"**ALL WE NEED IS OUR LAND:**"

AN EXPLORATION OF URBAN ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Blackfoot homelessness in relation to traditional attachments to Blackfoot territory. It addresses the underlying causes of Blackfoot homelessness in the city of Lethbridge. It speaks to the participants' experiences of loss on a multitude of levels, disconnection from family and traditional community, and the complex notion of what "homelessness" means for the Blackfoot participants. The thesis uses a literature review to inform the study. The research methodology is a focused ethnography. Interviews with Blackfoot homeless participants were conducted at the city of Lethbridge's homeless shelter in 2009 and 2010. Narrative analysis was used to interpret the data and the findings, and the subsequent discussion of them, were from a Blackfoot perspective. It is hoped that the information contained within this thesis will help those reading it to better understand Native homelessness and provide insights into the subjective nature of what it means to be "home." The results of the findings also suggest ways for service providers to develop improved programming aimed at the Native homeless population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As a Blackfoot person, listening to stories has always come easily to me and, whether or not I choose to, I do it all the time. The most compelling stories I have had the honor of listening to originated from people that I least expected; people who may not have had the opportunity to tell their stories because they feel no one is there to listen or no one has any interest in what they have to say. Perhaps they feel their perceptions about their experiences are not important or they are afraid of what others may think if they share parts of their lives – especially when the storyteller is a member of a population that is socially stigmatized and rejected. Nevertheless, I believe that stories need to be told and re-told. Oral traditions need to be carried on and the only way for them to continue is to tell stories and listen to them as well.

Traditionally, the Blackfoot people have held deep attachments to their land and historically they occupied a vast territory that extended to what is now northern Alberta, down into Montana and eastward into Saskatchewan. The Blackfeet, Blood, Peigan and Siksika reserves are all that remain of their once vast territory and are not only symbolic of past glory but also represent poverty, deprivation, and despair. The present day Blackfoot reserves offer very little in the way of opportunity for economic advancement, have minimal housing and are often spaces associated with crime, violence and addictions. Despite the deficiencies present on contemporary reserves, many Blackfoot people greatly esteem them, realizing that reserves are the modern remnants of a great history. Attachments to traditional Blackfoot homelands are not limited to the reserves;

they envelop the whole of Blackfoot territory where "home" is conceptualized and the space is familiar, comforting, and lend its inhabitants a sense of security.

Blackfoot homelessness is somewhat of a paradox given the fact that it is contextualized within a space that is essentially "home" for those who are experiencing homelessness. I had entered into my research with the intention of revealing some of the causes of Blackfoot homelessness but I quickly realized that in order to do so, I must also explore Blackfoot attachments to traditional homelands and the implications this may or may not have on their homeless situation.

This thesis is the result of unstructured interviews that I conducted at the City of Lethbridge's local homeless shelter with six Blackfoot people who were in a chronic homeless state – meaning they had been in a homeless state for at least two years and used the shelter as their primary means of lodging. The narratives that were later developed and presented in Chapter Four speak to their experiences as homeless, Blackfoot people who have endured much suffering, loss and trauma throughout their lives. I present their pathways to homelessness within an environmental context embodied by traditional Blackfoot territory for it is within the borders of their homelands that the participants exist as homeless; bereft of family with little to no community connections – reserve or otherwise.

Purpose of the study

Homelessness is a condition which affects virtually all urban populations, and while it is not unique to Native people, they are significantly overrepresented (CMHC, 1999). Given the fact that Native homelessness is on the increase, there is relatively little research that specifically speaks to this phenomenon and there is virtually no research

addressing the underlying issues of Native homelessness relative to attachments to

traditional land. The purpose of this master's thesis was to determine the causes behind

Blackfoot homelessness in the City of Lethbridge as they relate to Blackfoot conceptions

of land and its centrality to the individual. The study is both innovative and vital:

innovative in the sense that no other study has looked at Aboriginal homeless through a

Blackfoot perspective; and vital in that it will lend greater insight into the "problem" of

Aboriginal homeless in urban society. Determining some of the factors that make

Lethbridge's Aboriginal homeless population unique lends validity to an underlying

assumption that their experience of homelessness is different than those of their non-

Aboriginal counterparts. The approach taken by this research project was twofold: (1) to

understand Aboriginal homelessness in a specific context, and (2), to discover how

Blackfoot homeless people experience it. A secondary line of investigation addressed the

following: What leads to Aboriginal homelessness in Lethbridge and what are some of

the barriers preventing Aboriginal people from acquiring adequate housing? How do

Blackfoot homeless people understand, experience and perceive homelessness? Why do

they continue to stay in Lethbridge if they have nowhere to go? And, perhaps most

importantly, is land as central to the individual as it was in the past?

 The theme of being a stranger in traditional territory in essence, being homeless in

one's own land, is variably explored in my study. First, in Chapter Two, I present the

literature review that permitted me to explore the concept and causes of Native

homelessness as well as consider attachments to land/place and the meaning of being

"home," both generally and as it applies to the Blackfoot nation. The methodology

detailed in Chapter Three explains my research approach. Chapter Four includes the

interviews I completed with the Blackfoot participants who were in a chronic state of

homelessness and the findings that grew out of their narratives relative to my research

questions and objectives. Gratefully, they shared their stories and here I reproduce them

as narratives of their personal histories. This approach to my research served to situate

myself and my participants within the larger context of Blackfoot culture and was

consistent with Blackfoot ways of knowing. It has allowed me to remain true to the oral

tradition. The final chapter is a discussion surrounding the themes, patterns and findings

that have come out in the research. Included in this chapter is a reflexive/reflective

section where I consider the ways in which the research affected me on a personal level

within the cultural context of researching Blackfoot homeless as a Blackfoot woman.

Definitions of homelessness

The Canadian government's Parliamentary Research Branch considers the

complexity involved, and the difficulties associated with arriving at a definition of

homelessness that encapsulates the complicated and composite nature of what it means to

be homeless (Casavant, 1999). Therefore, it has generated three meanings of the term

"homeless" that are different, yet essentially are categories that label people as belonging

to a certain "kind" of homeless population, if you will:

> [1] The chronically homeless group includes people who live on the periphery of
> society and who often face problems of drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness.
> [2] The cyclically homeless group includes individuals who have lost their
> dwelling as a result of some change in their situation ... Those who must from
> time to time use safehouses or soup kitchens include women who are victims of
> family violence, runaway youths, and persons who are unemployed or recently
> released from a detention centre or psychiatric institution. [3] Finally, the
> temporarily homeless group includes those who are without accommodation for a
> relatively short period ... persons who lose their home as a result of a disaster (fire,
> flood, war) and those whose economic and personal situation is altered by, for
> example, separation or loss of job. (Casavant, 1999, PRB-99 1E)

These three categorizations of homelessness are useful because they address the fluid

nature of homelessness. Sider (2005), concerned about the debates around definitions of

homelessness, generally relies on the United Nation's definition as existing to differing

degrees dependent on individual circumstances and environmental contexts. The Canada

Mortgage and Housing Corporation (1995) relies on a definition that speaks to the

differing "degrees" of homelessness which is, again, comparable to the above. In another

report, the definition of homelessness has been extended to include the meaning of home

(CMHC, 1996). O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) considers the problems associated with

defining homelessness and offers three variations on the meaning of the term that are very

similar to the Government of Canada's definition: chronically homeless, sporadically

homeless and situational homeless. Included in his considerations are the small numbers

of people who actually choose to live in a homeless condition for whatever personal

reasons.

He suggests that although many individuals' circumstances correspond to these

aforementioned categories, the debate surrounding the term "revolves fundamentally

around who will be the subject of social relief efforts" (1993, pg. 7). This is useful to my

study as he addresses the point that mainstream society has often perceived homeless

individuals as deviant, shiftless and lazy, even as criminals! He further suggests that

> the only person who is in a position to judge whether or not they are homeless
> or not, or need shelter or not, is the individual who sees themselves in this way.
> The homeless should also include those who judge that the accommodation
> that they currently have is inadequate for reasons which make sense to the
> person. In the end ... who is homeless must come to rely not upon a definition
> developed by middle-class researchers but rather from the perspective of those
> who are living the experience they deem to be 'homeless.' (pg. 10)

My approach to defining homelessness is similar – I rely on the participants' stories about perceptions of being homeless, and how those inform the root causes of their homelessness in a specific place-context.

Menzies (2005) suggests that current definitions of homelessness emphasize the physicality of the term relative to actual shelter and do not address homelessness as it affects Aboriginal people. Alternately, he contributes a new definition of the term and identifies it "as the resultant condition of individuals being displaced from critical community social structures and lacking in stable housing" (2005, pg. 8). This definition is useful for it partly embraces the meaning of homelessness expressed by the study; and it reflects the Native perspective related to homelessness. I, too, suggest an alternate definition that relies on the narratives and incorporates the participants' understanding of the term – to be homeless means to be in a state of existence where there are no family or community support networks. This concept will be explored in later chapters.

Terminology

I use the terms Aboriginal, Native and First Nations interchangeably when referring to the original inhabitants of North America. Given the fact that I am First Nation from the Blackfoot Confederacy, I am comfortable transposing the terms, indeed, I prefer to do so. Historically, First Nations have been labelled with various terms that tend to reflect the changing nature of society's perception of them in terms of what constitutes "correctness." Today, First Nations are still referred to as being "Indian," but I prefer not to use this term because of the derogatory connotations associated with it. Throughout the thesis, I often situate Blackfoot homelessness within the larger and broader context of Native/Aboriginal homelessness. I do so because many of the features

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associated specifically with Blackfoot homelessness are also applicable to Native

homelessness.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Utilizing the existing literature, this chapter's intention is to synthesize the reality of Aboriginal homelessness and the concepts of space and place as a cohesive whole to arrive at a better understanding of Aboriginal homelessness. Not all literature relevant to homelessness are included, but rather just those which examine Aboriginal homelessness in a specific context; they contribute to the notion that it is a Blackfoot attachment to land, or more specifically, *place*, (traditional Blackfoot territory) that compels Lethbridge's Aboriginal homeless population to remain homeless. Basso eloquently ponders the concept of place when he asks the question:

> What do people make of places? The question is as old as people and places themselves…as the idea of home, of "our territory" as opposed to "their territory," of entire regions and local landscapes where groups of men and women have invested themselves…and to which they feel they belong (1996, pg. xiii).

The importance of place informs how I understand the following literature on Aboriginal homelessness. True enough, and as the CMHC identified a lack of literature exists speaking specifically to Aboriginal homelessness (Beavis et al., 1997). There is, however, a wealth of knowledge about place and space, mainly cited in anthropological literature and which the full extent cannot possibly be explored due to space limitations.

Therefore, in this review I will explore the literature as follows: (1) discuss the statistical data generated on homelessness in general and the difficulties involved with arriving at reliable numbers; (2) demonstrate how the phenomenon of Aboriginal homelessness has been researched and studied; (3) identify causes of homelessness that are unique to Aboriginals and some barriers that prevent them from obtaining adequate and lasting shelter; (4) and finally, explore the concept of attachment to land in

conjunction with an anthropological understanding of space and place juxtaposed with the

Blackfoot people's value of traditional lands. It is important to provide, at length, a

review of the literature that serves as context for understanding homelessness among

Aboriginal peoples, including the Blackfoot people.

Statistics and the problems associated with counting the homeless

Although it is not my intention to become preoccupied with statistical data, it is

worthwhile to provide a review of what has been found in recent and past literature to

demonstrate the persistent challenges associated with arriving at a national statistic on

homelessness. Jackson, speaking to this challenge, goes so far to suggest that "one has to

be numbered to be known" (1995, pg. 2). According to the CanadaWest Foundation, the

total homeless population in Canada hovers around the 150,000 mark (Snow, 2008).

Others report twice that many (Laird, 2007a). Nearly twenty years ago, however,

O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) reported estimates of the Canadian homeless numbers as being

between 100,000 to 250,000. The Statistics Canada website does not have an easily

accessible link for estimates of Canadian homelessness, perhaps merely suggesting, if not

solidifying, the fact that this number is not easily established. Another Canadian

government website provides no estimates but does conclude that no consistent and

dependable method is available for counting the homeless (Homelessness Partnering

Strategy). Another report produced for CMHC has "produced a country-wide estimate of

between 130,000 and 250,000" (Perissini et al., 1996, pg. 2). Given this report, as well as

O'Reilly-Fleming's estimates, are well over ten years old, it is safe to assume that Snow's

(2008) initial estimate of the total Canadian homeless population of 150,000 is

conservative at best.

As for Aboriginal homelessness, the overrepresentation is astounding, which suggests that social and economic factors are influencing the trends; factors not present to such an extent when compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Westerfelt and Yellowbird, 1999). For example, reports suggest that in 1993, between 10,000 – 15,000 homeless Aboriginal people lived in Toronto (Beavis et al., 1997). Later reports suggest that in 1999, 25 percent of the homeless population in Toronto consisted of Aboriginal people (Menzies, 2005). In Montreal, increasing numbers of Aboriginal women were found accessing services at the Native women's shelter in 1997 (Menzies, 2005). These data are consistent with the findings that there exists a significant Aboriginal homeless population in large Eastern Canadian cities (Beavis et al., 1997). Note well that this has not been explored as fully as it has in Western cities. In 1996, of 615 homeless people surveyed in Calgary, 20 percent were of Aboriginal descent (Menzies, 2005). At a more local level, the 2006 homeless census count for Lethbridge, Alberta, reported 118 people as being homeless with Aboriginals representing 54 percent of the total (Lethbridge Homeless Census, 2006). Arguably however, this number is not a reliable indicator as it represents only 20 percent of the total estimated homeless population of 590 (Lethbridge Homeless Census, 2006). The census report further identifies that:

> There is a historical belief in our community that the issue of homelessness belongs to the Aboriginal population, and people that belong to a 'Visible Minority' are definitely overrepresented in this study but observations indicate 36% of the respondents in the Census DID NOT appear to be of a 'Visible Minority.' This simply is not an issue that is exclusive to the Aboriginal population of Lethbridge. (Lethbridge Homeless Census, 2006)

Interestingly, the respondents were not given the choice to self-identify as being a part of a "Visible Minority," but rather were identified based on surveyor observations. This is problematic because a person may not always physically appear Aboriginal but may

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identify him/herself as such (and vice versa). If this is the case, then the data collected in the census is flawed to a greater extent than merely reflecting an underrepresentation of the actual homeless numbers would indicate. Furthermore, the census report does not comment upon a recommended course of action that will clarify the misconception that homelessness is exclusive to the Aboriginal population (Lethbridge Homeless Census, 2006).

Indeed, for comparative purposes, the census' findings are in contrast with another small, prairie province city, Saskatoon, where, in 1999, 50 percent of the total homeless population was Aboriginal (CMHC, 1999). Although the gap between these two reports is nearly ten years, it reveals the persistent trends in Aboriginal homelessness: that Aboriginals are overrepresented in the homeless population; and, on a larger scale, the difficulty in counting the homeless, particularly Aboriginals, all of which have an effect on studies done today just as it had done in the past.

These trends are reflected in the literature potentially offering an inaccurate portrayal of life on the street (Beavis, et al. 1997; Lethbridge Homeless Census Count, 2006; Menzies, 2007; O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993; Peressini et al., 1996; Snow 2008). Defining who the homeless are becomes just as important and just as difficult as determining their numbers (Peressini, 1996). Once a definition is arrived at, it becomes possible to map out a sampling frame, the standard being a service-based method (Peressini, 1996). This, however, does not always prove effective since all homeless people do not utilize services specifically targeted for them. They can also make use of a variety of social services not specifically designed for them (Peressini, 1996). This incongruity raises the question of whether it would be possible to identify and enumerate people using these services as homeless people as they are not always distinguishable

from the rest of the population (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993). Aboriginal people, specifically those who fall under the Indian Act, are unique in that they are fluid in their homelessness and have the option to "live part-time in cities and on reserves" (Letkemann, 2004, pg. 242; Peters and Robillard, 2009). Obviously this option compounds the difficulty in counting the Aboriginal homeless in contrast to their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Research methodologies as presented in the literature

Just as it is important to review background literature on the homeless phenomenon to get a general sense of its scope and associated difficulties, it is also essential to determine how it has been researched and studied. It would appear that a great deal of research has been largely qualitative in nature (Kingfisher 2007; Letkemann 2004; Lott and Bullock, 2001; Menzies, 2005, 2007; O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993; Sider, 2005; Vandemark, 2007; Walker, 2005). Other research represents reports and initiatives set forth by agencies specifically concerned with the homeless population (Beavis, et al 1997; CMHC, 1999; Lethbridge Homeless Census Count 2006; Novac et. al., 2004; Peressini et. al., 1996; Serge, 2005; Social Housing in Action, 2005; Snow, 2008). In spite of the subjective experience of homelessness (Letkemann, 2004), others employed a quantitative (Cozarelli et. al., 2001) and mixed-method approaches (Lapidus et. al., 2006; Westerfelt and Yellowbird, 1999).

One of the more meaningful ways to approach research on Aboriginal homelessness is to employ some form of ethnographic methodology. For example, Letkemann (2004) entrenched himself within an Aboriginal homeless context over a cumulative period totaling one year. This entrenchment or 'informal methodology'

allowed him to gain "contextual and behavioral knowledge that interviewing often cannot

[provide]" (pg. 245).

O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) used a total of 219 interviews as data to generate his

analysis:

> Two methods of recording interviews were used; where appropriate interviews
> were tape-recorded with the permission of the homeless person. In other cases,
> notes were taken either during or as soon as practical following an interview if the
> subject objected to being tape-recorded … . All of the research subjects were
> granted both anonymity and confidentiality…The underlying methodology was
> the in-depth interview technique supplemented by observation in both shelter and
> outside settings. (pg. xv)

This method of analysis enabled O'Reilly-Fleming to present an overview of

homelessness in a Canadian context.

Menzies (2007) used interviews and focus group meetings with Aboriginal

homeless men to gather data that was interpreted from a social work perspective. The data

led him to theorize the link between intergenerational trauma and homelessness, to

introduce a new definition of homelessness, and to develop 'the intergenerational trauma

model' which "is premised on the main constructs of the traditional teachings of the

Aboriginal medicine wheel" (pg. 384). Notably, his work was conducted exclusively with

Aboriginal men and he dismissed Aboriginal women's narratives because of a belief that

their homelessness is largely a result of factors that are related to "the oppression of

women in North American society" (pg. 376). This suggests that Aboriginal women's

issues can be evaluated according to feminist frameworks even though Aboriginal

women's experiences differ greatly from those of euro-Canadian women. This leads to

double oppression: (1) they are women living under a patriarchal society; and (2), they

are a minority oppressed by the larger Caucasian society. Fiske argues "that patriarchy

and colonialism have muted Aboriginal women's voices" (2005, pg. 58), and, to the extent of totalizing women under the umbrella of patriarchy, this is indeed the case in Menzies' discourse.

Kingfisher (2007, 2005) used a case study approach to analyze data gathered from the non-Aboriginal public, local policy-makers and service providers and interpreted the data through an anthropological lens. She found that constructions of homelessness were based on the stereotype of drunken, Aboriginal males as a way of expressing local racism. The pathology of homelessness was reduced to individual traits that were a matter of the community's perception rather than reality (Kingfisher, 2007). It must be noted that Kingfisher did not actually interview the Aboriginal homeless population, therefore their narratives and views are missing in her account.

Peressini and colleagues (1996) prepared a background report for CMHC that identified key elements involved in the process of reliably counting the homeless in Canada. They categorized methods that have been used to count the homeless, set up workshops in anticipation of researching (both Canadian and American) effective enumeration strategies and concluded the report with recommendations based on their findings. Another CMHC report employs a qualitative analysis based on a literature review and nine case studies to determine the on-going feasibility and issues surrounding transitional housing as a tool for combating homelessness (Novac et al., 2004). CMHC undertook another project that comprehensively reviewed the literature about Aboriginal homelessness to augment its homeless data sets and management systems (Beavis et al., 1997). The project not only reviewed literature, but also interviewed, via telephone, experts working on homelessness issues sought to identify and understand causes and possible solutions regarding Aboriginal homelessness.

Another study was conducted in which poverty was measured in terms of people's attitudes towards it (Cozarelli et. al., 2001). Because poverty is one of the main factors contributing to Aboriginal homelessness (Beavis et. al., 1997), it is relevant to briefly discuss this study's methodology. The study sampled 209 undergraduate students at a large U.S. university in the form of questionnaires that measured variables relative to perceptions of poverty. After interpreting the data, the researchers concluded that attitudes toward the poor and causes of poverty vary from person to person and are found "to be related to core American values such as the work ethic…" (Cozarelli et al., 2001, pg. 225). Interestingly, Kingfisher (2007) makes a similar observation in her treatment of Aboriginal homelessness in Lethbridge as being an affront to the neoliberal ideal of personhood as encompassing entrepreneurialism, self-governing and transcending "dependencies engendered by the Keynesian welfare state" (Kingfisher 2007, pg. 197). It is also interesting to note that although the two studies employed drastically different methodologies, they both arrived at a similar conclusion: that many people in society have an attitude toward the poor and impoverished that is influenced by Western values of self-dependency and capitalist motivations.

A mixed-methods study in the U.S. that included administered surveys and semi-structured interviews sought to determine how the threat of HIV influenced high-risk behaviors and perceptions among urban American Indians (Lapidus et al., 2006). Of the 222 respondents, 10 percent self-reported as being homeless, 4 percent were living in a mission/shelter and another 22 percent were living with family/friends. Nearly half the respondents reported engaging in behaviors that put them at risk for contracting HIV. As 36 percent of the respondents lived in utter or near homelessness, the study has inadvertently suggested a link between homelessness and infectious disease.

The above discussion has served to highlight the ways that Native homelessness

has been researched and studied. For the purposes of my study, the most important

method is that of a qualitative, ethnographic approach – similar to that which O'Reilly-

Fleming (1993) had conducted but on a much smaller scale – and which will be discussed

in the following chapter.

Causes of Aboriginal homelessness and barriers to adequate shelter

Although general causes of homelessness such as poverty and mental illness are

relatively consistent across a cultural/ethnic spectrum, Aboriginal homelessness is

entirely unique (Beavis et al., 1997). This in part is attributable to the lasting effects of

colonialism. Elizabeth Furniss asserts that the dominant Euro-Canadian hegemony

celebrates the settlement of Canada, glorifying a "frontier past," resulting in Native

peoples' subjugation (1999). Furthermore, the historic features of colonialism planted the

"seed of trauma" in Aboriginal communities "as it has left a lasting legacy of dependency

for many individuals and communities" (Menzies, 2005 pg. 68). Clearly, the subjugation

and trauma imposed by colonial policy present tremendous lasting effects on Aboriginal

people – chronic homelessness is one of the more appalling results. Indeed, Aboriginal

homelessness is unique because of its association with colonization (Menzies, 2007).

Directly related to the causes of homelessness is the contemporary fact that

Aboriginal people experience low socio-economic indicators such as income and

education, both of which lag behind national rates by as much as 2 – 3 times (Newhouse

and Peters, 2003). Another source reported in 2006 that 70.4 percent of Aboriginal

households in Lethbridge made an income under $30,999 (the study's Low Income Cut-

off indicator) (Belanger, 2007). According to the Statistics Canada website, the median

income in 2005 for households in Lethbridge, after taxes, was $68,645. This divide

suggests that the Aboriginal people in Lethbridge are at most risk of becoming homeless.

In the absence of adequate shelter, homelessness will remain a part of many Aboriginal

peoples' lived reality.

Another and perhaps more common cause of Aboriginal homelessness is

substance abuse. Studies show that the Aboriginal homeless present higher levels of

substance abuse (Beavis et al., 1997; Kingfisher, 2005; Westerfelt and Yellowbird, 1999).

Alcohol and drug abuse is common on many reserves and the behaviors remain when

Aboriginals move to the city (Beavis et al., 1997). One of the most enduring stereotypes

of Aboriginal people is that of the drunken Indian, a still too common issue that

recurrently resurfaces across Canada (The Edmonton Journal, 2008). This public display

of drinking outrages euro-Canadian society (Braroe, 1975). Kingfisher (2007) further

confirms that many people view homeless people as drunken Aboriginal males. Indeed, it

is reasonable to assume that this informs how society generally perceives Aboriginal

homeless people, who are assumed as predisposed to substance abuse. They, in effect,

deserve their social outcome since they are seen as the purveyors of their own misery

(Walker, 2005).

Policies and social services that are not culturally appropriate can be seen as

contributing factors to Aboriginal homelessness. One opinion is that policies perpetuate

poverty and criminalize the poor leading to pathology of homelessness (Pate, 2006). As

for the lack of Canadian policies to end homelessness (Stewart, 2007), Walker (2007)

contends that the current Urban Aboriginal Strategy to improve federal policy

development is regressive because it fails to acknowledge the Aboriginal need for self-

determination. Instead, the strategy "seeks only to address the urgent 'problem' of

Aboriginal poverty, essentially managing this margin of society in pursuit of greater social cohesion" which maintains the federal government's paternalistic tendencies (2005, pg. 410).

Aboriginal homelessness is attributable to a variety of causes. Domestic abuse for one is a major cause that often forces Aboriginal women out of their homes (Beavis et al., 1997). It is indicated also that adequate housing initiatives must become more culturally sensitive, and non-discriminatory while addressing the unique needs of Aboriginal women, thus decreasing dependency and offering them safe refuge from violence (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2004). Intergenerational trauma resulting from residential school experiences is proposed as a direct link to homelessness (Menzies, 2007) as are mental and physical health problems (Beavis et al., 1997). Sexual abuse at home is another cause leading to youth homelessness (Beavis et al., 1997; O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993; Serge, 2005). Aboriginals who make up the prison populations, upon release, often have nowhere to go which frequently leads to homelessness. Racism and discrimination have been suggested as contributing to Aboriginal homelessness, but "the extent and seriousness of discrimination against Aboriginal people, and the impact of this on homelessness, are hard to measure" (Beavis et al., 1997, pg. 10). Racism is a contentious issue, especially in conservative communities where members have a desire to appear tolerant (Kingfisher, 2007). Welfare dependency and a lack of motivation are also often cited (Sider, 2005). Poverty and deplorable housing conditions on reserves force many Aboriginal people into an urban setting where adequate shelter is not always guaranteed (Beavis et al., 1997).

One key issue exacerbating existing conditions is the general lack of affordable housing. For example, Snow (2008) reports that lack of affordable housing and poverty

have surpassed mental illness and substance abuse as the leading cause of homelessness in Canada. A direct link between housing shortages, rental increases and homelessness was also demonstrated (Snow, 2008). This has significant ramifications for the Aboriginal population, as current causes of homelessness are compounded by a shortage of affordable housing.

Another barrier, perhaps to a lesser degree, is rural-urban migration. Many Aboriginal people move in and out of a reserve setting on a regular basis (Peters and Robillard, 2009). Beavis et al. (1997) describe this as "hypermobility." It has been suggested that Aboriginal city residents are resistant to purchasing houses because they prefer the freedom of being able to move quickly (Belanger, 2007). A clear connection can be seen in Letkemann's discussion of "urban nomads" (2004) and the migratory habits of Aboriginal urban dwellers. Belanger (2007) further suggests that this desire to "move quickly" often proves a hindrance to stable shelter arrangements.

As suggested, racism and discrimination issues also impose barriers to Aboriginal acquisition of adequate shelter. The history behind racism and discrimination is as old as colonial interests and, due to space limitations, cannot fully be explored here. Braroe describes how in one Plains Indian community, "Indians are regarded as totally lacking in industry, self-sufficiency, reliability, and punctuality" (1975, pg. 4), traits that are the antithesis to Kingfisher's observations about neoliberal values (2007).

The importance of space and place

I will now turn to a review of the importance of place, or more specifically, the value people place on traditional lands. The literature, discussing theoretical foundations associated with First Nations understanding of land and place, is significant. To simplify

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a complex discussion, I will first consider pluralistic anthropological concepts that are central to better understanding the importance of land/place. Angus (1997) suggests that theories and philosophies about culture "should be understood in an inclusive anthropological sense to encompass both ideology and material conditions insofar as they are united within a form of life or style of practical involvement" (pg. 3). This approach is appropriate for this study for one of my primary goals was to better understand First Nation relationship with, and attachment, to land. More specifically, I seek to unpack Blackfoot conceptions of place and its importance to their philosophy. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz proposed using "thick description" to help explain and interpret human behaviour within a specific contextual framework, and that "In finished anthropological writings ... our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions" (1973, pg. 9). Here our ideas about the "other" culture will always be informed by our own subjective realities anchored in cultural reality. Western scholars often become trapped exploring the philosophical intricacies of exotic cultures to the point that they risk analyzing the "other" through Western eyes under the guise of cultural relativism. In his attempt to explicate the philosophy behind Aboriginal notions of time, Swain (1993) asserts that many scholars before him had made significant efforts "to understand the problem of time in Aboriginal philosophy" (pg. 15). Swain refers to Aboriginal philosophies of time as a problem that requires articulation according to Western understanding, rather than a way of life that can be understood in its own terms and explored for its own sake. Swain concedes "that Western historical consciousness is the 'natural' yardstick against which to measure other cultures" (pg. 15); however, it does appear that he is exploiting this yardstick by referring to Aboriginal philosophies as problematic. Whether or not this is intentional (which I think it is not), this example

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demonstrates how Western attempts at explanation and understanding of Indigenous philosophies fall short of their mark; that is, an evident disconnect between the two cultures makes producing explanations agreeable to both sides nearly impossible.

My attempt to write from a First Nations perspective adds further complexity, which may lead many to question my approach. Nonetheless, the perspective is valid because colonial interpretations can no longer be considered the accepted lens by which to understand history, especially if the goal is to reconstruct and reaffirm a Blackfoot identity that "can manifest and express itself outside the colonial paradigm, neither colonial nor postcolonial, but wholly and self-sufficiently engaged in its own discourse" (Bastien, 2004, pg. 165). Geertz's concept of context consideration within a thick description is relevant for our purposes insofar as First Nations' behaviours and, cultural and political practices were/are dependent upon the environmental surroundings particular to each group.

In his writing about establishing a discourse of place and space within anthropological thought, Hirsch (1995) concedes that "landscape has received little overt anthropological treatment," yet it figures greatly in the way local people give meaning "to their cultural and physical surroundings," and thus serves as a mechanism for framing experience (pg. 1). Green suggests that landscape, insofar as it shapes our external world whether in a psychological or social sense, deserves proper examination and theorization (1995, pg. 31). Basso (1995), a cultural and linguistic anthropologist, reiterates: "Practicing ethnographers ... take senses of place for granted, and ethnographic studies exploring their cultural and social dimensions are in notably short supply. Human attachments to places ... remain ... an enigma" (pg. xiv). Acknowledging the oft overlooked importance of land/place is significant for it brings into focus the importance

of ecological context which confronts romantic imaginings that Aboriginals possess

innate qualities naturally positioning them as innately closer to nature (Meyer and Royer,

2001). Gow, in his treatment of the Amazonia landscape, comments upon a "complex

process by which people and landscape interact" (1995, pg. 56). The process by which a

people interact with the surrounding landscape, as Belanger (2010) states, occurs within

an eco-contextual framework that shapes and influences their history, sociopolitical and

socioeconomic functioning, all of which serves to distinguish people within their regional

ecologies. Basso (1995) contends that senses of place give way to symbolisms such as

language, which is in essence a set of signs and signifiers through which we

communicate. He suggests that place-naming is how people give meaning to experiences;

highlighting cultural history, where creation through ceremony is. Belanger (2010) asserts

that dialects have emerged in an ecological context and that

> Language is an expression of society and culture that contains the stories of the
> land dating back to Creation. That is why dislocation from one's ecological
> context vis-à-vis the loss of language can leave an individual feeling disconnected
> or apart from Creation even when s/he is still living on her/his traditional territory.
> (pg. 29)

This can help demonstrate that traditional space and our homeland cannot necessarily be

recreated through the process of symbolic interaction, for we have already lost its major

component (language). If one was to apply Angus' (1997) deconstructed notion of left-

nationalism from a Blackfoot perspective, one would realize that place and identity are

inseparable and that promoting the persistence of the language would be a rather natural

occurrence, for it can be argued that First Nations possess as much right to some form of

national pride as does the rest of Canada. This does not inevitably mean that they are

merely being "anti-Canada," but rather asserting their "identity" – as problematic as

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Angus suggests this term to be. Bastien (2004) contends that "the need arises to affirm and, as necessary, to reconstruct an identity from the fabric that holds the sacred ways of the ancestors. The children of the *Siksikaitsitapi* must once again learn the sacred ways of their ancestors" (pg. 8). Interestingly, the young people need to regain a sense of the sacred and put its ways into practice if there is to be any hope of traditional cultural continuation. This would include regaining an appreciation of the land and its importance within customary Blackfoot perspectives.

A colonial theoretical discourse in the literature also employs dialectic between a binary opposition of power and oppression. Cole Harris (2004) provides an interesting critique of colonial theoretical discourse in his attempt to write towards an understanding of colonial tropes of land dispossession. He asserts that "colonial discourse theory … privileges the investigation of imperial texts, enunciations, and systems of signification. In so doing, it exposes implicit modes of seeing and of understanding that are held to infuse and validate colonialism while imparting much of its momentum" (2004, pg. 165). Harris' argument refutes this system of inquiry as merely another way for justifying colonialism within an objective, conceptual framework. Here, we can see that context is everything. Bastien (2004) furthers this notion when she contends that

> Tribal peoples' reality is altered by the interpretation of their experiences through the framework of colonized ideology. Tribal people have internalized Euro-Canadian beliefs and values through this process, and, as a result interpret their own experiences from an alien and alienating value and belief system. (pg. 152)

Bastien's contention parallels Harris's claims, since in my experience, most Blackfoot people (although certainly not all) have been educated and socialized within a colonial context. Alternately, John Douglas Bishop (1997) reconsiders John Locke's (1690)

theory of original appropriation, which purposefully justifies and rationalizes First

Nations land appropriation by virtue of the fact that, according to Locke, they did not put

it to "good" use, which can be applied to Native land claims to determine whether these

ideas also apply to Native property rights. Bishop's paper serves to utilize colonial

theoretical discourse within a First Nations context, and he justifies Native land claims

using a theory that sought to righteously dispossess them of the land and in doing so has

switched places, so to speak, between colonizers and colonized.

Additionally, geography and political science contribute to this discussion insofar

as they inform how individuals conceptualize place as a physical space that lends

meaning to experience and shapes a collective identity. E. Relph, a geographer who

positions the importance of place as a phenomenological experience, suggests that

"Places are emerging or becoming; with historical and cultural change new elements are

added and old elements disappear" (1976, pg. 3). This is useful as it illustrates the

transformative processes related to perceptions of place. Blackfoot culture has been

forced to morph and adapt to the changing nature of space and their place within it. Urban

centers now dot the traditional landscape covering and encompassing geographically

sacred places that have also been transformed into tourist meccas where the past can be

viewed. Additionally, the urban landscape is forced to adapt to existing and emerging

ethnicities. Mellon contends that some strands in literature inform us that "cities may

somehow transcend differences" (2008, pg. 61). Cities such as Vancouver can perpetuate

and emphasize differences with ethnic groups occupying their own space within urban

limits. Indeed, groups need not necessarily leave their niche in order to thrive; they've

created a unique cultural space where they may authentically feel at home. This echoes

Mumford's assertion that "the city records the attitude of a culture" (1938, pg. 5). This rings true in the case of Vancouver's Chinatown district.

These differences mount and are mirrored in tensions within a national ideology. Michael Ignatieff, in his compelling and thought-provoking discussion of a new ethnic and civic nationalism, asserts that "many of the world's tribal peoples and ethnic minorities do not think of themselves as nations" (1993, pg. 5). This may be so, but not for the Blackfoot who are seeking self-determination and a distinct place within the national framework. Ignatieff differentiates between Western notions of nationalism and traditional Native views of land: "Nationalism celebrates the land of a nation the better to subdue it to human purposes whereas First Nations' claim to land is as stewards and guardians" (pg. 164). He asserts that First Nations are not seeking a separate and independent state by becoming self-determining as opposed to ending the "permanent dependence on government handouts and an end to being passive spectators of the destruction of their lands" (pg. 166). First Nations, Blackfoot included, are seeking to reclaim some semblance of Native space and are using the tools and rhetoric of nationalism as a means to this end. Angus (1997), in his treatment of nationalism, asserts that only through realizing our own claims to national identity, can we appreciate others. But what are the implications for the Blackfoot people? Perhaps it means realizing that one element of self-determination and with it, self-government, involves asserting ourselves as separate and magnifying our distance from the national collective. This will exacerbate an already confused nationalism, and dependency on hegemonic powers will remain an inescapable reality. Perhaps it also means accepting that although Native space will always exist within the bounds of the larger nationalism, we can continue to slowly sever the apron strings of colonialism.

It can be stated without dispute that land and senses of place have been central to all cultures and societies. Whole disciplines in academia such as geography are dedicated solely to concepts of place and land. Ancient Greeks produced theories about place and space based on interpretations of individual experiences with a place (Walter, 1998). Land has been closely related to people and as Tuan (1977, pg. 153-154) informs:

> The people of ancient Greece and Italy believed in exclusiveness. Every domain was under the eyes of household divinities, and an uncultivated band of soil marked its limit…land and religion were so closely associated that a family could not renounce one without yielding the other…This profound attachment to the homeland appears to be a worldwide phenomenon. It is not limited to any particular culture and economy. It is known to literate and nonliterate peoples, hunter-gatherers, and sedentary farmers, as well as city dwellers.

This universality of attachment to, and reverence for, land is not exclusive to Aboriginal people of the Northern hemisphere, but important to Western societies who also attach to land innate qualities. Environmentalists have looked to Aboriginals as figures of "land reverence" (Meyer and Royer, 2001). Deloria (1992) for one advocated for a return to Native beliefs in order to save the world from environmental disaster. Deloria is careful to acknowledge that every society needs sacred places in order to bring them together; and thus to arrive at a social cohesion.

Traditional Blackfoot perceptions of attachment to land

It is vital to better understand how Aboriginal people perceive land The earth is alive and animate. Sandra Tomsons, quoting Leroy Little Bear, states that "Place is for the interrelational network of all creation. Land is the place where all renewal processes occur" (pg. 7). Ontologically, Blackfoot philosophy encapsulates respect for Mother Earth, respect for relatives and respect for oneself. Everything in nature is related to each

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other just as we are related to nature. Modifying, changing or destroying one element in nature can have devastating effects on another. A fragile balance must be maintained lest we risk losing the respect of nature. Nelson, in his analysis of Native American literature, writes, "…that place – in the sense of a real geophysical entity – matters, that 'life' is a 'property' of the land as well as the life forms occupying it" (pg. 3). Blackfoot perceptions represent an authentic appreciation of the natural environment and our experiences within it. Historically, they were dependent on nature and all knowledge was derived from its elements. According to Bastien (2004), sacred knowledge is derived from *Ihtsipaitapiiyo'pa*, "the great mystery that is in everything in the universe" (pg. 77), and is passed on to the generations through ceremonies and oral histories. Again, respect for the earth is foremost in Blackfoot perspective and landscape serves to place the culture within the universe. Identity is not entirely dependent upon individual achievement or heroic feats, but is made up of intricate associations with mother earth. Basso (1995) associates and interprets this kind of personal identification with place as a "way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. We *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine." He further postulates that "place-making" is a practice of culture and "can be grasped only in relation to the ideas and practices with which it was accomplished" (pg. 7). This suggests that an anthropological "emic" approach is one way in which an outsider can understand indigenous perspectives of place, however limited it might be. Unfortunately, this approach is neither generally accessible nor is it ubiquitous.

Some geographers such as Cole (2008) speak of a "built environment" that shapes and lends meaning to the builder's experiences. This suggests that the environment is man-made and subject to change and transformation over time. This is certainly true of

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the urban landscape where neighborhoods are created and abandoned and left to decay. In contrast, traditional Blackfoot landscape as it existed before colonial encroachment consisted only of the natural environment which originated from the Creator and was shaped and molded by the four elements. Built structures such as teepees comprised temporary materials that were easily absorbed back into the earth. More permanent constructs such as those etched into the rocks at present day Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park were traditionally attributed to the work of spiritual beings privy to supernatural abilities. These beliefs mirror Cole's assertion that personal experience of a place is not only dependent on the landscape itself, but are also shaped by "myths and perceptions" (2009). Hungry Wolf relates a time when the Blackfoot people "lived completely in harmony with nature" (1977, pg. 180): a tradition passed down from teachers to students. Hungry Wolf embraces the belief in Aboriginal people as being closer to nature. I would argue that his observations are reliable given to his long residence among the Blackfoot people, when he was the privilege of partaking in traditional ceremonies thereby obtaining insider knowledge of traditional perceptions of land. Bastien claims that traditional ways of knowing are rooted in the natural world and our relationship with it (2004). Deloria constantly refers to sacred places and their position within an Aboriginal worldview (1992).

Over time, the Blackfoot conception of land and its relationship to Aboriginal people became equated with displacement and disconnection from traditional lands as well as land disputes. In dominant discourse, it has become more of a question of what parcels of land belong to whom. For example, Lambertus reports that British Columbia's Aboriginal population have "strong feelings about the traditional rights to the land"

(1995, pg. 8) when questions of Aboriginal title to the land are at odds with the Canadian government's perceptions of sovereignty.

Modern notions of land and our place within it have come to focus on private ownership, rather than reflecting the sacred. For example, Fiske argues that the modern British Columbia economy is based on the extraction of natural resources and gives rise to an imaginative "series of rich opposition: northern development versus southern investment, forest harvesting versus environmentalism, fishery versus logging, First Nations versus settlers" (2005, pg. 64). Evidence of these oppositions occurs in virtually every facet of modern life, for which another emerges: the housed versus the homeless.[1] In today's global world the concepts of space and place have transformed, indeed, have shrunk to such an extent that it is possible to be connected, via the World Wide Web, with societies that would otherwise be foreign to us; a "virtual" community has revealed itself where no physical contact exists but interaction is mediated through information technology (Cameron and Gross, 2002).

Conclusion

The concept of attachments to land and the reality of homelessness are intertwined and related to such an extent that, as Basso puts it,

> Until, as sometimes happens, we are deprived of these attachments, and find ourselves adrift, literally dislocated…It is then we come to see that attachments to land places may be nothing less than profound, and that when those attachments are threatened, we may feel threatened as well. Places, we realize, are as much a part of us as we are of them… (1996, pgs. xiii-xiv)

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[1] By utilizing these binaries, context is being established for understanding the conflicts surrounding First Nations land claims issues, capitalist private property and traditional notions of the sacredness of place which are relational to the housed/homeless dichotomy.

Blackfoot attachments to land and reverence for the natural world are values that are becoming replaced with preoccupations with modernity. Consequently, Aboriginal people must adapt to today's society, or risk being dissolved in it yet adaptation also comes with risks. The Blackfoot homeless people of southern Alberta are dispossessed of their traditional lands. They appear to wander through it, seemingly without purpose. It can only be assumed that they believe, or better yet, know they belong here in the traditional sense, albeit without a home to live in and in turn are totally dependent on the local community's charity. It borders on the absurd: Aboriginal people homeless in a land they have called home, the site of their collective history. These ideas of physical and ideological ownership, have as of yet to be explored; a gap this thesis endeavors to fill.

Chapter Three: Methodology

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Introduction

The concepts central to this thesis are the nature of Blackfoot homelessness as it is understood by those experiencing it, relative to Blackfoot attachments to land and place. These concepts were explored through qualitative analysis of interview and focus group data. As I reflect back upon my motivation leading to the research design, I have come to realize that my methodology must incorporate the oral tradition that has been central to First Nations and ways of knowing. Perpetuating stories through their retelling is a powerful/empowering act, something Bullchild (1985) claims, if done properly, preserve "our Indian history" (pg. 2). As we listen to the stories of the dispossessed, Blackfoot homeless people and retell them, we foster a form of agency that situates them within the larger context of Blackfoot society. They begin to feel grateful that they are given the opportunity to tell these stories and that someone is willing to listen. Gregory (1994) provides further enlightenment to this concept stating that "Narratives provide a window to the experiential domain … Humans interpret experiences as well as make them understood to others through language" (pgs. 53-54).

I find myself in a unique position because of my Blackfoot heritage and feel this has been advantageous in the sense that has provided an enriching facet to the research, for my life experiences are relevant in terms of general Blackfoot philosophical and cultural teachings which have served to shape the person that I am today as well as allow for some degree of "theoretical sensitivity" to my research (Glaser, 2004). Hence, my cultural background is in common with my participants, which has ultimately led them to trust in me as person and the study in general.

In order to effectively gather useful data, the methodology and design for the research primarily relied upon a focused ethnography method (Knoblauch, 2009), and

included interviews with Blackfoot participants who were chronically homeless; a focus group session with service providers; and a literature review that informed my research on Blackfoot homelessness relative to Blackfoot attachment to land and place. Knoblauch (2009) identifies that when practicing focused ethnography, the researcher relies on shorter, more pragmatic visits to the field setting which are compensated for by collection of more intense and robust data sets and close scrutiny in the analysis stages. Moreover, the focused ethnography seeks to study the smaller elements of a much larger population (Koblauch, 2009). This was the case in my study when I was concerned with homelessness as a phenomenon affecting some members of the Blackfoot nation rather than its general or national occurrence.

Because qualitative research is more subjective, it allows for a wider range of meaningful data to emerge as represented in the participants' narratives. The goal of re-telling stories as consistent with the Blackfoot oral tradition was accomplished through narrative analysis as a data analysis approach. Additionally, the nature of qualitative research is flexible and permits a fluidity of understanding that is not always present in a quantitative approach. Consequently, I consider the qualitative research approach the most appropriate which "did justice" to my research. In short, it revealed how some Blackfoot people understand homelessness. Bryman and Teevan (2005) have identified some aspects of qualitative research that were applicable to my research: naturalism and ethnomethodology. These aspects have been used by others who have researched Aboriginal homeless phenomenon (Kingfisher 2007; Letkemann 2004; Lott and Bullock 2001; Menzies 1999, 2007; O'Reilly-Fleming; 1993; Sider 2005; Vandemark 2007; Walker 2005). Specifically, ethnomethodology, because of its focus on understanding social reality through the analysis of conversation (Bryman and Teevan, 2005), has been

used by Kingfisher (2007) in her study of how the local community views Aboriginal homelessness, where she found that constructs of homelessness were often used as a hidden expression of racism. Most others researching Aboriginal homelessness appeared to have made use of the naturalistic approach to data analysis in seeking to "understand social reality in its own terms; [and] provid[ing] rich descriptions of people and interaction in natural settings" (Bryman and Teevan, 2005, pg. 145).

Setting

The primary setting for the interviews was a private office space at the local homeless shelter. Gratefully, the operations manager granted me virtually unlimited access to the shelter with the understanding I would provide shelter staff advance notice of my intended arrival. Located near the heart of the city's downtown and the south-side industrial area, the shelter can hardly be seen by the drivers on the busy thoroughfare only yards from its doorstep. Also situated very near the train tracks, the shelter guests and employees are regularly exposed to the loud rumblings of passing trains. The building's exterior is neat and well-kept with maintenance performed on a regular basis. The soup kitchen, located in the same building, is often accessed by the city's low-income population, not just the shelter guests exclusively. The rear of the building is comprised of a park-like setting with picnic benches in the yard. During the summer months, shelter guests can be seen socializing, smoking, or getting some much needed rest under the shade of nearby trees. In winter months, however, the area is virtually deserted with only the smokers braving the chill.

The building's interior is divided into the living/common area and the resource area (the latter being cordoned off by a temporary wall after 4:00 pm). It is also closed to

guests during the weekends. One of the shelter's striking features is its discordant atmosphere, primarily noticeable when the resource area is closed. Guests, many of them often intoxicated, are heard shouting and the potential for violence seems to be a constant threat, especially during the evening hours. Because of the guests' unpredictable nature and the often hectic environment, it was not an option to conduct the interviews after the resource side was closed and for practical purposes, I had to consider my own safety. Business hours brought a marked calm to the shelter with administration, nurses and social workers were present to provide valuable services to the guests. The living/common area and resource side are not too large in size and during business hours, the smell of cleaning antiseptics cuts through the air. This often is not enough to erase the previous night's smells of booze, cigarettes and scents resulting from a large group of people forced to occupy a relatively small area. There is an art room where several of the guests' impressive work is displayed, a main reception area, and several offices on each side of the interior. Entrance to the soup kitchen can be gained through a door past the main reception desk and it is a separate room unto itself.

Two interview sessions were conducted at the home of a female participant, who had managed to obtain housing with the assistance of shelter staff and resources. Her home, a low-income housing project in the city's downtown core, was small, sparsely furnished and adequate to her needs; indeed, it was a welcome relief from the shelter's often crowded and noisy environment.

Sample

The participant interviews were conducted over a six month period; from October 2009 to March 2010. The proposed number of Blackfoot homeless participants was conservatively estimated as being between 5 and 8. Given the time limitations and the transient nature of the participants, in all five narratives were completed with six participants. All participants signed a consent form that described, in detail, the nature of and purpose of my research, the extent of their voluntary involvement, the benefits available to them and the assurance that their privacy and anonymity will be maintained. As an incentive, I gave the participants' small gifts in the form of practical clothing items, and tobacco/cigarettes as tokens of my gratitude. With the exception of two, interviews were conducted at the local homeless shelter.

The participants ranged in age from their early thirties to early fifties. There were four male and two female participants. Each of them had been using the shelter resources for a number of years and chronic homelessness was common among them. Because of the nature of my research, it was imperative that all participants were of Blackfoot descent. This was determined by simply asking the participants of their first Nations' origin.

Participant recruitment

The first step used to recruit my participants was to engage key guides. These individuals had detailed and intimate knowledge of the population utilizing their services and therefore, were in an excellent position to recommend possible interviewees. Without their cooperation and guidance, my fieldwork would have been difficult. I made a number of previous visits to the shelter so the guests would become familiar with my presence and many people from the local First Nation reserve approached me to enquire about the

reasons I was there. I had prepared posters (APPENDIX A) which I displayed in various high traffic areas of the shelter to grow a purposeful sample (Low, 2007). This was admittedly easier because all recruiting was done in one locale. The participants were selected based on existing information regarding my research objectives. I used plain language on the poster which was easily accessible and understandable to prospective participants and I welcomed any questions they had regarding my research.

Although I used the above strategies, the most effective recruitment strategy was personally approaching the guests, informing them of my research objectives, and asking if they would consent to participate. Some were apprehensive but most welcomed the opportunity.

Focus group

The focus group (Green, 2007), lasting approximately one and a half hours, was conducted at the shelter with the sample consisting of six of the shelter's service providers. The purpose of the focus group session was to determine general characteristics of the Aboriginal homeless population, how many (to the service providers' knowledge) were of Blackfoot heritage, who used the services, why, in their opinions, they thought there were higher numbers of Aboriginal homeless people, and finally, if they believed that a familiarity with the Lethbridge area influences the Aboriginal homeless to remain homeless. The focus group was used as "preparatory work" (Green, 2007) which aided in the development, structure, and design of the participant narratives. Data gathered from the focus group was used as insight in later data analyses and is presented in the following chapter.

Formative arrangements for the focus group were made in April of 2009, although an interview guide (APPENDIX B) was prepared much earlier in advance – in February, 2009. In May 2009, I also prepared a luncheon information session, where I identified the purpose of my research and the extent of participation by the shelter staff. I served a traditional meal of stew and bannock. All interested staff were welcome to participate and I took this opportunity to have those present sign focus group consent forms (APPENDIX C) that was to follow. Because of schedule conflicts and the nature of the their work, arriving at an agreement regarding the date of the focus group as well as which staff should attend proved to be very challenging. Although the data gathered was useful and informative, it was took a lot of energy, time-wise, to put the focus group together.

Key guides

The key guides I worked with were primarily the shelter's operations manager and administrative assistant. These two individuals were most knowledgeable regarding the service users' characteristics. I engaged Aboriginal key informants partly because the Aboriginal homeless population tends to be a socially isolated group and approaching them directly can prove damaging to the relationship that I intended to build. The guides were effective in minimizing this possibility.

Field notes

I kept a record of any thoughts, events and observations that were of significance to the research. Bryman and Teevan (2005) point out, it is not always a good idea to take notes while doing interviews as this practice tends to be extremely distracting. Instead, notes were taken outside of the shelter and while the events were still fresh in my mind.

Interviews

The interview process was completed over a six month period in the field setting according to an unstructured interviewing approach. Low (2007) has identified that engaging the participant in unstructured interviews[2] allows "access to the subjective perceptions of individuals, as well as the means by which they give meaning to their experiences" (pg. 75). This approach permitted the participants' narratives to emerge from a perspective that was totally their own. The complex nature of Native homelessness and its underlying causes were explored through the participants' experiences which allowed them a form of agency and empowerment concerning what they were willing to share (Low, 2007). Each interview lasted roughly one hour. Some strategies that I used included Kvale's ten criteria (Bryman and Teevan 2005, pg. 187) as a guide for successful interviewing. I have presented these criteria here in detail with some examples:

1. *Knowledgeable*: A thorough familiarity with the focus of the interview (How the Aboriginal homeless participants understood themselves as being homeless and their possible connections or attachment to place);

2. *Structuring*: Gives purpose of the interview and invites questions (The purpose of my interview was to explore how participants understood their situation in terms of being homeless.);

3. *Clear*: Ask simple, easy and short questions (For example, "Many people would consider you as being homeless. Do you think of yourself as being homeless?");

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[2] Although the data analysis approach suggests structured interviews, I refer to unstructured interviews here because the questions were used only as a guide and participants were encouraged to share all they felt relevant to the study regardless if it was not consistent with the guide. Jerry did this most regularly.

4. *Gentle*: Let people finish; gives them time to think; tolerate pauses (a necessary strategy given the sensitive nature of the subject matter.);

5. *Sensitive*: Listens attentively to what is said and how is said; is empathetic (This can be related through body language or action, for example, I stopped an interview when the participant became upset or too emotional.);

6. *Open*: Respond to what is important to the interviewee; flexible (for example, "That's a really interesting thought…please tell me more if you like….");

7. *Steering*: Know what needs to be found out (I like your ideas about place and land, let's talk about that some more.);

8. *Critical*: Prepare to challenge what is said, when dealing with inconsistent responses (I thought you said yesterday that _____ and now you're saying _____. Let's clear this up so we're on the same page.);

9. *Remembering*: Relate back to what has previously been said (Last week we talked about _____. Shall we pick that up today?); and

10. *Interpreting*: Clarify and extend meanings of statements without imposing own meaning on them. (I used reflecting/mirroring participants' responses without adding any new meaning).

I had ten questions that acted as a guide for the interviews (APPENDIX D) and which I provided to the participants at the beginning of each interview. However, I informed them that we were not bound by those questions and any thoughts/feelings they had that were related to their homeless experience could also be explored and discussed. It was imperative that the participants were not under the influence of any drugs or alcohol, and oftentimes setting up appointments with the participants proved ineffective because of

their transient lifestyles. I had to work around this and often I would make "spot" checks at the shelter for my participants. This was useful on several occasions, for these random "check-ins" led to an impromptu interview. The interviews were recorded with the aid of a digital recorder, which was reflected in the consent forms. Utilizing this device was important because I had to reproduce the participants' words "verbatim in the analysis to preserve meaning" (Low, 2007, pg. 79).

Fieldwork

Preliminary field work for the study began early with my participation in the City of Lethbridge's October 2008 homeless census count. After that initial contact and during the same month, I approached the program manager with my research intentions, and requested permission to conduct it at the shelter. From that time one, my continued contact with the homeless shelter was persistent yet varied on a month to month basis. During the interviewing stage, and on average, I had made three to five visits to the shelter per week extending over a six month period. Additionally, I attended the monthly resource team meetings from May, 2009 to July 2010. These meetings kept me apprised of the shelter operations and I found them to be useful in that I was able to keep those agencies that worked directly with the Native homeless population up to date on the progress of my research. The primary location for my fieldwork was at the Lethbridge homeless shelter although occasional observations were made on the streets as they related to my research.

Data analysis

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and understood in their own terms. The primary research questions served as guidelines for the data analysis. The need to "fish" for matches between the participants' responses and my research objectives was eliminated, as much as possible, through careful formulation of the questions used in the interview process. In terms of saturation (Low, 2007), the collected data set was strong and full of rich, varied and valuable information. Low (2007) indicates that saturation is accomplished when no new information can be garnered from subsequent interviews. The strategies I used when interviewing in conjunction with the interview guide served as a means by which I could determine the saturation point. The themes and categories that arose from the narratives were diverse and after collecting the data, I was comfortable enough to move to the analysis stage, develop my interpretations, and link categories with a high degree of certainty (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). In terms of interview data, it is interesting to note that in his mixed-method study of Canadian homelessness, O'Reilly-Fleming's analysis consisted of approximately 219 interviews (1993, pg. xv). This is not to suggest that my data analysis had approached these numbers by any stretch, but it is worth noting to highlight the power that meaningful interview strategies hold within qualitative research. Employing a qualitative approach, I interpreted the data framed through the subjective realties of the participants just as researchers studying a phenomenon similar to mine have done previously (Kingfisher, 2007; Letkemann, 2004; Menzies, 1999, 2007; Sider, 2005). Bryman and Teevan (2005) have presented qualitative data analysis as an emphasis on understanding reality as it is accounted for by individual experiences of it. In terms of the participant interviews, analysis was conducted using

narrative analysis (Alaszewski, 2007), with a focus on aspects relating to theme, structure, interaction and the role of the author.

The purpose of the data analysis approach was to reiterate the participants' narratives as they were told to me, but within the structure of a story. This method was most suitable because it was culturally appropriate given the Blackfoot people's oral tradition. Five sections (A, B, C, D, and E) comprised the analysis approach with each speaking to different themes present in the data. Section A was the narrative template. This served to structure the five narrative accounts insofar as it related to the data analysis stage and was not considered or developed when the actual interviews were conducted. In section B, I looked "across" the five narratives – establishing patterns and unique experiences as told by the participants. How the participants' defined homelessness was explored in Section C. Section D identified the pathways to homelessness among the participants as revealed in their narratives. And finally, section E considered their present situation as well as plans for the future. There is a beginning, middle and an end and the narrative template was applied to each participant's story as prepared below:

A.

> **Narrative Template**
>
> 1. The overall sense of the narratives
>   - Childhood (events in early life, i.e. trauma, loss, joys, etc.
>   - Family of origin (who was their first family? Did they only have one? How does his/her familial origin inform his/her present situation?
>   - Adult Years
>
> 2. How does the participant understand homelessness?
>
> 3. What is the participant's pathway to homelessness?
>   - What has contributed to his/her current situation concerning homelessness?
>
> 4. How does the participant understand his/her attachment to traditional Blackfoot territory?
>   - What are his/her perceptions about the concept of land and its centrality to the Blackfoot people both traditionally and into modernity?
>   - Does importance of place influence his/her choice of residence?
>
> 5. The present and the future
>   - What is their current situation?
>   - What, if any, are some of their long-term goals?

B. In this section of the analysis, I looked across the data set, i.e., across the five narratives, and identified common/unique themes and patterns such as racism, discrimination, and profound losses. I included data from my field notes and from the focus group as appropriate. I addressed the following questions in relation to the data: What were the general life experiences of the participants? What genre of narrative best described the five narratives (narratives of suffering, narratives of loss, narratives of love and hope, etcetera)?

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C. How did the participants define homelessness? How have the five narratives informed our understanding of this phenomenon? What were the commonalities and differences inherent across the five narratives?

D. In this section I considered the participants' pathways to homelessness, i.e. the patterns and themes that arose from the five narratives and which account for their current state of homelessness.

E. Here I considered the participants' present and future. What was going to happen to them? What were their immediate and possibly long-term goals?

Bryman and Teevan (2005) have outlined the approaches to analyzing narrative data. Thematic analysis was used when gathering data from the Aboriginal homeless participants because of its emphasis on how people make sense of experiences; in this instance, how they experience and understand their situation in terms of being homeless. The Blackfoot language is not as widely used and the English language cannot adequately express emotions and perceptions that were formed in Blackfoot thought process. Therefore, I needed to be aware of the cues given through body language. Focus group analysis was conducted with an emphasis on the interactional construction of meaning between the service providers and the group was used as the unit of analysis (Green, 2007).

Researchers must be wary of allowing their own values and experiences to bias or influence the interpretation of data yet it is almost impossible to be free of bias to some degree (Broom and Willis, 2007; Bryman and Teevan, 2005) Indeed, it has been suggested that the very tools used in research are biased, to an extent, by their creators (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). This was especially true in my case as there was a potential

to over-identify with the participants' lived realities by virtue of the fact that I too am of Blackfoot descent and was readily able to easily with past cultural traditions that we had in common. Bryman and Teevan (2005) have indicated that all research is not "value-free," but by taking a reflexive approach to the research, we can at least acknowledge and recognize the part our values and biases may have played in the research process.

Trustworthiness

Because of the qualitative nature of my research design and analysis approach, the trustworthiness of the data, and subsequent interpretations of it were informed by the notion that it is difficult to arrive at, or apply, quantifiable measures to qualitative data as one would with quantitative (Bryman and Teevan, 2005). To do so would imply that the reality and truth about societal phenomenon are absolute and entirely subject to measurability and disclosure. Some, have suggested that in qualitative research, one can only present truths insofar as they have been depicted in the real world relative to an "awareness of the series of interpretive acts and discursive practices entailed in any effort to synthesize research findings … Reviewers accept that although multiple versions of truth can exist, multiple contradictory versions of it cannot" (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007, pg. 227). I relied on criterion that is equivalent for assessing quantitative data; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman and Teevan, 2005, pg. 150).

As it related to credibility, member checks had been an on-going process and were completed at various points throughout the research. I had provided the shelter's operations manager with a summarized version of the intended methodological approach before beginning the research. The participants were made aware of the nature of the

research and using the aforementioned interviewing strategies, I reflected meaning and content from their perspective back onto them in order to reinforce that what was being recorded was accurate and replicated according to their subjective realities. Additionally, I had informed the participants that at any time, they may request copies of the transcripts to ensure the accuracy and credibility (Bryman and Teevan, 2005) of my research.

Transferability was achieved through the participants' narrative accounts, the thematic content contained therein and the fact that they were often applicable and transferable to other First Nations as many of these themes were not exclusive to the Blackfoot nation. Dependability in the research was maintained by keeping several copies of each participant's interview transcripts, supporting documents and letters, and drafts of all papers pertinent to my research. Confirmability was accomplished by reflexive considerations and acknowledgment of the possibility of inherent biases that may have arisen because of the nature of my research and the effect the topic had on me as a student, a person, and a Blackfoot woman.

Ethical considerations

An ethics application was submitted to the Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge and approved in April, 2009. Ethics was guided by the Tri-Council Policy Statement (http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf) with special consideration given to Chapter 9, Research Involving First Nations, Métis and Inuit People, which states that researchers involved with Aboriginal communities should consider the following practices: to respect the culture, traditions and knowledge of the Aboriginal group; examine how the research may be shaped to addresses the needs and

concerns of the group (2010). The policy also states that "Life history and language research are examples of research areas where insider relationships and cultural competencies provide unique opportunities to extend the boundaries of knowledge" (pg. 119). My research is framed within these bounds.

Informed consent was obtained from the Blackfoot homeless participants and shelter service providers (Appendix B and C). A letter written to the shelter's operation manager stated that my intended research was to be viewed as a partnership between the Lethbridge Shelter and Resource Centre and the University of Lethbridge. Applicable protocols found within the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2010) were adhered to including respect for persons "through the securing of free, informed and on-going consent of participants (pg. 109), the maintenance of "justice" through an adequate balance of power, and "concern for welfare" of the participants was expressed in the consent forms and throughout the interview process.

Chapter Four: Narratives and Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The following are narrative accounts of interviews I conducted with Blackfoot

participants at the local homeless shelter from October 2009 to March 2010. The names

have been changed to protect their privacy. The table below provides a general

demographic representation of the six participants at the time the interviews were

conducted:

Name	Age	Marital Status	No. of years homeless	Fluent in Blackfoot	Blackfoot Nation
Charity	35	C/L	2+	No	Kainai
Les	46	C/L	30+	Yes	Kainai
Mike	51	Single	20+	Yes	Kainai
Jerry	42	Single	10+	Yes	Peigan
Roger	32	Single	2+	No	Kainai
Ursula	45	Single	2+	No	Siksika

C/L = Common/Law

I introduce each narrative with the participant's background information to offer the

reader context regarding personal attributes.

Charity and Les: The participants as persons

Charity and Les are a couple residing at the local homeless shelter and although they are not legally married, their common-law union has been consistent. They can often be found in the downtown core and many staff at the shelter told me that they are practically inseparable. Charity is a Blackfoot woman in her mid-thirties who has remained in the local vicinity for all of her adult life. She is a slight woman of petite stature and once very lovely and vivacious; it is now apparent that the years have not been kind to her and she can often be seen with various bruises and injuries to her face and body. These are likely the result of physical assaults while she was intoxicated. When sober, Charity is approachable, easy to talk with and always willing to share whatever she has. In his mid-forties, Les is also of Blackfoot heritage. He is not a large man; standing around 5'6" and weighing 150 lbs. He appears to be a very private person who remains close to his group of friends at the shelter, and I am under the impression that he does not easily trust others. Although their relationship is marred with addiction and poverty issues, as a couple, Charity and Les appear to get along quite well and genuinely appear to love one another.

Childhood years

Because we did not go into any significant detail regarding their years growing up, it is difficult to describe Charity and Les' childhood years. This section is limited by the data collected but I will include my prior knowledge of Charity's history.

Charity spent most of her childhood on the local reserve located a short distance from Lethbridge and attended schools in the surrounding areas. Her childhood, it appears, was very typical of children being raised in a Native community and she faced many of

the same challenges as a Native person in a society divided by racial tensions. Like many young women on reserves, Charity had her first child when she was quite young and as such, did not finish high school. I can still remember seeing her walking down the streets of Townsite strolling with her baby in a carriage with her being not much older than a child herself. After this period, I did not have any contact with Charity other than friendly greetings in various social situations that were fewer and farther in-between.

I know little to nothing of Les's childhood years but he indicated in the interview that "I've never had a stable home most of my life. I've been on the street for 32 years; since I was 14 years old." This statement is revealing because it speaks to the fact that the homeless condition is not often experienced as an immediate event but is rather a gradual process compounded by many events in one's life.

Family of origin

Charity and Les are both from a local, Blackfoot reserve, and during the interview they did not reveal any substantial information regarding the extent to which their family of origin may have influenced their current homeless situation.

Adult years

Les's transiency has been much more consistent than Charity's with 32 years of his life being spent on the street; he tells me that "My whole life I've grown up on the street." In Lethbridge at the time of the interview, they had been without a stable home for over a year. Although not explicitly shared in the interviews how long they have been in a relationship, I have been told that they have been together for nearly ten years.

Prior to moving to the city, Charity and Les were living on the local reserve and when asked if they had their own place, Charity related to me, "We did before, yes, but we just left because it was really bad." Les further discloses that "Well her [Charity], she would drink every now and then, but me, I kept drinking and we just went downhill as soon as we came to Lethbridge. We always had our own place but as soon as we got here, we went downhill." Les's statement is important because although Charity's answer suggests that they left the reserve because of difficult social circumstances; he indicated that moving to Lethbridge served to exacerbate their already dire situation. Charity's drinking worsened after their move and this was the point when their troubles with retaining adequate housing began. Les substantiates this notion: "Yeah, at her dad's and when she wasn't drinking I was always working and we always had our own place. But then drinking got the best of us." Drinking only served to bring out the worst in them, and Les's statement brings to light the sad reality that is life for many Blackfoot individuals who suffer with their addictions.

Perceptions of homelessness

When asked if they consider themselves as homeless, Charity and Les expressed to me that they are in fact homeless. For them, especially Les, being in a state of homelessness is not so much about not having a roof over one's head. More significantly, to be homeless means to be without the support of one's family. When asked how this affects their current situation, sighing with loneliness, Les replies "we get no family support and that's why we're on the streets." This perception is consistent with Blackfoot cultural values in the sense that without family and community support, an individual is essentially without a home because the notion of "home" is centered on family.

Les acknowledges that some of his experiences in life have been much different than his wife's. Les's homeless condition, as suggested, exists because there is no family support available to him. Charity, on the other hand, appears to follow Les and perceives alcohol and drug addiction as the reasons for her homelessness.

Although their perspectives are different, their reality and understanding of homelessness is relatively the same because they experience the same things. Les and Charity offer me a general picture of homelessness when they share the following experience as it pertains to Native people:

> Les: Ever since I've been here I haven't seen one white person get kicked out into the cold, to sleep in the cold. Last night I got kicked out. I stepped into the alley and covered myself with carpet. I don't think the shelter staff should be doing that because ...
> Charity: ... a lot of Native people get kicked out into the cold ... .
> Les: We could get sick. A few of my friends got kicked out and now they're dead from things like double pneumonia. One is in the hospital right now because he had to sleep outside... . I mean last night I had to sleep under some rugs and this morning I woke up and could barely feel my legs.

Here it becomes obvious that there is racial tension between the Native and Caucasian shelter guests. The couple agrees, however, that their homeless experience is not very different from that of non-Native people: "Well the white people here at the shelter, we're pretty much all in the same shoes, but the outside public, they look down on us." There is the idea that homelessness is a commonality which gives street people a collective identity that transcends cultural and racial boundaries. Aside from intimating that some of the shelter staff are prejudiced toward Native people, Charity and Les do not offer any kind of explanation as to why Les was "kicked out of the shelter" the night before the interview took place. I am aware that loud and raucous behaviour is not tolerated at the shelter and many guests are not allowed to sleep there if they are causing undue

disturbances. Nonetheless, it was bitterly cold that night and Les is certainly lucky that he was able to find something to warm himself with.

In addition to racial tensions, being homeless also brings to light the notion of disputed spaces. Les, with a tone echoing regret, tells me that, "we get banned from places like the malls and we can't even sit in there to warm up. They tell us 'hey you guys aren't having anything to drink or eat so can't stay in here; you guys have to go.'" Essentially the city malls and business districts are for the general public; the streets, shelters and sidewalk corners of the urban landscape are occupied by the destitute and displaced.

For Charity and Les the opportunity to obtain housing in the city often means having to turn those friends away who are experiencing homelessness. Les and Charity informed me about maintaining a place in Lethbridge:

> Les: .."[it's] going to be hard because of the people we know, they're on the street too. Once they find out where we live they'll be coming over and wanting to...
> Charity: ...stay over
> Les: especially if they get banned from the shelter. We did that before eh?
> GWH: How did that go?
> Les: We had our own place on the south side, it was a whole house and that night it was really cold. The staff...
> Charity: ...kicked these people out
> Les: and they came over to our house and we just let them in because it was too cold
> Charity: yeah we didn't want them to freeze outside
> Les: and I'm the kind of person that doesn't turn anybody away. If they come to my door and they need help, I'll let them in. I tell them just to sleep wherever. Sometimes there'll be about ten of them. So that's the thing; if we find our own place and once they get banned, they'll want to come over and I want me and her to be sober, to sober up.

The concept of street relations can no longer exist and what is a reciprocal and beneficial relationship on the street becomes a hindrance for those with a home. Essentially, they will need to ignore Blackfoot cultural traditions that involve community sharing and

reciprocity if they are to maintain adequate housing. This is especially difficult for Les because of his generous nature.

Pathway to homelessness

The couple was in mutual agreement that the contributing factors to their present homeless situation are addiction issues. Although not always explicitly stated in the interviews, their pathway to homelessness was not the same. When asked if they thought, ten years ago, they would be in this situation, Charity readily answers "no," yet Les does not provide any real answer only plainly replying that, "My whole life I've grown up on the street." For him, being homeless is a fact of life and part of his identity was shaped by the events experienced on the street. Indeed, Les acknowledges that his experiences are much different than Charity's, although she believes that "me and him experience the same thing." This declaration, although accurate in the sense that they experience some of the same things now, has not always reflected reality.

Understanding attachments to traditional Blackfoot territory

Charity and Les have informed me that they feel a deep connection to Blackfoot territory. Charity, having grown up on the reserve, conceptualizes home as a place where one "comes from," where one's identity and roots are embedded. For Les, having been on the streets since he was 14-years-old, the attachment to traditional Blackfoot territory is less concrete.

When asked if they thought Blackfoot land is just as important now as it was in the past, Charity, without hesitation, answers "yeah, I think our land is very important to us." She is concerned about the future of her children and refers to the fact that the land

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needs to be there for future generations. Les, taking more of an economic perspective, answers,

> it is important but we're losing our rights to is ... as long as we get a piece of the pie. Like if they're going to build a casino out there, it's not going to come to us... they say they're going to build trailers there but I'd like to see it, I mean over 400 acres, I think band members should get a piece of the pie instead of just chief and council.

Unlike Charity, Les's relationship to the land is premised on the extent to which it can benefit him personally. However, the interview reveals a much more profound connection and he expresses that no matter how far he has been or will go, he will "always come home." His heartfelt and powerful reply reflects the notion that "home" is a secure place where one can always go back to.

Traditional territory has served to shape the couple's identity, and it is helpful to discuss some issues mentioned in the interview about the local Blackfoot reserve, even though it represents only a small portion of traditional territory. Specifically, the belief that the local reserve has done nothing to help improve their situation. Indeed, being homeless on the reserve is not much different than being homeless in the city. When asked if living on the reserve is much different than living in the city, the couple informs me that there is no real difference since "there are people who are homeless on the reserve and then there are people who are homeless here." The moral: the people existing in a homeless situation do not have it any easier compared to those in the city. During the interview, Les is constantly returning to the idea that the loss of family and community support is equivalent to the loss of home:

> What I see on the reserve is there are no community supports so the ones who are homeless, they hear about the shelter so they come here. They think once they come to Lethbridge there will be something for them, but they all end up here. Some of them sleep outside, we even sleep outside ... me and her, we have no

support from our own flesh and blood, we get no support from them.

For Les and Charity, the reserve space no longer represents traditional Blackfoot values and customs such as community or foundational support upon which a person's identity is shaped and built.

The couple is, however, divided on whether they would move away from Blackfoot territory to an area where reliable housing is plentiful. Les says that, "I'd be willing to pack up and leave if there was a good job." Charity, however is less inclined to leave, because "we have a daughter so we'd have to stick around." After some thought, Les agrees with her saying, "It's hard for us to leave, just to say 'okay let's find something else.'" Here it is apparent that Charity's concern for their daughter greatly outweighs leaving traditional Blackfoot territory for brighter horizons, as it were. Ironically, being homeless means that she is unable to care for her daughter's needs regardless of whether or not they are in Blackfoot territory. Charity appears to be more connected to the land and being a mother, she is resistant to moving lest she totally abandon her children. Les, being transient for the better part of his life, has no real ties to area except the semblance of family represented by Charity and a daughter for whom he is incapable of caring and providing. They continue to remain in Blackfoot territory nonetheless born out of the idea that familiarity with one's environment can bring a sense of security no matter how desperate and bleak the situation.

The present and future

Currently Les and Charity are living on the streets and making use of the homeless shelter's resources. Their children are either in the care of social services or with

relatives. With little to no formal responsibilities, they indulge their addictions supplementing their income by panhandling. The search for adequate housing is hindered by alcoholism and discrimination present in the local city.

Again, the two appear to be divided when asked what the main hindrance was that prevented them from obtaining housing in the city:

> Charity: They didn't want to rent us [the landlords], they were prejudiced and...
> Les: Well, mainly like I told you it was the drinking
> Charity: Yeah, they don't want to rent us
> Les: We have to clean up our acts, quit drinking and clean up ourselves; look presentable so we can start looking

Instead of placing the blame on the landlords for not renting to them, Les takes an approach that makes them more accountable and he is quick to point out their alcoholism as possibly the primary reason preventing them from securing housing. That observation being made, he does not deny that discrimination exists in the local community. The couple informs me that "There's prejudice people we have to deal with ... A lot of prejudice [people] around here." The implications surrounding this are exacerbated by the fact that the couple, visibly homeless, are not only being discriminated against because of their ethnicity but also socially because of their low economic state. Landlords are hesitant to rent to them for fear they may damage their property yet the local community has a reputation amongst the Native people for discriminatory and racist attitudes. The couple also tells me that they find it much harder to get a place as compared to the non-Native people: "they get places but it's harder for us guys."

The couple's search for a home to rent is compounded by feelings of estrangement and abandonment from their reserve community. They state that more young people are

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migrating from the reserve to the city because there is little to no opportunity for

economic advancement. Les concludes,

> What I see on the reserve is there are no community supports so the ones who
> are homeless, they hear about the shelter so they come here. They think that once
> they come to Lethbridge there will be something here for them, but they all end
> up here ... There's a few that are really young, maybe 18, and they're already
> coming here.

Consequently, factors such as more young people moving from the reserve into the city

could potentially exacerbate local homelessness. Once here however, they have neither

the resources nor the life skills to viably sustain themselves. Eventually, their only option

is to use the services available at the city's homeless shelter.

As for the shelter and its services, Charity informed me that, "if you've been here

awhile ... they help you out." Les, agreeing with his spouse continues, "yeah if you're

serious, you want to sober up, they'll help you 100%; but if you just bullshit to them and

say 'yeah, I want to do this and that' and then you don't follow through and you try to

turn to them again, they won't be here for you anymore." For the couple, the shelter

offers services that are vital to their survival yet at the same time there is a sense of

mistrust and resentment directed toward some of the shelter staff because they feel

discriminated. I asked if they felt the shelter was a second home and they answered,

> Charity: Yeah
> Les: Well, for the homeless it is
> Charity: nobody has nowhere to go so ...
> Les: they make this their home
> Charity: it's our home too and we've been here for a while

Les and Charity are at the shelter out of sheer desperation, almost as a last resort, as it

were. The tone of the interview revealed that Charity considered shelter more favourably

often calling it her home. Les was much more cynical and indicated that the shelter can be

considered as a second home if one follows the rules. Essentially though, it is a shelter in every sense of the word and does not necessarily represent "home" for many who use its services.

At the time of the interview, the couple was scheduled to leave the shelter for a nearby treatment centre with the hopes of learning how to manage their addiction. They stated:

> Charity: We're trying to sober up now...
> Les: Yeah we're going to treatment
> Charity: yeah and then we're gonna look for a place
> Les: yeah, Lethbridge Housing and that outreach housing, they're helping us
> to get a place.

In addition to utilizing housing supports, the couple seemed sincere in their resolve to control their drinking. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. I have seen them together on the streets of Lethbridge and nearby the shelter, often intoxicated and in a generally pitiful state.

For Les and Charity, the shelter and the streets are the only option for them. They can indulge in their addictions on the street and return to the shelter nightly for a warm place to sleep and a hot meal. They are quite aware, perhaps Les more so, that changes are needed they are to get their addictions under control, otherwise they will remain homeless. Arguably, culturally appropriate support programming is needed to address the unique needs of the Blackfoot homeless population of Lethbridge and regarding the local community helping the Native homeless people, Les indicated there "should have better resources where we could go to get support." He did not however, indicate what this support should look like. Indeed, the couple was at a loss for words when I asked what they thought the local community could do to help improve their situation. Instead, they

again pointed to the reserve by "preparing them [the young people] to move [to the city]."

In sum, Les is upset with local reserve policies that alienate urban Natives, and suggests

that reserve leaders acknowledge that they are as much a part of Blackfoot cultural

identity as reserve residents. Cultural borders dividing urban and reserve Natives must be

dissolved and new policies and programming put in place that would allow Native people

to make a successful transition from the reserve to the urban landscape.

Mike: The participant as a person

Mike is a single, Blackfoot Native from the Blood Tribe in his early fifties. I had first seen him at the local shelter during the summer of 2009. Mike is a physically intimidating man standing around 6'5" and probably weighing well over 200 pounds. In contrast, his voice is gentle, his mannerisms polite, and first impressions suggest that he trustworthy and kind. He still retains much of the familiarity with the old traditions and regularly speaks the Blackfoot language.

Childhood years

Mike's homeless experience began when he was quite young and he speaks of loss at a very early age: "I was still that kid who lost his whole family at 10 or 11. I was homeless at that age, me and my brother, in [Jamestone][3]. We were actually being shipped from house to house, uncle to auntie, to St. Paul's." St. Paul's was an Indian Residential School run by the Anglican Church and sanctioned by Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada. That Mike had nowhere to go after the loss of his family is apparent when he relates that much of his childhood was spent moving amongst relatives and finally settling at the residential school. This forced displacement compels Mike to conclude that many Native people at the homeless shelter share the common bond of loss of family at an early age: "The reason I bring this up is because a lot of the people here at the shelter and like I said, I've been here long enough to know so many people, this is their background; my background."

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[3] Fictitious name.

Family of origin

Mike's family of origin is very large, particularly his mother's side. Like most families of the Blood Tribe, they will take in displaced children and Mike's experience was no exception. His narrative indicates that his first family was his mother and his siblings. His father was rarely mentioned throughout the narrative suggesting that he did not figure largely into Mike's early childhood years. After his mother left, Mike indicates that he went to live with various relatives. Upon leaving his second family of relatives, Mike was placed at the St. Paul's Indian Residential school; this would be his third "family" for the majority of his child hood. His tone is very "matter-of-fact" when he speaks of his early years, and he does not go into any detail regarding his experiences at the residential school.

When Mike was a teenager, he indicated that his mother returned home, and that he left the residential school to live with her: "…my mother returned home to us … and I went there in about grade 11, after residential school, to her house. After that my brothers stayed with her because they couldn't get their own homes on the reserve [but] eventually they got their own homes." After moving in with his mother, Mike finished high school and decided to pursue his education in an eastern province. This was not an easy transition and Mike returned to the Blood reserve. He discloses that he was unsuccessful in his educational endeavour "because I was totally on my own. I did start and so many people expected so much out of me but like I said, I wasn't brought up, or prepared, where I was even mature to go off on my own. I was still that kid who lost his whole family at 10 or 11." Mike recognizes that he did needed to expose himself to a bigger world, as it were, where better opportunities lay, yet he was drawn back to the reserve and

found that he was too immature to make the transition to post-secondary education – still

thinking of himself as a kid reveals how familial loss had deeply affected him.

Having lost his first family at such an early age, Mike's narrative sheds light on

the fact that he considers this to be one of the root causes of his homelessness, and that it

informs his present situation to such an extent that his story is one of extreme loss on

almost every personal level. He returns to this fact stating that "You know I come from a

background that, well the way I've grown up was pretty rough. I'd say that I've always

been homeless, pretty well." Mike is unable to come to terms with this. Currently, Mike's

family consists of his siblings, children, and the other guests that he has formed a bond

with at the local shelter. The latter however, is a much more consistent presence in his

life.

Adult years

There are significant gaps in the narrative during this period of Mike's life but he

does reveal that he was married and has children. His marriage, however, ended in

divorce. He did not discuss the details of the break up, and I was often left wondering, as

will become apparent, if his addictions were the cause. There is a sense that Mike's adult

years were marred with addiction issues that can be perceived as coping strategies to deal

with profound loss during his childhood and teenage years. Indeed, significant loss has

followed him into adulthood:

> Like for me, I wonder why it is so hard. I was the caregiver for my mom before
> she passed away last year and so it wasn't necessary for me to look for a place
> because I took care of my mom. Out of my brothers and sisters, I was the only one
> who looked after her. Before her passing she had a treaty 7 home for 20 years and
> after, that left me homeless. But I was still going through issues like deaths in the
> family. My daughter committed suicide ... In the past year, I've seen so many
> friends pass away on the streets here and that's just not normal, for this group of

people to have so many deaths by suicide, accidents. I've seen three people run over on these streets and nothing is ever done about it. You never hear these stories. I've had two cousins killed in the coulees and you never hear about it. Over doses are the big things too. Cirrhosis in the young people, as young as 20. Before, you never heard of that.

One needs simply to look about the local shelter to realize the painful truth of Mike's words and the harsh reality of life on the streets for those unfortunate enough to find themselves in that position. His narrative also reveals his frustration with the local community's lack of recognition for those homeless individuals who have met their demise due to violence, accidents or suicide.

He related to me that he has lived on and off the street for 20 years; indeed, half his adult life. His voice resonating with a slight echo of hopelessness, Mike also revealed that "I've been alcoholic and on the streets but this is first time that I've been totally and absolutely homeless in my life in the last year." This kind of transiency is typical in the sense that it reflects a notion that homelessness is a fluid experience and is not a constant in Mike's life.

Perceptions of homelessness

Although he considers himself homeless, Mike is not always consistent in this perception and has given conflicting answers when directly questioned. In some instances in the interviews he will admit to being "totally and absolutely homeless," but other times he prefers to explain the reasons why he is in a homeless situation rather than give concrete, yes/no answers:

> I consider myself independent but I find it hard to get a home in this place ... Well, it's really difficult finding a place here in Lethbridge; especially for a single man ... it's tough when you're like me. I do and can work and everything. I'm trying to get my job back, and like I said I recently, fell off, so that caused a lot of the ..."

For Mike, articulating homelessness is difficult because answers are not easily found. The

causes vary on individual circumstances. He feels that if local landlords gave him the

opportunity to rent, he would be successful at maintaining his home. However, he also

concedes that his addiction to alcohol has often ruined his good intentions. In addition, his

narrative suggests that his homelessness condition goes hand in hand with addiction – he

constantly refers to his lifelong struggle with alcohol in conjunction with his perception

of homelessness: "The way I grew up caught up with me right then and I became an

alcoholic; right after my first drink. In other words, it was natural for me to become an

alcoholic. I've always had problems with a home." Mike provides a general picture of

homelessness when he describes the reality of life on the streets for both Native and non-

Native people:

> As a man you're proud of Native women and now you see what Crack is doing to
> them. What they're willing to do for that stuff; they really disrespect themselves
> for that stuff and they're targeted easily by people who come in and out of the
> city. White people are more transient than the Natives. I see men come here once
> and then they're gone. There are a lot of white people who go province to
> province collecting welfare. On the street, you see the group of people that I'm
> with but then there are other groups come in. They're here for maybe a year at the
> longest, and they may be Natives from other places, and then they're gone again
> ... [the homeless] people are moving to the outskirts, like the Wal-mart out there.
> Now, it's spread out over the city. It's not in the downtown core anymore. A lot of
> times someone here may get a house and then they'll start going there to sleep. It
> may turn into a party house; they just don't last long. That's the real rough part
> here...

For Mike, there are different groups that constitute the homeless population reflecting

differing levels of transiency that are distinguished from his own. For those who are

chronically homeless, Mike describes them as becoming institutionalized "because that's

all they've ever known. They may go out to their relatives on the reserve but they're

always back here and they never get away from that pull." The pull of the streets offers

many avenues for things such as developing friendship, indulging addictions, linked responsibilities to one another, and an angry defiance against the euro-Canadian, conservative hegemony of local society. For Mike and many others, the pull is irresistible and "knowingly or unknowingly ... they're just drawn back here." The concept of "institutionalization" that Mike introduces is interesting and somewhat paradoxical in that we usually associate it with confinement. For the Native population such settings vary from jails, residential schools, even treatment centers. We rarely think of wide open spaces such as downtown Lethbridge as a site of potential institutionalization. The street, instead of representing something that is specifically heterogeneous, is transformed to the homogenous and could be any street in any urban setting. It institutionalizes the individual who, once stripped of identity, ultimately conform to socially accepted norms of behaviour that are consistent with street culture.

Pathway to homelessness

Mike explains that his pathway to homelessness was a journey that he began at a young age. This began with the break-up of his nuclear family. From that point, he went to live with relatives and again was confronted with loss when he was shipped to St. Paul's Residential school. Later, his mother returned and he was reunited with his original family. Along the way, however, Mike was confronted with events that kept him on his pathway to homelessness; which in certain cases accelerated his journey. He was not successful at his attempt to further his education at a place which, essentially, was at the other end of the country. Lacking secure and strong familial roots, Mike acknowledged that he was neither stable nor mature enough to complete his studies and that the pressure of living up to other's expectations became overwhelming.

Perhaps the most consistent companion that accompanies Mike during his journey to homelessness is alcohol. Substance abusers often find it difficult to maintain, or obtain, adequate housing when in the throes of alcoholism or drug addiction. When the first interview was conducted in October of 2009, Mike had been sober for seven months. By the time the final interview was complete in January of 2010, he had relapsed and was once again homeless. Mike also identifies a lack of steady employment as an exacerbating factor. He recounted that "To get a job, like a good paying job where I can afford it [a place of his own], to take up my time. It keeps your mind off drinking, you know busy." In sum, having something to do is vital to Mike's sobriety.

When asked to describe some of the events that have contributed to his current condition, he replies:

> Low self-esteem. You don't think much of yourself so you don't expect much out of life ... Other things are family break-ups, family-loss due to alcohol. It all points back to these addictions and how lost you get into it. The reserve has grown; it has out-grown itself and out-grown housing. In my opinion there has to be really drastic measures taken to combat all these deaths; people dying needlessly. They really have to think about what's most important for the survival of the Blackfoot people. We'll never get rid of this image, I don't believe, because there's always going to be racism and differences amongst people ... I've been angry with all the racism around me and even more so, they act like nothing is happening. They won't admit that they think we're second-class citizens; even if you're at the same level as them ... I've grown up with so many of my peers who were very smart and had so much potential, but then again, because of alcohol and family situations, they are now homeless.

For Mike, the path to homelessness is not only paved with addictions, his perception of self and the perceptions of the local community about the Native homeless also contribute to his homeless condition. He identifies racism and discrimination towards the Native population; specifically the Native homeless population, as harmful to self-image and self-esteem. Perhaps what is most frustrating for Mike is the denial of Lethbridge

residents that racism and discrimination exist. It is a harsh reality for those experiencing racism, and although veiled it is a significant undertone permeating throughout the urban landscape: "... they say there is no racism but there is. There is; it seems very subtle..." Additionally, many landlords are unwilling to rent to Native people because of racist, stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes.

Mike is a compassionate soul and has the unique ability to put himself in the position of others and he constantly does this throughout his narrative. When speaking about racism amongst Native and non-Native, Mike informs me that

> we've experienced more than [they] have ever had and then being homeless, even these white people, they get discriminated by their own people because they're homeless too, not just us. A lot of these [white people] they suffer it too, they suffer because they're homeless. [T]hey are down and out, they see them walking from the shelter, they see them walking here for lunch, they're discriminated by their own people, you know. So it happens on both sides too ...

Here, however, the distinction ends and Mike detailed regarding the racism and discrimination the Native homeless community deals with daily:

> I think it's kind of tougher on us because you're already labelled just because you're Native, you're already labelled. You are already put down, you have to make your way up, whether you're already educated or whether you're not drinking, you are automatically put down to begin with; they don't see eye to eye with you right away. They look down on you first. Then if you do something, they say you have to build up yourself, your image and then they will accept you.

The repetitive nature of Mike's words belies his frustration with the people of Lethbridge suggesting that Natives have to "build themselves up" to prove their worth to the dominant euro-Canadian society. They are not looked upon as people worthy of respect. They must earn it. They are looked upon first as Natives and second as individuals.

Mike identifies the loss of traditional cultural values as another contributing factor to Native homelessness:

I think as Natives we kind of hold ourselves back. [I]n other words, in the old days we help each other. It doesn't seem to be like that anymore, it seems like we lost that, we've lost that [to help each other out, pull each other up]; you know to help each other, right now we are kind of learning the white man's way. You're trying to get as much as you can, save as much as you can for yourself, instead of sharing. You know, like what tradition is, our tradition is you know [helping the one in need]. It seems that has been lost; we're losing that so much. Now, you're trying to get ahead of the other guy, you're trying to get the bigger truck than the other guy or something like that. Instead of trying to help each other out, where we survived as a group, now we're trying to survive as individuals trying to get a bigger piece of the pie or whatever. I don't agree with that.

Here Mike is identifying modern Blackfoot people as being more individualistic and selfish; lost to the "white man's" ways. The ideas of communal sharing are being abandoned, and he openly acknowledges this loss of culture and its negative effects on Native communities. He also feels the Blood Reserve's unwillingness to provide aid perpetuates Native homelessness: "That's one of the reasons I am homeless too; I could have got a little more help from the reserve, my own reserve. I don't get anything from them ... all we need is our land to help us out, that's my own personal situation."

Understanding attachments to traditional Blackfoot territory

Mike's perception of the importance of land to Blackfoot people is seen through both traditional and modern lenses. He informs that neither he nor his brothers can access their land that is located on the Blood reserve. This causes him much frustration and he feels that his children would have improved opportunities at a better life if he could put his land to good use. When asked if he was very familiar with this traditional land base, Mike's responded:

I would say yes. Yesterday I walked from the west side. I walked all the way because I just needed to. I walked and walked down through the coulees and was just thinking. Shit this ... [pauses] you think about it, that sun. I thought about the old people. This was their land. I was walking through Whoop-up drive thinking

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how nice it was. Holy, it's beautiful country, you know to see it. I walked right through it there just thinking about it.

When listening to Mike, I could not help but sense the notes of quiet nostalgia that had settled in his voice; almost as if the "old people" were all around us urging him to articulate of his attachment to his homeland.

Mike feels that land is just as important now to the Blackfoot people, as compared to the past:

> You know before ... they wouldn't think of saying [it belongs to me]. We shared it, but now they come in and say this is their land now. This is theirs and they are giving us a parceled piece of land. You know, there are more Natives now and land is more important right now, very important. To have a home on our homeland, you know.

For Mike, land and its centrality to the Blackfoot individual anchors one's culture and perpetuates traditions. Having the ability to remain in one's homeland is very important to Mike and he speaks of it as possessing spirit. Simply stated, "this land is important to us because this is where we come from." He sees land as a connection to the past and although he admits that he does not possess the "old people's" knowledge, he has great respect for it.

In terms of attachments to traditional homeland informing his decision of establishing a home, Mike reveals that it most certainly does. When asked if he would move from this area if it meant obtaining steady employment and a dependable place to stay, Mike answered,

> I probably would, but then like I said, I'm drawn back home. I'd work but I'd always be drawn back home, but I would definitely would go; even for schooling. I even thought about it. I'm partly from the states too. I am a U.S. citizen and I'm even thinking of moving down with one of my sons.

Mike expresses the need to advance his socio-economic status regardless of place, but simultaneously he admits that he will always return home due to his deep attachments to traditional homelands: "... I'll go because I have to go to make a living; to make a living for myself." When asked if he would come back here, he answers, "Yeah, it seems, like I said, I'm drawn back here."

The present and the future

Currently Mike makes his home at the local shelter, and although he may occasionally "crash" at relatives or friends, he can usually be found there on any given day, especially when lunch or dinner is being served at the soup kitchen. He often praises the shelter's existence: "I'm very fortunate that this place is here. I'm very glad this place is here. If not, [I'd] really be out on the street." Mike is fiercely independent and is hesitant to take charity from others, even family. He acknowledges that the services the shelter offers are vital to the Native homeless population, but in the same breath he states that "it's also up to the individual to try and make the effort too. They have helped, but as an individual, you have to make your own effort in order to be helped." This statement represents Mike's own philosophy regarding individual responsibility even in the direst of circumstances; in essence, he is acknowledging his own agency as a Native male living in a homeless condition.

Mike is in a constant battle with his addiction to alcohol and has sought treatment on numerous occasions. He also sees a counselor on a regular basis because he suffers from depression brought on by his past and present experiences, in particular the suicide of a daughter and the death of his mother. He is faced with racism and discrimination on an almost daily basis and struggles to come to terms with the division in the local

community. Not being racist himself, he often tries to understand the reasons behind the racism by placing himself in his fellow person's shoes. In light of these discriminatory and racist attitudes, Mike is having great difficulties in securing adequate housing as landlords are quick to turn him down as a potential renter. Additionally, addiction issues would likely prevent him from maintaining housing should he secure it in the first place.

Mike's primary goals at the time the interviews were conducted were to obtain adequate housing and deal with his addiction. He was doing everything he could to be in a position to secure a home and utilizing all possible resources. Unfortunately, he still was unable to obtain housing and found that local resources were ineffective with regard to getting a home. His long term goals, dependent on whether he obtains adequate shelter of course, involve securing steady employment and when in a better position, return to school to complete earlier academic endeavors. Housing programs and increased supports in the areas of addiction and loss/grief counseling that are culturally appropriate are vital to Mike's future success.

Roger: The Participant as a person

Roger is a young, Blackfoot Native man in his early thirties. Originally he is from a local Blackfoot reserve but has been residing at the city's homeless shelter for the past two years. Roger is a soft-spoken, quiet young man who tends to keep himself thus ensuring a small circle of friends. Yet, he is easy to approach and always willing to offer a friendly smile to those whom he trusts and I get the impression that trust does not come easily for him. Roger looks much younger than his years and he is often mistaken as being a teenager. He stands around 5'9" and he takes great pride in his appearance as he is always clean-shaven. Indeed, Roger's general appearance belies the fact that he is homeless. At the time of the interviews, he was in very good spirits with high hopes for the future as he had obtained a place and was simply waiting to pay the first month's rent.

Childhood years

Roger spent his childhood years in the care of his grandmother. Roger, like many children from the Blackfoot community, was reared by his grandparents. With a hint of nostalgia, he informs me that, "I was raised by the old people and I'm way different from my brother, my sister and my cousins. So I grew up with the old people way back then." By differentiating himself from his siblings, Roger makes the veiled suggestion that he may have been a favourite of his grandparents (many older Blackfoot elders of the Blackfoot tribe will often take first born or favourite grandchildren and raise them as their own). Even so, Roger's childhood was not without its own traumas. Regarding his grandmother, Roger shares:

She really hit us a lot, really a lot. She hit us and treated us like she was still at

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Residential [school]. [It] really affected us and she really hit us rank, really hard. She'd come into the room and 'Bam!' She'd hit us clear across the room and I didn't like that. Sometimes I'd just walk out of the house and I wouldn't come back for awhile. My dad came back to put a stop to it and he told her, 'whatever happened to you in the residential school was back then. You can't get mad at those people that did that to you because they're all gone and passed away.' My dad took me for awhile and then I had to go back to my grandma and [she] used those effects on me, my two brothers, my sister and my auntie.

Roger continues to relate that his auntie, also raised by his grandmother, is currently staying at the shelter as well. Intergenerational trauma and the idea that the cycle of abuse perpetrated on the survivors continues to effect younger generations are concepts prevalent in his narrative. With notes of slight hesitation in his voice, Roger recounts his childhood experiences in relation to intergenerational trauma:

> ... the abuse they got from there and the effects [of it], they're starting to use it on their kids now because my grandma went through that and to tell you the truth, she was kind of mean; she was really mean. That was the effect the school had on her and she used it; she used it on me too even though she raised me...My mom passed away, it's been 10 years now. It [residential school abuse] had an effect, the abuse they got, especially on my grandma. I know that. Other people I know they beat on their kids, hitting them, abusing them. [However] it [affected] them is how they're affecting their kids. It [a]ffected the elders today, but not all of them.

The above excerpts are indicative of the fact that although Roger loved his grandmother dearly, he is also aware that abuses suffered at the Residential school hindered her ability to adequately care for him. Roger relates that his father stepped in one time, but failed to offer the reasons why he left again. Roger's narrative reveals that his childhood may have been happy at times, but was marred by loss; loss of a father figure and loss of trust in his grandmother. Additionally, Roger also feared his grandmother as well as felt helpless for not being able to protect his siblings. Interestingly though, where he differentiated and separated himself from his siblings in terms of being raised by his grandparents, of which

he initially spoke of with high esteem, he stresses that they were all physically abused at the hands of his grandmother. Being a favourite grandchild, or being raised in a more traditionally cultural respect, did not spare him from his grandmother's wrath – evidence of her Residential school abuse.

Family of origin

Roger retains close connections to his biological family, which I know is quite large and extensive. As identified earlier, he mentioned his father's intervention early in his childhood, but makes no reference to him in later interviews. He also reveals that his mother passed on ten years ago. This is the first and last time that Roger mentions his mother. It is unclear what role she played, if any, in his childhood years. It was his grandparents who influenced him and instilled cultural traditions and he still maintains close contact.

Several of Roger's family members are homeless and staying at the local shelter. His aunt, whom he speaks of with endearment, is locked in her own struggle with alcohol addiction. Roger reveals that,

> With my other family they have to straighten up. They've really dropped their level since they've been here. My aunty was working but just by someone talking to her here, she gave up everything. Like these guys, they're always putting me down and I told my aunt just keep going but these people keep talking to her and it just really got her down and she quit her job. I really feel bad for her ... She has a boyfriend and nobody likes him. He hits and stabs my aunty and she stills stays with him even after he got out of jail. I told her that I don't want him at my place. He went to jail for a year and when he got out, she ran back to him.

Roger's frustration and helplessness is apparent, and he is worried at how easily other shelter guests negatively influence him and his family members. I am aware that another aunt of Roger's was homeless on the local Blackfoot reserve with her children for a

lengthy period of time. Roger has followed his family members into the city in the hopes of finding greater economic opportunity. Sadly, they have all ended up homeless and living at the shelter.

Adult years

In his early thirties and with no children or spouse, Roger is employed as a server at a local city restaurant. He often moves between the reserve and the city, and his narrative informs me that he still takes care of his grandmother, often sending her money. With little opportunity for economic advancement on the local reserve, Roger was forced to move into the city to seek employment because "there are no jobs out there and that's why I left. I did try getting a job but I couldn't ... it was really hard times." Roger did not complete high school; going only as high as grade 11. His lack of education is something that still bothers him and he expressed that he will one day finish high school.

Throughout Roger's adult years on the reserve he saw and experienced many things, especially with regard to Native gang activity both on and off the reserve. He shares that local reserve gangs had tried to recruit him and gives me a general picture of gang activity as he perceived it: "We're going to lose all our youth to gangs [and] they are recruiting 8 and 9 year olds. If you read the newspapers, there's a guy who got tortured ... because he was going to quit one gang and join another and the other gang tortured him. I guess he burnt his bandana in front of them ... These gangs cause trouble and fights here in the soup kitchen." For Roger, exposed to physical abuse and loss as a child, negative social ills greatly affect him as an adult in his search for self-sufficiency.

His frustration with his family, compounded by the environment at the local shelter, has led him into a depressive state. He informs me that his use of alcohol has

increased since leaving the reserve and that he uses it as means to alleviate his depression. With desperation tainting his voice, Roger reveals that he has been searching for an adequate place to rent since moving to the city: "... I did look, I really did look. I gave up for a few months because the days would turn into weeks and months. I'd get really depressed when I got money - it literally drove me to drink, it really did. Drinking and stressing out ..." His feelings of hopelessness and depression are likely exacerbated by his use of alcohol. Even though he has family who has offered him a place to stay in the city, he chooses to remain at the shelter lest he be a burden to them.

Perceptions of homelessness

When asked if he considers himself as being homeless, Roger's response is "yes," in spite of the fact that he also thinks of the reserve as his true home. It is unclear whether his answer is influenced by the fact that he is residing at the local shelter. What is certain for Roger though is that to be homeless, in part, means to be without a sense of control or agency over one's life. Additionally, Roger perceives being homeless as being situated on the bottom of the social hierarchy, as it were, and he is generally ashamed of his homeless state.

Roger's narrative reveals that being at the shelter has left him with feelings of helplessness because he is often put in vulnerable situations. He does not want his employers to discover that he is homeless and staying at the shelter because of the perceived stigma attached to it and also for the fact that he is afraid that he will be fired from his job:

> GWH: You told me that you also didn't want your work finding out that you're here at the shelter
> R [Roger]: If they do, I'm gone

GWH: and they still don't know?

R: No they haven't found out. There's only one person from this building [shelter] that knows...well actually they all that I'm working but there's one who's threatening to tell my work that I'm here. So I have to do a few things I don't like to do; like help them out and give them money every few weeks and I don't like to do that.

Essentially, Roger is being taken advantage of by other shelter guests who exploit his fear of losing his job, whether or not it is justified. He is therefore vulnerable to certain shelter guests. Being unable to obtain a place to rent may lead his employers to perceive him as being irresponsible in the sense that he cannot find or keep adequate shelter. Hence, his job is at permanent risk. This deception has been greatly troubling for Roger and it has led him to harbour deep resentment for some of the shelter guests, particularly the residential school survivors. Of this group of the Native homeless population, Roger feels that "they're not even trying" to get over some of the pain they suffered or to seek help for the abuses. Instead, he describes life at the local shelter for the residential school survivors: "They're just drinking everyday and all different kinds of stuff – as long as it has alcohol in it; even hairspray too. Most of them are from residential school too and when they get their residential, they wouldn't be here for weeks and once the money's gone, they're back here in the same spot still drinking."

Roger, feeling a lack of control over his environment, is constantly put in a position where other guests are expressing their feelings of hopelessness to him: "... they're telling me all their problems and it gets depressing for me. It makes it worse. Almost every day I hear their problems." In a later interview, Roger further shares that, "A lot of these Natives tell me a lot of stories and I just sit there and listen and it makes me feel bad ... I hate to say this but these stories also drive me to drink and I've been drinking more than I have ever did before. I've been trying to quit but I get so depressed

in here ..." Already dealing with his own desperate situation, he often feels forced into listening to others express their frustration. Roger informs me that, "they just call each other down and try to get me in it because they know I'm working ... I'm just trying to mind my own business but people are trying to put me down too. They really put me down." This negative environment is depressing for Roger, yet he feels anger for having remained at the shelter the past two years; and for being unable, indeed at times unwilling, to change his situation. Roger regretfully admits that even though this is the case, he is "getting used to it here ... this lifestyle that I'm living right now." This powerful statement speaks to Roger's belief that despite employment and hopes for a brighter future, he has come to perceive his life at the shelter as an integral part of his identity. For all his complaints about the other guests, he is unable to avoid internalizing their stories. Indeed, he expresses that being at the shelter; "it's kind of making me ... well, I hate to say this, but it's kind of making me ... it feels like I'm not [long pause] it feels like I'm in jail, but I'm not." Like a prisoner without any control or agency in his life, Roger exists at a level where he is incarcerated by his choices.

For Roger, to be homeless also means that people in authority have the power to dictate how he lives his life; indeed, even how he manages his finances. He reveals to me that a person working for a local social agency is attempting to become of a trustee for Roger. This worries Roger: "I don't want him to do that ... He made me sign that paper and I don't know if he has control over me now." Later in the interviews, he continues "... there's this white guy trying to take my money. He's trying to take it all. He went straight to my boss ... I don't like what he did, that guy … I don't want him taking anything, not even a penny. That's my money!" The reason behind this is that it is questionable whether or not Roger suffers from Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Roger vehemently

denies this and states that, "He probably thinks I'm handicapped, which, I'm not, or that I don't know how to spend my money." Sadly, it is most likely true that Roger is suffering from some sort of mental deficiency be it depression or FASD and this only serves to increase his feelings of helplessness and alienation.

Throughout the interviews, Roger constantly refers back to his annoyance with the way people treat each other, and that by making use of the shelter resources, he is "lowering" himself to their level. He informs me that since residing at the shelter, he has demeaned himself as an individual. This devaluation of identity is made tangible in some of his statements:

> "I'm going downhill now. Like I used to be way up there and now I'm getting put down."
> "With my other family they have to straighten up. They've really dropped their level since they've been here."
> "I'm in the same boat. I do exactly the same thing as they do"
> "I'm in the same boat as they're in because I'm in the same building."
> "They're [people at the shelter] putting me down and I don't want to get to that point. They're pulling me down."

The above assertions indicate that Roger perceives his situation as being at the lower rungs of the social pyramid. The negative stigma attached to homelessness is affecting how he perceives himself as a person and by comparing himself with the other guests at the shelter, regardless of the fact that he is employed, he defines himself as a homeless person. In this sense, Roger associated his identity in with place – in this case, the local homeless shelter.

Additionally, Roger's homeless condition is aggravated by the fact that when attempting to approach potential landlords for a place to rent, he is often placed in the same category as other Natives who have poor reputations with landlords because of past property destruction. Roger shares that,

it's the Natives who wreck it for other Natives; the ones who are trying. Once they get to the point that they want to get a place and then the landlord says, 'Well you guys will just trash this place,' and it's really wrecking it for us. Like for me, I'm trying, my heart is really into it and that's what's preventing me; those Natives who wreck it for other Natives. It's all the drinking that's causing this...

It is not unusual for shelter guests to obtain rental accommodations and then be evicted because of disruptive and destructive behaviour. Roger is frustrated because he is perceived as being a part of this relatively small Native population that have been labelled as "bad" renters, as it were.

Pathway to homelessness

It is unclear in the interviews when Roger's pathway to homelessness began. He speaks of having the support of family members yet he also shares with me the fact that other family members have been homeless and, at the time the interviews were conducted, staying at the local homeless shelter.

Roger's narrative suggests that his journey to homelessness may have been one he undertook at an early age. Past physical abuse suffered at the hands of his grandmother, whom he loves and respects, led to feelings of helplessness and embedded deep feelings of mistrust. In addition to this, being abandoned by his father at a time in his life when he desperately needed him was destabilizing. His biological mother, only mentioned once, did not figure largely into his life. The local reserve which he is a member of has done nothing to improve his situation and offers no opportunities for social or economic advances. Hence, he moved to the city with hopes at a better life that were not realized. All these factors combined set Roger on the dreary path to homelessness.

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Roger makes no racial distinctions when he discusses the plight of homeless

people, which provides me with a general picture of why he believes people are

homeless:

> Well, they're homeless too; it's not just us Natives. They have the same issues,
> the same problems...They get called down when they go downtown. They're
> told, 'hey, get a job and get out of that place.' They do that to the Natives too.
> They get depressed and they drink a lot. They really get called down a lot and
> that's why they drink a lot...some of them have been abused, been beat up and
> a lot who do have families, their families don't want them back and they're
> called the black sheep; and these are just the white guys. Some of the Natives have
> had it worse, way worse.

For Roger, homelessness is a condition that potentially its roots in one being ostracized

from family supports. It is interesting that although Roger informs me that he still has the

support of his family, he remains homeless. This can be attributed to the fact that his

family is probably the main reason as to why he is currently homeless. He continues to

send them money whenever he can and has even admitted that he may allow other

homeless family members to stay at his place if needed. Unfortunately, for Roger to be a

successful renter, he will have to distance himself from his family for they are a drain on

his financial resources and could result in a future eviction notice. Family detachment is

not a part of traditional Blackfoot cultural values and I am under the impression that

Roger will have great difficulty in separating himself from his family.

Understanding attachments to traditional Blackfoot territory

Roger feels that land is extremely important to First Nation peoples. Blackfoot

identity has been shaped by the land and when asked if being able to stay in Blackfoot

territory is very important to him, he answers, "Yeah, it's very important to me because

it's our land. We were here first ... it's very important stay here, to stick with your

people." In the same breath however, Roger also informs me that he thinks traditional Blackfoot knowledge is being eroded; "... we're slowly losing our Blackfoot religion because our younger generation, they don't know Blackfoot and we really need that back. We're losing our ways." For Roger, traditional attachments to land and its importance to the Blackfoot people is still strong, but the erosion of traditional perceptions serves to devalue how the younger generation can come to perceive these attachments.

Having grown up in Blackfoot territory, Roger has never ventured far and shares with me that, "I am very comfortable around here, this land, in spite of what we went through was back then. I am very familiar with it [the land]." When asked if he thought land was still important to Blackfoot people as it was in the past, Roger replies, "Yes, it's still important and not just to me. Some of us Blackfoot gave up our land." He follows with a somewhat bleak, if not desperate, commentary on the effects of land-loss:

> Yeah, that reserve, they all got that money and now that land is being run by the government. If that ever happened to [my reserve], there's going to be big problems. What if they tried to take our land?! Where are we going to go? What are we going to do? It's going to be so hard for us and it's going to lead to even more drinking, deaths, and suicides. Right now we have enough deaths on the reserve – one right after another...well, you know how it goes.

Roger is afraid that the reserve will give up more of its land for money or even worse, that reserve land will cease to exist thereby causing his people to be without a land base.

Roger's connection to the land is so complete that it influences his current situation. He would rather be homeless in traditional territory with family around him than leave this area if better opportunities were presented. The following is an excerpt of our interview as it relates to the above notion:

> GWH: Okay, say you had a chance to move far from here and there was a good job waiting and good place to stay waiting for you, would you leave?
> Roger: A different place, a different life, and all around are people I don't know?

GWH: Yes, that's right
Roger: Who am I going to talk to out there? I'm not going to know nobody
out there.
GWH: Probably not
Roger: Well, [long pause] if I'm going to do that I'd have to keep in touch with
everyone down here and least I'll have to know that I have a place to come
back home to here.
GWH: Could you possibly see yourself moving back out of loneliness?
Roger: Yeah of course I'd probably get really lonely
GWH: Being able to be close to the reserve, is that very important to you?
Roger: Yes! These are my mountains, these are my people, this is my place!
It would be really difficult for me and I'll probably get lonely right away;
even if it was a good job and a good place to stay...No matter if it was a
really, really nice place, I wouldn't be home.

Instead of having a sense of renewed hope at the prospect of leaving Blackfoot territory

for possibly a better life, Roger feels he would be stepping into the unknown where

overwhelming unfamiliarity would leave him incredibly lonely for "his mountains" and

"his people" therefore compelling his return home. For Roger, being reluctant to leave

Blackfoot territory because of his close attachment to it contributes to his homeless

condition because he feels compelled to remain regardless if there is a lack of housing.

The present and the future

At the time the interviews were conducted, Roger was staying at the local

homeless shelter and his situation was dire. Falling into the depths of depression and

alcoholism, and frustrated with his situation, he was excited with the potential to move

out of the shelter as he had found a place to rent and was merely waiting for the new year

to.

His situation at the shelter was troubling for him and I got the sense that he was

beginning to harbour deep resentment for the place, the staff and the other shelter guests.

Roger offers me a general picture of life at a homeless shelter:

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> They make us get up at 6 in the morning because of the bathrooms and on the weekends they're not here, and I wonder why we can't get up at 7. Sometimes they wake us at five-thirty and I don't really like that. I work. I have a job and I need that rest. Other people are getting fed up too and I can't speak for all of them because they have their own way of life ... it's just that there's been a lot fights in this building ... It's cold down there and they only give us one blanket. Some of these white guys get two blankets. Why can't we get two? Why can't we be treated equally?

Although Roger says that there is no difference between non-Native and Native homelessness, or that "Race or color doesn't matter," I get the sense that it does matter to him unequal treatment based on race exacerbates his frustration. Roger, continuing to describe the racial divide, shares with me; "I see a couple of Native groups here, they tease the black guys and call them niggers and I don't like that. They [the black guests] retaliate and say, 'You guys are all drunks, you guys just drink Listerine,' and I can hear all this." This constant strife also causes him to be depressed, and he has turned to alcohol to appease his feelings of dissatisfaction.

His perceptions of the homeless shelter are mixed and at times, contradictory: "it's been a place to stay and not really a home. I'm not glad to be here because of all the fighting and the swearing, but I do get my meals here." For all the complaining he does about the shelter though, he recognizes its value: "What if this place burns down, I wonder where we'll go. This place is really important for us and needs to be here." For the time being, Roger understands that his situation will not allow him to move and that he must settle at the shelter lest he be completely on the streets.

Returning to his reserve is not an option for Roger though he has family there, he does not speak of it in terms of high-esteem. The depressing state of reserve reality is accurately depicted as he describes it:

> What's going to happen to our future generation? Our language and our religion?

They're saying Sundance isn't so sacred anymore and the bundle exchanges are different. [The] youth are starting to drink on the Sundance grounds. I've seen it and it's not good. It's bad luck. [The] old people are saying it's bad luck and it's going back to the reserve. Bad spirits are going onto that sacred land. I hear a lot of stories and it's really bad. The reserve is in terrible condition and what's the Chief doing about it? Our elders are getting abused and little kids too. A girl got attacked in "new" townsite. There's no trust anymore and they're always talking behind others' backs. There's so much negativity and rumours going around that aren't true. A guy gets beat over this may not have even done anything. There's a lot of fights on the reserve. There bootlegging going ... it's just really depressing.

Roger has lost all faith in the abilities of reserve leaders. For him, the reserve represents a place where traditional Blackfoot values are in danger of being lost, now only a remnant of the glory days of the Blackfoot nations. Currently, sacred grounds are tainted by the impurities of alcohol abuse, violence and loss of respect. A paradox exists whereby Blackfoot territory (including the reserve) is home to Roger; and yet, he is dismayed and disheartened with the reserve community and what is transpiring there. It is clear that he loves the land and its people, but is greatly disturbed with the reality of the reserve.

Roger managed to secure housing that is best described as substandard. Maintaining his place is going to be difficult for him as family and friends have already asked him if they can move in. Compounding this is the fact that many of the people he associates with "party" and drink alcohol. Roger informs me that, "they'll want to come to my house. Like we all drink and they're going to want to party but I can't have them here. We'll party someplace else." As good as his intentions are, it will be challenging nonetheless.

Roger's future, at least at the time of the interviews, appears full of promise as he has secured relatively adequate housing and continues to be gainfully employed. He recognized leaving the shelter was vital for his mental and emotional health and he found the agency within himself to do so. Unfortunately, Roger's alcohol use has increased and

if he does not keep it in check, may spiral out of control and undo all that he has worked

so hard to build up in terms of his employment and improved living conditions. Roger

needs continued supports to assist with his life and decision making skills. Culturally

appropriate counselling programs that address his issues of past abuse and mistrust need

to be put in place in order to ensure his continued success. In spite of Roger's resistance,

a public trustee is probably a step in the right direction to decrease the likelihood of others

taking advantage of his finances.

Jerry: The Participant as person

My first encounter with Jerry was at the local homeless shelter in the spring of 2009. He is a 42 year old single, Native male originally from a neighbouring Blackfoot reserve. Jerry is a large man standing 6'2" and weighing around 200 pounds. His outward appearance bears testament to the harsh life he has endured. I have often seen him with various injuries arising from the fights he gets into while intoxicated. Displaying a naturally outgoing personality, Jerry is approachable but when under the influence of alcohol, it is best to keep a distance. Jerry is quick to speak his mind and does not let others intimidate him. He readily stands up to authority figures if he does not agree with what they are doing.

He is familiar with the old cultural traditions of the Blackfoot people and he takes great pride in his heritage. He is also a deeply spiritual individual and often ponders on how the traditional past has influenced his values and shaped the person he is today. Jerry also possesses a good understanding of the local area's history and the ongoing effects that colonialism has wrought upon the Blackfoot people going into modernity.

Childhood

Although he rarely talks about his formative years, Jerry indicates he had an extremely difficult childhood that was punctuated by severe physical violence: "I used to get beat with baseball bats, I got the scars to prove it; I got stabbed with forks, butter knives." Jerry is unsure if he attended the Indian Residential School and when asked if he did/did not attend, he replied,

> I can't remember, I can't remember but I think I did because I remember
> one thing and one thing only. I remember somebody standing by the sink
> and I wanted a drink of water and he wouldn't let me so I had to drink out

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of the toilet bowl. That's how thirsty I was and the same place they
burned my hand, this part of my hand it mostly survived but this hand
[indicates the burn on his hand], they just forced it in there and held under
the hot water. I remember that and I remember standing beside the stove
and the fridge crying and it just all bubbled.

No one told him if he went to the Indian Residential School. This loss of memory is in

keeping with his loss of self and identity at a very young age.

When Jerry reflects back to his childhood, he often talks about his own children.

That he loves his children is beyond doubt as he recalls meaningful episodes with his

oldest daughter and right away, I noticed his voice soften. He speaks of love as a

reciprocal emotion:

I have three children, 20, 15, and 9. My oldest is working at [a bingo hall
concession.] I don't play bingo, I don't gamble [laughs]! But she works out
there and she came to visit me a couple days ago. It surprised me, and if
people, when they have children, can show their love to their children,
that love will come back to you and they'll do good for you.

Marred by abuse and neglect, Jerry refuses to put his children through the kind of life that

he faced while growing up.

Family of origin

It is difficult to determine Jerry's family of origin because of the significant gaps

in his narrative. It is unclear under which hands he suffered his abuse. However, in a

historical sense, Jerry is deeply aware of his family roots and divulges that,

I'm a _____ and the _____ were actually born lone fighters and lone
fighters mean, 'Family that fights amongst themselves.' Lone fighters are
like dog soldiers, they used to camp around the outside of the camp tipi village
on the outskirts and they used to protect the village. And that's where lone
fighters came from because we used to always fight amongst each other and
that's why we had to camp on the outskirts of the village. Anyways that's a
little history.

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The passage demonstrates Jerry's close connection to his history. It is interesting that he would mention this part of his history given that his biological family offers him little, if any, support and that, presently, he has little contact with them.

Currently, his family consists of those with whom he has formed a close bond at the local shelter, as well as his children. Jerry states that, "we all share, all of us, you know here at the shelter, all these homeless people, we all share with each other no matter what, we take care of each other, watch over each other ... I'm about to cry [long pause]." For Jerry, the shelter guests have replaced his biological family and they offer a sense of security and connection. They represent a true family because they take care of him unconditionally and he does the same for them. The shelter family offers him what his biological family cannot. Jerry is emotional in the recognition of this truth.

As far as how familial origin informs his current homeless condition, Jerry's narrative reveals that having endured excessive abuse when he was younger, he has used alcohol as a means of coping with this abuse. As a result, he continues to remain in a homeless state although he has made attempts to overcome his addiction in the past which were unsuccessful.

Adult years

Jerry's adult life is a constant struggle with alcohol addiction. Although it would appear that he possesses a strong work ethic, his plans for improved socio-economic status are undermined by self-sabotaging behaviour. Jerry has sought help for his addiction and indicates that, "I went to treatment in '91. It did me good for a couple of

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years." This suggests that he was sober for a long period of time. He also returned to school in another province, yet he does not indicate the reasons for returning home.

He does not mention marriage or his wife, but does indicate that his children are very important to him and that he loves them dearly.

Perceptions of homelessness

Jerry does not consider himself as homeless per se. The actual term "homeless" is problematic for him because he insists that he does have a home which is his reserve. He blames the local Lethbridge society for labelling Natives as being less then homeless: "Not homeless, they don't consider us homeless..." The Native people are "placed" at the lowest level of the socio-economic hierarchy. Being labelled a "damn Indian" is far worse than being simply labelled as homeless. According to Jerry, when an individual is Native and homeless, his/her exposure to racism and discrimination increases twofold.

For Jerry, to be "homeless" means to be an alcoholic. There is no separating the two conditions and this notion is echoed time and again in his narrative. When asked a specific question regarding certain things he could have done differently to prevent his homeless situation, Jerry transforms my original question: "Geez that's a good question. What you should have really asked is 'why do you drink?' That's in the same boat." Here it is suggested that alcoholism totally strips a person of all identity and in essence, whether or not one has a roof over one's head, he/she is destitute. The truest sense of home is totally lost; that person is in an absolute homeless condition because he/she is totally consumed with his/her addiction to alcohol.

Jerry identifies colonial influences for introducing alcohol to the Native population: "... it was with the Europeans all their lives but when the Europeans came

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over that's where alcohol was introduced into the Native life and that's how they controlled us. That's how they killed us ... tried to kill us." Here, Jerry's reasoning is consistent with his reference to the past and how it influences his present situation. He speaks to the fact that in colonial times, alcohol devastated the Blackfoot Nation and its full effects are as much a reality to him, and many other Blackfoot people, as they were to his ancestors at a time when the whiskey trade was strong. Although he acknowledges that Blackfoot people have endured, "but we're still alive and still kicking and there's still a lot of good people out there who are doing good things," there are a good number who have succumbed to the ravages of alcohol and, according to Jerry, are homeless.

Pathway to homelessness

Jerry began his journey to homelessness at an early age. The physical violence he endured as a child traumatized his spirit. He presents a terrible depth of loss and frustration by not being able to recall childhood events. His memories remain foggy, and as such so does his sense of identity. This terrible sense of loss follows him into adulthood and although he does not go into detail, Jerry shares with me a song which he played at his infant daughter's funeral; "my daughter's funeral song." In addition to the loss of his daughter, Jerry also tells me that he lost a grandfather due to unnatural causes: "He froze to death behind [a] laundromat because he had no place to go." This excerpt reveals that homelessness is a condition which affects more than just Jerry. His grandfather died while homeless making a terrible event all the more tragic was the small-town community's failure to prevent his death: there were no local resources for aiding the homeless.

Loss of family is present in Jerry's narrative. Although briefly mentioned early in the interview, it is a contributing factor in Jerry's homeless situation. He shares that, "I do not have the support I should really have which is family support and that's what makes a lot of people homeless, no family support. That's the main reason why people hang around out here because they have no family support." Familial bonds are deep structures among Blackfoot people and these bonds have endured into modernity. Lacking the vital support that his family could offer, Jerry's reality reflects a down-ward spiral into the abyss of alcoholism and violence.

Jerry's narrative reveals that he holds a deep-seated resentment to the way Lethbridge society perceives the Native homeless population. This resentment serves to fuel negative self perceptions. These feelings are dealt with by indulging in addictive behaviours. For example, Jerry asks,

> Why do we drink? Probably because of [R]esidential [School], because of the way white people treat us, look at us, look down on us ... no, I'm going to say a much stronger word, the 'immigrants,' the way the immigrants look at us; this ain't their land ... you know I could go really deep.

This passage is revealing because it demonstrates the depth of his resentment toward the euro-Canadian people in the community who are racist and discriminatory. Much more than just products of a colonial past, Jerry refers to the local "white" community as "immigrants" suggesting a disconnection and division within the urban landscape, an absolute separation of two cultures. Throughout his narrative, Jerry indicates that derogatory labels about Native people develop based on stereotypical, racist and discriminatory attitudes: "they call us 'bums,' all the derogatory names they can call us. 'Indians, those damn Indian'... that's the label they put on us of course it hurts the

feelings." He constantly returns to this emotional place along his pathway to homelessness.

In addition to his negative views of the local, euro-Canadian community, Jerry has equally strong resentment toward his reserve because of the lack of supports offered to urban Natives. He confides that,

> I do have a home but there's too much alcoholism, strife, backstabbing, I don't know how you'd say that in proper language but people talk behind your back. like there's too much strife on the reserves. I have my own house, my own trailer blah, blah, blah, but there's no jobs ... there's no work, there's no school. All there is welfare and alcoholism and ... I don't know how to refer to that where people talk about you and start rumors they just think that's too cool. That's why I'm here, I'm working, I'm not just on welfare right now. I haven't been on welfare for the past, since holy smokes, since September. I've been working for this place ... .

Although Jerry indicates that his reserve is his actual home, all the backstabbing and disloyalty present real challenges for him and lessen his sense of security and confidence in his community. Compounding this is the fact that his reserve offers no opportunities for economic advancement; there is limited employment on the reserve. Jerry is realistic about the lack of opportunity and hopelessness that the reserve represents. He has abandoned his home there anticipating brighter future in the city.

Perhaps the greatest factor contributing to Jerry's homelessness is his alcohol addiction. He cannot overcome this will to drink and he blames his alcoholism for putting him in his present homeless situation. When asked about the main barrier preventing him from obtaining adequate shelter, Jerry simply answered,

> Alcoholism ... Pretty much that's all we know is to drink. We're good workers if we set our mind to it but still that alcohol, it's in our system, it's in our mind and I don't know, maybe even in our blood. It's all we know, pretty well most of us and alcoholism is pretty hard to get out of, especially when you grew up with it.

Jerry's alcoholism is so deeply entrenched that he begins to think it is in his blood; a naturally occurring element that he knows will surely destroy him sooner or later and one that he presently has no control over.

Understanding how the past informs the present

Revealed in Jerry's narrative is his deep connection to traditional Blackfoot culture with an angry emphasis on its colonial past as well as a spiritual, and sometimes inexplicable, link to his heritage. Throughout the storytelling process, Jerry is constantly looking to the past in reference to events in his life and his current situation. He shares with me a dream he had in the late eighties:

> It's about a baby white buffalo. I was walking along a prairie, you know those big humps of grass, I tripped on one, next think you know I rolled down a steep hill and I rolled under this old pine ... what do you call them ... tipi pine poles, they were kind of grey, I rolled under it, I got up and I seen this white guy with a 50 caliber Hawkins, I remember that rifle exactly the way it is ... [octagonal] ... anyway eight sided barrel; he was aiming at that baby white buffalo and the mother buffalo was scared but the baby buffalo was just kind of prancing around, you know how babies are. So I was talking to the mother, I told her don't worry nothing is going to happen and I stood in front of that hunter or that rancher or whatever. I told that mother buffalo, 'don't worry about it you'll be ok, so will your baby' and I stood in front of it. As soon as he shot, he shot three times, reloaded because he had those you know where you have to put in the ball, he shot three times and I woke up clutching my stomach. Before I woke up I could feel the blood seeping through myfingers and I was clutching my stomach when I woke up, I was looking for blood, holy smokes! That was a powerful dream.

Jerry had never shared this dream with anyone but myself and there are various aspects that make it significant and speak to the "olden days" of the Blackfoot people, as it were. The landscape of his dream indicates that it could have occurred at almost any time yet one is reminded of the pristine grasslands that once dominated the prairies before the introduction of agriculture. The white buffalo is symbolic of "powerful medicine" and its

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presence on the plains is considered a source of good fortune. That Jerry dreamed of the white buffalo is indicative of a close, spiritual link to his heritage. The "white guy," attempting to kill the buffalos is representative of how Jerry views colonial encroachment onto the lands and lives of the Blackfoot nation. Colonialism is total in its destruction, motivated entirely by self-advancement, relentless in its intrusion, and absolute in its domination. He acts as a saviour for the baby buffalo and in doing so, establishes himself within the cosmology of the Blackfoot people in the sense that he is the protector of his animal relations.

When I asked Jerry what he thought the importance of his dream was he replied, "Well I have three kids. I don't trust the world these days to have another child, I'd like to but I don't trust the world these days. It's just too much; it's like hell in a hand basket." He loves his children a great deal yet is hesitant "to have another child" because of what the world has become. As Jerry sees it, traditional Blackfoot values are being abandoned and are replaced with western values of individualism. He angrily refers to the euro-Canadian people in his community as "immigrants," and although many have familiar roots dating back hundreds of years ago, for Jerry, their presence is alien to him just as some of them, in turn, alienate the Native homeless population; indeed, the Native population in general. Between the past and the present, there is no clear divisor within Jerry's narrative and his homeless condition is informed by concomitant historical influences and contemporary factors.

The present and the future

Currently, Jerry makes use of the resources available at the local shelter but more often than not, he can be found on the streets of the Lethbridge either picking cans to

supplement his income or just hanging around with fellow shelter guests. Jerry tells me that he and most of the others at the shelter are "all good people, we don't hurt anybody. We're not out there trying to shoot or stab, beat up everybody; those people are in jail right there." The reality of street survival has taught them to stick close together and for those like Jerry, common misconceptions about the homeless population are a constant source of low self-esteem.

He is regularly exposed to violence to an extreme degree and he certainly has the battle scars to prove it. Jerry relates an incident that occurred during the holiday season in 2009 that should have been playful and memorable:

> Oh the police, you know what they did to me just before Christmas. I went to go take my picture my picture with Santa and I wasn't supposed to be at the City Mall but I just wanted to get my picture taken and as I was walking out, the security guards grabbed me and brought me into the office, gave me a trespassing notice. When the cops came they were talking down towards me, you know, damn drunken Indian blah, blah, blah, "why do you guys make us come here just for you, you people?" He handcuffed me, threw me to the cement and kicked me in the ribs and I got one broken rib and a fractured one and I'm still dealing with that.

In the same breath though, Jerry gives the police the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that "Those are probably rookies. The older police call me by my first name because I used to be a trouble maker, badass. I got nothing bad to say. They're rookies." This speaks to Jerry's forgiving nature yet the whole experience and the fact that he "got put in the hospital three times last year," demonstrates that, for Jerry, violence has been a regular visitor during his journey to homelessness. In addition to violence on the street, Jerry moves between street life and jail life as easily as he transitions between the past and the present.

I am uncertain what the future holds for Jerry and he did not go into any detail about his prospects or expectations. He did mention however, that one possible way to affect the Native homeless population is for the local community in Lethbridge to become more educated; "what they learn and what they call us is a learned behaviour and it's got to be untaught, people have to be educated." Jerry suggests that real change begins with each individual as early as infancy, and that changing attitudes and beliefs that have endured for generations is a difficult task. Furthermore, for Jerry to become successful at securing and maintaining housing, he must have access to adequate and culturally appropriate addictions programming. There must be acknowledgement of his past traumas as well as a focus on his strengths. He would also likely benefit from anger management. Unless he successfully addresses his addiction issue and seeks treatment for it, Jerry most likely will continue to exist on the streets of the urban landscape.

Angela: The Participant as person

Angela is a Blackfoot woman in her late forties who, at the time of the first interview, had been residing at the local homeless shelter for the past two years. At first glance, one is drawn to her kind eyes and ready smile, yet her tired shoulders and weary gait suggest a life of hardship. Standing only about 5'2" and probably not weighing more than 110 pounds, Angela is a petite woman, small in frame and unpretentious in manner. Being soft-spoken and quiet, Angela is not a large presence at the shelter and having not seen her around the local reserve, I was unsure whether she was indeed from one of the local Blackfoot reserves. Upon approaching her however, I was put quite at ease and thankful for her friendly demeanour and willing participation.

Childhood

Angela and her siblings were apprehended from her biological parents by child welfare authorities at a very young age. She informs me that she does not remember her birth parents and is unaware of the reason as to why she and her siblings were taken from them. She shared with me that,

> Well there were eight of us all together and we were all taken away and put in foster homes two by two. My one brother and I were put with my mom and dad and the other ones were put in other foster homes. Then my other brother and sister were put in foster home but they wanted my little sister, not my brother, so my mom took my little sister in too, so all four of us grew up together. The other four eventually got back but us four got the PGO [Permanent Guardianship Order] papers signed.

Losing half of her siblings as well as her parents, loss characterized Angela's early life. Angela allowed me a deeply personal glimpse of a significant event related to her by her adoptive mother of when she first went to live with her parents: "She said my brother and

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I would hide under the table and speak Blackfoot to each other because we didn't know any English. That [Blackfoot] was the only language we knew when we were younger." This is important because it echoes the fact that many Native children, being apprehended by child welfare authorities in what is commonly known now as the "Sixties Scoop," were deeply connected to culture and if language moulds identity, then theirs was fashioned by cultural values, sculpted by tradition and fired by the ancestors. Yet, these traditional cultural identities were shattered.

Angela was fortunate in that she had a good upbringing and did not bounce from one foster home to another. Hers was a stable environment: "I was with my mom and dad before they adopted us." Referring to her adoptive parents as if she has always been with them, she did not distinguish being different from her family, although she confided in me that, "I thought it was normal, like, I didn't consider myself being darker than my parents. My mom [adoptive mother] had dark hair and was tanned. I mean, I knew she wasn't my biological mother but I kind of connected to her." Despite not being her biological mother, Angela felt close to her nonetheless, and I am under the impression that a true "mother-daughter" bond was forged between the two. Although Angela does not know what her life was like with her birth parents, happily she tells me that, "I had a good upbringing too, after I got taken away." This is intriguing because she only acknowledges a good childhood insofar as it relates to her adoptive parents.

Speaking about her childhood before being apprehended, her narrative would suggest that her biological relatives from the Blackfoot reserve know more about her identity than she does:

> Well, my cousin has offered me [a chance] to go back with her because she lives here in Lethbridge on the West side. She says 'don't be scared because everyone wants to know who you are and how you've been' and for them to

explain exactly why we were given up because that's what happened; we were taken away.

The hints strongly the extent to which Angela is estranged from her Blackfoot roots. People who have never met her know more of her early history than she does. Relative to this fact, Angela admits that, "Before my biological mother passed away, I just had so much anger towards her and I was like, 'why, why, why?' and I blamed her for anything that went wrong. I didn't let her explain anything and it wasn't until after she passed away that I was told." Blaming her mother for her own past failings, Angela has not been given the opportunity for closure regarding her mother's death, and I get the sense that she is still grieving for her loss.

Her narrative reveals nothing further regarding her childhood, and it seemed as though her life was stable from the time of her adoption. However, Angela's early childhood losses would influence the direction of her adult life.

Family of origin

Angela's family of origin was her biological parents and her siblings. For reasons unknown, she was taken from them and placed with a family whose parents later adopted her – this being her second family. Later in life, Angela was in a relationship that bore her two daughters. Sadly, the breakdown of the relationship led her to hand her daughters to the child welfare authorities where they remain in foster care.

Losing what is in essence three families, Angela's current "family" are shelter guests with which she has formed close bonds with as well as many that she has met on the streets. She shares with me that, "When you're on the streets it's like you're a family, you know, just like this is family. Everybody gets along because everybody is at the same

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level." Later in the interview, she reiterates this fact stressing that, "it's more like family here." The shelter guests and some staff members are standing in place of the notion of her adoptive nuclear family, which she admits has given up on her. Although she gets visits with her daughters, she does not play a significant or influential role in their upbringing.

Adult years

Angela admits that most of her adult life has been marred by addictions, abusive relationships and poor life choices. She is familiar with the streets and it is apparent from the interviews that there has not been a great deal of constancy or permanence since moving from her adoptive parents' home.

She explains to me that she is aware of her familial origins and has had to return to her reserve in order to obtain personal identification. Symbolically, this is significant because it is the site of her core identity and where her roots are. When asked if she ever goes back home to her reserve, Angela replies in a slightly hackneyed tone, "Just to get my ID, but as soon as I say my name, they ask for my biological parents." The fact that she needs to obtain her ID on the reserve suggests that even though she does not identify with her Native heritage, it is there – on the reserve and in relation to the community members – where she ultimately finds her identity.

Angela admits that much of her adult life has been spent existing rather than living and "just living life day to day." She reveals that her poor choices have a caused a rift between herself and her family:

I guess I kind of disappointed my family and like I said, the rest of the kids have

their husbands and wives and white picket fences and here's me being the oldest and out being crazy ... I kind of veered off and started doing the drinking and drugs and that's where my money went to. Your body starts telling you that's enough and kind of use ... well I used up all my resources with my family. [T]hey just, you know, said 'smarten up.'

Loss of family support and feeling she has disappointed them has caused Angela much mental distress. Her narrative speaks to emotional guilt, desperate helplessness and a profound sense of loss.

This loss is repeated with regard to her daughters. Angela informs me her addiction to alcohol and drugs had forced her to seek treatment in Edmonton. Having no family to care for her daughters, she asked a friend who agreed. Unfortunately, her friend was dealing with her own personal crises at the time, and although Angela did not go into any specific details, the care giving situation put her daughters in some form of danger. Her voice shaking with regret and sadness, Angela relates that, "It took a lot of strength, I mean a lot of strength, love and caring to phone child welfare and ask them to take my girls because this is what I'm doing ... oh my God, I didn't want to do it and it was so hard." Helpless to control her own situation or her friend's, Angela felt that putting her children in the care of child welfare was her only option. It is not unusual for many of the women at the local shelter to have children who are in the care of child welfare authorities. Angela informs me that, "A majority of the females in that dorm are Natives and I find their kids were taken away and they get in that spiral ..." Having no home, limited economic resources and probably lacking in family supports, the women are totally dependent upon a social system that they do not always trust or have much faith in.

Her children's initial placement did not go well and unlike Angela, they suffered abuse at one of the foster homes. Fortunately, she helped to expose the abuse and her

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daughters are now in a stable foster home near Lethbridge. Her oldest is now an adult but her youngest remains in foster care. Angela ruefully admits that, "I haven't really been stable enough to take her you know; like bouncing here and bouncing there and then getting addicted to pills and crack and coke; all that ... I love my kids and I want them to have a good upbringing and they got it." For Angela, that her kids were exposed to abuse matters little now, for they are happy and in a stable, loving home. Even so, there tends to be this stigma attached to women whose children are in the care of child welfare authorities and for Angela, she makes it clear to me instead of her daughters being removed from her home, she willfully gave them up. This difference is important for her because it allows her some agency in regard to the care of her children.

As previously mentioned, Angela's adult life has been a consistent cycle of triumphs and defeats. She has been gainfully employed and is not lacking in education. Yet, for all her accomplishments, addiction issues have always managed to drag her down. Many times all that she has worked so hard to build up in her life has come crashing down because she cannot control her alcohol or drug use. Street survival became her calling, so to speak, and there she got to know where the hot meals were served, where to go for a change of clothes and she became a part of the street community – it matters little what city or street as to be homeless looks the same in almost every urban context.

Perceptions of homelessness

When asked if she considered herself as being homeless, readily answered "Oh yes, I do consider myself homeless because I normally have an apartment or a roommate." Early in the interviews, Angela informs that when she began going to the

local shelter, she "felt really embarrassed, like I didn't belong here ..." This perception is consistent with the social stigma attached to the homeless population and given this fact, her current situation is embarrassing. Indeed, many homeless people stigmatize the shelter. Angela reveals that, "There are people on the street and they think going to the shelter would mean they're bums and they think they're better than that. A lot of people on the street don't like going to the shelter. Some go to the soup kitchen but there's way more people out there than just the ones who go to the soup kitchen." Hence, stereotypes about homeless people are sometimes perpetuated within the homeless population. Wishing not to be associated with a shelter is indicative of the fact that many people would prefer to "go it alone" without the help of social agencies such as homeless shelters.

In spite of Angela's embarrassment, she has come to recognize that homelessness does not necessarily mean living on the streets. Instead, the local shelter has played a valuable role in her life and has helped her to redefine the notion of home and family. Angela describes to me that she was unaware of the resources the shelter had to offer: "I didn't know the first time I went there that that's what they had to offer ... when I first lived on the streets here in Lethbridge. I just got up and sort of went on my merry way you know ... I thought it was just a place to sleep and get up and get kicked out." This suggests that many street people are resistant to institutions of any kind; indeed, the idea of getting "kicked out" after sleeping in a homeless shelter is not any different than an overnight stay at a local jail. Angela is now grateful for the local shelter and the fact that it has brought a sense of agency and feeling of belonging back into her life. She informs me that, "just speaking for myself I probably would have still been living on the streets and sleeping here and there but in the summer when I got sick and when I came back

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[from the hospital], that's when I realized that there were a lot of resources out there and are willing to help you if you help yourself." The shelter and its resources offered her the opportunities and resources to obtain adequate housing as well as allowed her to feel as if she were part of a family once again.

Perhaps because of this, Angela has come to rethink homelessness and what that term really means. During the initial interview, she indicated that she thought of herself as being homeless, however, she explicitly refutes this comment when she states,

> I hate the words 'homeless,' I really do, you know, it's more like family here. When you say you're at the shelter, they say, 'oh, you're homeless' and well, no, actually they're providing us food and clothing and with the sandwich truck or van or whatever, and there's the soup kitchen. I hate the word 'homeless' because it's not being homeless.

For Angela, there is family at the shelter and therefore she is not homeless. Resources such as food and clothing available at the shelter support this family. Through this realization, Angela has also come to resent the way society conceptualizes and recognizes homelessness. She explains that, "It seems the only time they advertise homelessness is around Christmas time but no, homelessness happens year round ... people need help year round whether it's spring, summer, fall or winter ... the support and help should be year round." Angela recognizes that the nature of today's society only allows for compassion at certain times of the year – as if the spirit of giving only happens during Christmas – and this makes her very frustrated and angry. Being homeless changes perceptions of homelessness and often compels one to redefine the meaning of "home versus homelessness."

Pathway to homelessness

Angela's journey to homelessness began in early adulthood, perhaps much earlier if we consider her childhood which was filled with a great deal of loss. Poor choices and bad relationships were first signs of a troubled future. When I asked her about some of the things in her life that had brought her to her current situation, she replies, "I was adopted out so I don't know the language or the culture." Unlike her siblings who "have their married life and their white picket fence," Angela has often picked herself up and changed her direction in life for the positive. However, personal relationship and addiction issues caused her to "veer off." She admits that, "I just fell back into that rut again and this where I ended up at. I can't really explain how I ended up here it's just ... I was just here." This quiet yet powerful statement speaks to the fact that for Angela, the choices she made in her life contributed to her situation and paved her pathway to homelessness – a condition which she accepts almost as an inevitable fact: "I was just here." Giving up her children was only another incident of loss that accelerated her journey.

Angela shares with me that for her, homelessness was a gradual process as well as a cycle that was constantly repeating itself. She confides that, "my biggest fear is to keep having to start over and over and over again," and the sad reality of her life is that this fear was realized many times over. Angela expands upon how she ended up in a homeless condition:

> It's not like someone picked me up and threw me on the street and said, 'you're on your own.' Like I said I did live on the streets in Calgary and here in Lethbridge ... it's just that I didn't [pauses with a long sigh] ... oh how can I put it ... I had choices but I didn't choose those ones that were good. I wanted to figure things on my own which is really hard and thinking that you can do it by yourself when you really can't.

Angela takes responsibility for her current situation and readily admits that poor choices were really what led her to becoming homeless. It was not a sudden occurrence but rather the result of a pattern of behaviours that included alcohol and drug abuse as well as events in her life characterized by loss.

Understanding attachments to traditional Blackfoot territory

Being adopted by non-Native parents and raised in a non-traditional environment, Angela has often expressed the fact that she knows little of her culture: "I really regret that I didn't have that opportunity to learn about it. I hardly know anything about my culture." Because of this fact, Angela's knowledge and perception of traditional Blackfoot territorial boundaries is limited. When asked Angela if she thought land is as important to Blackfoot people as it was in the past, she replied, "Well for me, from what I've learned and heard, land is very important ... people are keeping the tradition and culture going ... it makes me really happy." Not experiencing or participating in traditional Blackfoot culture, Angela learns about it second-hand from other Native guests at the shelter. She does have strong opinions nonetheless:

> Back then they [colonizers] thought of us as dumb and stupid and gave us a piece of our land [reserves] and said, 'okay this is where you guys stay.' Meanwhile, took as much of our land as they please. They took total control and told us we couldn't go off the reserve ... I'd say in the last 40 years the Native have started to come and say, 'Hey, we're human beings too and we have a right to a decent education, a decent place to live with heat and water. Back then, they were living in cook houses ... It's bad enough they took our land but then they took our children and now the Natives are showing this absolute bitterness toward the white people.

Although Angela did not grow up with any traditional teachings, she knows enough now that she is able to articulate an opinion about the process and effects of colonization.

As far as attachments to traditional land inform Angela's choices, she indicated that staying in Lethbridge is due to comfort: "I do like Lethbridge in that it's a city but it's still like a town. I just don't like all the racism." With a relatively large Blackfoot population, Lethbridge offers Angela an opportunity to "reconnect with my heritage even though I'm older. I'd still like to learn about it." Angela also informs me she is in contact with a cousin who is involved with cultural activities and would like to take Angela to the reserve to meet the rest of the family.

The present and the future

At the time of Angela's last two interviews, she was renting a 1 bedroom apartment in a low-cost housing project in the city's downtown core. With the help of the shelter employees, she was able to afford the place and she was very glad to finally be in her own home. Even as small as it was, it met her needs.

As a Native woman, Angela has had to deal with racism and discrimination; even more so since moving to Lethbridge more than 12 years ago. This has affected her to a great degree, and being homeless increases her exposure to it. For example, Angela indicated she faced discrimination and racism when she previously attempted to obtain both housing and employment:

> [When] going to see a place, I found some of the landlords were prejudiced. 'You're Native and all you're going to do is drink and party." There are a few of us out there who are willing to get and brush [our]selves off and you know, it took me two years to that point but ... you do get up and brush yourself off and you want to make a clean break ... Like I said a lot of these landlords are very racist and it is hard to find ... for a Native person to go find a place on their own without kids; but with kids, it's even harder.

Angela estimated that upwards of 70-80% of landlords she has encountered were prejudiced. The fact that she had to list the shelter as a current address only served to make her search more difficult. As for employment, much of the work she did find was janitorial. In Calgary, she found it easier to obtain employment for which she was qualified but upon moving to Lethbridge, she informs me that "the only kind of employment I got was janitorial work after all the education that I have. Why bother going to school just to be a janitor?" Clearly frustrated, Angela thinks that one of the main reasons behind this is the fact that as a visibly Native woman, potential employers are discriminating against her based on race and gender.

In terms of her heritage and personal history, Angela shares with me that she not only faces discrimination in the non-Native community, but also within the Native population:

> I was raised by white people and I don't know my culture, I don't know the traditions and I don't know the language and if you don't know any of those things, then the other Natives really frown on it ... It's been brought to my attention that they [Native guests at the shelter] think I only hang out with white people. To me I just associate with whoever's there. I get called an apple.

This has led her to distance herself from her heritage and she has often found herself "thinking that I'm better than them, which obviously I'm not. I know that but still I think, 'hey don't talk to me, and don't even look at me.' In the back of my mind I wonder why I'd be even thinking that." Not learning the Blackfoot language or culture, although no fault of her own has caused her frustration. Now that she is older, she is silently lashing out at her culture, specifically the Native guests at the shelter, a group of people and a history she has never truly felt a part of.

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At the time of the interviews, Angela's future plans were to maintain and keep her rental unit. Angela informs me that some future goals include learning more about her heritage and for all the hardships she has faced, she stated, "I am happy that I experienced what has happened and if other people have the same experiences, then I can talk to them about it." Given Angela's history of relapse into substance abuse, remaining on her current path will be challenging. On-going, community supports are vital to her success. She would also benefit greatly from grief/loss counselling as well as a referral to a Native friendship center where she can reconnect with her culture and rediscover her identity as a Native woman.

Thematic analysis: Looking across the five narratives

The narratives, representing fives stories told by six participants, speak to general themes that include experiences of loss and suffering, alienation from community and family, addiction, racism and discrimination and estrangement from traditional Blackfoot land. Compounding these issues is a lack of trust in others and their community. As a result, the participants have formed a "street family" at the local shelter where feelings of community and acceptance prevail.

Loss of family and identity

Present in all five narratives is the profound sense of loss relating to identity and family. All participants shared experiences that involved losing family members at a very young age; hence their pathway to homelessness was paved early on. For example, traditional Blackfoot culture is built upon family connections, a tradition that continues today. When one is asked from whence one comes, he/she is asked to identify first their family name and second, his/her parents. Identity is shaped by the ancestors who went before us. The importance of family connections, is foundational in the lives of the participants, and was collectively revealed in the narratives. These connections were severed many times over. For some of the participants, the early death of other family members, combined with the terrible effects of the Residential School system, resulted in deep losses. These losses were destructive to their identity, sense of self, and tore the very fabric of Blackfoot culture. The focus group datum reiterates expressions of loss with one participant stating,

> I think it made a hole in the culture. Residential schools came along and broke up the family and family was a big part of the Blackfoot people. Family is the culture … we stick together. Putting the kids in residential

schools broke up families and taking away language … all of this trickles
down to what we see now … I don't know my culture … maybe a little.
I don't know what my grandparents know and they don't always tell me.
They don't talk of traditional ways; it's always about what they did in
residential schools.

This "trickling" away of culture has become a steady stream of loss that was manifest

when one entered the shelter: "I have never really wondered what profound loneliness

looks like or what constant longing feels like until I entered these walls. Depression and

loss permeates the air. I wish I didn't have to come back tomorrow" (March 3, field

notes). The participants often concluded that loss of family was the primary reason they

were homeless. It is important to note that the death of family members usually occurred

unnaturally; either through accidents, results of addiction, or suicide. These events signal

an inherent dysfunction in their families that in turn lead to depression and the use of

various substances, mainly alcohol, as a way of coping with their losses.

Participants also indicated that they felt abandoned by their families, that they

were turned away, and have exhausted all resources and supports available within the

familial structure. The participants felt ashamed and guilty for disappointing their family

because of the choices they have made. Because family is so central to Blackfoot identity,

losing family is greatly felt by the participants. Dishonouring the family for failing to

seek out treatment for addictions and forfeiting all responsibilities for a life on the street

goes against the principles of traditional Blackfoot culture.

The participants' narratives revealed that family support was virtually non-

existent in their lives. This led them to seek out an alternative family; participants formed

bonds with others who were living on the street. There, a form of family was created to

fill a void. The need for family was real for the participants.

Loss of community

The narratives speak to the loss of connection to traditional community, which is their local Blackfoot reserve communities, as well as the local urban community of which they want to be a part. Many of the participants noted that they did not feel as if they were members of a community. The participants voiced that they were dislocated from the reserve as this community offered them little in terms of opportunity or supports. As a result, they were forced to transition from the reserve to the city. One focus group participant expressed that, "it's the transition of coming into town and not knowing what to expect … how to support your family. Finding it hard and tough, you end up drinking because you don't know how to cope." Another focus group participant added "When you move to the city, an urban environment, there's certain things you have to comply with that you don't on the reserve." Some Natives are hesitant to leave the reserve because they feel disconnected from the traditional community, hence affecting a successful transition to the urban landscape. Yet, ironically, they feel a degree of disconnection even when they were in the traditional community represented by their reserves. Many of the participants observed that the notion of 'traditional Blackfoot community' no longer existed and that modern society would dictate an abandonment of traditional community values such as sharing for group benefit if one was to be successful on an economic and social level. Again, this goes against the grain of traditional Blackfoot values.

Paradoxically, this traditional value (sharing to benefit the group) had the potential to compromise the success of those participants who had secured housing. That is, the shelter family could place the renter at risk if they engaged in drinking and/or partying on the premises

Because of this, many of the participants' narratives speak about reconstituting community, as it were, at the local homeless shelter. We can informally observe the community on the streets of the city. It is very much a part of the urban landscape yet unmistakably separate from local mainstream society. The participants all expressed that they felt as if they were considered as "outsiders" in a city located in their traditional homeland and that they were often looked down upon by the local citizens. This precipitated issues related to low self-esteem and general feelings of minimal self-worth. With the exception of the city's homeless shelter, there were virtually no urban organizations offering vital supports that are considered appropriate for the Blackfoot homeless community. One focus group participant revealed that many of the agencies working with the homeless population take more of a "clinical" approach and "that a lot of our Aboriginal people fear those organizations. If it's very clinical … social work type … it's not going to work. This is what Pathways lacks, the cultural component." The lack of specific, culturally appropriate programming directed toward the Native homeless population, compounded by the general public's unwillingness/inability to re-learn and re-conceptualize Native people through a lens unclouded by old stereotypes are political and social aspects of the urban landscape that reinforce Blackfoot homelessness. The Native homeless populations are, in essence, strangers in their homeland.

Loss of trust

Because the participants endured much trauma and suffering throughout their lives, trust did not "come easy" for most. They were often wary of organizations that were working in their best interest; however, the participants also understood that they needed assistance in dealing with their addictions and their general living situation. For

some of the participants, trust had been lost in their formative years where those charged with their care were abusive, neglectful or were absent from their lives in a meaningful way. Jerry's narrative spoke to profound mistrust in the general non-Native population. Roger believed I intended to assist a social organization in signing over his finances to it. Indeed, all participants were not initially willing to be a part of my research until I thoroughly explained the purpose of my research and what it entailed.

Addictions

Present in all the participants' narratives was a desperate, often losing, battle with alcohol addiction. The urban environment offered ready opportunity to indulge in alcohol abuse and the family and community they established were ones where alcohol served as the unsteady foundation. Always subject to some form of past/present trauma and suffering, the participants used alcohol as a means of numbing psychic and emotional pain; and yet they were keenly aware of the fact that this addiction exacerbated their already dire situation. One participant blamed his alcoholism as being the sole reason for his homeless situation, yet acknowledging that he was helpless to control it. The focus group data also revealed that addiction issues were main barriers to obtaining adequate shelter. One participant informed me that "They do have good intentions but when the time comes to pay damage deposit, addictions get in the way and they've lost out."

Being a Native homeless person brought with it the stigma that all Native homeless people confront on or many forms of addiction. Sadly, the participants' narratives revealed that this was indeed accurate. This observation made, it is important to understand that their addictions were most likely the result of long-term suffering and profound losses experienced in their formative years and throughout their lives. The many

times I visited the shelter I observed that most of the Native guests were under the influence of some type of substance. In addition to alcohol use for example, Charity and Les also abused prescription medications. I was approached on more than one occasion by people at the shelter wishing to sell me prescription drugs. It would appear that most of the Blackfoot people who made use of the shelter resources were forced to cope with their profound losses and resultant grief by seeking temporary relief through alcohol and drug use.

Racism and discrimination

Another predominant theme running throughout the narratives was the reality that all participants were subject to racism and discrimination. Additionally, the focus group session yielded data which spoke to this theme and reinforced the racial divide present in the local, urban community. The participants also spoke to the extent of stigmatization and stereotyping that took place, on a day to day basis, within the city. There was a definite resentment toward the dominant society in Lethbridge. One non-Native participant disclosed that she too was a victim of racism because she publically associated with "shelter homies" on the street:

> It's not just people who comment or are just being ignorant, but sometimes I'll be at a meeting and with different health professionals and they'll ask me where I work, and I say 'I'm an outreach nurse at the shelter,'[4] and they'll make a comment … these are health professionals! This really disgusts me, and they'll say something like, 'I'll bet you see a lot of Indians there,' and I'm like, 'No!' There's people who've been health care professionals and they've ended up here. It can happen to anyone. It just makes me really mad. People who you would think aren't this way, actually are.

She felt a sense of empowerment resulting from her open rejection of the largely non-

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[4] The shelter's health nurse consented to having her identity known in the research.

Native, negative stance toward the Native homeless population. It is truly sad to conclude that racism has permeated helping organizations which work directly with the Native homeless population, which serves to perpetuate the negative attitudes by those employed therein.

Racism and discrimination greatly affected the participants seeking rental accommodations. They concluded that attempting to rent in the city has become an exercise in debasement where potential landlords screen renters and rent only to Natives as a last resort. The focus group participants felt that landlords were wary of Native tenants partly because of previously negative experiences which are in part due to stereotyping. To be sure, many landlords perceive renting to Natives as a "bad investment;" suspecting they will damage property or become hopelessly behind in rental payments. This is unfortunate because it categorizes all Native renters as potential risks when in reality, renting to any tenant, no matter what ethno-cultural background or socioeconomic status, poses risks in terms of property damage and lost income. Addiction issues forcing unwanted expenditures also prevented some renters from developing into responsible tenants. This was disheartening for the homeless participants, yet they realized that their lifestyle and addiction issues made it difficult to maintain a place. Charity and Les acknowledged the fact that they must address their alcoholism and drug abuse issues before they can even begin to look for a place to rent.

The participants were affected by racism to differing degrees in terms of how it impinged on their everyday lives. Angela revealed that having been raised in a non-Native foster home she did not really feel the negative effects of racism until she moved to Lethbridge. The other participants' narratives, particularly Jerry's, speak to an insidious and profoundly negative impact to their sense of self as Native people. Often

referring to the non-Native community as "those people," the participants expressed

frustration, resentment and anger towards this community as they were constantly looked

down on and rejected by it. There was simultaneously pressure to conform to the

standards and expectations of non-Native society and a need to reconnect with Blackfoot

culture. Indeed, present in the narratives was simultaneously a sense of pride in what was

and a fear and an aversion of what the greater non-Native community in the urban

landscape conceptualized as Native culture.

Estrangement from the reserve

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of my research was the degree to which the

Blackfoot participants felt disconnected from the reserve community. Urban Natives

receive no support from the reserve and the narratives reflected this reality. With little to

no opportunity for economic advancement compounded by the deplorable housing

conditions on reserves, many Native people are forced to urban environments where they

are neither prepared for the transition, nor the racism and discrimination. The politics of

the reserve community do not include urban Natives and some of the participants'

narratives reflect a great deal of resentment toward the reserves. The focus group session

brought to light that there was a border evident between reserve and city space. Some

participants identified themselves as being urbanized while others acknowledged that they

regularly move back and forth between urban and reserve life. The city, for some

participants, represented employment and education whereas the reserve symbolizes

"home" and a place where First Nation identity was defined and supported. In order to

successfully adapt to the urban landscape, the shelter guests had to conform to, and be

accepted by, the dominant society. Suffering from addiction and being visibly homeless

makes acceptance virtually impossible but this was not necessarily what the participants' narratives reflected. Participants wanted to exist in the urban environment where they felt valued as citizens, their identity as Native people was respected, and Blackfoot history became significant and meaningful; as opposed to being recognized as a product or consequence of the colonial past.

Conceptualizing traditional Blackfoot territory

In terms of how they understood their attachments to traditional Blackfoot territory, the participants revealed that being able to remain in Blackfoot territory was important to them, albeit to differing degrees. With the exception of one, all participants grew up in Blackfoot territory and remained connected to their local reserves in one way or another. It was there where a symbolic and physical sense of "home" was conceptualized and understood. The narratives revealed that the participants had a great sense of pride in their homeland that encompassed the city. There was also a deep resentment, however, of what their reserves had come to represent in terms of the dire economic and social circumstances present there.

Les revealed that potential opportunities for housing and employment available outside of Blackfoot territory might be something he would consider for the short term, but he would eventually come back "home." Mike perceived Blackfoot land as vital to Blackfoot identity, and Roger revealed he would find it very difficult to venture off Blackfoot territory as his family and identity are rooted in the land. Jerry informed me that his reserve was rife with conflict and although he has a house there, returning to the reserve was not an option for him. Charity was more concerned for the future of her children inheriting the negative remnants of Blackfoot territory as symbolized by the

reserve. Interestingly, Angela, having not grown up in traditional Blackfoot land and with little to no cultural influence, eventually returned to the territory and was intent on staying and building a productive life here.

The research findings suggest that having the ability to remain in Blackfoot territory influenced the participants' homeless situation to the extent that they were comfortable and familiar in the area; that they were hesitant to leave Blackfoot territory, and they would rather stay in the city despite the racism and discrimination present in everyday living and in the rental market; that there was simultaneously a sense of pride in one's homeland and sadness for the present state of reserve affairs.

Creating community

Because the participants felt they lost the support of family and traditional Blackfoot community, they re-created community and familial bonds with other "street" people. The local homeless shelter is a place where the participants re-built community and regained a sense of belonging and acceptance. It was "home" to the shelter guests as many of the staff are Native, speak the same dialect and have the same mannerisms; this lent a familiar aura to the shelter environment. One focus group participant observed that "It's a comfort for them knowing that you're Native as well."

The homeless shelter offered services that include cultural programming incorporating traditional practices such as smudging and sweat lodges, and the participants felt that this type of programming reinforced the traditional community. Job and life skill programs were also offered. Clients learned about the different resources the city has to offer. The participants' narratives spoke to the importance of the shelter in their daily lives and although there was sometimes conflict with the staff and the general

day to day operations, they felt that the shelter was vital to their survival. The shelter has come to represent "home" insofar as it has been the place where new family bonds are formed and meaningful existence is re-discovered within its walls.

Defining homelessness

According to the participants' narratives a new definition of homelessness has emerged. For them, to be homeless means to be in a state of existence where there are no family or community support networks. Being homeless does not necessarily mean having a roof over one's head or having a home in the physical sense. Common and generally accepted societal definitions of the term "homelessness" do not reflect the participants' conceptualizations. They are utterly and hopelessly homeless when they feel abandoned by their family and the traditional Blackfoot community. The phenomenon of homelessness is a condition which is fluid in the sense that it changes and takes on new meanings for those who experience it. Focus group participants reiterated this fact in that some shelter guests obtained housing but return to the shelter because they felt so isolated from community. Essentially, they were still homeless because support systems such as family were not present in their lives regardless of the fact that they are housed.

Unique themes and individual experiences

Although the participants' narratives held common threads of understanding, there were also unique themes that were not common across the data set. I will briefly touch upon these. The way men and women experience and conceptualize homelessness was unique. The women's narratives revealed concerns about children, and their pathways to homelessness were predicated upon losing their children and/or making poor relationship

choices. Addiction issues were predominant throughout the narratives, yet Roger's homelessness was not the result of alcohol abuse and he still retains deep connections to his family. Roger's situation is unique in that although his family is a large influence in his life, it is not always to his advantage because some members, especially his grandmother, are very dependent on him and others he has followed into the city are homeless as well. Mike and Jerry's narratives spoke to profound losses experienced throughout their lifetimes and their use of alcohol a means of coping with the deep loss and trauma. For the participants in this study, the causes of their homelessness were complex, multi-layered and arose from a culmination of events in their lives that were similar to one another, yet experienced and conceptualized on deeply subjective and personal levels.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the five narratives as told to me by the participants that included descriptions of their childhood, adult years, and pathways to homelessness, present perceptions of homelessness and their future outlook. I explored major themes arising from the narratives such as losses relative to family, identity and community, experiences of extreme suffering, addictions, subjection to racism and discrimination, and estrangement from their reserves. I established the influence that attachments to traditional Blackfoot territories may have had on the participants' homeless state, defined "homelessness" pertinent to the participants' perceptions and consistent with their narratives, and also acknowledged distinct experiences that were individually exclusive.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter I present the major findings of the research in relation to relevant literature

by drawing out the themes in the participants' narratives. I will also examine resiliency

factors, ways by which an individual overcomes and is strengthened by personal traumas

and hardship, existing interventions or strategies for healing past stressors and improving

housing options for the Blackfoot homeless population, and incorporating some

suggestions that may ameliorate the Blackfoot homeless situation in Lethbridge. Included

in this chapter is a reflective/reflexive consideration of my research informed by a deeply

personal perspective whereby my Blackfoot heritage and individual feelings about Native

homeless and attachments to traditional territory are implicated.

Losing identity

It is not my intention in this chapter to explicate or examine all pertinent factors

contributing to the loss of Blackfoot identity. A major theme present within the

participants' narratives was loss of identity. The causes of identity loss were many and

included: inter-generational trauma; loss of traditional land; language and cultural

traditions; and racism and discrimination. However, I will only discuss those mentioned

above as they dominated the narratives.

Inter-generational trauma resulting from colonization is most often linked to the

Residential school experience, is a by-product of historical trauma, or the "soul wound,"

which is defined as "trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends

beyond the life span" (Duran et al., 1998, pg. 342). Hypothetically, the narratives are

reflective of this in the sense that each participant is a product of historical, social, mental, emotional, physical, indeed spiritual trauma experienced as a collective whole; the common denominator being some form of trauma lived out as a Native person. Although it is not the intention of this study to delve too deeply into the theory of multi-generational trauma, it is worthwhile to briefly explore it for the multi-layered complexity of the responses to historical trauma has led to a loss of identity. Although expressed in different ways, loss was dominant in the narratives and is explicitly articulated in some narratives more so than in others. In her narrative, Angela was raised in a non-Native home and this has led to a disconnection from her Blackfoot culture. The secrecy surrounding the circumstances of her apprehension by child-welfare authorities has also contributed to her loss of identity. These events have cost Angela her traditional roots. Interestingly, she must venture "home" to the reserve to collect her I.D.[entity] which she then takes back to the "real world" so she may be legally, not just visibly, recognized as a Native woman. Angela, angry at her birth mother and blaming her for all her problems, has suffered from unresolved trauma. Duran and colleagues state that "Mourning that has not been completed and the ensuing depression are absorbed by children from birth on" (1998, pg. 342). This suggests that trauma can be passed down generationally – from mother to child – as appeared to be the case for Angela. Her Blackfoot identity having never been established, she has also "given" up her children to the child-welfare authorities where they remain in non-Native foster homes presumably without the knowledge of, or pride in, their traditional Blackfoot culture. And so the cycle of loss continues.

Loss of traditional land, traditional cultural practices and the erosion of language are other dimensions that contributed to identity loss – indeed, Blackfoot identity is

shaped by these and to lose one means the whole structure of Blackfoot culture is

fragmented and destabilized. Retention of one's language, while forming a bridge to

conceptualizing one's identity as a Blackfoot person, can prove to be difficult when those

around cannot understand the language. This may lead to further alienation because

although a person can retain his/her Blackfoot identity to some degree, s/he cannot easily

communicate thoughts and feelings to those around them who are also of Blackfoot

heritage.

Attachment to land is a concept that held much personal meaning for me and I had

approached this notion with specific inquiries in mind when designing the research. Most

of the participants conceptualized land and "home" as a binary construct. They felt that

land was important, yet at the same time they were also deeply troubled with what their

reserves had come to symbolize – a conduit for post-colonial isolation that alienates and

separates its inhabitants as being "others." The reserve nations are essentially reminders

of past injustices. Informing this notion, Whitbeck and colleagues (2009) suggest that:

> Reservations/reserves represent the remnant of 'homeland.' However,
> this 'homeland' often occupies the least productive, least desirable area
> of what was once their vast territory. As a social context, [they] are at
> once a symbol of what was and the representation of what has occurred.
> The land represents a revered past, yet the histories of some reservations/
> reserves are filled with stories of epidemics, corrupt government agents,
> food shortages, and repression. Simply living on reservations/reserves can
> be a reminder of ethnic cleansing, broken promises, continual encroachment
> on tribal lands, and continued pressures of assimilation. At the same time,
> reservations/reserves may be a refuge from discrimination and the land a
> symbol of the living culture. They hold sacred places, and remain the repository
> of cultural knowledge. (pg. 18)

The above quotation effectively captures the participants' perceptions of their local

reserves. Having great pride in one's homeland, yet being unable to advance there

because of social and economic deficiencies, the participants had become estranged from

their homelands. However, they remain in close proximity to them for reasons related to security and familiarity – indeed, the city occupies traditional Blackfoot territory and is a symbolic representation of the remnants of their identity as being a part of the Blackfoot Nation.

Language loss, most significantly in the younger generation, has profound negative effects on Blackfoot identity. Of the six participants, three were able to speak the Blackfoot language fluently. Roger was particularly troubled and frustrated by this loss. As the youngest participant, his lamentations are neither unusual nor are they unique as many young Native people are beginning to feel the effects of losing their language – something they were never really given the opportunity to learn, yet had every right to know. McCarty, Romero and Zepeda (2006) inform us that "many youth are deeply concerned about the crisis of Native language loss" (pg. 28). The lack of knowledge contributes to loss of identity and one means to recovery is for the older generation of Blackfoot people to learn the importance of language continuity, and teach the young people our language – a process which should not have stopped at all. This proves difficult when the language was not associated with a corpus of written material and its continuity and use persists within the bounds of a small and select few in the Blackfoot community. Its usage has not crossed over generations and therefore, many young people cannot respect it as being part of their identity or appreciate the gravity of its loss. Indeed, many older people, because of the Residential school practices that forbade speaking in one's Native language, are neither accustomed to using the language outside of private space nor do they have the knowledge on how to teach it.

Today, there are many Blackfoot people who neither follow traditional practices, nor know much about their culture. Losing the will to follow traditional practices or not

having the knowledge and tools to do so, especially losing esteem in one's culture, leads

to loss of identifying with oneself as a Native person. There are many older people at the

shelter who obviously speak the language and are aware of the traditional protocol, yet

they do not actively engage in practicing their culture. They feel a sense of hopelessness

that they cannot re-claim or re-discover that which has been lost. Menzies's research

among the Toronto Aboriginal, male homeless population, rightly informs us that

colonization and assimilation policies "ha[ve] left many Aboriginal peoples without the

necessary resources and life skills required to achieve harmony and balance in their daily

lives" (2005, pg. 4). When referring to colonialism, many First Nations are under the

assumption that it is a slow process begun with the arrival of Europeans on the North

American continent in 1492 (Duran et al., 1998).

Bastien suggests that First Nations identities have been shaped by colonialism

that speak to a process of encroachment and assimilation (2004). She further states that

"Tribal people have internalized Non-Native beliefs and values through this process, and,

as a result, interpret their own experiences from an alien and alienating value and belief

system (pg. 152)." Balancing one's life and finding purpose are prerequisites to a healthy

lifestyle yet the participants are unable to do either resulting from generations of cultural

erosion and years of growing up in maladaptive environments wrought with a myriad

abuses, alcoholism and a general sense of hopelessness and defeat. The dominant, non-

Native society has exercised power and control over First Nations on every level. Reserve

politics, operating by a system that its officials do not fully understand, have corrupted

many reserve members, created an economic and social imbalance, and have led to

feeling of mistrust (Thibodeau and North Peigan, 2007) and lost faith. Residential schools

and past injustices have often led to Native people as conceptualizing themselves as

victims (Bastien, 2004) and in doing so, they perpetuate and sustain hopelessness and defeat that is reflected in their lifestyles and attitudes.

The notion of historical loss and trauma is reflected in the very nature of homelessness. The participants, both internally, through their articulations of their existence and personal histories, and externally, the way the local community perceives their homeless state, are constantly reminded of this loss. Whitbeck and colleagues (2009) provide insight into this notion with their hypothesis that being exposed to and "growing up in a cultural context of reminders of ethnic cleansing may contribute" (pg. 17) to a host of problems that include depression, demoralization, and I argue, loss of identity. Although Whitbeck is making a reference here to cultural genocide, I am more concerned with the discussion as it relates to loss. Having a need to be accepted and valued in the community, yet constantly being reminded of their place in society through the apathetic gazes and negative perceptions held by the majority of the local community, the participants in this study navigate the streets of the urban landscape fully aware that they are not a part of it.

Racism and discrimination compound the erosion of identity. Whitbeck and colleagues observe that "Evidence is accumulating that discrimination functions in a way similar to that of other psychological stressors" and that it can be ranked "with major negative life events such as the death of a loved one, divorce and job loss" (2004, pg. 409). What are the implications for the Blackfoot homeless participants? Already suffering from emotional, mental, physical and cultural anguish, as it were, they are often subject to prejudices and intolerance because of their ethnicity and homeless situation. This only exacerbates their depressive state and, as Whitbeck and colleagues have suggested (2004), could have direct effects on their excessive alcohol abuse. As a highly

visible and vulnerable population, the participants' narratives speak to frustration, anger and resentment toward the local non-Native community. Catherine Kingfisher's work has made a valuable contribution in addressing issues surrounding racism that directly focus on the Native homeless population in Lethbridge (2005, 2007). Her study on how the urban community perceives the Native homeless revealed, among other things, that the nature of racism in Lethbridge is an issue that the public is very sensitive about (2005) – it is unequivocally displayed and expressed, yet is often explicitly denied as existing. Therefore, racism is generally perceived as a non-issue and becomes normalized, as it were. Menzies supports this notion in his assertion that racism and discrimination oppress a whole community of people and that community "becomes normalized to the point that the group does not realize how social conditions continue to oppress them" (2005, pg. 72). It is difficult to change negative attitudes when they are not recognized as being harmful to the community. Furthermore, this lack of acknowledgement only serves to increase the divide between non-Natives and Natives and perpetuates the power imbalance. Racism and discrimination become accepted practices that 'dysfunctionalize,' if you will, the whole community.

Losing family, losing community

Loss of family and community exacerbated the participants' homeless situation. As members of the Blackfoot Nation, family and community are central, foundational structures of an individual's sense of self and belonging. To move outside either of these structures puts an individual at risk for harm making them vulnerable to abuse, addictions and poor life choices, and this was reflected in the narratives. Inter-connectedness represented in relationships between family, community and the environment are vital to

the balance and well-being of the Blackfoot people and have existed for time

immemorial. Bastien relates how these relationships and connections form Niitsitapi ways

of knowing: "The nature of being is conceived within and originates from these

relationships" (2004, pg. 4). To be severed from these relationships means losing one's

place within the Blackfoot worldview. Menzies suggests that removing Aboriginal

children from their homes has directly influenced the current state of Aboriginal

homelessness and has "diminished opportunities for the transmission of family values,

parenting knowledge and community behavior between generations" (2005, pg. 71). The

very essence of Blackfoot culture rests in these relationships and family, whether

immediate or extended, and is the main support in an individual's life. The participants

were robbed of this at a very early age. This experience is common to many Residential

School survivors; indeed, the effects of abandonment and abuse have an impact the next

generation. Sider, in her examination of Aboriginal homelessness, states:

> The destruction of traditional childrearing practices destroyed parenting
> skills, knowledge of child development needs and practical family
> management skills. Methods of corporal punishment often replaced
> traditional childrearing practices, thus creating intergenerational cycles
> of abuse." (2005, pg. 39)

The participants, with the exception of Roger, indicated that they were homeless because

they had no family support. Charity and Les readily contend that "we get no family

support and that's why we're on the streets" and Jerry has shared that "I do not have the

support I should really have which is family support and that's what makes a lot of people

homeless, no family support."

The participants feel they have been abandoned by their community. Many people

in the community choose to distance themselves from the Blackfoot homeless and

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rationalize this by adopting a belief that homelessness is a choice and those choosing that lifestyle must then live with the consequences. Kingfisher states that the problems and causes of Native homelessness are often reduced to the personal level: "Rather than attributing cause to economic shifts or institutional racism or particular historical relations, for instance, cause is reduced to private, individual problems that reflect individual deficiencies or problematic life trajectories. Cure is, accordingly, reduced to individual change" (2005, pg. 8). I also argue that no one "chooses" to be in a situation where they are vulnerable to abuse, helpless to combat addictions and where they have lost their sense of dignity and self-worth. By placing the onus entirely on the individual, members of the community have effectively diverted any sense of responsibility from themselves by failing to recognize, or even acknowledge, some of the issues and causes surrounding Native homelessness. The community is in a state of dysfunction as the Native homeless population come to feel increasingly disconnected from it to such a degree that detachment becomes normalized.

The distance between the public, both Native and non-Native, and the homeless Native person can be profound and this disconnection is reflected in the way many of the local citizens interact with the Blackfoot homeless population. For example, the simple act of extending a helping hand in the form of providing spare change is not done as this would entail some small connection to the homeless and many people, again both Native and non-Native, wish to avoid making any such connection. Justified by their distorted beliefs and perceptions about the Blackfoot homeless population, the local community perpetuates the disconnection and places blame on the homeless individuals for being an "eyesore" in the local community, a drain on resources, lacking in motivation to change their situation, and accountable, indeed responsible, for their current homeless state. This

perception of Native homeless people fosters feelings of resentment and anger held by many of the citizens in Lethbridge which, according to some of the participants' narratives, in turn negatively affect the Blackfoot homeless population.

The remoteness that exists between the participants and their communities, both urban and reserve, bears loose resemblance to the practice of "banishment" that took place in traditional Blackfoot communities. Banishment was punishment that was exacted in cases where social and moral codes were broken or where an individual brought great dishonor upon his/her family or the community and was asked to leave the tribe. In a report submitted to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Colin Goff defines banishment as "a traditional response reflecting a respect for the community and the preservation of core community values. Penalties can be harsh: the maximum punishment can be permanent removal of an individual or family from a community" (2005, pg. 18). Crop Eared Wolf describes crimes, or more appropriately, "wrongdoings," as "those acts that are seen as a serious disruption of the order and harmony within the family, clan and community (2007, pg. 101)." Significantly, those who were banished were held with disregard, possessed no honor, and like a walking corpse, were given no acknowledgement.

As the concept of banishment relates to my study, I argue that the Blackfoot homeless population can be viewed as symbolically and socially banished from the Native and non-Native communities. Like the banished ancestors who went before them, they wander through the fringes of the urban landscape, which is situated on traditional Blackfoot territory, and are marginalized both spatially and socially because of the life they have "chosen" to live. Despite the fact they remain in Blackfoot territory and exist in their homelands, they are still in a homeless state because they have been abandoned by

family and community. Their crimes are an inability to conform to neoliberal values

(Kingfisher, 2007), inability to overcome addictions, and disrupting the community by

being visibly homeless and publically displaying their hopelessness. The Blackfoot

homeless people, while existing on the fringes of society, are banished socially and

psychologically and unlike the wrongdoers of the past, they are seen daily in the larger

context of society. They are talked about and viewed as outsiders and reminders of

wasted lives that become stereotyped as representative of Native people. The housed

Blackfoot people seek to distance themselves from their homeless counterparts as they

attempt to find a place within the context of urban Canadian society that affirms them as

being contributing members to it. Fleming (1993) provides insight into the notion of the

negative implications of being visibly homeless when he states that laws against

panhandling are not put into place because of the actual act of begging but more

appropriately, the begging, homeless individual is fined because of his/her presence on a

public street. The participants become reminders of the possibility of living a life in utter

despair and desperation that could very well happen to anyone of us if we cannot conform

to the ideals of modern society. Fleming suggests that much of the general public:

> view the homeless as undeserving of help. Their condition is viewed as
> pathological, self-induced and self-selected. They are, in effect, living rough
> because they are lazy, shiftless, bums. The constant request of businesses to
> remove the homeless from public places since they are 'bad for business,' and
> their almost certain removal, gives credence to the view that the homeless are
> seen as having less than full status in our society. (1993, pg. 6)

Fleming captures the local society's attitude toward the homeless participants and the

profound disconnection from community revealed in the narratives. Kingfisher (2007)

states that the "problem" of Aboriginal homelessness rests in unacknowledged and

distorted perceptions that are held by the local community; both Native and non-Native.

Mentioned in everyday conversation, I have often heard other Blackfoot people speak of the homeless population as "choosing" that lifestyle because of their addictions and unwillingness to change their situations. Menzies has indicated that many of the participants in his study have "acknowledged a feeling of 'not fitting in' with either Aboriginal culture or the mainstream (2005, pg. 133), especially those not raised within traditional Native communities. Therefore, Blackfoot people fortunate enough not to have experienced homelessness use this type of rationalization to appease their own consciences and also as an excuse to justify their lack of compassion which was a principle value in traditional society. Crop Eared Wolf informs this concept when she relates that "Compassion is central to Káínai relationships and is the motivation behind the peacekeeping traditions such as counseling, advice, and encouragement. All intended to keep the harmony, the balance and the order with the best interests in mind for family, clan and the Tribe as a whole" (2007, pg. 90). Vital to the well-being of the community, compassion for one's family and neighbours served to reinforce relationships and also lent to individual feelings of emotional and mental well-being. Preoccupation with modern societal values has left many Blackfoot people lacking the knowledge and the purpose of fundamental social structures and value systems by which traditional Blackfoot society operated.

Complicating and exacerbating the notion of banishment is the fact that many of the participants were fluent in the Blackfoot language. They conceptualized and expressed meaning traditionally as speakers and thinkers of the language, yet they were unable to communicate this meaning to non-Blackfoot speakers because much of what they needed to communicate could not be translated into English for the messages would lose original significance. Psychologically, they struggled with meaning and expression,

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which led to increased feelings of isolation. As a concept, banishment extends beyond the physical and includes those feelings of social separation that become compounded by an inability to communicate in a language which solidifies as affirms the participants' identities as Blackfoot people. Today, the Blackfoot homeless population essentially is abandoned by community and exists as the "others" outside mainstream and reserve society.

The paradox of re-building family and community on a weak foundation

It was identified in the previous chapter that the participants created a family and community with other shelter guests and street people. For its members, this newly developed community is a much needed element in their lives. Unfortunately however, its structure is built upon a collective commonality fortified with addictions. The community members are united in their mutual need for alcohol and other drugs as a means of dealing with the traumas, profound and deep losses, and stressors in their lives. Whitbeck declares that "Alcohol may serve to reduce intrusive thoughts or feelings related to historical loss and to numb reminders of that loss. Alcohol abuse may also represent anger manifested in self- destructive behaviours" (2004, pg. 416). Many Blackfoot homeless have experienced some form of trauma and their alcohol misuse can be perceived as a type of dysfunctional therapy. Sider, providing more insight into alcohol misuse with her study of Aboriginal homelessness, found that each homeless person she interviewed "has lived through more than one traumatic life experience, any of which may contribute to the hopelessness and despair they feel today. They are 'lost souls,' or 'wounded spirits', who turn to alcohol and substances to 'numb the pain'" (2005, pg. 84).

For the participants and other Native homeless people, this re-created family may serve to replace their original family. Alcohol, through re-establishing the universal need for belonging and non-judgmental acceptance, brings its members together, as it is apt to do in mainstream society. Yet things quickly fall apart, relationships are destroyed, and violence and abuse eventually prevail. Paradoxically, the newly formed family and community replace that which is vital yet missing in the lives of the participants. However, because its foundation is built on addiction, it only appears to offer more than it can. In the end, the Native homeless people have re-assembled only the promise of a family and community which, because of alcohol misuse and the power of the local community to disrupt fragile social relations, is dysfunctional and apt to disintegrate at the slightest discord.

Resiliency

That the participants have sought to re-build community, however shaky its foundations, and managed to survive their losses and traumas; indeed, their narratives also spoke to love, forgiveness and endurance. These are indicative of the resilience of spirit even in the bleakest of situations. All the participants recognized that they needed to make changes on an individual level and that their alcohol misuse only served to exacerbate their homeless state. Some of them also realized that their inability to obtain adequate housing was partly the result of their lifestyles and acknowledged that they first needed to "clean themselves" up before they could begin searching the rental markets. This recognition and accountability brings about the hope of changing circumstances. The local homeless shelter offered a space where the participants engaged in the smudging ceremony and connected them with resources that can assist them in getting off the

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streets. In terms of addiction to alcohol, the participants were aware that they were agents

of change, and many had goals they aspired to, as well as children for whom they still felt

responsible. It is important to note however, that changes, although vital at the individual

level (micro), must also happen at the community level (macro). Otherwise, individual

change becomes pointless.

Interventions

When considering intervention approaches directed at Native homelessness, it is

vital to be aware that the causes behind it are complex and multi-layered and involve

issues that stretch far beyond having a roof over one's head. It is not my intention here to

discuss a multitude of treatment options for the Blackfoot dispossessed, but rather to

briefly consider some of the predominant themes in the study relative to suggested ways

of healing traumas and ameliorating the homeless situation.

Presently in the city of Lethbridge, there is an aggressive move to end

homelessness and house those who are living on the streets (Social Housing in Action,

"'Bringing Lethbridge Home': Five Year Plan to End Homelessness", 2009). The plan

outlines some solutions to "end" homelessness that are based on a Housing First model

(Tsemberis, 2010). The goal is to first house the homeless individual, and then put

supports in place that would allow the person to maintain housing. This approach, I

believe, is misinformed because it does not actually focus on the delivery of treatment or

counseling to Native homeless people before housing is secured. I am not suggesting that

this approach does not work for the majority of the homeless population as it has had

tremendous success in addressing homelessness. The focus group revealed, however, that

many of its former guests returned to the shelter and lost their homes because they felt

disconnected from the community. The recreated community the participants have established reinforces substance abuse and if torn apart, they suffer increased alienation and isolation. Alcohol cessation may prove ineffective in improving their situation because community disconnection will persist – access to the Blackfoot homeless community will be limited because the individual will not share the common bond of alcohol misuse that brings the community together. The need for social acceptance and belonging will continue.

Menzies (2005) indicates that holistic healing approaches will not be possible unless it is guided by a healthy and balanced community. The challenge therefore, is to incorporate holistic and meaningful Blackfoot healing traditions into mainstream programming that increases feelings of social acceptance within the homeless community. The participants' narratives revealed that some of them must first deal with their addictions before they can consider seeking out housing. This study suggests that offering to first house the individual then providing the necessary supports may not work because they do not have the skills in place to maintain housing in the first place. As the narratives informed, Blackfoot homelessness is not necessarily associated with lack of housing as a physical space, but rather, lack of family and community connections. Menzies (2007) reiterates this fact when he suggests that the solution to Native homelessness is not so much about building houses, but about rebuilding connections that link the homeless person with their respective First Nation, community and family.

In its plans, the city has identified some root causes of homelessness on a general scale but has not necessarily addressed Native homelessness as a unique phenomenon; but it does, however, recognize that discrimination is a problem for Aboriginal renters (Social Housing in Action, pg. 19). There is no mention of racism as being a factor contributing

to Blackfoot homelessness in the city of Lethbridge. Structural and social determinants should be considered and addressed as they relate to Native homelessness before a plan is put in place to house them. This would entail the city's acknowledgement that some perceptions held by its citizens are directly and negatively impacting, indeed aggravating, the Native homeless condition. Sider (2005) suggests that as it relates to Native homelessness, there needs to be an acknowledgment and acceptance of Native history on the part of municipalities which directly occupy traditional First Nations territories to improve relationships between Natives and non-Natives. Chansonneuve (2007) further emphasizes that "From an Aboriginal perspective, the history of Aboriginal people is more than stories of mass trauma" (pg. 73). In terms of the city of Lethbridge and its citizens, this acknowledgement is vital in repairing existing relationships and building positive ones. Land and its importance to Blackfoot people must also be acknowledged and this, I believe, should involve much more than a passing recognition and identification that the city occupies the heart of Blackfoot territory.

Despite the fact that the Blackfoot people were a highly mobile society, this mobility was limited to its territories and therefore the notion of "home" was not conceptualized as a fixed place, but rather was fluid and changed with the seasons, resources and primarily, the buffalo's migration patterns (Binnema, 2001). Yet, it had defined borders that encompassed its territory. Transitioning between places is not new to the Blackfoot people. As mobility applies to the Blackfoot homeless participants in this study, the participants were highly mobile in terms of reserve to off-reserve transitioning. Unfortunately, neither of these places are welcoming and they continue to feel alienation both on-reserve and in the city. Addressing Native homelessness in Lethbridge necessarily involves the local Blackfoot reserves to take the steps needed to include

urban, off-reserve Natives in planning social policies and attempt to incorporate urban

Natives as still being very much a part of reserve society. Menzies has identified that for

Native people who are chronically homeless, there is a need "to be repatriated as

Aboriginal peoples to their families and to their communities" (2007, pg. 387). They need

to feel a sense of belonging to, and a part of, their communities – not alienated because

they are forced from their reserves.

The past traumas, losses and suffering experienced by the participants, indeed the

Native homeless population in general, must be acknowledged and addressed as being

significant and contributing factors to homelessness and solutions such as intense,

culturally sensitive programming and treatment options should be made available to the

homeless Native people. By incorporating traditional approaches that speak to the values

and principles of Blackfoot culture (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007) we can attempt to heal the

intergenerational wounds that have been inflicted upon Blackfoot culture since

colonization[5]. Duran (1998) has suggested that a return to a traditional therapeutic,

healing practice is the only way that Native people can begin to overcome the multitude

of social, physical, emotional and mental health problems that constantly persist today

and offers some alternative approaches that speak to this practice. Group intervention

workshops on intergenerational trauma and unresolved loss have proven to be effective in

"Indian Country" and Duran states that "We have seen many tears in the eyes of our

elders as they feel the liberating touch of historical truth and the validation of their pain,

grief, and anger" (1998, pg. 352). However, "returning" to traditional healing practices

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[5] I am neither suggesting that Blackfoot culture is static nor am I referring to the notion of "tradition" as evoking an essentialist perception of First Nations culture. Some members of Blackfoot society have chosen not to participate in "traditional" practices yet this does not mean they have lost their identity as First Nations or are detached from their culture in a meaningful way. Others can move in and out of "tradition" and do so quite regularly. Again, this does not necessarily mean they are disconnected from their culture but on the contrary, this type of movement serves to emphasize the fluid nature of culture.

exclusively is not always possible for many First Nations people. Perhaps providing the option of some form of traditional healing methods for Native clients into mainstream addictions programming can be a good beginning. From a Canadian perspective applicable to all First Nations, Menzies (2007) offers two models of intergenerational trauma entitled "The Intergenerational Trauma Model" and "Intergenerational Trauma" respectively, for use in treatment development relative to the field of social work that are "premised on the main constructs of the traditional teaching of the Aboriginal medicine wheel" from a macro perspective (pgs. 384, 387). Bastien (2004) calls for the inclusion of traditional "ways of knowing" within the context of modern life so that the Blackfoot nation can begin to repair all that was destroyed by the terrible effects of colonization and its resultant "Indian" policies aimed at annihilating the culture.

Addiction issues, especially alcohol misuse, must also be aggressively treated. This study has revealed that the participants drink to assist them in coping with past traumas, to help them forget about their current situation if only for a short time, and perhaps, to alleviate their depression. Presently, there are addictions counselors who regularly visit the shelter to offer treatment and supports to those suffering from addictions, but culturally specific programming could be introduced that, working in conjunction with more common addiction programming, addresses the underlying issues that lead to alcohol/drug abuse. McCormick (2000) identifies some reasons for the unsuccessful treatment of Aboriginal people entering mainstream addiction counseling such as differing value and belief systems between the majority culture and First Nations, lack of trust in the service providers and a general reluctance for Aboriginal people to admit to drug or alcohol dependency because of the shame and guilt surrounding such admissions. If given the outlet and opportunity to re-learn and practice traditional

Blackfoot culture, the participants can begin to address and overcome their addictions from a perspective that is culturally relevant. Traditional Aboriginal healing practices that address community disconnection have been successful in the past (McCormick, 2000). Whitbeck suggests that "'enculturation' is a resiliency factor that may protect against alcohol misuse or serve as an important curative factor in alcohol treatment programs" (2004, pg. 409). It has been indicated elsewhere that Aboriginal groups in Canada have developed a successful approach to treatment and "healing that is grounded in their cultural teachings" (Chansonneuve, 2007, pg. 73). It is vital that the participants in this study and other Native homeless people be given the opportunity to address their addictions in a manner that is appropriate, meaningful and less clinical in nature. Although challenging (Whitbeck, 2004), programming should begin at the community level, both on-reserve and off.

On a more comprehensive social level, especially with regard to those working with First Nations homeless individuals, awareness about Native culture is valuable in being able to actually work with the Native homeless population. It was indicated earlier that the participants had lost trust in the community and felt disconnected from it. Ways to regain trust and confidence include being aware of and acknowledging their past history and present suffering; especially some of the causes surrounding it. This process is inclusive and involves Native people who are working with the homeless population as well. Providing a space within the borders of the urban landscape where the participants can feel welcomed and escape from the social stigma that is attached with their situation. Earlier in the study I had discussed the fact that the Native homeless population were being forced from the city core and further marginalized to its outskirts. With the exception of the city's homeless shelter, there exists no space where they can go to

reconnect with their culture and address the underlying issues of their homeless situation. Accessible housing is a first step but is not the sole answer in alleviating Native homelessness for when housed, many return back to the streets to regain community and individual connections that have been lost in the housing transition. Real and effective remedies for improving and preventing Native homelessness in general must be considered on the micro, mezzo and macro level that include homeless people in community discussions resulting in recommendations to regional service providers and those charged with implementing social policy (Sider, 2005). Change is viable on an individual level but it must be supported through culturally appropriate programming and inclusion into mainstream society.

Implications for future research

In this study, it was not possible to address all issues and concerns that were related to Native homelessness. It would be beneficial to explore the extent to which First Nations reserves contribute to Native homelessness by alienating urban Natives from community because the feeling of being isolated from their reserves was very real for the participants. Existing reserve policy surrounding the treatment of urban Natives should be examined and new policy/programs put in place that provide those who are moving to cities with the necessary skill sets and resources that allow for a smooth transition. The Native Women's Transition Society, which offers housing and counseling supports to First Nations women, provides this programming to a certain degree but neither is it comprehensive enough nor available to the Native homeless population on a general level.

The participants' narratives reveal that there is a marked difference in the way women and men experience and understand homelessness. For the female participants, their homeless state was more about spousal relationships. The partners they chose had a direct impact on their homeless state. They were also concerned about their children who were in foster care and for Charity in particular, leaving Blackfoot territory was not an option because of responsibility toward her children. Others (CMHC, 1996; Cone, 2008) have provided some insight into the phenomenon of homeless mothers but much more research needs to be done to determine the causes of homelessness for Native women and how this impacts future generations.

The mental health of the participants was explored only briefly as it pertained to depression resulting from the participants past experiences and present homeless situation. Often poor mental health is associated with homelessness (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993) and the Native homeless population is certainly no exception. A more in-depth exploration surrounding Native mental health and Native homelessness would provide more insight into the relation between the two and perhaps lead to culturally appropriate mental health programming as an element in preventing and ameliorating Native homelessness.

Additionally, future inquiry should be made into determining a course of action that would build community and improve relations between non-Natives and Native people. Indicated earlier in the study, it is difficult to change attitudes and perceptions, but it may become viable when more rigorous, specific exploration is conducted surrounding the root causes of negative Native and non-Native relationships at the community level.

Researching as a Blackfoot woman

As indicated in the introduction, I had entered into my research with the intention of researching the causes behind Blackfoot homelessness but had sought also to explore it within the context of attachments to traditional Blackfoot territory. The perspective I used during my research – completing the literature review, approaching the participants and conducting the interviews, interpreting and analyzing the data, and articulating the findings – was through the lens of a Blackfoot woman seeking to gain answers as to the nature and causes of Native homelessness on a general level, and how the relationship to land might inform the homeless situation. Not explicitly stated, I was also engaging in a process that sought an attempt at restoring some form of dignity to my participants. As a culture, the Blackfoot nation is extremely proud. It troubled me that some of its members were existing in despair, dependency, poverty and seeming shiftlessness. Being raised in Southern Alberta, traditional Blackfoot territory, I had developed a great attachment to the land and think of the area as my home. Given the opportunity to complete the Master's program, I knew the research I wanted to do must be of a personally meaningful nature. Therefore, I sought to meld the two concepts together and determine the extent to which attachments to Blackfoot land may or may not influence the Blackfoot homeless person's state.

Quite often, because of the divide existing between the Native and non-Native population in Lethbridge, I had felt like an outsider in my homeland – as if I did not belong there. Quite often I had returned to my reserve to live and work – to the place where I felt most comfortable even though it was depressing and offered little opportunity for economic advancement. Quite often, I found myself in a situation where I was near to

being homeless because I could not find a place to rent in Lethbridge. My personal

history influenced the research that I did later, of which this thesis is the result.

The research methodology and the approach I had taken in analyzing the data

seemed a natural process. As a Native person, I engaged in participant observation as a

daily ritual and was keenly aware of my surrounding, taking note of how events affected

me, I interpreted those events through the lens of a Blackfoot woman. My people's

history is a source of great pride and I have always loved hearing these stories

notwithstanding the teller. It was however, sometimes very difficult for me to listen to the

stories of the participants; indeed, to reproduce their stories and allow their voices to

dominate through a narrative process that was unaffected by my own voice. Although this

proved arduous, I feel that interpreted by an "outside" lens, the stories and findings could

be much different. As suggested earlier, biases exist from which it is difficult to escape in

social research and the researcher often allows his/her interpretations to influence the

research to some degree (Bryman and Teevan, 2005) – whether knowingly or

unknowingly. However, the trustworthiness of the data may remain intact by

acknowledging bias done through a reflective/reflexive process. Alvesson and Skoldberg

(2000) inform this process suggesting that reflection/reflexivity involves understanding

the extent to which one's own interpretations affect research, having the ability to

conceptualize interpretations from multiple perspectives and above all, being self critical.

The nature of my study dictated that I maintain a healthy "distance" between myself and

the participants, as problematic as this is when conducting qualitative research. I could

not afford to invest too much emotion into the nature of my study, especially during the

interviewing and data analysis stages and was weary of being drawn too deeply into the

suffering of the participants lest I lose all sense of objectivity. Even so, I was to

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conceptualize the data through their perspectives, and although difficult to do, I also explored the local urban community's perspective of Native homelessness.

When conducting the interviews, I was aware that although my cultural history and my participants' were essentially the same, there were profound differences that existed on a personal and socio-economic level. This was somewhat troubling for me because I found it hard to conceptualize, especially in Charity's case, why this was the case. She and I shared many of the same opportunities in life and we both came from relatively well-to do reserve families. Why was it that I was conducting the interviews and she was homeless? What events in our personal histories led to these differences? Still, I am unsure of the answers. An invisible wall was erected between myself and the participants during the interview process that I attributed to our different socio-economic statuses and although not articulated, I often walked away from the interviews with a deep feeling of being disconnected from the participants' lives. The research involved me spending long hours at the shelter and frequent visits were made where I only "popped" in to check and see if they were there. These visits, no matter what and how long, were extremely challenging to me as a person, especially as a woman, because I was deeply aware of my surroundings and needed to think of my safety. The shelter guests would often be intoxicated and the potential for violence was a real threat. I could begin to understand why the general public was afraid of the Native homeless population, yet I also understood that violent guests were coming from a place of personal torment and relived tragedy. For example, one early afternoon, I dropped by the shelter and there was a young, intoxicated Native male who was becoming aggressive with staff. He was restrained and the police were called. When being led out of the shelter, his cries spoke to earlier events in his life when he was molested as a child. The general public is not aware

of the reasons behind the violent behavior and only tends to see the aftermath in the form of public displays of aggression and violence.

Researching as a Blackfoot woman has allowed me to articulate and explore the reasons behind Blackfoot homelessness from multiple perspectives. I explored the relationship to traditional Blackfoot territory as paradoxical because it was deeply troubling to me that so many of the Blackfoot people were homeless in their homeland. I became less judgmental of my fellow Nation members, especially the women in the study, for often times I could not understand why a mother would give her child away yet hearing their stories has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the causes surrounding the proliferation of Native children in the child welfare system. I, too, was puzzled as to why many Native homeless people did not simply return to the reserve and live with their families. They did not have any family to return to. Essentially, the study has allowed me the honour of walking a mile in another's moccasins.

Summary remarks

The goal of this master's thesis was to determine how Native people experience and understand homelessness and to frame this relative to First Nations' attachment to land which may or may not compel many Blackfoot people to remain homeless. The literature review served to situate the study within the contexts of other research conducted on Native homelessness and the importance of place, and to inform the research. The focused ethnography and data analysis approach did justice to the participants' stories and the data collected was robust with saturation being achieved. The findings spoke to themes of personal tragedy and loss on multiple levels. The discussion

chapter expanded upon these themes from a Blackfoot perspective and explored some ways that the Native homeless situation may be ameliorated.

Although the causes behind Blackfoot homelessness are complex, multi-layered and involve much more rigorous exploration, it is incumbent upon us as a society to begin to address some of these causes from an approach that focuses on rebuilding community connections, creating relationships and acknowledging cultural histories. We should begin to understand that Native homelessness involves much more than lack of housing but rather, is related to lack of family and community and how this knowledge can be used to determine best-practices in improving the situation for Native homeless people.

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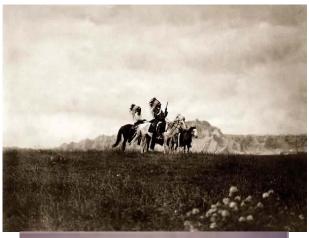O'Reilly-Fleming, T. (1993). *Down and out in Canada: Homeless Canadians*. Toronto:

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HOW DO BLACKFOOT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS? IS LAND AND PLACE AS IMPORTANT TO US, AS BLACKFOOT INDIVIDUALS, AS IT WAS TO OUR ANCESTORS?

YOU ARE INVITED TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH PROJECT CONDUCTED BY GABRIELLE WEASEL HEAD, A MASTER'S STUDENT IN NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE
FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT THE FRONT DESK

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions (for the service providers):

1. What is the percentage of aboriginal people using the shelter services?

2. Has there been an increase/decrease?

3. What are some of the characteristics of the aboriginal homeless population that utilize your services? (i.e. average age, nation descent, substance abusers, rate of attrition)

4. Are there any trends you have noticed? (i.e. has the population remained steady, increase in younger people using services, seasonal population fluctuations, etc.)

5. In your opinion, what are some of the main barriers aboriginal people face in terms of obtaining dependable and adequate shelter?

6. In your opinion, do Blackfoot homeless people face unique challenges in Lethbridge? (i.e. issues of racism, breakdown of traditional community, breakdown of family, intergenerational trauma)

7. What are some services your organization offers exclusively for aboriginal clients?

8. What are some of the changes the local community can make to improve the Blackfoot homeless situation?

9. What are some programming you offer that has impacted the Blackfoot homeless population?

10. Are there any suggestions/comments you have on an individual and personal level?

APPENDIX C

Consent form

Oki,

My name is Gabrielle Weasel Head. I am a Master's student at the University of Lethbridge researching Blackfoot homelessness in the city of Lethbridge. I would be grateful for your participation in the research. This will involve a short, informal interview on the topic of the perceptions of traditional Blackfoot attachments to land as well as discussing other culturally sensitive topics. The information gathered may be used in my Master's thesis. If you decide to participate, please be aware that you are free to withdraw from the research for any reason and without any negative consequences. You will receive a monetary stipend for your participation and be aware that there is no personal risk involved. You will remain anonymous and all information you provide shall be kept confidential.

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxxx, or if you have more general concerns, please contact the Office of Research Studies at the U of L at xxx-xxxx.

I consent to participate in the research as described in the letter above

_____   _____
Print Name   Date

_____
Signature

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions:

1. Many people in Lethbridge would consider you as being homeless. Do you think of yourself as being homeless?

2. What are some of the events in your life that have brought you to where you are now?

3. Do you think there are some things you could have done differently to prevent, as some would say, "living on the street?"

4. What are some of the main barriers you see as preventing you from successfully getting a place here in Lethbridge?

5. In terms of events leading up to being "homeless," do you think some of your life experiences are very different than non-Native people who find themselves in the same situation as you?

6. Are you very comfortable here in Lethbridge?

7. Is this land very familiar to you?

8. Do you think land is as important to Blackfoot people as it was in the past?

9. Is having the ability to stay in traditional Blackfoot territory very important to you?

10. Would you move from this area if it meant having a dependable place to stay elsewhere?

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM

Oki,

My name is Gabrielle Weasel Head. I am a Master's student in Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge. I am wanting to learn more about Blackfoot homelessness in the city of Lethbridge. I would be grateful for your participation in this research. This will involve several interviews with you over a three month period. The interviews will last about an hour. With your permission, I would like to tape-record the interviews. The purpose of the interviews will be to ask you about your thoughts regarding Blackfoot homelessness and what might cause homelessness for people. I would also like to explore with you the importance we place on traditional Blackfoot territories. Information gathered from the interview will be used to arrive at a better understanding of Blackfoot homelessness in traditional territories. Results from the research will be provided in a presentation to all interested parties at the Lethbridge Shelter and Resource Center once the study is complete. If you decide to participate, please be aware that you are free to withdraw from the research for any reason and at any time without any negative consequences. You may receive small "gifts" in the form of useful and practical items once an interview is complete. The risks that may be involved would be the fact that information you provide may be emotionally painful for you to relate/recall, but every effort will be taken to make sure you have access to counseling services if the need should arise.

The interviews will be conducted in confidence at the Lethbridge Shelter and Resource Center and in other locations that we agree upon. You will remain anonymous. By this I mean that no one will know your identity. All information you provide me with during the interviews shall be kept confidential. The interviews will be recorded so we can avoid any distractions or disruptions from note taking.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx (home), xxx-xxx-xxx (office) or if you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research, please contact the Office of Research Services at the U of L at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

I consent to participate in the research as described in the letter dated 10/01/09

_____   _____
Print Name   Date

_____
Signature