, [in some communities] singing traditional songs, passing out gifts to those friends and family members who were close to a person who had passed away, sharing memories, and comforting one another during the period of loss. Prior to the funeral certain men in each community will gather at the graveyard to dig the
grave, no matter what the temperature is outside and even when the ground is frozen. Participants shared that sometimes this required building a fire on top of the ground to first warm up the ground before digging the grave. Women in each of the communities gather together and line the coffin the men build with material so that it looks nice for the viewing. From start to finish, community members work together to ensure a proper service, burial, and potlatch for the deceased. According to the participants, all of these responsibilities were an important way people in each of the communities work together to show people that you care for them and provide them comfort in their time of need. They also acknowledged that without working together as a community this would not be possible.

Certain individuals in each of the communities took the lead in carrying out those above-mentioned activities and also other positive community events. They are considered leaders amongst their fellow community members, because they frequently help those who need it. This study refers to these individuals as informal leaders, because they don’t hold a formal position (e.g., tribal council/tribal court judge) in their community, yet they were absolutely essential to community well-being.

Almost every participant spoke of working together as an important component of community well-being and was supported by observations in daily life in the villages. It is the way these small communities get major tasks accomplished, such as funerals, the annual spring carnival, the 4th of July celebration, and events that supported people in need (e.g., fundraisers). In one of the communities, I had a chance to join the entire community in cleaning up the graveyard for Memorial Day. Each Memorial Day in this community, as well as most communities in the Yukon Flats, the entire community goes down to the graveyard and cleans up all of the graves to make them look nice. It is a chance for people to share memories about their
loved ones who have passed on, visit each other, and even tell jokes and laugh. The event is intergenerational and everyone has a role. Some clean up the graves, others fix up wreaths to place on graves, and others make trips to the dump with the debris collected at the graveyard. After the event is finished, a campfire is made and people cook food over the fire and eat together.

It was also acknowledged by some participants that working together can at times be compromised by disagreements, infighting, and gossip. As the researcher, I believe that imposed western governance structures have created a system of hierarchal leadership (e.g., one chief versus historically having multiple leaders that represented family and clan systems) and multiple governance structures that have replaced traditional governance structures. For example, a tribe, a regional corporation, a village corporation, regional non-profits, and in some communities a municipal government all co-exist. While these are all different entities, they predominantly serve the same people (e.g., tribal member are also corporate shareholders); they provide shared services and they have interest in the same lands for different reasons (hunting and fishing versus development). The goals of some of these different entities are very different, yet people from the same community, same tribe and/or same regional area work for or serve on the boards of these different entities. This naturally lends itself to differing goals and sometimes-competing goals that create division.

While some of the infighting among families might not be directly related to serving these entities, the western systems imposed on Gwich’in and Koyukon people have disrupted the more collective decision-making processes and the result is this division. One way in which this might be explained is through Institutional Theory (North, 1990 & Ostrom, 1990), which emphasizes that institutions [rules of the game] are successful when there have low monitoring
and transaction costs. North (1990) gives the example of small tribal societies, where people are in constant contact with each other through dense social networks are less likely to cheat or deviate from accepted behavior because of repeated interactions with each other and thus the community institutions are self-enforcing (i.e., most of the time people don’t want to deviate or fight or gossip because they have to deal with the same people day-in and day-out and so it doesn’t pay to deviate). While this type of society still exists to some extent in the Yukon Flats, where community members hold each other accountable due to the dense social networks that exist and repeated interactions, there also exist newer forms of institutions (i.e., formal institutions) that are less personal and have assumed control of major governance functions. That is these newer institutions have replaced the traditional governance structures where everyone was responsible for the community well-being and held accountable and instead power is redistributed to a select few, elected individuals that sit on a tribal council, city council, or Alaska Native regional or village corporation board. Hence, the interactions are less personal and the enforcement for deviating from accepted behavior comes from a third-party enforcement. This naturally lends itself to issues. North explains it poignantly by stating, “Nevertheless, the dilemma that is posed by impersonal exchange without effective third-party enforcement is central to the major issues of development” (p. 56).

**Self-sufficiency.** Self-sufficiency or the ability to take care of oneself was also mentioned as an important part of community well-being. As previously mentioned, for some communities in the Yukon Flats, the ability exercise self-sufficiency has been limited in recent years due to limiting laws and regulations. This has delivered a devastating blow to the people of the Yukon Flats, because if you cannot exercise self-sufficiency you cannot care for yourself, your family, or your community. According to the participants, the ability to take care of oneself
also allows for the ability to care for others. One of the participants, who advocates on behalf of her community and their traditional way of life, spoke about the importance of exercising your rights as a tribal member and being a good role model for others as a way to achieve community well-being. She stated, “Practice exercising your rights…that’s the only way you can prove you have that right; you have to exercise it”. Throughout the interview, this participant talked about the importance of living the life [traditional life] everyday as a way to exercise your rights and achieve individual and community well-being. If you did not live your traditional life, you could not take care of yourself or others. You would instead rely on others or other means (i.e. the government or other people) to care for you and your family’s well-being. It is also living this traditional life (i.e. hunt, fish, gather) that you practice and exercise your traditional values as a Gwich’in and Koyukon person. This participant also shared that by exercising your rights you would be taking care of the land, the animals, and the water and in return the land, the animals, and the water would also take care of you, consequently allowing for self-sufficiency. In this way, self-sufficiency was part of a holistic cycle of life, moving beyond just meeting one’s own needs.

Another participant spoke to the importance of self-sufficiency and stated, “Community well-being is being able to be self-sufficient, be able to share and to help each other, to recognize and respect, love each other, and do things together.” From this quote, we can see that for the participant the ability to be self-sufficient allowed for other values to emerge: sharing, helping each other, love, respect. By living these values you develop your identity as a Gwich’in and Koyukon person.

An elder in one of the communities was reflecting on the importance of hunting, fishing and gathering, which is the way in which people in the Yukon Flats demonstrate their self-
sufficiency. He stated, “I think it is important because of our dignity, you know…that’s who we are, history tells us that’s where we came from”.

This statement strikes at the heart of why self-sufficiency is so important to individual and community well-being; to be self-sufficient means you know who you are and by expressing who you are demonstrates your dignity. If you have dignity you will treat others with the same dignity, which in turn increases overall community well-being.

Community well-being does not exist in a vacuum, but is rather the result of three co-existing elements: people in a community taking care of one another, working together, and remaining self-sufficient. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Elements of Community Well-Being

Elements of Community Well-Being
Governance

The topic of governance holds special importance to Alaska Native tribes, as they have had to fight hard to ensure their rights as inherent sovereigns is respected so they can continue to govern their people and traditional homelands as they have since the beginning of time. This section of my dissertation examines the conceptual definitions of formal and informal governance as defined and explained by the participants. The second part of this section examines the relationship between governance and well-being, both at the individual and community level. Embedded in these two sections are examples of how tribal members participate in governance.

Formal Governance

When asked what formal governance meant to the participants, the responses varied. However, two themes surfaced as definitions of formal governance from the perspective of the participants. The themes included: 1) participation in formal [tribal government] positions and processes and, 2) exercising self-governance and/or self-determination. (See Figure 7).

Participation in formal tribal government positions and processes. According to the participants the first element of formal governance was participation in formal tribal government processes. These include positions and processes within each community, such as a job at the tribal office, holding a seat on the tribal council, serving as a tribal court judge, and/or participating in tribal council meetings. Depending on the size of the office, there are positions associated within each of these topic areas or departments, or if the office is smaller, one employee will cover several positions within the departments. In each tribal office, there is a tribal administrator or an executive director (different villages have different titles for the same position) who performs and supervises all administrative functions of the tribe.
When asked, “What does [formal] governance mean to you?” most participants responded by discussing the federal government, the state government or the federally recognized tribal government, which maintains a tribal office [physical space] in each of the communities and houses programs such as education, environmental programs, tribal operations, housing, and an Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) position. The federal government funds these positions with money passed through the tribe and consequently the positions are prescriptive in nature. One of the elders responded to the question by stating:

Well government is, like the government is the one that offer us money. Like the government; the federal government, the state government…well uh, they are the ones that give us the rules and we have to make our own rules, like what the policies and stuff like that.

This elder shared how it was important for tribes to spend their money and implement programs in the right way, he shared “We have to do it right, you know, like from our real government [federal government] who give us the money; we have to show them how we’re going to handle money, the way they make the rule, we’re supposed to spend it the way we’re supposed to spend it.” This particular elder was very focused on his tribe spending money exactly how it was supposed to be spent, according to the federal government rules and regulations because he wanted the tribe to flourish and do well, so not to lose any funds in the future. Also, this elder had served in the military, which is a very regimented and rule-driven system.

Another participant felt that the work her tribe was accomplishing was important and necessary for future funding and programs. In her response, she explained how the tribe, through the work of the tribal office, its employees, and with the oversight of the tribal council, helps to
lead the people and ensure things get accomplished in the community, through federal, state and
grant-funded programming. She stated:

Well, a lot of them [tribal leaders] go down to Washington D.C., for them to talk for us, or they go to Juneau. You know, we need strong voice, we need leaders; and we do have good leaders in our Yukon Flats. I know they talk good for us, that’s the reason why we all never get stuck. And they try to get it for us whatever we need. And I really uh, I’m really thankful for that, because other places, like outside, they don’t get what we have, you know… And then the grants, they write grants for our education and uh I’m so thankful that Council of Athabascan tribal government [tribal consortium].

Another participant talked about the importance of a tribal constitution and other policies and procedures. This participant stated, “The governance is going by your [tribal] constitution, going by what you believe in and, you know, what’s right and wrong, and having policies and procedures and guidelines to ethics.” This participant was focused on the tribal constitution, which outlines how the [tribal] people wish to be governed, establishes the organization of the tribal government, and delegates authority from the people to the government to act on their behalf. It is a formal written document, which can be amended, but is not an easy process to do so.

Other participants spoke of the importance of having people involved in formal government processes, such as speaking or providing input into decisions the tribe is charged with making. One participant, who serves in different leadership capacities in her community, shared:
I try to get community input when I do projects. But it’s not always easy, like when we just had the flood preparation, I held like community meetings everyday just to make sure that everyone had all the information that they needed, so everybody could be prepared.

This participant acknowledged that even though she held these meetings there were still people who said they were not aware of the flood preparations and didn’t get a chance to attend or provide input. She stated, “And then, I mean I’m always, I’m really always busy, but I try to let people talk to me, whenever they can. I’ll try to get better at that.” During our time spent together during the course of research this participant, as well as others, shared that despite ample opportunities to provide input or to serve in leadership positions working for the tribe, serving on the council, or serving as a tribal court judge, there would always be individuals who are critical of tribal leaders and the work of the tribe in general, but you just have to keep moving forward.

Other participants echoed the importance of participating in the process of formal governance. A participant, who served in various leadership capacities in his community, shared, “Well what they can do [tribal members from his community] is be active in in making decisions, they can be active in participating in public meetings or they can be active even in private consultation, you know advising in a private setting, you know and maybe they don’t want to go to a public meeting, but meet up with maybe a director of something.”

The participants felt that participation in tribal government positions and processes was an important element of formal governance. The ways in which participants describe participation were: working for one’s tribe, providing input into tribal government decisions, and/or serving as a tribal council member or tribal court judge. The participants in the study who served in these different capacities shared that they all welcomed input from tribal members
during their time serving their community and that input was an important part of formal governance. Other participants in the study shared that an important part of formal governance was self-governance or self-determination, which could change formal governance from being prescriptive to being more responsive to tribal members’ needs and in also meeting the demands of their ever-evolving environment and landscape.

**Figure 7: Elements of Formal Governance**

**Elements of Formal Governance**

- Self-Governance/Self-Determination
- Participation in formal tribal government positions and processes

**Self-governance.** When participants were asked to define what [formal] governance meant some of the participants responded using the words self-governance or self-government. The difference in terminology, governance, and government was partially due to some participants
speaking English as a second language, but the terms were also just used interchangeably by some, even those who spoke English as a first language and fluently. The term self-governance “refers both to the broad principle that tribes have the right to govern themselves, and to particular statutory rights enabling them to do so through the use of federal program funding (Stromer & Osborne, 2015, p. 30). The term self-governance is also used in the federal legislation, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (P.L. 93-638) of 1975, which was amended many times and is one of the most influential pieces of legislation in the history of Federal Indian Law (FIL). This Act (P.L. 93-638) ended the era of termination and launched the era of tribal self-determination. This legislation allows and encourages tribes to assume management of their tribal programs previously managed by the federal government (i.e. Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services). Self-governance supports the transfer of federal programmatic resources and authority to tribal governments, with the belief that tribal governments know their tribal citizens and community needs best and therefore are in the best position to deliver those services according to their own policies and procedures (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2017).

When asked about governance one participant in the study stated, “Self-governance? Yeah, self-governance, it’s the ability to do things for ourselves…oh, oh like the community. Like, like when we do projects you know, we have to have a lot of community input.” Another participant, who was raised by his grandmother, knowledgeable about the traditional ways of the past, and understands modern governance systems stated:

We are sovereign people and have our own government, tribal government and we can, run our own affairs, and be really strong in our beliefs of running our own communities in our own region because we’ve been doing this all this time.
These responses reflect that indeed participants have adopted the use of terminology outlined in the ISDEAA of 1975 as they discuss the topic of formal governance, but moreover these data reflect deeper thoughts about formal governance. That is the assertion by the participants: While formal governance are actions, such as working tribal office, serving on the tribal council, or serving as a tribal court for your community, formal governance is also making decisions with and on behalf of their people and using these decisions to effectively govern, as has been done for thousands of years. As one elder participant poignantly shared:

Well, have respect for self-government. That’s what we want all the time. I don’t want nobody come in from somewhere to just start saying something and do this do this. I don’t think anybody can tell me what to do around here. Because I’ve been here thousands of years, my great grandfather is here. So every day I look at the, this land here, just like the mountain around here, I feel like I’m part of it; connected in to the land. Another participant shared how her people have been making decisions on behalf of the people for thousands of years and how they will continue to do so:

Government is our tribal government is original; originates from this area. That’s how we got here. And that’s how we been here. And governing ourselves to be healthy and strong and we have to govern ourselves like we always have. Our government has always been here. I mean, from time immemorial and that’s how we are here today and uh for thousands of years and it’s a good government because we’re here today and we going to continue to exercise our government or govern ourselves…rights.

Other participants affirmed these statements of how formal governance was the ability to make decisions or do things for oneself. For example, tribes set priorities based on the feedback and guidance of their tribal members. In the Yukon Flats some of these priorities include
improving physical and mental health, adequate housing for all tribal members, increasing economic development (i.e., jobs), securing hunting and fishing rights, and opportunities to improve the local educational system, as well as opportunities to attain a postsecondary education if a person so desires. Tribes assert and focus their sovereign efforts on certain priorities at certain times based on a host of different factors. For example, in the past ten years tribes across the Yukon Flats have focused a lot of their time on advocacy efforts to secure co-management or full Indigenous self-governance of hunting and fishing management. The factors that led to this asserted effort are the decline in Chinook salmon numbers and ability to fish for Chinook in the region, increased criminalization of their hunting and fishing rights overall, and the high cost of living (i.e., energy) in the Yukon Flats, making hunting, fishing, and gathering all the more important. More recently, tribes in the Yukon Flats have focused a lot of their time to learning about the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), how the law impacts their local education system, and where to leverage the law to best meet the unique needs of the students in each of the communities in the Yukon Flats.

Overall, the participants in the study agreed that tribal governments, as federally-recognized governments, are important as they operate in powerful spheres of influence due to their sovereign status (i.e. inter-tribal, corporate, state, federal) and from some of these interactions positive outcomes transpire (e.g., ISDEAA allowing for greater tribal self-determination in utilizing federal funds). Also acknowledged by the participants was the fact that operating within these different spheres could be limiting at times, because tribes had to follow state and federal laws when it came to hunting and fishing; doing so means tribes do not have the opportunity to exercise full self-governance. For years many years tribes in Alaska, not only in the Yukon Flats, have been advocating for either co-management agreements, where they
govern alongside the state and the federal governments, or full Indigenous self-governance, where they fully manage fish and wildlife on their traditional territories (regardless of who owns the land).

The definition of formal governance is therefore tribes’ ability to do things for themselves, as the participants reflected. This includes creating spaces for tribal members to weigh in on important decisions, creating jobs that meet local needs and priorities, participating in politics, such as serving on the tribal council and tribal court, and finally serving in political positions that operate in political spheres outside of the local context, such as at the state and federal level. The multidimensional ways and processes that tribes engage in to achieve their goals can be though of as institution building, where they leverage their sovereignty to achieve their goals, institute and modify the rules or codes of conduct that tribal members abide by, and shape human interaction to best meet the current needs of the overall community.

While formal governance allows tribal governments to operate at the 30,000-foot level, creating programs and policies, interacting with the state and federal governments, Alaska Native corporations, and working to improve the overall health and well-being of tribal members, equally important to the participants was informal governance. Informal governance is more localized governance and the way traditional values are authenticated. In what follows is an in-depth description of informal governance, as described by the participants in this study.

**Informal Governance**

The topic of informal governance provoked a lot of thought and discussion within the interviews themselves and between the researcher and tribal partner(s). From the responses to this question, “What does informal governance mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?” and observations collected throughout the study, a holistic definition of informal governance by the
participants emerged. From the participant responses it was established that informal governance is traditional values in action or traditional governance as it was practiced in families, bands, and clans prior to western systems replacing them. Informal governance includes elements of living traditional values, natural leadership, following traditional laws, and elder guidance, as illustrated in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Elements of Informal Governance**

**Living traditional values.** Participants in the study consistently referenced their traditional values, as learned from their parents, grandparents, friends and community members as being important to them. Observations confirmed that traditional values are an important aspect of informal governance. For example, one of the participants, who has held a variety of jobs in his
community, and also actively participates in his traditional hunting and fishing way of life, referred to it as the “Indian way”. He stated:

Informal way of governance to me is to volunteer out of the goodness of your heart…in Indian way, the elders they say this, you know, if you can help somebody, to help them and leave it alone. Don’t say next year ‘hey, remember I helped you’ and expect something back or expect money or expect a favor. If you leave it alone in the Indian way, it will come back to you.

This participant talked at length about the importance of sharing and teaching whatever skills you have, whether that is a gift of music or a traditional skill, such as cutting fish. In the interview, he shared a story of how initially he was upset about a situation where the school was hiring people to share their traditional knowledge and getting paid to do it. The participant shared that he thought to himself, “I could teach the kids a skill, such as cutting fish, and get paid” because he has developed that skill over the course of his life, but the school did not invite him to teach. However, one day he was down at the riverbank and there were some people visiting from Canada and he invited them to come visit his house. While visiting, he ended up teaching one of the young men in the group how to cut fish outside of his house at his fish cache. He stated that teaching that young man how to cut fish gave him a sense of pride and satisfaction, something that no amount of money could give him. Through this experience and others, this participant embodied traditional values in action; on any given day during the research period, I would see this participant tending to his dog team, cutting fish, or driving his boat. He leads a traditional life and was observed teaching his kids and grandkids what he knows.

Another participant explained informal governance as setting social norms, which is also
living one’s traditional values. Setting social norms was important because it ensures there is order in one’s family and community. This participant gave an example of some guys from a different village that came into town and were selling drugs. This participant saw them down at the riverbank and he confronted them and asked them why they were selling drugs in his village. He let them know it was disrespectful to do that and told them he would never do that in their village. This participant felt that by taking matters into his own hands and ensuring that visitors follow traditional laws is important and teaching others how to live according to important traditional values, such as respect.

Sharing is a traditional value that is practiced on a daily basis in the communities where research was conducted; it is one of the most important traditional values according to the participants and this was confirmed by observations. One participant discusses how important sharing is to life in his village. He shared, “And we have to take care of ourselves too, because we really need our health and to make a living, to fulfill our dreams, to work, and we got to really take care of ourselves, to provide for our families and also to share.” I experienced the traditional value of sharing during my time conducting research. Wherever I visited, I was welcomed in and offered something to eat and drink. People shared food, stories, and whatever they had. I knew that people did not share with me just because I was a visitor. Wherever I went, I observed sharing among families and community members. No one went hungry, even the most vulnerable. For example, birthdays were almost always a community event where people cooked big meals and invited everyone in the community to come eat and celebrate. Families would save up their best traditional foods and also order food from the city to cook for the community. Other people in the community would help prepare, cook, and clean. One of the participants in the study was known to help others during celebrations and potlatches to prepare
food, cook, and clean. She spoke about the importance of coming together, helping one another and, sharing what you have. She stated:

[Our] spring carnival, it’s been, I would say like 80 years; it’s been going every year.

They have dog races, they have all kinds of games for children, they do a lot of activities at night and we do have our local musicians that play and dance, and they have potlatches, and then we do have cook out at where they have the spring carnival; it’s usually down at the bank of the river, and everybody goes down with Native food or whatever, and just share. That’s one thing about my people, my tribe, is we share whatever we have. And we all support one another. And we have respect for each other too. And that’s how my people been that way for years and years, you know, respect one another.

Sharing is demonstrated in different ways, including inviting people into one’s home to eat or share whatever it is that a person might need. Even those people without much in terms of monetary resources were observed sharing whatever it is that they had, whether that is food, time or money. One of the participants, who works for her tribe and also spends a lot of time with her family out on the land, spoke to how sharing is an important aspect of well-being:

[well-being is] everyone’s healthy, happy, participating in activities, just sharing with everyone in the village. If someone gets, you get a moose and someone else don’t have meat, then you share it with them or if you get fish and you have a little extra you, you know, share it.

Some community members were known to be good hunters or fishermen/women. These people would share at the community level, sharing with anyone who did not have the means or
access to hunt and fish (e.g., no boat or no four-wheeler). These community members demonstrated natural leadership, which is an important element of informal governance.

**Natural leadership.** Another example of informal governance or traditional values in action was one’s ability to demonstrate leadership qualities. One participant who was known to help others in the community whenever someone needed help or something happened, good or bad, responded to the question what does informal governance mean, “‘’You mean the leaders? Yeah. I see a lot of our leaders doing a very good job by what they’re supposed to do. You know, there’s always needs; we need this, we need that and they’re always good about doing a good job for us.’” This same participant later stated:

Well, there are a lot of natural people in this, in our community. Like [names a person], she knows what to do, exactly what to do; if somebody dies and needs help, her and I, we just get together and we know what to do. And then and then a lot of these [people] here in our community, they’re just natural. They’re just born that way, you know, to be a leader.

Leadership emerged throughout the interviews, where participants talked about certain people who were known to be natural leaders in times of planning events in times of loss and as needs arise. For example, every year each community pulls together a spring carnival and a fourth of July celebration, which are events for the entire community. The planning that takes place prior to the events requires fundraising, scheduling, volunteers and donations from the community, as there are cash prizes given out for first, second and third place of each event. At the spring carnival there are events that take place for a week, some which are important for living and surviving in the woods, such as dog races, target shooting, snowshoe race, wood splitting contest, and caribou head skinning contest. Other events include children’s egg toss, pie
eating contest, and a parade. Each night there is a dance, featuring fiddle music and rock and roll, and these dances last late into the night and early morning. Through observation, I was able to witness these celebrations unfold. A lot of effort goes into them, including volunteers setting up the schedule, community members cooking for the potlatches, and community organizations (e.g., tribal office, city office, and community store) donating money and prizes.

These events bring everyone in the community together, demonstrating community well-being through intergenerational contact and fellowship. It is the natural leaders who help with all these community events, as well as help at school events and other events that bring the community together. They are the ones that raise the funds to host events, plan each and every activity and ensure the schedule is set each day of the carnival. These and other natural leaders are also the ones that cook for funerals, help line the casket and dig the graves of the deceased and create fun activities for children (e.g., sledding). They are the people that others turn to get things done and help teach others how to be a natural leader. There are natural leaders who are less involved in community events, but demonstrate leadership qualities through their everyday actions. These natural leaders, typically men, teach other young men important skills such as dog mushing, hunting, fishing and construction skills. In this manner, these men teach younger generations how to acquire important, traditional skills and be self-sufficient. While these men were not interviewed as part of this study, observations and sharing by participants in the study confirmed their impact.

Participant interviews and study observations revealed that natural leaders serve as a cornerstone of the community. Through the interviews participants differentiated these natural leaders from the more formal leadership roles in the community (e.g., chief), however sometimes they are the same people (e.g., natural leaders are encouraged to run for more formal leaderships
positions and some do and get elected). Some of these natural leaders are born into families of leaders or leadership, so they inherit leadership so to speak. For example, those leaders that help with community events such as the spring carnival will often have their kids alongside them helping out and as the years pass these children start to run the spring carnival. However, there are also those natural leaders that are not from a family of leaders and are instead identified or chosen by other leaders. For example, some elders and community leaders (both formal and informal) identify a person that they believe embodies certain leadership qualities and mentors them for certain roles within their community. One of the participants talked about a natural leader that works alongside her to plan funerals. She shared that this person works hard and is always willing to help so she taught her how to properly take care of funeral arrangements from start to finish. The common characteristics that formal leaders embody are the ability to speak in public, share their opinions and the opinions of those they represent, be someone people look to for advice, the ability to make decisions, and carry a certain level of power in the community. Whereas the common characteristics of informal or natural leaders are the knowledge of cultural practices and protocol, predominantly quiet and introverted, hard working, and a desire to help others. Different leaders embody different characteristics and thus the above lists are not comprehensive or prescriptive.

Natural leaders are a select few in every community and so the risk of burnout is a reality. However, these natural leaders do call on others to help and most of the time others step-up to help. Another reality is that anyone in a leadership role, whether formal or informal, are subject to criticism and it does happen, which causes stress for some. Nonetheless, these natural leaders persevere and continue to serve despite the criticism and divulge that they serve for the good of the community, not a select few, despite what others say about them. These natural leaders are
often also versed in traditional knowledge and traditional laws, which is why they are so often called upon. A discussion of what constitutes traditional laws follows.

**Following traditional laws.** Participants talked about informal governance as traditional laws people must follow, such as not wasting any part of an animal or taking care of everyone in the community. Even when the participants didn’t use the term traditional law, their responses aligned with what constitutes traditional laws and were grouped into themes accordingly. One participant who not only has a job, but also practices his traditional hunting and fishing way of life with his family, talked about informal governance. He stated, “We’re like one big family here and a lot of times when there’s people, when something is needed the community usually gets together and you know we help one another and that would be a form of informal governance.” A tribal leader who has served in a formal leadership capacity most of her life, contrasts informal governance with formal governance stating:

A big issue on how we conduct our tribal government versus let’s say Roberts Rules. To me, when we get into the western way of Robert Rules of Order of conducting business it seems to really effect how we do business on sovereignty. But if we become very informal, and follow the participation and just do informal business, we get more done, we see more healthy because we’re not really going by the rules of the Roberts Rules. I think we hinder ourselves and hinder participation of our tribal government we get too formal.

This participant felt that conducting tribal business in a more informal way, through consensus, was more productive than following Roberts Rules of Order, which is a method of conducting meetings that is not traditional, but rather passed onto tribal governments from western systems of governance. Making decisions based on consensus was and is to some extent
the way things get accomplished in communities in the Yukon Flats. Each village, which has population sizes ranging from less than 100 to over 500, has a tribal council, which consists of approximately 5 to 9 elected officials who represent the tribal members enrolled in the tribe. Each council usually meets at least once a month and tribal members are encouraged to attend. New and old business is discussed at these meetings and a lot of the time decisions are made that impact tribal members. Consensus is sought and involves everyone having a chance to share his or her thoughts and weighing in on the decisions made. For decisions made at tribal council meeting this means everyone sharing their opinion on matters, even tribal members in attendance. Certain decisions require only input and votes from tribal council members and in these instances a special meeting or executive session may be called to streamline the process.

Sometimes to reach consensus leaders (both formal and informal) will talk with each other outside of a tribal council meeting to share opinions, understand where each other stand on certain issues, and even influence decisions. These processes sometimes result in decisions where everyone’s’ requests or opinions are in some way reflected in the final decision made and other times this results in people getting to share their request, but the ultimate decision rest in the hands of the tribal council or those informal leaders that influence the tribal council (e.g., elders). Elders do have a lot of power in the communities in the Yukon Flats. For example, they are invited and will show-up to most important community and regional events and meetings. Also, when contentious issues arise they are called on to mediate and help the community reach consensus. Even in cases where families do not get along or have an ongoing dispute elders help to keep the peace so that things can get accomplished, even if people don’t reach consensus. In some communities elders will gather together, decide how they should respond to a certain problem, and then deal with the problem. They usually conduct business along with the blessing
of the formal tribal government leadership (i.e., chief) and in some cases the chief first approaches the elders to handle the problem. The ways in which elders or other informal leaders handle a problem depends on the situation, the degree of the problem, and the consequence(s) to others in the community. In this manner decisions made at the informal level are publically enforced and enacted. This enactment and enforcement compliments more formal governing structures. For example, if a young kid is getting in trouble in school they might not be deterred by detention or even being expelled, but if an elder approaches them and talks to them in a stern way or work to reconcile their wrongdoing they will be more inclined to correct the behavior, because they don’t want to upset someone such as an elder or community leader. The dense social networks help to deter some negative behavior from occurring, but not all of the time. Sometimes leaders, both formal and informal, must come together and strategize as to how they should tackle and alleviate persistent problems.

Participants interested in tribal governments going back to more traditional styles of governance such as consensus feel that is more productive and allows for everyone to participate in decisions. Tribal councils can do this and are not limited to operating according to Roberts Rules of Order. It is up to the individual tribe, given their sovereign status, and what they believe is best for conducting tribal business. These participants’ statements were also supported by observations of each community where elders, spiritual leadership will continue to have good hunting and fishing luck. Other traditional laws included listening to elders; showing respect for all living things, including the land and the animals; helping those in need and not looking down on them; and following formal tribal laws (e.g., not drinking in a dry village). In this manner, traditional laws aligned with the documented cultural or traditional values.
One of the participants shared the importance of traditional laws and formal tribal government laws working together. She shared, “Well, like I said earlier there is the village council, they oversee everything [in that particular village] and you know what stays or what goes in the community…But there’s elders and older people that we look forward to asking what they think or what we should do.” This participant spoke several times throughout the interview about how the village council seeks the advice of elders when it comes to making important decisions, because the elders and other long-time tribal leaders have a lot of experience:

Umm, personally, myself, when I have, well I take a big role in the village council and everything; personally I have one person that I always go to for questions or for help or advice [names the elder]. He’s a real good role model, because he knows so much about the tribal governance and the umm constitutional bylaws that we have at the tribe, such as subsistence, and there’s you know always elders out there that’s willing to give us advice and encouragement.

This participant mentioned that elders know the traditional laws and therefore help enforce them. Elders talk with each other and will come to meetings and events to share their thoughts in an effort to support and assist the tribe and community in making decisions and achieving well-being.

Enforcement occurs through different ways. Formally, tribes have the right to sanction those tribal members who do not follow tribal law (e.g., underage drinking) by giving them a citation and requesting they show-up in tribal court. Sanctions include fines, community services, and in some tribes reconciliation (i.e., meeting with the person or family you harmed and collectively deciding on a plan to reconcile the harm). Tribes also have the power to issue protective orders in the case of domestic violence and all law enforcement (local, state, and
federal) have to honor and enforce the protective orders issued by a tribe. Informally, elders and tribal leaders will scold people who do not follow tribal and traditional laws. For example, if someone has killed an animal and not treated it properly (e.g., wasting meat) elders will scold the person and tell them how they are suppose to care for the animal. One of the elders in the study shared with me how there are certain traditional laws when it comes to hunting animals, such as never shooting the lead caribou in a herd. If a lead caribou is shot the other caribou will lose their way, so it is important to let the first herd of caribou to pass, prior to hunting. The elders make sure everyone knows these laws and talks with people when they break the laws. He said you have to know these laws for everything to stay in balance. The harshest enforcement that occurs is people are “blue ticketed” (i.e., kicked out) of tribal communities by the council for violating traditional and tribal laws. This rarely happens, but in extreme cases where people repeatedly violate laws and cause problems it does happen.

According to the participants elders are important teachers and enforcers when it came to understanding the traditional laws in all three communities. Their guidance in each of the communities is fundamental and even when they don’t have a formal leadership role; they are considered important leaders nonetheless.

**Elder guidance.** Elders have important roles, whether it is within their respective families, communities, or their regions at-large. As mentioned above, elders are regularly consulted when major decisions need to be made, but they are also honored at community events. Most villages in the Yukon Flats have a tribal chief who is elected by tribal members. This tribal chief can be male or female and any age (above 18); however, there is also a traditional chief, who is recognized by leaders in the community, both formal and informal. This traditional chief is usually a male elder who is held in the highest regard, based on a host of
factors to include spirituality, their traditional knowledge, leadership qualities, and life experiences. The traditional chief guides the tribal chief, the tribal council, and the community during gatherings, ceremonies, and in difficult times. One of the traditional chiefs in one of the communities talked about how the community relied on him to guide them, especially when facing difficulties or making decisions. He talked about a time when there was a young man bringing alcohol into the village and people were very upset, so they kept calling him to see what they should do because they did not want the alcohol there. This traditional chief said he would handle it and so he invited the young man to his house and he talked to him “real good” and used his “good words,” so by the time he was done talking to this young man the young man knew the right thing to do.

Other participants also talked about the importance of talking with, and receiving guidance from elders to help make major decisions in the community or at the tribal level (i.e. council meetings). For example, a participant spoke about consulting elders when she visits them each day and getting their advice on how to handle certain situations. She reflected how doing this is effective and a good way because it is the traditional way.

Another participant who served in the capacity of a tribal chief for a couple of years echoed this sentiment. Both participants shared that before every big decision is made, it is important to consult the elders, especially when one becomes stuck and needs advice. He referenced a few elders he regularly visits and gets advice from. He stated:

Because that’s what they’re [the elders] there for, you know. So that’s just like our teachers you know. So it’s important we, while they’re still alive with us, we need to, like learning a lot from them whatever skill they have, you know?
As previously mentioned, this method of governance (i.e. talking and getting advice from elders) was part of the traditional governance in place prior to western governance systems influencing or replacing it. Accordingly, it made sense that some of the older and middle-aged participants would rely on this system of governance, as they were alive during the transition between governance systems, thus having knowledge of both. One of these leaders, who is now considered an elder, mentioned that when tough issues come up in the community it is important to not only address them [the issues] in public tribal council meetings, but also talk to the elders on the side to get specific advice on how to deal with these difficult issues, such as substance abuse. She shared:

We also have to do [it] behind the scenes and there are work behind the scenes and I commend the people that’s working on it and that’s doing it. And sometimes it has to be done behind the scenes for any fruit to come out.

The “behind the scenes” work this participant is referring to is consulting with elders and other leaders to come-up with solutions for difficult matters. Doing so helps to ensure things get done or be addressed properly, especially with such difficult, sensitive issues. This approach to governance aligns with traditional Alaska Native forms of governance, which relied on the elders and other leaders coming together to collectively make decisions on behalf of their people and community. For this participant, there was reassurance in consulting elders prior to making any big decisions.

These findings were supported by observations as well. For example, the above-mentioned leaders were observed visiting elders and visiting around their respective communities on a regular basis. This presence in the community and willingness to interact with their fellow tribal members is important because it urges open lines of communication in the
community and also allows tribal and community members to see the leaders as real people; approachable and willing to listen. Not everyone saw the leaders in this light, but in general most participants looked favorably on elders, viewing them as a valuable asset to their community and providing a vital form of governance. Another young leader reflected on the question regarding informal governance paused and shared:

Yeah, umm our elders are very important. They lived through a long period in their life and they learned a lot. And going forward as in you know a tribe or individual, like myself, being a young man, I take the elders’ advice into consideration all the time. Umm, they’ve seen certain situations and they know how to deal with certain things whereas I might just go in, go in blindly and not know circumstances or so on and so forth. And, but, they yeah, in our culture it is very important to take the advice of elders.

As outlined above, informal governance plays an important role in community politics and decisions in the Yukon Flats. Engaging in informal governance keeps traditional forms of governance alive and puts traditional values into action. Community members rely on informal or natural leaders to get things done and according to traditional values. Moreover, the results [what is well-being] underscore that both individual and community well-being are highly influenced by the presence and time spent with elders. The responses from younger participants in the study reflect this importance. For example, a participant who serves in the law enforcement field expressed the importance of interacting and reaching out to elders for advice. He stated “you know, informal governance, when I hear that I think of like elders, you know, giving advice and you know, seasoned hunters helping out the green hunters and everything”.

Participants also shared how the presence of elders during major events, whether they are funerals or times of celebrations, grounds them, as they always know what to do or say.
Observations and examining historical institutional documents confirmed the importance of elder guidance throughout these communities over time. One example is the start of the Gwich’in Steering Committee, which was formed in 1988 and started by a group of elders from around the Yukon Flats in response to proposed drilling for oil in the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The elders knew that developing oil on coastal plain would disrupt the migration patterns of the porcupine caribou herd on which they depend and Gwich’in continue to depend on for food and clothing. The elders called on leadership [chiefs] from each of the Gwich’in villages in Alaska and Canada to come together to meet and discuss how to protect the refuge and other threats to the Gwich’in way of life. This gathering has been transpiring biannually since 1988 and the elders continue to shape and guide discussions and decisions made by the contingency representing Gwich’in communities in Alaska and Canada.

Accordingly, elders remain as a strong life-force in Gwich’in and Koyukon communities, as they possess Indigenous knowledge relating to language, history, spirituality, storytelling, and the traditional hunting and fishing way of life. They also know how traditional governance systems operated prior to western, tribal governments being established and also are called on to mediate disputes. These elders are a link to the past, yet understand current events, contemporary issues and their potential impact on Indigenous knowledge and ways of life. These elders are called upon to be a part of every event in their communities and their presence is welcomed and honored.

The challenge will be for younger elders, adults and youth to ensure the knowledge from these older elders is not lost. This is crucial, as their knowledge is based on their acquisition of and versatility in both traditional and western worlds. Additionally, their knowledge is grounded in a close connection with the land and animals on which culture and traditional values are
based. Adults and young people have competing priorities with western education, technology, and jobs pulling them away from learning from elders on a daily basis. Therefore the younger generations will have to focus their time and efforts on learning from these elders, amidst the competing priorities in their lives.

The relationship between formal and informal governance can best be described as complimentary. While formal governance is important, because tribal governments are sovereign governments and with this sovereignty comes a lot of power, they are also newer governance structures. The way the tribal government is structured today is different than how governance was structured and operated historically. As previously mentioned, formal tribal governments today have a chief and council who hold a lot of the decision-making power, whereas historically every family or clan may have had a person to represent them in governance spheres. However, leaders who represent the formal tribal government do reach out to informal leadership when making difficult decisions and this informal leadership is fairly representative of the families in the communities. In this manner the governance structures are complimentary. Today, informal governance structures still hold a lot of power, especially elders and informal leaders. They are often consulted by formal leadership when making important decisions and attend most formal meetings, to demonstrate their support and also listen and weigh in on important decisions. For example, when difficult decisions arise in the community, such as a proposed development project that could impact the tribe’s traditional territories, the informal leaders will reach out to informal leaders to discuss how the tribe should proceed. The formal leaders then bring that information back to the tribal council and membership and share their thoughts and proposed course of action. There are also situations where the formal and informal governance structures are at odds and what usually happens is those who are informal leadership
roles will bring their concern to the tribal council meetings and bring it out into the open so that
the formal leadership is aware and the situation can be dealt with. It’s not always a smooth
process, but over time these difference are worked out.

**Relationship between Participation in Formal and Informal Governance and Well-Being**

For this section of the dissertation, I asked the participants a set of questions regarding the
relationship between participation in governance and well-being. The questions asked of the
participants were:

- Does participation in formal governance affect individual well-being?
- Does participation in formal governance affect community well-being?
- Does participation in informal governance affect individual well-being?
- Does participation in informal governance affect community well-being?

The answers varied and there was some confusion with the questions in general. Some
participants asked me to turn off the recorder and asked what I meant by governance and to
provide them with examples. I did provide them with prompts and also encouraged them to
answer the question in the way they understood it. Also, some participants thought the word
“affect” meant a bad thing, rather than the question simply asking whether or not there was a
relationship between the two concepts at all [good or bad]. What follows are the findings from
each of the questions.

**Does participation in [formal] governance affect individual well-being?**

The answers to this question varied as some of the participants interpreted the question to
mean “affect” in a negative way, while others interpreted the question as intended, which was to
understand if participation in [formal or informal] governance affected [individual or
community] well-being at all. One participant, who wears many hats in her community,
including serving as a health aide, raising children, volunteering for community events, and leading a traditional lifestyle stated:

I think so. I mean, you know, in our little circle of life that’s the high man [the chief] on the totem pole and you have the ability to go talk to them, it gives you some sense of accomplishment when you can talk to somebody that’s in charge. And at least you have your voice heard. There’s no way, federally or state where our voice gets heard.

In this quote, the participant emphasizes the ability of community members to talk with their chief and tribal leadership, comparing this to the inability of tribal members to talk with state and federal leadership, some of whom hold power over certain activities that are important to the people in each of the research communities, such as traditional hunting and fishing. Through observations and time spent in each of the communities, it became clear that people felt frustrated with the inability to voice their opinion or influence decisions that impacted such important aspects of one’s life.

Another participant who has held several leadership positions in the community talked about how important it was for people to have an opportunity to vent and speak about what is troubling them at council meetings. He stated:

Yeah, I think it does [participation in formal governance affects individual well-being]. I mean, a lot of people, like at a council meeting, people will attend, you know, to talk about the things that are troubling them or bothering them, or you know give thumbs up to the council for things that are being done.

A different participant, who served as a tribal court judge for many years and also owns his own business, reflected on the relationship between participating in formal governance:

Oh, I’d say it affects big time. I mean it’s your sense of participation in, even if just in
small thing that doesn’t make the papers, nobody knows about it, just that makes you feel good…everybody wants a sense of accomplishment, no matter how small it is.

This participant talked at length about his past experience being a tribal court judge and how challenging his duty was, but also how rewarding it was. During parts of the interview he reflected on the seriousness of serving in such a capacity and how one internalizes this and he elaborated further on the question regarding participating in formal governance affecting individual well-being, stating:

Oh for sure. Taking responsibility, especially as a presiding judge, it’s a serious matter. It is one that is very serious. You are making decisions that will affect youth up until their adulthood. You know your decision it’s a high, one of the highest levels of responsibility you are going to bear.

This participant was referencing child welfare cases where he had to decide whether or not a child could remain with their parents, enter into the foster care system, or be adopted out due to the parents rights’ being terminated. This participant also talked about the cost of serving in such a position, stating sometimes when people were not happy with the decisions he made as a tribal court judge they would personally attack his character. He also shared that sometimes these same people, the ones who chastised him, thanked him later for the decisions he made on behalf of their children because it was the push they needed to make a change. He went on to say that despite those experiences he served for the sake of children and families and did his best, even though it was difficult.

Other participants agreed with these statements, emphasizing the importance of participating in formal governance to voice your opinions on decisions being made by formal governance entities (e.g., tribal court), but also ensuring decisions made sense given the context
and were in alignment with what the community wanted and needed. A participant who works for her tribe responded to the question stating:

I feel like it does. I feel like, I don’t know, when you’re handed things from the state, or from the federal government, and you don’t have any umm input into how it is then it affects, I mean it affects me. I get frustrated all the time.

When this interview was conducted, this participant was in the process of applying for funding to fix some of the roads around town, which were not wide enough for some of the equipment purchased to maintain them. She expressed frustration with the fact that tribes have very little say in major decisions that impact their daily lives (e.g. roads), yet tribes have to deal with the shortcomings or failures that result from these uninformed decisions, thus negatively impacting both her as an individual (because she is a tribal leader) and the community at-large. Another example she spoke of was the airport being built in a location that “cut off” the community because the river was on the other side of the community. She felt that this was not a sound decision by the state of Alaska, because when there were issues that threatened the safety of the community, such as a threat of a flood, the community could not move further back without running right into the airport.

As mentioned above, there were participants who found this question confusing. For example, a participant who served as the tribal administrator for his tribe stated, “No I don’t think so, I think that the tribal member within the self-governance, you know, they have their input too, and that helps by having workshops or just attending the meeting to discuss issues that face us”. Another participant responded to the question, “Does participation in informal governance affect community well-being?” by stating, “No. It gives the, you know, encouragement to teach us young ones or young adults to know the right thing is to do in the
community and what not to let happen”. It was clear from these participants’ responses and their sharing with me that they did not fully understand the questions as they were intended. Even in those instances, prompts were provided, but no attempt was made to re-direct the participants one way or the other, but rather just let them answer the question. However, it illuminates the fact that the questions was not well understood and could have been improved. In general, these types of responses were in the minority, yet they did occur.

Observations used to triangulate the interview data revealed that individuals who were active in formal governance did assume large amounts of responsibility in the community, whether it was making day-to-day decisions that affected tribal members (i.e. housing, electricity bills and jobs), hosting community events (e.g., Fourth of July), or guaranteeing that funding proposals and reports that supported tribal services were submitted. These responsibilities were overwhelming and stressful at times, as observed and also disclosed by the participants. During visits to the tribal offices during the course of research the participants also shared they knew that some members of the community were not happy with them and critical [at times] of how well they were doing their job; however, they acknowledged that criticism came with leadership and in general they felt that they were doing the best that they could and had support from most of their respective community. One participant shared, “Conflict of interest; that’s a big thing here, you know, that’s a bad thing [between the families]...I hate to talk against people but it’s like it’s really really is for a long time”. These conflicts and disagreements happened across communities and most participants agreed that no matter where you lived there would always be conflicts and difficult situations to overcome, but the participants also acknowledged these situations rarely surfaced. Most of these types of conversations occurred off the record, as people did not want to be recorded talking about these sensitive issues.
In general, the answers to this question about participation in formal governance and its relationship to individual well-being varied. Some participants felt that participation in formal governance negatively impacted their individual well-being due to the stress that comes with serving in such a capacity. Others, however, saw participation in formal governance positively affecting their individual well-being, as they felt they were serving to meet the needs of their entire community.

**Does Participation in [Formal] Governance Affect Community Well-Being?**

This study found that participation in formal governance affected community well-being in a positive way. Some of the participants who worked for their tribal government talked about being in these types of positions. Whether it is a paid position with your tribal government or a volunteer position, such as sitting on the tribal council, you are making decisions on behalf of everyone. One participant, who holds a leadership position in the tribal consortium CATG, responded to the question stating, “I would think so I mean if you’re in a position like that you’re acting on behalf of your whole community and doing what’s right for your community and your people.”

Whether paid or volunteer these leadership positions come with a lot of responsibility and wanting to ensure things are done to benefit everyone. One participant who has held various leadership positions in the community including a seat on the tribal council stated, “Yes [participation in formal governance affects community well-being] because everybody’s opinion should be respected, you know. And that’s what you know often times the tribal council meetings are for, is so that people can voice their opinions.” Another participant who served as a tribal administrator for some time echoed this sentiment and stated:

Our meetings are open to tribal members. They are free to come and give their
opinion to the council while it meets… I think it [the decisions you make while participating in governance] affects the community greatly. I mean we are elected to be the voice and we make the decisions for the profit of the tribe as a whole entity instead of an individual. I mean we would hear the individual’s, you know, comments and concerns regarding the matter, but we’d still have to make a decision based on the whole of the tribe.

Other participants also mentioned the importance of community members feeling informed and part of the process of decision-making. A tribal chief who was a participant in the study shared that it was especially important for the tribal office and tribal council to inform tribal members of things happening in the community, good or bad, and request input from them.

According to the chief, these opportunities provide an avenue for tribal members to voice their thoughts and opinions, but also resolve any tension surrounding the topic or issue at hand.

Creating these spaces for tribal participation in decision-making results in increased community well-being. The tribal chief provided an example of a time when her community was facing the threat of a possible flood and how the tribe worked hard to ensure everyone was prepared and they knew what was happening. There were meetings called at the tribal council for community members to come and be informed as to what steps the tribe was taking to ensure everyone was safe. She stated, “Well, everybody felt better. Everybody felt like the kind of knew what was going on; the people that participated [in planning meetings].”

Other examples throughout the study confirmed the importance of involving the community in decision-making. An example was given by a participant who had served as a presiding [head] tribal court judge; he mentioned that you have to really take your role seriously and that making decisions on the cases one oversees not only impacts you, but the families you
work with, and the community at-large. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that those who come before the tribal court have a chance to speak. He shared:

I take the lead in running the court and uh make sure everybody gets their time to talk. They get, you know, nobody’s shut out, it ain’t just one sided. If I got, if I am talking for ten minutes you can talk or ten minutes, you know? Everyone can have their equal time. That’s mainly what a presiding judge does, that and actually oversees the orders that are carrying out.

Other participants concurred with the belief that participation in formal governance affected community well-being in a positive way because people felt that even if they did not hold an official seat on the tribal council or tribal court they could still voice their opinion. A participant who sat on the tribal council for his village spoke to this stating, “Our meetings are open to tribal members. They are free to come and give their opinion to the council while it meets, and we take the time and hear their concerns.” In a follow-up question regarding those who voice their opinions regarding decisions that are contentious, this participant stated that even then those who serve on the council take time to listen to what the person has to say; however, the final decision is based on what is best for the tribe as a whole. It should be noted that many of the participants in the study were in formal leadership positions or had been at one time.

Observations and information gathered from the interviews implied not everyone was happy with the make-up or the decisions their respective tribal council or tribal court made; however, it was observed that people were welcomed into the meetings and given an allotted time to voice their opinion. It was also observed that only a select few in each community took the time to come to every council meeting or stop by the tribal office to talk with the leadership. Yet, during the annual tribal government meetings and meetings where major decisions were
made a lot of tribal participation occurred. One example referenced by a participant in the study was meetings held to discuss the proposed land trade in 2009 between Doyon Limited and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service where Doyon Limited (the regional Alaska Native corporation that covers the Yukon Flats) would acquire land in the Yukon Flats owned by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that contained substantial natural gas reserves. He mentioned that tribal members all showed up to the meetings as the land trade had the potential to negatively impact the traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering areas of the people in the Yukon Flats. Overall though it is a select few, those in formal leadership positions and those who regularly participate in voicing their opinion(s) at council meetings and in other ways (visiting with chief and/or tribal administrator), who participate in formal governance on a systematic basis. No tribal court sessions were happening while research was being conducted or I was unaware: Tribal court sessions are usually closed to the public because most cases deal with children and juveniles so they are confidential.

According to the participants in the study, participation in formal governance affected individual and community well-being in both negative and positive ways. On the negative side, participating in formal governance or being an official in the formal government structure (i.e., tribal council or tribal court) could at times negatively impact one’s individual well-being, due to the stress that comes with politics and responsibility of such a position (i.e., making decisions that are both positively and negatively perceived or might benefit some and not others). On the positive side, the participants shared that it makes them feel good to serve their community and help their tribal members. Despite this duality, most participants expressed that they represented the entire tribe and not select individuals and so in this way they felt that overall participation in formal governance positively affected individual well-being.
In terms of the relationship between participation in formal governance and community well-being, most participants viewed this relationship as positive, because tribal members had ample opportunities to participate in governance. The various ways in which tribal members could do this are: Run for a seat on the tribal council or tribal court, voice their opinions at tribal council meetings, engage in the governance process through collective decision-making, and regularly visiting with tribal leadership. The participants also shared that there are ways in which other tribal members who do not run for tribal council, tribal court, or work at the tribal office can and do participate in formal governance. They can simply vote in tribal elections, which ensures they have a say in who is elected and who represents them as a tribal member. Also, all tribal members can and many do attend tribal council meetings, which ensure they stay abreast of what is transpiring at the tribal level.

**Does participation in informal governance affect individual well-being?**

The participants focused a bulk of their responses regarding governance on informal governance, which is likened to traditional values in action (e.g., respect) or the traditional governance systems that pre-dated the influences of western culture.

Many of the participants shared stories of learning from and taking care of elders as a form of participating in informal governance. The younger participants believed elders had the knowledge and wisdom to make the right decisions regarding governance. The elders in the study believed they had knowledge and wisdom to share with the younger generations and this knowledge would help these younger people in all areas of their life, including making important decisions. One participant gave the example of learning from elders in his community and shared how the elders never directly tell you to do things a certain way, but give you information
and allow you to do what you will with the information. In this manner, you learn from elders’
experience, both good and bad. He stated:

I think most of their [elder] teaching I heard from not only my parents but other older
people is they never said you do it like this, you know, they usually give you an example
of what happened in the past and maybe they did it wrong then but they won’t say so.
But [the elders say] this is what happened, something like this happened before and they
tell you the story about the goings on and how it turned out. Well you can take that and
form your own plan.

The above-mentioned quotes exemplify the powerful role elders have in these
communities and how they also play an important role in instituting and sharing the values that
represent informal governance. It was also clear from the interviews and observations that
younger generations seek advice and council from the elders, especially elders in one’s own
family and those elders who have or currently serve in leadership roles (e.g., past chief or
traditional chief). As much as learning from elders is an important value among Alaska Native
groups in general, so is teaching and ensuring the younger generations traditional values and
practices.

An elder who spent a lot of time with young people, mentoring them and giving them a
place to live when needed, shared:

Well, especially when we do it [spend time out in the woods with young people] during
the season, like fishing season or moose season, if they do get fish they share when they
get back, that’s how we do things and we show them that way. Just like moose, bring
back the moose, be sure that they get a piece [the young person and others in the
community], we do that a lot.
A different elder from the same village echoed this response:

I don’t think there’s too many of us [elders] left now here. And what the young people still know about what’s going on, and so they know they’ve got their own this land and they know this is a self-government. But then it’s only way we could do now is we have to keep working with them [younger generations] I think.

This elder was concerned with not only the younger generations being knowledgeable and understanding current self-government structures and systems, but also traditional ways of life and governance, which this study refers to as informal governance. Later on in the interview he referred to a time when he was a young man and all young people would gather up with the elders and listen to them tell stories and learn about the spiritual life. He stated:

And then in the evenings [after everyone was done working] they get together and they always tell about what they did today, what happened today, and they talk about what they done, and they were happy together; laughing and all of that. I remember that, happy people. But now it’s really changing. No one is really happy like long time ago, even kids.

He mentioned that it is no longer like that, yet there is a need to bring that back so young people can receive guidance to do things the right way. He then shared his perspective about how he believes more and more people all over are getting enticed by money and that breaks apart that sense of community and togetherness that is so integral to informal governance or those traditional values in action. He stated, “People more look for making money in everyday activities. And when I grow up, we did where there’s not much money anyway in the community, so all we do is subsistence life year round; every year, same thing”.

Through observations and responses to the interview questions it was concluded that for
some participation in informal governance positively affected well-being. This was especially true for the older participants and some younger participants, who were either versed or interested in their traditional values and/or language and took the initiative to stay involved. However, for those individuals who were not as versed in their traditional values and/or language and more interested in those outside influences the above-mentioned elder spoke of, this relationship seemed more tenuous. Added to these challenges of passing on traditional values from elders to younger generations were the complex impacts colonization has had on the communities in the Yukon Flats. Colonization was successful in suppressing some of the traditional values and this prevented them from being passed on to younger generations over time (e.g., Alaska Native spirituality).

Despite these challenges, informal governance continues to play an important role in the communities in the Yukon Flats. For example, it was observed in all three communities that people continue to practice their traditional values, such as language, sharing, and respect. Even though the older generations are primarily the ones who are fluent in the Gwich’in and Koyukon language, there is resurgence in each of the communities to learn the languages by the younger generation. There are classes within the school systems and some families are meeting with elders to gain fluency. The traditional value of sharing is also regularly practiced, especially sharing of Native foods.

In this manner participation in informal governance happened either intentionally through what individuals learned within their family system or organically through interaction with and among one’s community. These experiences positively affected individual well-being, because if you participated informal governance you were essentially participating in your traditional values and culture. An example that illustrates this relationship occurred when I travelled with
one of the participants and his family to his allotment where a camp for kids and young adults was being held. The kids learned all about Gwich’in and Koyukon culture in addition to other camp content, and observations indicated that the kids were learning skills and values each day in addition to having a lot of fun. It brought this participant great joy to share his land and his culture with the kids, as disclosed during one of our visits. In response to a question about community well-being, the participant responded, “Well I think of a perfect little community just like my camp, you know they asked me to the prayer and me and my guests we eat first, you know, just makes me happy.” During time at camp, the participant would spend time with the kids, sharing stories that were infused with cultural values, eat meals with the kids and sit by the river in the evenings. The kids showed their thanks and also the value of respect by serving this participant coffee, tea, and food when it was time to eat and always checked-in with him to see if he needed any help. These interactions embodied traditional values in action.

Another participant who is a leader in her village discussed informal governance, sharing that they are “the codes of conduct, like the things that nobody really needs to tell you to do, like, like helping elders or helping out at potlatches.” She then went on to describe how her cousins took care of their grandma and made sure she had wood for her woodstove and it was chopped and packed into her home because she [their grandma] could no longer do these things for herself. The participant shared why she felt participating in informal governance positively affected individual well-being:

Well it makes them feel useful, it makes them feel useful and like they’re doing their part. Because my grandma, she, she’s had like a huge part in all of our lives and teaching us how to help people and how to umm, just how to come together as a community.
This participant described how her grandma, who was a teacher’s aide for over 30 years in the village, brought most of the kids in the community to fish camp and taught them all how to winter camp and survive in the woods if they ever got stranded. The participant shared how powerful this was, her grandma teaching and sharing culture with all of the kids in the community and what an impact that had on everyone. In this participant’s view, not only does participating in informal governance impact one’s own well-being, but the community as well, because everyone is taken care of and needs are met.

**Does Participation in Informal Governance Affect Community Well-Being?**

It was found that participation in informal governance positively affects community well-being, through people sharing what they have and coming together.

**Sharing.** Sharing was identified as an important aspect of informal governance. Sharing is a traditional value that has held its importance throughout time, despite the vast changes that have occurred across the Yukon Flats. As the researcher, I experienced how important this value was through spending time in each community. People opened up their homes to me and fed me well while spending time in each community. Data gleaned from the interviews supported the importance of sharing, as mentioned throughout this chapter. An elder in the study spoke about people from his community always sharing because it was necessary to survival before there were stores and programs to support people. He stated:

From way way back, hundreds of years or thousands of years, what people do is we always share. Like just like I said, in [names a different village], sometimes they’ve got poor season with fishing [season] and stuff like that, and [my] village got caribou meat and stuff like that, they share. They just go down there and help them. One time too, around here they’ve got no food and they all went down to [a different village], I hear,
way before us. They got no food. They’ve got no caribou and got no choice. They got to go down to [different] village. And that [different] village people got to supply them with fish and stuff like that.

These participant’s words were supported by observations as well. In one of the participating communities this sharing was observed when a young man from the village got a moose with his grandpa and they shared meat with a lot of the village. This was also observed in a different community with caribou as well. Because of sharing everyone had food.

One of the elder participants in the study shared stories of when he grew-up and how important traditional food was to the people. In recollecting, he stated, “That’s uh…our main nutrition is caribou and moose, and people been using it every day. And it’s not much problem with that food anyway; sharing and everything.”

Again, the practice of sharing is very much a traditional value embraced across Alaska Native cultures and was reflected in the communities where research was conducted. In addition to sharing food, participants also discussed how people in their community shared [donated] items for fundraisers to raise money for a cause, such as youth sports, a family in need, or a community celebration. Some items people would share were beadwork, Native food, or more contemporary items found in the store (e.g., DVD movies).

Sharing responsibilities was observed in the communities as well. Extended families shared caregiving responsibilities, both of children and the elderly. It was common to see grandparents helping to raise grandchildren and also grandchildren helping to take care of their grandparents. Young teenage men check on their grandparents to making sure they have wood and water. They also learn to hunt from their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers and then assume this role when the time is right. One elder participant talked about how he taught his grandsons
how to haul a caribou back to the village on its own hide after hunting. He didn’t think the boys were listening, but when they went out hunting on their own, they hauled the caribou back like he had taught them: on its own hide. Young women help maintain the household and learn to take care of meat and fish, cook, sew, and take care of children from their mothers, aunties, and grandmothers. Every person has a role. No one spoke of these shared responsibilities, but it was observed across communities. Knowing these responsibilities within the family affect individual and community well-being in a positive way.

While sharing is indeed an important value and part of life in each of the three research communities, life has changed according to the participants. For example, modern life and all that that encompasses, including a gradual change from a primarily traditional hunting and fishing lifestyle to a mix of hunting and fishing and a cash-based economy, has evolved. An elder participant reflected on this change, sharing that when he was growing up life was much different compared to life now because money did not have as strong of an influence on people as it presently does. People in the study and key informants in each of the research communities concurred, yet they acknowledge that money was necessary to practice hunting, fishing, and sharing. People need money to buy and support the new tools they use to hunt, fish, and gather, such as a boat, motor, four-wheeler, and gasoline. This elder and others in the study who witnessed these changes did not belabor the point, but simply noted these changes. They saw the impact that the outside world was having on their community and wanted to be sure the younger generations were aware and would seek to find balance in both worlds. In his interview, this elder shared how life is different today, especially in terms of well-being; he reflected back on how life used to be to share his thoughts:

In the early days when uh we had good health by uh good living and we had our own
language and our own health system, our own way of governance by having tribal chief and council and that’s changed quite a bit on through the ages; people coming to live in one place.

This participant emphasized how important those traditional values, such as sharing Native food, language and traditional governance were to well-being while he was growing up. Other participants in the study collectively emphasized this relationship as well; that is, traditional values in action positively affect individual and community well-being. Sharing was brought up many times as an important value that positively affects well-being. This was not unexpected as sharing is a traditional value and is practiced in everyday life in the village. It was observed to be a central aspect of informal governance, and without it, it would be very difficult to live in the village. Sharing is a form of interdependence and interdependence has kept the people in the Yukon Flats alive through generations of living in a very harsh environment.

While life has become much easier with modern day conveniences, sharing still remains a crucial part of life. The participants also shared that even when people don’t get along they share because they know the importance of sharing and coming together. Coming together is a form of informal governance that positively affects community well-being.

**Coming Together.** It was clear from any amount of time spent in the three participating communities that people come together in times of joy, need, and death. If something good happened, such as an anniversary celebration of a couple or organization or a baby’s birthday, people gathered together and shared food and fellowship. Also, each year in each community there were different times when people came together to celebrate. One participant who was serving on his tribal council gave the example of the Christmas to New Years Potlatch in his community, which is an event that happens annually where the whole community takes turns
cooking and feeding the community breakfast, lunch and dinner. He explained:

Christmas to New Years is one of the coldest times of the year. The tribe holds, I don’t know is it a week long...yeah mostly a week-long potlatch, where everyone can go and you know enjoy a good, hot meal. They do this, I’m not sure where it started or why it does, but I think it, what I think is that they do this to bring people together in the cold darkness of the middle of the winter, so they can you know catch up with people they never seen all winter because of the cold and just come together as a community and enjoy each others’ company. That’s my take on the whole potlatch thing. And that, in turn, makes the community well, you know.

This potlatch is well attended each year and there is always a broad array of people from the community that come to eat and visit with others. Usually hunters in the community apply for a special permit to hunt a moose for the potlatch. Even in times of death, the potlatches bring people together to share a meal and to support each other in times of need. Potlatches are a lot of work because people are needed to set-up, cook, clean, and get wood to keep the fire going inside the tribal hall. Therefore, the potlatch requires that as many community members as possible come together to make it happen. One of the participants who dedicates a lot of her time to helping with potlatches and other community events shares:

Well, there’s a lot of natural people in this, in our community. Like uh (names a person), she knows what to do, exactly what to do if somebody dies and needs help, her and I, we just get together and know what to do.

This participant who references “natural people” is considered one herself. It was observed that whenever something was happening in the community, whether it is for funerals, potlatches, or other celebrations, people called on this participant to help. This participant is
versed in her traditional ways so she knows the traditional laws that must be followed when doing certain ceremonial things, such as a proper burial and service. Many of the activities in each of the communities could not happen without the assistance of these natural people. Thus, participation in informal governance affected community well-being in a positive way.

Participation in both formal and informal governance affected well-being in both positive and negative ways in the Yukon Flats. For individuals, participating in formal governance, whether that is serving on the tribal council, the tribal court, or working at the tribal office, gave participants a sense of accomplishment and an opportunity to have their voice(s) heard. On the contrary, people felt like their participation in governance could be stressful at times and negatively impact their individual well-being because of the politics involved in leadership.

Most of the participants agreed that participating in formal governance positively affected community well-being. The interviews and observations supported this conclusion. Even in situations where there was dissension participants felt that there was a positive relationship between participation in governance and community well-being because participation in formal governance allowed for people to voice their opinions and influence decisions, serve in a leadership capacity, and/or work at a tribal office. In this manner, all tribal members were afforded opportunities and encouraged to share in the decision-making that influenced community well-being. It should be noted, however, that the participants in this study were all leaders, both informal and formal, so their responses ostensibly lend themselves to be in favor of viewing a positive relationship between participation in formal governance and well-being.

Participation in informal governance positively impacted individual and community well-being. Through participating in informal governance, which is one’s traditional values in action, participants [at the individual level] developed a strong, Native identity, learned from elders, and
developed good/useful feelings. Participation in informal governance positively affected community well-being through people sharing with one another and also coming together in times of need and celebration. By sharing and coming together, it was felt that no one was left out of the circle. It is important to recognize that participation in informal governance (i.e. traditional values and culture) is a part of daily life in the communities in the Yukon Flats and therefore informal governance is not separated from daily life, but instead an integrated part of daily life. This can be contrasted to western forms of governments that tend to separate government from daily life. Though repeated interactions and the dense social networks that North (1990) references informal governance has maintained validity in communities in the Yukon Flats as a stable institution. Yet informal governance remains vulnerable as younger generations participation in informal governance is more of a challenge in today’s world because while younger generations are aware and practice some of their traditional values and culture they are also faced with competing priorities and challenges, such as newer forms of governance that coincide with informal governance structures, very few young people speak their language, and there are some limitations on their traditional hunting and fishing lifestyle than earlier times when the elders were younger. For example, one way people in the Yukon Flats come together is through engaging in their traditional hunting and fishing lifestyle and then sharing their catch. Unfortunately, the ability to engage in this lifestyle has been severely limited in two of the research communities, due to declining Chinook [king] salmon runs over the past twenty years. These declining runs have resulted in more stringent regulations that have severely impacted the Gwich’in and Koyukon traditional livelihoods. Traditional hunting and fishing are an integral part of life in the Yukon Flats and this practice dates back millennia. The ability to hunt and fish are essential to identity, values, and individual and community well-being.
Hunting, Fishing, Gathering and Well-Being

As previously mentioned, this research was conducted in partnership with the CATG Natural Resource Department. Collectively, our research team thought it was important to add a question to the research regarding traditional hunting and fishing as it pertains to governance and well-being, given the fact that Gwich’in and Koyukon people have been hunting and fishing since time immemorial and has been a primary way to identify oneself (i.e. being a hunter or fisherman/woman in a community and all the skills and values that role embodies). Moreover, hunting, fishing, gathering, and being out on the land are the ways that Gwich’in and Koyukon practice or put their values into action (e.g., sharing one’s catch, showing respect for others as well as the land and animals). Yet, in past ten years the State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Serve have heavily regulated Alaska Native hunting and fishing, especially traditional fishing for king salmon. The reasons for these stringent regulations are complex, but include: the number of king salmon have been declining both in the oceans and rivers in Alaska and across the world for the past twenty years; there are large and varied monetary interests involved in salmon; international treaty obligations; limited funding for in-season management; and these various interests all have a political hand in what happens to salmon. Unfortunately, Alaska Native people have had very little say in establishing and amending these stringent regulations because the process is complex and confusing and the decisions are often made far from their communities, thus limiting their participation. This has resulted in the Alaska Native voice largely being left out of decision-making regarding fish and game, yet these decisions have huge impacts on individual and community well-being. Accordingly, the importance of traditional hunting and fishing to Gwich’in and Koyukon people cannot be understated.
The importance of hunting and fishing was evident in each of the research communities during the time research was conducted. During the summer, people in two of the research communities were busy preparing and fishing for salmon. First came the king salmon, next came the silvers, and last came the late fall chum. However, the summer that research was conducted there were limited king salmon fishing openings and the following summer there was no king salmon openings. This impacted people greatly. All throughout the communities people talked about fishing, the regulations, and listened to the fishing reports. Community members who fished made sure they knew when the openings were or if there were openings at all and for how long, especially for king salmon. Around the communities were empty fish caches, a physical sign that it was a bad year for fishing.

Nonetheless, despite these hard times, participants and others in the communities fished for other salmon species including what participants referred to as silvers, but were actually early fall chum, and then late fall chum, which were caught for dogs. After fall chum, it was moose hunting time and in other communities caribou hunting. Entire communities set out to their traditional hunting camps, usually with extended family members. These traditional hunting and fishing camps (i.e., fishcamps) are important not only for the purposes of hunting, fishing, and gathering but also for intergeneration fellowship and leadership training, although no one said “I am going to train so and so through these activities”. Leadership training was more integrated into daily activities and through the transmissions of traditional values. Thus these traditional hunting camps and fishcamps are important settings for informal governance. Observations also confirmed that traditional activities are an essential part of life in the research communities. When posed with the question, “Is traditional hunting and fishing, also referred to as subsistence, important to well-being?”, all of the participants responded favorably and their responses were
grouped into three emerging themes: 1) it’s who we are; 2) it connects us to the land and animals and; 3) it allows for self-sufficiency.

**It’s Who We Are**

Overall, the participants believed that hunting, fishing, and gathering were important to well-being because it plays a central part in developing their identity or “who we are.” One participant responded to the question by saying, “Yeah, it’s important. I mean, it’s the way we, it’s one of the main ways that we’ve been able to identify ourselves.” This participant then went on to say that without the land and one’s traditional use area, it takes away one’s identity. Another participant talked about a time he and his partner went out in the woods and how they shot some ducks and just really enjoyed themselves out there in the woods. In response to the question, he stated:

> From my point of view, the ability to do that is the very essence of well-being to me. I look forward to going out…We went out camping last weekend, just for one night out. Boy, refreshed…we stayed up late but we had good conversation, we paddled around, we had a real good listening to the sound of nature…The ability to the harvest one’s own food, we shot a duck took and we cooked it. And that had a really good taste, I mean better than anything we could have got out of the store and it gave us a really good sense of well-being.

For this participant, being out on the land and being able to harvest food not only filled a physical need, but a spiritual need as well. Other participants resonated with this response, such as a younger participant whose grandmother had been harassed and cited for fishing out of season. What happened to her grandmother inspired her to get involved in leadership and work to change existing regulations. She explained the importance of hunting and fishing as central to
identity and when something so central to identity is taken away, she explained, “You start feeling lost and spiral down”. She then elaborated on the importance of fishing and why the limited openings and closures impacted her community, stating, “Like, I don’t know, this is just how I think, but with our Native men these days, they have serious problems with self-esteem because, you know, in the past they’ve been our providers”. With limited employment opportunities, men are able to supplement the family economy through the hunting, fishing, and gathering lifestyle. However, with the king salmon fishing closures, the men in her village could not provide for their families as they had been taught to do and this impacted physical, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Even those people in the communities who do not hunt, fish, or gather are still involved in the process through helping to process the fish and game or supplying gas money or shot gun shells to the hunters and fishermen to help offset the costs, so when a closure occurs or there are limited openings and stringent regulations, this impacts everyone.

These above-mentioned responses reflect the overall feeling that many people, especially those who actively engaged in fishing on a regular basis, experienced in regards to the limited openings for king salmon that summer [research was conducted] and the summer before and after. It was a spiritual disaster as much as it was economic. For the participants, hunting, fishing, and gathering not only allows people to fill their freezers, but also allows them practice their way of life as their ancestors had and also connects them to the values embedded in this way of life. A participant who served as a tribal administrator in his community responded to the question [regarding the importance of hunting and fishing] by stating, “Yes it is. Because it’s, it’s our way of life for, you know, for 10,000 years.”
Connects us to the Land and Animals

In the words of many of the participants, the ability to hunt, fish, and gather was bigger than securing food and resources, but was also a spiritual practice that connects one to the land and animals. An older participant who is an activist and has always worked to protect her traditional homelands from outside development reflected on the question regarding the relationship between hunting and fishing and well-being. Expressing how connected she felt to the land and the animals, she stated:

Oh yes [the ability to hunt, fish, gather] it helps too, it helps the land, in order for, you got to know how your land is, or how the environment is in order to know what’s healthy and what’s not…we respect the cycle of life and my dad he knows when it’s good for trapping by just looking at the land. Like, and he knows if it’s over trapped and then he won’t kill the last of it. He’ll go somewhere else that might be more healthy. Yeah, so uh, that’s the way you balance that life.

Prior to the interview, this participant spoke at length about her family and how they would travel between their home village and other villages where her dad would trade his furs. She spoke about how important it was to her father to get out and get to know and become familiar with the land, then teach his children this way of life. According to this participant, by knowing the land and caring for it you would also be taken care of by the land in return. The land would provide. She stated:

And then you have to take care of the environment in order to take care of you. You have to take care of it in order for it to take care of you. So that goes for clean air and clean water and clean land and life. Life includes, you know, everything. You know, we believe that everything has a life to it. Like the animals, the trees, the land, all that, it’s
life. Fish. Yeah. All that, you know, if, that has to be healthy in order for it/you to be healthy.

This participant’s words reflect the sense of connectedness that exists between humans and the natural world and that this connection is sacred.

A young leader, who is very involved in his community and also travels a lot for his job reflected on the importance getting out in the woods and how it brings him happiness. He stated:

I like a lot of solitude out in the woods. You know, hunting, fishing, trapping and stuff. It’s cleansing…those times that I have to go out in the woods, you know, do my thing out there. Come back and it’s like, you know, a fresh start every day after I go out in the woods.

Other participants spoke about getting out on the land to hunt and fish and the spiritual nature of those cultural activities. A tribal administrator who also spends a lot of time out on the land shared his thoughts on the spiritual nature of hunting and fishing. He shared:

Well the [community] well-being is uh ensuring that we’re still living our subsistence life. You know, in the way that we raise our kids and the way that we do our potlatches that are still spiritual; our fishing our hunting is always spiritual…It’s [practicing subsistence] spiritual in our well-being, on our health, our…the way that we’re conducting ourselves when we’re teaching the kids. Or when we’re hunting, we respect the land, we respect the environment or the water you know, it’s very important.

Other participants, who all shared how important getting out on the land to hunt and fish and all that is embodied in those activities was to them, supported the words shared by this participant. Different participants explained that the animals that are hunted and the process of putting those animals away bring good feelings and a sense of pride: that one can provide for
oneself just as their ancestors had. A participant who has three children, works full-time, and also tries to instill in her children a strong sense of Native identity, described individual well-being in these terms: “For myself I feel good when I’m like if I go out for a walk, I’m in the land, umm it just makes me feel good being out there.” She then spoke about the importance of the land, the animals that give themselves to provide for the people, and what that meant to her. She shared how her grandmother taught her proper protocol when you take an animal for food. She stated, “If you shoot a moose, you know say a prayer thank-you, thank God and thank the animal for giving itself to you and your family to or to your community umm to feed you.” She said her grandmother taught her to respect animals and the importance of properly taking care of the meat from the animals and she is trying to ensure her own children know these protocols because it gave her a strong sense of pride that she carries with her today:

Umm, it gives me a sense of pride and uh it’s just, it’s a good feeling I just feel like um
I’m handing down something to them that umm my grandmother taught me, even though I’m not perfect at all of that. I am trying to share all of that with them and umm I think that’ll keep them healthy and tied to their culture and umm give them a sense of who they are.

These reflections and accounts shared by the participants reflected the deep connection and spiritual nature of hunting and fishing, which for the participants brought feelings of well-being. Hunting, fishing, and gathering also allows one to be “out on the land” and conduct an activity that is spiritual in nature, which results in increased feelings of well-being. While these feelings are experienced at the individual level, the food and other resources (e.g., wood) benefit the communities because people share and take care of each other. This ability to provide for oneself and one’s family and community allowed for self-sufficiency. Recognizing the
important role subsistence plays in peoples ability to be self-sufficient Fall et.al., (2017) found that rural Alaskans (a majority of who are Alaska Natives) consume 34.3 million pounds of wild foods annually, 32% of which are salmon alone. This amounts to approximately 155 lbs. of food per person annually.

**It Allows for Self-Sufficiency**

The interviews and the observations supported the view that the ability to hunt, fish, and gather allows for tribal members to be self-sufficient, a key element of community well-being as defined by participants. The high cost of living in the villages, which includes the high cost of shipping food, fuel, and other necessities, is a hardship. Therefore, people rely on hunting, fishing, and gathering wood to offset these hardships. One participant talked about how the food one hunts and fishes for allow one to survive and not rely on store bought food, which is expensive and not as healthy for you. He shared:

> Oh, of course it is [importance of hunting, fishing, and gathering to well-being]. It’s the way we feed ourselves. Everybody, you know, a lot of the outside people, that look at us say ‘well, you know, you’ve got a store there.’ Our tradition wasn’t going to a store; our tradition was storing food for the winter. So, the ability to go out and gather what you need for a long cold winter is pretty much life or death here.

A tribal leader from the same community elaborates on the importance of self-sufficiency. She shared:

> I think it [hunting, fishing, gathering] has a lot to do with uh, yes definitely, well-being because it’s umm, it’s self-sufficiency, being able to go out and to live off of the land and to bring in your wood, like I see a lot of people do today. And being able to uh do things for themselves, that they could be proud of and be happy with because they did
something for themselves during the day. Whether it’s hunting or fishing or just being part of the woods, revives your well-being and values.

Other participants affirmed that hunting and fishing allowed families and communities to be self-sufficient just as their ancestors had been. Yet it is difficult to be self-sufficient when state and federal regulations are not supportive of this lifestyle. Participants felt that on the one hand that different state and federal entities criticized them for not being self-sufficient, yet the way they practiced self-sufficiency was by hunting, fishing, and gathering. One participant talked about the moose population being low and that tribes needed to be able to manage that [i.e. regulate predators], so they could increase moose numbers. Doing so would enhance food security and self-sufficiency. He stated:

Well there’s a lot of importance to it [hunting and fishing], you know, a lot of it is, you know, having food security out there and well, as a Native person, you know, thinking back in how our ancestors hunted and trapped, and fished on this land you know it gives you a sense of pride knowing that you know they didn’t have snowmachines and boats and motors you know, they did it by hand in a real hard way. And…you know, we are still here today…living off the land, living off the land is a it’s really gives a person a real sense of pride, knowing that you can provide for your family off of what you bring in from the land whether it be berries, fish, you know you go out there and haul firewood and you know that firewood keep us warm…And just living off this land is pretty hard but it’s, it’s a good life and it’s something that we need to teach our children.

It was clear from the interviews and observations that the ability to hunt, fish, and gather was important to both individual and community well-being, as explained by the tribal members in the Yukon Flats. The ability to do what the participants’ ancestors had done for thousands of
years gave them a sense pride and helped to build a Native identity, as the participants reflected it’s “who we are”; hunting, fishing, and gathering connected participants to the land and animals in a spiritual way; and finally, hunting, fishing, and gathering allowed for self-sufficiency.

**Synthesis**

The study reveals several, important overarching findings:

1) Definitions of well-being for Gwich’in and Koyukon people in the Yukon Flats are holistic, including aspects of physical, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Individual well-being is centered around respect for oneself; embedded within respect for oneself are several elements, including sobriety, staying busy, spirituality, passing on culture/traditions, and developing a strong identity as a Native person.

2) Well-being is also contingent upon on knowledge of one’s traditional values and the ability to put those values into action. One traditional value that was important to almost every participant in the study was sharing, especially traditional Native foods, such as fish, moose, and caribou.

3) Hunting, fishing, and gathering are essential elements of individual and community well-being for Gwich’in and Koyukon people. In order to share Native foods, which are an important element of well-being and informal governance, one has to have access to first hunt, fish, and gather and also share in the management of these activities.

4) Informal governance structures, such as elders and natural leaders, maintain legitimacy in their communities, as they are the conduits to pass on traditional knowledge and values as well as mediate disputes. Even if elders and natural people are not in positions of formal leadership, formal leaders and others in
the community seek their counsel. This is especially true of the elders, who know the history, stories, and culture of the people.

5) This study finds that there is indeed a relationship between governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats. As illustrated in Figure 9, the theoretical statement explains the relationship between participation in governance and well-being and that the relationship is strongest when tribal members in the Yukon Flats are able to hunt, fish, and gather. Through hunting, fishing, and gathering tribal members learn and practice their traditional values (i.e., informal governance) and the acts of hunting, fishing, and gathering are forms of governance themselves. For example, tribal members’ ability to hunt, fish, and gather and also participate in informal governance promotes the effective management of resources and healthy ecosystems, given tribal members today and those that came before them have been living and stewarding the land for thousands of years. Tribal members’ ability to hunt, fish, and gather and participate in informal governance also promotes feelings of empowerment through developing a strong, identity as a Native person. The figure also illustrates the more tenuous relationship between participation in formal governance and well-being. The reason this relationship is tenuous, as illustrated by the dashed lines, is due to the fact that tribes in Alaska are sovereign, yet they are not attributed full sovereign status by other governmental entities, such as the State of Alaska and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. These entities do not recognize tribes as sovereigns when making decisions related to natural resource management within their traditional
territories. There are different ways in which tribal people are encouraged to participate in the management process, such as serving on a Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council, which consist of volunteers that serve as local voices from different regions of Alaska to recommend changes to the management of Alaska’s fish and wildlife resources on federal public lands to better meet the needs of their communities. There are also other ways in which tribal members can get involved in the management process of critical fish and wildlife, yet all of these mechanisms consist of a few, select individuals from a region and this is in direct contrast to the more collective decision-making that occurred among Alaska Native peoples prior to the implementation of these western governance systems. Additionally, tribes managed the resources they intimately depended on prior to the establishment of western governance systems and these resources have been sustained. There is the desire among many tribes to have an active, meaningful role in the management of culturally important fish and wildlife resources. These management designs would allow tribes and tribal people to more fully exercise both informal and formal governance. The dashed lines signify the potential to strengthen this relationship, which would in turn lead to effectively managed resources and feelings of empowerment through developing a strong, Native identity among Gwich’in and Koyukon peoples, both of which would positively affect individual and community well-being.
Figure 9: Strengthened Theoretical Statement

- Hunting, Fishing and Gathering
- Participation in Informal Governance (e.g., Traditional Values in Action)
- Participation in Formal Governance (e.g., Tribal Council)
- Effectively Managed Resources and Healthy Ecosystems
- Empowerment Through Developing a Strong, Native Identity
- Well-Being: Individual & Community

Hunting, Fishing and Gathering
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Chapter VI
Summary and Discussion

In this final chapter, I summarize key findings from the forgoing data and analysis, then take the discussion a step further, aiming for a clearer understanding of the definitions of governance and well-being and the relationship between these concepts as practiced and articulated by tribal members in the Yukon Flats. In-depth interviews, observations carried out during repeated visits, and review of institutional documents in three research communities provide the basis for analysis and interpretation. Following discussion of findings, I turn to the study’s methodological strengths and limitations, and I conclude with the practice and policy implications of this study.

Key Findings

The central finding is:

• There is a relationship between governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats, specifically as it relates to the management of fish and wildlife resources. The foundation of this relationship rests upon the exercise of informal governance, also defined as traditional governance. Informal governance mirrors the institutions that predated the integration and adoption of western, non-Native, and more formal institutions. Informal governance ensures traditional laws are followed, which require people practice respect for oneself, their relations, and community, and their natural world.

Other key findings are:

• Indigenous definitions of well-being in the Yukon Flats are centered upon the ability of one to live their traditional values and practice respect.
• Formal governance structures such as the tribal council and the tribal court are held in high regard as important institutions in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats, as they are recognized as sovereign governments. Yet, these institutions are modeled after non-Native governmental institutions. Thus, should tribes feel the need or desire a more integrated governance structure they might consider re-shaping these important institutions to reflect traditional governance structures and the traditional values of the people.

• Informal governance is traditional governance, which includes elements of elder guidance, living traditional values, following traditional laws, and natural leadership. All of these elements serve as important institutions in the communities in the Yukon Flats, which maintain authenticity and integrity. Elder guidance serves as an overarching institution from which the other elements of well-being are derived.

• The ability to hunt, fish, and gather and to share in the governance of these traditional practices is essential to well-being at both individual and community levels.

**Indigenous Definitions of Well-being**

In this study, I asked participants to define both individual well-being and community well-being. The Indigenous definitions for both individual and community well-being are centered on the ability to live according to traditional values. Demonstration of respect for oneself is at the heart of individual well-being. Participants identified five key areas in which an individual develops respect and, in addressing these, individual well-being is actualized. The five key areas are: practicing spirituality, staying busy, developing a strong Native identity, and passing on culture and traditions, and sobriety.

These five key elements of individual well-being are demonstrated in everyday life. For
example, spirituality is very important as it helps to ground people in a larger positive narrative and cope with the extensive challenges of daily life Yukon Flats. Spirituality is also a source of strength as people aimed for and sometimes achieved sobriety. For some, spirituality was acquired through attendance at weekly church services, whereas for others spirituality was a personal journey practiced in individualized traditional ways, such as time spent on the land or in personal reflection and prayer.

Staying busy was also important to individual well-being. Participants spoke about how their parents, grandparents and other family members taught them the importance of always staying busy. Staying busy allows participants not only to provide for their individual needs, but the needs of their family and community as well. Staying busy includes jobs, family obligations and events, hunting and gathering, and community engagement.

A strong underlying theme in the research findings is a robust interest and resurgence among community members to practice and pass on Native traditions and culture. This was demonstrated in a wide range of activities, including classes offered to learn a certain skill (e.g., skinning an animal someone had trapped, or tanning a moose or caribou hide), language revitalization efforts, celebratory potlatches and fiddle dances, and “culture week” offered at the schools each spring. These efforts to promote Native culture are vital to Indigenous definitions of individual and community well-being. Residents of the Yukon Flats have a keen awareness that culture and accompanying traditions have been passed down to the next generation for thousands of years, and they feel a responsibility to continue this intergenerational chain of tradition.

Moreover, given the sometimes overwhelming challenges currently faced by the tribal communities in the Yukon Flats, traditions and culture enable them to address these challenges
on a stronger footing, leading to better outcomes. Elder participants reflected on their childhood, a time when they perceived well-being to be consistently present, though life was hard. These elders shared in detail how everyone had a role in the family, life revolved around the seasons, and traditional culture framed daily life. Engaging in these cultural practices and honoring traditions builds a grounded Native identity, which was identified as fundamental to individual well-being.

Sobriety was identified as an important element of individual well-being. Participants talked about how drug and alcohol use is a barrier to well-being, as it limits people’s ability to achieve their goals and live a full life. Sobriety enables people to engage in life more honestly and more fully, which includes practicing values, engaging in Native culture, and achieving goals.

Overall, these elements of individual well-being provide capacity to mitigate daily challenges of living within a modern Indigenous community, which is still coping with the impacts of colonization. These elements give individuals meaning, purpose, and connections to the world around them, both natural and social.

Participants identified three elements as being important to community well-being; these are: working together, taking care of one another, and self-sufficiency. These elements of community well-being emphasize the importance of family, social relationships, and interconnectedness. As with individual well-being, which is centered on respect for oneself, community well-being is centered on respect for one another. For example, individuals who lacked the means to fully care for themselves were cared for in their community, as others shared food and other resources with these families (e.g., firewood, child care, money). Additionally, if someone was sick or had lost a family member, people in the community worked together to
carry out a proper burial and potlatch for the grieving family. In this manner, safety nets are woven for those who would otherwise struggle. Also, the sense of interconnectedness makes living in the communities not only necessary, but also highly desirable. Individuals feel connected and cared for even when life is difficult.

These Indigenous definitions of well-being as articulated by study participants in the Yukon Flats, can be compared to previous research where definitions of well-being are often metrics based. For example, well-being is often measured by the Human Development Index (HDI), which “assesses intercountry development levels on the basis of three so-called deprivation indicators: life expectancy, adult literacy and the logarithm of purchasing power adjusted per capita GDP” (McGillivray, 1991, p. 1461). While these metrics of well-being are useful, especially when making comparisons across countries and when examining deprivation as a barrier to well-being, the measures are limiting and incomplete for understanding well-being from an Indigenous perspective. A majority of the participants in this study do not focus their responses on income, education, or life expectancy. Even if these indicators are relevant in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats, the participants do not prioritize them as most important. While the results may seem remarkable from a “development” perspective, in this study only a few times did participants mention money and jobs in their definitions of well-being.

As described above, the definitions for both individual and community well-being are centered around living according to traditional values. Traditional values ensure that individual and communal needs are met and culture is sustained. Similarly, a study conducted with traditional knowledge bearers from Yukon Flats revealed that traditional principles (i.e. traditional values) are the foundation for traditional tribal stewardship. (See Figure 10). These traditional principles guide human behavior, especially as it pertains to caring for the land,
animals, and environment (Adams, Black, Brewer, Britton, Pitka, Stevens, & Williams, 2016). Thus, the importance of traditional values/principles cannot be understated, as they serve as important, foundational institutions in the communities in the Yukon Flats.

The primary way in which tribal members in the Yukon Flats learn and practice their traditional values are through hunting, fishing, and gathering lifestyles on their traditional homelands. These definitions of individual well-being are also consistent with other evidence, though limited, on well-being in Indigenous communities. Studies find that health and well-being consist of maintaining balance, having a sense of harmony, and being in control of spiritual, cognitive, and physical realms (Turkovich and Lattergrass, 2008); and being in balance in four quadrants spirit, body, mind, and context is important (Limb & Hodge, 2008; Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2006; Cross, 1997, 1998, 2001). As the key fulcrum in this body of work, including the present study, well-being is place-based and cannot be experienced apart from one’s environment and the interconnectedness of people and context (Panelli and Tipa, 2007). Yet this place-based notion of well-being is in peril, as the land, animals, and overall environment are being threatened due to rapid climate change.

There is a growing body of empirical evidence that documents the impacts climate change is having on Indigenous populations, including changes to their overall mental and physical health. Indigenous populations’ heavily reliance on the land, animals, and overall environment for their livelihoods, connection to culture, and overall well-being make them particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts. For example, it has been documented that the Inuit who have identified changes in the environment, including changes in the weather (e.g., overall temperatures) reported experiencing challenges to mental health (Cunsolo Wilcox et al., 2012, 2013a, b, 2015). Additionally, Cunsolo Willox et al., (2015) found that the multiple
impacts of climate change, including changes to the land, weather, and sense of place impact Indigenous people in the Circumpolar North at exponential rates, causing Indigenous people varied levels of stress and distress. Climate change creates situations where Indigenous people can no longer get out on the land or practice their traditional way of life as they had previously done; this disconnect from the land and traditional way of life causes stress and negative mental health.

Understanding how Gwich’in and Koyukon people define well-being contributes to the evidence on well-being among Indigenous peoples of North America. Many tribal nations have experienced similar histories of colonization and continue to combat long-lasting impacts. The larger question remains, “How can tribal peoples heal from the long-lasting negative impacts of colonization, and create their own self-determined futures?” Based on overwhelming historical precedent, it is unlikely that the colonizing culture will answer this question to the benefit of Native people. Therefore, a positive answer must ultimately lie within the people themselves. Building on previous research on Indigenous definitions of well-being, this research offers insight and specificity to Alaska Native definitions of well-being, which are context specific, from the people themselves, and authentic. Results confirm that the hunting, gathering, and fishing lifestyle, and the interaction between people and environment, are fundamental to understanding well-being in the Yukon Flats. Life still largely revolves around seasonal patterns of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Well-being is woven into this context. In addition, this study contributes to evidence and understanding of the unique spiritual relationship of Alaska Natives [Gwich’in and Koyukon specifically] with the land and animals.
Figure 10: Dinjii Zhuh K’yaa Gwiindaii: Live Your Traditional Principles
Formal Governance in the Yukon Flats

Participants in the study defined formal governance in two ways: the first was participation in governance through formal means (i.e., holding a job at the tribal office, or serving as a tribal council member or tribal court judge) and the second was through self-governance, which the participants defined as “the ability to do things for ourselves” without outside influence. While these institutions (tribal council and tribal courts) have political power and legitimacy in tribal communities, the way they were established and currently operate mirror a non-Indigenous, western framework. This framework does not fully align with traditional governance structures, resulting in an institution that does not reflect the values of the people or the traditional ways in which decisions are made and enforced (Cornell & Kalt, 2003). For example, the tribal council meetings now commonly operate according to Roberts Rules of Order, which serves as a guide for conducting meetings and making decisions. This places one person in charge of conducting the meetings where tribal council members vote yes or no on certain decisions, and the majority carries the decision. This system of governance is very different than traditional governance systems, which operate according to consensus. Seeking consensus is a much more involved process than simply voting yes or no. Thus, it is important to assess how tribal governments and tribal councils operate and ask whether the process of governance aligns with the values of the people. In Native traditions, the process should be inclusive and transparent, with the aim of ensuring empowerment and participation of tribal members in decisions that ultimately affect them. When it is not open and inclusive, people feel alienated and question the system in place, and this is what I found in the Yukon Flats.

These findings are similar to conclusions of Cornell & Kalt (2003), who conducted hundreds of case studies across American Indian and Alaska Native communities and suggest
that tribes who participate in a nation-building approach create thriving tribal governments. A nation-building approach is reflected by Native nations asserting their decision-making power, backing up that power with effective governing institutions, ensuring that governing institutions match the Indigenous political culture, and practicing strategic decision-making. Under these conditions, leaders serve as nation builders and mobilizers (Cornell & Kalt, 2003).

One way to achieve a nation-building approach in the Yukon Flats is to conduct tribal council meetings in a way that mirrors the traditional values and culture of the community. So if elders or natural leaders are understood to be leaders in a community, as they are in the Yukon Flats, it is important to invite them to be part of—or even lead—tribal council meetings. In some communities they do. For example, one of the communities in the study conducts their tribal council meetings in this manner: where everyone sits in a circle, people in the community are encouraged to participate, elders have an influential role in the meetings, and decisions are consensus-based. This community governs in a way that matches the traditional culture of the community, where elders are the primary decision-makers and other leaders take direction from them. This approach appears to be effective for this community. However, each community must govern in a way that matches its unique context. Successful governance is never a fixed arrangement, but instead requires that tribes consistently reflect and adjust their programs, policies, and processes, to ensure that they are meeting the needs of tribal members and well-being of the community.

**Informal Governance as the Path to Well-Being**

Participants in this study defined informal governance as embodying four fundamental elements: Elder guidance, living traditional values, following traditional laws, and natural leadership.
Elder guidance was repeated to be important to informal governance. First, elders have witnessed immense change over time and have adapted accordingly; second, elders have traveled the land and have a keen awareness of how the land and the animals behave; third, elders have endured tremendous hardships surviving in the harsh, Alaska environment and during times of sickness and starvation; fourth, elders still speak their language and rooted in the language is Indigenous philosophy and worldviews; and lastly, elders fulfill central roles in their communities by conveying traditional knowledge, culture, history, laws, and values to younger generations. Respect for elders was evident in the study; almost every participant referenced them as being critical to daily life in their communities. Elders in the study also recognized their contributions to the community, based on their knowledge of history, language, cultural practices, traditional way of life, and how these have changed or not changed over time. Elders are seen as experienced and resilient; they are the keepers of wisdom.

Younger generations rely heavily on the elders to keep them connected to their culture as they navigate the future. Therefore, it is important that each community take time to document elder knowledge and whatever elders want to share, so that this knowledge can be preserved and shared with future generations. Some of this documentation is occurring, but ideally it would be done with each elder in each community in the Yukon Flats. If not recorded, their knowledge will die with them. Equally important is for younger generations to purposefully seek out elders and to talk and listen and learn as much as they can from them. It is important that young people talk with elders face-to-face and listen carefully because the way in which elders communicate is very different from the communication style of younger people. One-to-one conversation and storytelling are the primary methods in which elders communicate, rather than through technology (e.g., cell phones and Facebook), which is now common among younger generations.
These findings align with the work of Kovach (2009) and Lewis (2010, 2011, 2014) who highlight the importance of American Indian and Alaska Native elders as wisdom keepers, serving as mentors and teachers to younger generations, and through this process keeping communities healthy. Additionally, a study conducted by Blandford & Chappell (1990) with both Native and non-Native elders in Canada, found that Native elders, when considering components of well-being, included strong connections with extended family networks, involvement in community activities, and connection to their culture.

Living traditional values was also recognized as a fundamental aspect of informal governance. Living traditional values includes, but is not limited to, demonstrating respect for all living things, sharing what you have, learning from elders, and maintaining a balance.

Also, traditional values shape institutions. Defining institutions as “the rules of the game.” North (1990) specifies that institutions reduce uncertainty by establishing a uniform structure to human exchange, whether political, social, or economic. The traditional values of the Gwich’in and Koyukon people have created expected patterns and a social structure that guides human interaction and ensures Gwich’in and Koyukon people live in congruence with each other and with the natural environment. When individuals deviate from living according to these values extensive kinship networks—including elders, family members, and respected leaders—aim to get them back on track, or in the words of North (1990), they have established institutions that serve as important enforcement mechanisms.

Extensive kinship networks ensure that everyone knows the traditional laws, which are the rules that people know and live by. For example, traditional laws include sharing and giving away one’s first catch, saying a prayer over the animal, thanking the animal for giving its life, and following elders and other respected leaders’ advice. These traditional laws are documented
in this study as an important pillar of informal governance because they guide daily behavior and relationships. Expressing traditional values and following traditional laws also ensures that people are always taken care of: “No one is left out of the circle,” as poignantly stated by one of the participants.

Moreover, living according to traditional laws grounds individuals in expected patterns, enabling them to form a strong identity as a Gwich’in or Koyukon person. This is important given the massive upheaval that has occurred in their communities over the past two hundred years. Practicing traditional values and laws provides Native people with a firm foundation in the face of adversity, enabling them to remain steady and resilient. Thus, the practice of traditional values and laws—comprising a specialized, Indigenous knowledge for living—persists against the negative impacts that “Western civilization” has presented.

As noted above, natural leadership is an important element of informal governance. Natural leaders don’t hold official, formalized positions within their respective communities, yet they are the people that community members turn to in times of need. Prior to the implementation of western, formalized tribal governments, natural leaders would be recognized and consulted prior to making any major decision. This remains somewhat true today; however, there are also formally recognized tribal leaders in each community. For the most part, the two types of leaders appear to work effectively together, though there are times when dissent occurs. Based on the examples and data in this study, dissent appears to occur when the formal tribal organization makes decisions that are not perceived as being in the best interest of tribal members, or not in alignment with local values. One way to address dissent positively is to bring everyone together, invite opinions, and discussion, and invite the natural leaders to be a part of the formal decision-making process. Natural leaders know what is happening in their
community and people trust them. Indigenous people know how to consider different voices and make decisions in this manner, and in the best examples for community well-being, this is what occurs.

These findings align with the work of Ostrom (1990), Trawick (2001), and Acheson (2003), who through their respective research conclude that local and egalitarian input are essential elements to long-enduring common pool resources. Notwithstanding the advance of private property regimes and Western legal systems, tribal people in the Yukon Flats—as well as many other Indigenous peoples—view their environment as a common property to be cared for by the community, and to be handed down to the next generations. Thus, the desire to manage this common property or these common-pool resources appears logical. The reality though is tribal communities have limited influence in how fish, game, and other resources are managed within the State of Alaska therefore threatening their ability to fully and effectively manage these CPRs for future generations.

Informal governance, based in a communal living perspective, is an important institution in the Yukon Flats. This institution is long-enduring and has deep legitimacy in the communities. Informal governance encourages people to know, understand, and practice their traditional values, which include respect, sharing, taking care of land, water and animals, and learning from elders. Managing relationships and resources is rooted not in an abstract set of rules, but in the lessons of generations living together on the land, among the resources.

**Hunting, Fishing, and Gathering is Essential to Well-Being**

Returning to the key finding in the study, the ability to hunt, fish, and gather is essential to well-being in the Yukon Flats. This is evident in everyday life in each of the communities where research was conducted. People are out on the land whenever they get a break from their
jobs or daily life. Some of the jobs people have are seasonal jobs (e.g., firefighting in the summer), jobs at the local school, store or post office, or part-time jobs (e.g., home care attendant for elders). In some of the larger communities there are more and diverse jobs, such as working for nonprofits in various capacities (e.g., Early Head Start program), whereas in the smaller communities jobs are scarce and people do not have jobs and instead draw income from state and federal subsidies (e.g., general assistance and TANF). Consequently hunting, fishing, and gathering is also important in that it supplements the cash economy (or lack there of) and also offsets the high cost of living in the villages. People shared that they enjoyed getting out on the land to hunt, fish, or just enjoy time in nature. Participants did not always mention time on the land as important to well-being, but observations confirmed this importance; on any given day people were hunting, fishing, gathering. Even when doing something else they were out in their environment, riding a snowmobile, taking a boat trip, walking beside the river, or driving a four-wheeler up into the mountains.

Given this core lifestyle, limitations on opportunities to hunt, fish, and gather has resulted in devastating impacts on tribal members in the Yukon Flats. As previously mentioned, this is especially the case for fishing for the Chinook, or king salmon, on the Yukon River, whose numbers have been declining since 2000. Other resource degenerations and depletions, along with incursions by mining and other commercial activities, have materially interfered with Native livelihoods and way of living. Also, threats of development and resource extraction loom as a real threat to an important, spiritual way of life.

To compound these losses, tribal governments and peoples have been largely left out of natural resource management discussions and decisions. This is highly unfortunate for everyone involved. Given the vast experience and knowledge of tribal members and informal governance
based on centuries of living in close proximity and in relationship with common-pool resources, tribal governments and peoples have much to offer in ensuring the sustainability of fisheries and other common-pool resources. Greater local participation in laws, policies, and decision-making regarding the management of hunting and fishing would improve the overall system and outcomes, but this human resource is often ignored.

In *Governing the Commons*, Ostrom (1990) argues that to ensure long-term viability of Common Pool Resources (CPR) such as fisheries, institutions for collective action must be established based on a set of eight design principles. (See Table 4). The problem with the management systems in the Yukon Flats and other parts of Alaska is that most of the design principles are not adhered to. For example, in regards to king salmon fishing and management in the upper Yukon River only two design principles apply: Clearly Defined Boundaries and Graduated Sanctions. It is very clear according to state and federal laws who can subsistence fish and who cannot in the Yukon Flats. The graduated sanctions design principle applies; however the sanctions are not necessarily graduated, but rather harsh, with immediate fines if one deviates from the proposed rules (e.g. fishing past a closure or wrong size net). The rest of the design principles do not apply to the current situation, regarding king salmon management in Yukon Flats. For example, the congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions is lacking. On some parts of the Yukon River, the river is narrow: thus, limited, short openings to fish do indeed meet the local conditions. However, on other parts of the river where the river is wide and there are many channels, such as the case in the Yukon Flats, the limited, short openings do not meet the local conditions. Most people on this wider part of the river need longer openings to get any king salmon at all because the fish have many channels they can
swim in and thus fishermen/women are constantly having to move their nets and fishwheels to catch fish.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Principle</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearly defined boundaries</td>
<td>Individuals or household who have rights to withdraw resource units from the CPR must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions</td>
<td>Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective-choice arrangements</td>
<td>Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated sanctions</td>
<td>Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or by both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-resolution mechanisms</td>
<td>Appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low-cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal recognition of rights to organize</td>
<td>The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nested enterprises (for CPRs that are parts of larger systems)</td>
<td>Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the positive side, Alaska Native people do serve in advisory capacities on Local Advisory Committees (LACs), Regional Advisory Committees (RACs), the Federal Subsistence Board and the Board of Fish. These boards and committees are some of the ways the state of Alaska and U.S. federal government attempts to get input from Alaska Native people. The representation is important and helpful, but it is not enough. The requirements and processes of these councils and boards are often perceived as arduous, confusing, far removed from home communities, and overall do not have adequate Alaska Native representation. These factors discourage full Native participation in these processes. Yet they do provide an attempt to gather Alaska Native input.

As it stands, tribal members in the Yukon Flats have limited input on management decisions that impact their daily life and culture. Participation is more often “on paper” instead of in real decision-making, and discussion is superficial. Instead of surface level input, tribal members in the Yukon Flats should be assisting in establishing the rules, sanctions, and related laws and policies regarding the management of these resources. According to Ostrom (1990), this is what differentiates long-enduring common-pool resources from those that do not endure. As one example, Acheson (2003) found that in order for Maine lobster fisheries to be sustainable, local governance and the rules created by these governments must be encouraged and respected by other entities, including state and federal governments.

This is not the case in Alaska where tribal governments have limited input into natural resource management decisions, though they are officially sovereign entities. Of course this is not the only instance of ignoring local resource practices. Ostrom (1990) shares a case example of Nova Scotia fisheries where many of the small fishing villages had devised their own rules for governing the use of nearby fisheries based on generations of experience. However, problems
arose when Canadian policy was developed which gave “little credence to the ability of local customary regulations to adequately police the fishery” (Matthews, 1998, p. 175 as cited in Ostrom, 1990), thus essentially undermining informal institutions of governance that had been in place for centuries. The result in Nova Scotia was declining fish stocks and broken systems of management, much like the current case of salmon mis-management in Alaska.

Hunting, fishing, and gathering are important to tribal members in the Yukon Flats, with huge impacts on individual and community well-being. These practices are at the core of Alaska Native identity and living patterns. As one villager put it clearly, “It is one of the ways we have been able to identify ourselves.”

Even more important, hunting, fishing and gathering has spiritual elements, practiced with the aura and meaning of ceremony. This spiritual process is multifaceted, embodying kinship, transmission of values, intergenerational fellowship, hands-on skill building, and good feelings from time out on the land. Accordingly, limited season openings for catching king salmon, along with limited decision-making power in overall natural resource management discussions and decisions have disrupted core spiritual practices, further impacting the well-being of individuals and communities.

The importance of spirituality to Alaska Natives well-being as well as acknowledging that spirituality is practiced differently among different people (e.g., spending time out on the land practicing hunting, fishing, and gathering) aligns with the work of Beckstein (2014) who asserts that well-being is perceived differently among Native Americans (NA). He states, “The NA view of mental health tends to be much more holistic and incorporates more spiritual and community aspects than the mainstream culture. Religiosity and spirituality are important for many people’s happiness” (p.1). A study conducted by Goodkind, Gorman, Hess, Parker, &
Hough (2015) reaffirms the centrality of spirituality to American Indians and Alaska Natives and place-based notions of spirituality. Their study aimed to understand youth, parent, and elder perspectives on coping with stress, healing, and treatment. Among the core findings were the participants in the study experienced healing from the land and the environment; not only being on the land or in the environment, but being with others in these places. Also, the participants described becoming “stronger spiritually” from being out on the land and experiencing time in sacred places (p.16). The healing power of the land and the natural environment through the process of being together in these places and connecting more deeply with them and with each other was significant.

Given the importance and centrality of hunting, fishing, and gathering to well-being in the Yukon Flats it is imperative that this way of life remains accessible. It is how tribal members learn and practice their traditional values and in turn culture is expressed. Moreover, it is one of the primary ways individuals in the Yukon Flats form and express their identity as Gwich’in or Koyukon people. Colonization and other factors have deeply changed life in Gwich’in and Koyukon communities, resulting in immense loss and generations of traumatic experiences, which have profound, generational effects. Yet, Gwich’in and Koyukon people remain strong and resilient, as they continue to practice their traditional values, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering. The loss of these traditions would result in yet more trauma and negative impacts, likening the loss to historical trauma. This cannot happen and it does not have to happen. If Gwich’in and Koyukon people are afforded equal access and weight in management decisions we can ensure that not only are the Gwich’in and Koyukon people thriving well into the future, but the land, animals, and resources as well.
Study Strengths and Limitations

In this study, I have aimed to define and clarify definitions of governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats, the relationship between governance and well-being, and the importance of hunting, fishing, and gathering to well-being.

Strengths

The study is in some ways unique. To my knowledge, very little research has been conducted on examining the relationship between participation in governance and well-being, especially as it pertains to natural resources. This is important as the global climate is rapidly changing, and with this change, natural resources are also changing or even becoming nonexistent. It is therefore imperative that nations take the lead and engage in decisions that will positively impact and preserve natural resources for future generations. In order to do this, an accurate understanding of the relationship between participation in governance and well-being is needed, especially concerning management of natural resources.

Second, very little research has focused on well-being in Indigenous communities, as most of the research focuses on the challenges Indigenous people face. While it is important to recognize these challenges, it is equally important that strengths, resiliency, and protective factors be documented to help mitigate the challenges. This documentation, and the methods involved in the documentation, can be a tool used by other Indigenous populations who are experiencing similar challenges, such as other Indigenous communities in the Circumpolar North.

Third, there has been limited in-depth social science research in the Yukon Flats conducted by local Indigenous researchers. This is significant because local Indigenous researchers not only know the local context, but also know the values of the people, potential
partnerships, and what issues are relevant. Moreover, it is important for Indigenous scholars to be writing about Indigenous issues. Doing so will reflect the unique epistemology and ontology that Indigenous researchers bring to their work. These contributions are important for the larger field of social work and other social sciences to understand, as Indigenous people live all around the world in both rural and urban settings, and some of these epistemologies and ontologies are significant across Indigenous populations.

Finally, this study documents governance practices and meanings that have proved effective for centuries in living in balance with the natural environment. Although the people who carry out these practices have experienced colonization and hence severally repressed in many ways, they continue to hold these values. At the same time, the dominant society is rapidly endangering the environment, threatening literally all life on earth. In this context, Native knowledge regarding humility and balance, and processes for inclusive decision-making, may be among the most valuable types of knowledge on the planet. In this regard, this study and other research on Native peoples, governance, and well-being may have value far beyond the local setting. For everyone’s sake, we can hope this will someday be recognized.

**Limitations**

As in all research, there are limitations. First, the study might have been stronger by asking fewer research questions. Asking several research questions sometimes detracted from spending more time and exploring a particular question in-depth. For example, the topic of governance for Alaska Natives is very different than governance for American Indian tribes in the continental United States. This is primarily due to the way in which land claims were settled in Alaska, creating a mosaic of land ownership and management systems. This might have been a good dissertation topic in and of itself. However, there were seven other questions in the study
that the researcher had to attend to. This created breadth and enabled certain analytical
conclusions, but it also diminished depth.

Second, some of the research questions were worded in ways that confused participants
(e.g., “Does participation in informal governance affect individual well-being?”). Some of the
participants immediately understood the questions and answered them, whereas others really
struggled and asked for clarification. While I encouraged the participants to answer the
questions in the best way they could and provided them with prompts, not fully understanding
the questions sometimes resulted in short and limited answers to the questions. After the first
few times of experiencing my participants confusion with these question, especially around
governance, I did get creative in the prompts I provided and explaining meaning, but some
participants still did not fully understand the question. To minimize this issue, piloting these
questions with a more diverse group of tribal members in the Yukon Flats would have been
helpful. In the larger picture, extensive pre-testing of research instruments, while time
consuming, is time well spent.

Third, to capture more nuanced examples of the relationship between governance and
well-being, more participants could have been invited to be part of the study, though there was a
positive trade off. Since there was a manageable number of participants interviewed (N=21),
extensive time was spent with each participant and deep conversations and interactions
transpired. These extended time periods allowed for holistic answers to the research questions to
emerge.

Fourth, because so many elders were interviewed, it would have been useful to have the
research questions translated into Gwich’in and Koyukon languages and recruitment of fluent
speakers to help conduct the interviews. This would have ensured that the elders, who were all
English as second language speakers, understood each question. Moreover, this would have ensured that the study more fully captured the philosophy, nuances, and deeper meanings rooted in the knowledge systems of the elders. Many fluent Native speakers observed that some of the knowledge loses its meaning when it’s translated into English.

Fifth, interviewing younger generations (18 and under) as part of the study might have more fully captured intergenerational similarities and differences in understanding governance, well-being, and the relationship between these concepts. This is important because so much change has occurred in Gwich’in and Koyukon communities, and rapid change continues.

Lastly, because governance over land and natural resources in Alaska involves multiple entities, the study would have been strengthened by interviewing officials from the State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Native corporations, and policymakers at state and federal levels. This would have highlighted differing perspectives across agencies and people, and offered wider interpretations of the relationship between governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats.

Practice, Policy and Research Implications

Alaska Native people are at a critical juncture in time. Momentum is building across tribal communities to heal past traumas, reclaim Indigenous identities, and assert inherent sovereign rights as tribal peoples. These research results can inform and support this movement toward healthy, sovereign, and empowered individuals and communities, based on Indigenous definitions of well-being, and respected and effective governing institutions.

Practice and Policy Implications. First and foremost, findings from this study have relevance in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats, as the definitions of well-being are context and culture-specific. In addition, these definitions may be of interest and have relevance in other
tribal communities around the state, nation, and internationally as well, given the shared experiences among many Indigenous people and communities. These implications include the strengths of connection to place and importance of traditional values, coping with the tragic histories of colonization and dispossession of lands, and redressing the social ills that accompany these traumas.

Indigenous definitions of well-being can serve as guiding principles in tribal communities to strengthen individual and community well-being, mitigate harm, and address individual and collective challenges. We have seen that Indigenous definitions for both individual and community well-being are centered around the ability to live according to one’s traditional values; therefore, integrating the promotion of traditional values into programs can be an effective means to increase well-being. For example, spirituality is one identified element of individual well-being, thus creating opportunities for people to learn about their traditional spiritual practices and beliefs from elders or other appropriate teachers within tribal health care systems in the Yukon Flats can work to increase individual well-being. As traditional values are so central to well-being it can be seen as critical that every young person know these values; this can occur through integrating traditional values into school curriculum. For example, Figure 10 is a list of traditional principles created by elders from Beaver. This poster and its accompanying principles could hang in every school in the Yukon Flats, and during tribal consultation with the school district, each tribal government could mandate that each school make these principles a central part of school curriculum at all grade levels. Not only would students have to know what the principles are, but by the time they graduate they would also have experience in practicing these values in context (e.g. hunting, fishing, and gathering).
Second, the results from this study can be used to inform tribal governments in the Yukon Flats about tribal members’ perceptions of tribal operations, including level of understanding among tribal members on the breadth of their governing abilities, on the scope of services offered, and on the various initiatives in which they are engaged. The results can be shared with tribal governments to initiate conversations exploring definitions of governance, strengthened governance, and community perceptions of governance efficacy and authenticity. Tribes can then create a plan to achieve an identified vision for their tribal governance structures. For example, if tribes want to be perceived as innovative and progressive, offering culturally-grounded jobs that meet community needs, then tribes can create a vision and a plan to get there. In this way tribes would follow the nation-building approach as identified by Cornell & Kalt (2003).

Third, the results from this study can be used to inform other governmental entities, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service & State of Alaska Fish and Game, and policymakers at the state and federal level what constitutes well-being for Alaska Native people; Informing and ensuring state and federal agencies, lawmakers, and their representatives understand the relationship between hunting, fishing, and gathering and well-being can have powerful impacts on not only regulatory and policy change, but tribal, state, and federal programmatic activities as well. One way this could be achieved is inviting the personnel from these entities out to the different communities, taking them out on the land and allow them to be part of traditional way of life, so that they can not only listen to why it is important to tribal members in the Yukon Flats, but feel it in their hearts as well. If the visits don’t or can’t happen, another way to achieve this understanding is to create videos of people spending time out on the land, the values learned and practiced, and then interviewing tribal members from all walks of life as to what this
way of life means to them. These videos can be shared with various decision-makers and anyone interested.

Fourth, because elders are central to informal governance institutions in tribal communities in the Yukon Flats, it is important that their knowledge, history, and experiences be documented. The young people in each community can do this, providing them an opportunity to learn from the elders while giving elders a chance to share as well. One way this might materialize is tribal members from the Yukon Flats who are also Indigenous scholars could seek funding to support this documentation project and hire on the young people to gather the data. This allows the young people to not only gather the elder stories, but also be mentored and gain valuable research skills at the same time.

Finally, the results from this study can be used by tribal governments to advocate in policy realms for the right to manage or minimally co-manage critical resources upon which they depend. The stories captured in this study as well as the observations and findings can be used as tools to relay the message of why Indigenous management or co-management is necessary for not only for Indigenous well-being, but the well-being of the resource itself. The results from this study can also be used as powerful documentation that indeed a relationship between governance and well-being does exist and the mechanisms through which this relationship exits.

**Research Implications.** Though this dissertation study is minute in scope and conducted in a remote part of rural Alaska, the results of the study might be perceived as useful to other Alaska Native communities and parts of the study useful to Indigenous people in other contexts. What is unique about this study is it examines well-being from an Indigenous Alaska Native perspective and attempts to explain why traditional livelihoods such as hunting, fishing, and gathering, are important to individual and community well-being. Additionally, this study
examines the relationship between governance and well-being in the Yukon Flats, specifically explaining how and what governance structures either support or undermine this relationship. These two areas are where the study makes its contribution to the larger field of social work, especially as it pertains to American Indian and Alaska Native well-being.

The study is however limited in several ways. In its attempt to cover breadth, the study lacks depth in certain areas. The study fails to adequately define formal governance. Part of this failure is the way the question was asked of the participants. While probing questions were utilized the question still fell short of defining formal governance in a comprehensive way. Second, the definitions of governance and well-being are subjective, as is my interpretation as the researcher, though my partners in the research process did also analyze the data on their own and we met and co-created a list of findings. One way to strengthen this subjectivity in the future is to not only engage in in-depth interviews, but also administer surveys across the greater population in the Yukon Flats, which will help to provide reliability. Lastly, this study was conducted in a small, rural area in Northeastern Alaska, so it lacks generalizability. Nonetheless, the overarching aims of this study, to better understand governance, well-being, and the relationship between these concepts, may be of interest to tribal peoples both in Alaska and in other Indigenous contexts. Therefore the next step in this research would be to implement this study in other contexts and compare the results to the results of this study. This would help to achieve a comprehensive and holistic definition of well-being that spans the broader Indigenous context.

This study makes valuable contributions to better understanding Indigenous definitions of well-being, which is sorely needed given much of the empirical literature on Indigenous people is problem-focused. Primarily focusing on problems minimizes the valuable contributions
Indigenous people bring to the world. Whereas, understanding how Indigenous peoples define well-being helps researchers and Indigenous communities alike target interventions towards keeping people well.

This study also explains why hunting, fishing, and gathering are so important to individual and community well-being. Conveying this special relationship is important, because it is understudied area and yet when tribal members in the Yukon Flats are unable to hunt, fish or gather it has devastating impacts on individuals, families and communities. The participants in this study shared how hunting, fishing and gathering help shape one’s identity as a Gwich’in and Koyukon person and when you can no longer do those things that shape your identity, you start to spiral downwards. This study aims to prevent tribal members from spiraling down and instead experience individual and community well-being through participation in governance and practicing their traditional values.

**Conclusion**

Well-being in the Yukon Flats is multidimensional. It moves beyond standard definitions of income, education, and health and incorporates culture, community, and traditional values. In this manner, well-being in the Yukon Flats is intimately tied to hunting, fishing, and gathering and grounded in respect. Through hunting, fishing, and gathering, individuals are able to practice their traditional values and provide for oneself, one’s community, and care for the world around them. Thus, respect is demonstrated and experienced on all levels.

Elders are a significant institution in the Yukon Flats. Elders teach younger generations their traditional values, guide community life, and provide wisdom in challenging and celebratory times. They provide peace during tumultuous times and they are the go to when questions arise. They are a window to the past and provide important knowledge to navigate the
future, as they have experienced life in both the traditional and modern world. It is imperative that elder knowledge be learned and documented for future generations.

Unfortunately this traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering lifestyle is in peril with contentious laws that don’t afford Alaska Native people an equal seat at the decision-making table. Yet, Alaska Native people have a wealth of knowledge to contribute to managing these natural resources, given the immense and accumulated knowledge they’ve acquired throughout centuries of meaningful time “out on the land”. Additionally, Alaska Native communities are changing and adapting to modern culture, thus hunting, fishing, and gathering are one of the ways in which Alaska Native people are able to stay grounded in their identity amidst the competing priorities. Therefore, it is paramount that hunting, fishing, and gathering remain a strong pillar in the communities in the Yukon Flats.

To realize these ideals, communities in the Yukon Flats and across Alaska must be in the drivers seat, making localized decision in every facet of their lives, including decisions on hunting, fishing, and gathering. Strong institutions, both traditional and contemporary, must support these decisions. Achieving such will lead to strong, vibrant Alaska Native people and communities, grounded in their values and connected to their culture.
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Appendix 1: Interview Questionnaire Guide and Prompts

1. What does individual well-being mean to you as a tribal member from the Yukon Flats?
   (Prompts: When you feel “healthy” what are some signs that you are well? When you wake-up and think “today is a good day”, what makes you feel like that? If they ask what aspects of being healthy, I will say, all aspects [spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally]. Another prompt would be: If you were telling your children, nieces or nephews, or grandchildren what well-being means to you, how would you explain it to them? Can you provide an example of what do you do to stay healthy?)

2. What does community well-being mean to you as a tribal member from the Yukon Flats?
   (Prompts: If you lived in a perfect community, what would it look like? What would people be doing? Can you provide specific examples? If you were telling someone, not from your community, what well-being means to people living in community X [the person being interviewed specific community], what would you tell them?)

3. Is the ability to hunt, fish, and gather [sometimes referred to as ‘subsistence’] in the Yukon Flats important to well-being? (Prompt: If they just say “yes”, I will ask, how so? Can you provide for me in your own words why it matters? Can you tell me a story to demonstrate this relationship?)

4. What does governance mean to you [individually] as a tribal member from the Yukon Flats?
   (Prompt: If a person from outside your community asked “what does governance mean to you as a tribal member from the Yukon Flats?” what would you tell them? In your words how is it different than state governance or federal governance? If they are still struggling, give them the definition of governance provided by Jorgensen and colleagues, then ask them to give a specific example of the tools that they use to solve problems they face).
According to Jorgensen and colleagues:

We can think of governance as tools, the instruments that Indigenous nations use to address and solve the problems they face—maintaining good relations among themselves, surviving hard times, interacting with other nations, caring for the land, educating the young, and so forth. Prior to the European arrival in North America, Native nations governed and sustained themselves through the skilled use of such tools (p.59).

5. What are examples of community members participating in governance? (Prompts: Again, I would ask them to imagine a person from outside your community asking “how do people in your community demonstrate governance?” and then I would ask the participant what examples they would provide [to the person asking] of governance being exercised. Again, to help the person draw a comparison in their mind, I would state “in your words how is it different than state governance or federal governance?” If they are still struggling, I will give them the definition of governance provided by Jorgensen [above], then ask the participant to give a specific example of what tools that community members use to solve problems and how they use these specific tools. I will tell them they can use a story to help illustrate their point).

6. Does a tribal member’s participation in governance affect his or her [individual] well-being? Can you provide specific examples? (Prompts: So you just explained how community members participate in governance [above], does this participation affect his or her well-being? Can you please explain how that happens? Another prompt, “those things you do to participate in governance, do they affect your well-being? Please explain how: use a story if it helps you.”)

7. Does a tribal members’ participation in governance affect community well-being? Can you provide specific examples? (Prompts: Above you explained how participation in governance impacts individual well-being, does this participation in governance impact community well-
being? How so? If they are still struggling, I will say, “you’ve explained how participation in
governance allows people to X [I will then provide them with the example they gave me up
above, such as *get food for the winter*], how does this participation impact the whole
community? Is there a specific example you can share? If they are still struggling, I can say “in
some countries or other places in the nation/world, people participate in governance so they can
ensure certain programs, such as education funding and assistance, are provided to all citizens,
how does participation in governance in tribal communities ensure that certain things happen in
the community? Can you provide me with an example of those certain things in your
community? Again, please use a story if it helps you.”

8. What does informal governance mean to tribal members in the Yukon Flats?

(Prompts: So we’ve talked a lot about formal governance, such as X, Y, and Z [whatever they
say], however I am also interested in those individuals who participate in informal governance. I
will then give the definition of informal constraints given by North and the different examples he
provides:

One definition of informal governance or informal constraints, provided by a scholar named
Douglass North, is that it is the norms of behavior or codes of conduct that different societies or
cultures develop over time. Examples are things like kinship ties, social networks” (North, 1990,
p. 37). So this person says that informal governance are norms of behavior that a certain
culture has developed over time, I will then state “what do you think informal governance means
to tribal members in the Yukon Flats? What are some norms of behavior that people in
community X [their community] has developed over time? If they still struggle, I may have
them think about a community, other than their own, that they might more easily be able to say
“people from community Y are like this” and then bring it back to their own community stating
“what might people from community Y say about norms of behavior in your community?] What does informal governance mean to you?)

9. In what ways do tribal members in the Yukon Flats participate in informal governance?

(Prompts: Given the definition of informal governance you provided above, what are some ways that you believe people participate in informal governance? If they repeat their definition, I will say “ok, so if you do this thing[whatever they defined as informal governance] how would I know you were doing it? How would you show me? If they struggle I will state, “Sometimes in tribal communities we see people who participate in activities at the public level [e.g. voting in elections] and/or even just talking about governance. Other times we see people getting involved in governance, but are behind the scenes or they are doing things, can you example of those people behind the scenes and the specific things that they do?” How do they demonstrate governance without publically showing it? Use a story if it helps you).

10. Does a tribal members’ participation in informal governance affect his or her individual well-being? In what ways? (Prompts: So we’ve talked about how tribal members participation in formal governance [e.g. such as sitting on the tribal council or voting] impacts individual well-being, I am now interested in how participation in informal governance (e.g. such as X [whatever they explained to me up above; however if they didn’t have an example, I will provide one, such as elders making decisions and letting people know]) affects individual well-being? If they still struggle I will give them a scenario: say that an individual in your village never attends tribal council meetings or any public events, where formal governance decisions are made, but makes sure and scolds young people who don’t act according to traditional values, this would be considered informal governance. Do you think this impacts individual well-being? How so? Can you give me one or two examples?)
11. Does a tribal members’ participation in informal governance affect community well-being? In what ways? (Prompts: So we’ve talked about how tribal members’ participation in informal governance impacts individual well-being, I am also interested in your thoughts about how participation in informal governance [the thing you stated above] affects community well-being? If they still struggle I will repeat the scenario: say that individual that I explained above, who never attends tribal council meetings or any public events, but makes sure and scolds young people who don’t act according to traditional values, how does this person’s actions impact not only individual well-being, but community well-being as well? Please give me a specific example. Use a story if necessary.)